



The return of the king

Threatened with extinction in the 1960s, the mighty peregrine—with its astonishing speed and super strength—has staged such a remarkable comeback that its now more successful than it was in the Middle Ages

NO bird speaks more eloquently of recent ecological change than this iconic falcon. The peregrine (*Falco peregrinus*) is a species found on six continents and, with Mankind, is one of the most successful predators on Earth. Today, it has resumed that apex position and globally it's judged a 'green-listed' species, which means the population is of the lowest environmental concern. Yet this wasn't so in the 1960s. The news was so desperate and alarm so urgent that this bird—distribution wrapped around our planet—was judged to be threatened everywhere with extinction. For once, the small numbers in Britain played a major role in the unfolding international story.

The late Derek Ratcliffe, arguably our greatest naturalist of the 20th century, was fixated with peregrines. By the late 1950s, he, as did others, noticed that the numbers in his Cumbrian home area were inexplicably collapsing and nest sites he'd known for decades were being abandoned. It was his research that eventually showed the cause to be agrochemical poisoning. Once the offending

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products were withdrawn, bird-eating raptors of all kinds—sparrowhawks, marsh harriers and peregrines—began their steady recovery. The story is ongoing, but the latest census (2014) for the last species returned a figure of 1,760 pairs. It is possible that peregrines have never been more successful in this country since the Middle Ages. Compare that recent total with the 874 pairs counted in the 1930s or the telltale figure of 385 from 1961. Today, the birds have also moved inland from their traditional coastal cliffs and down from the mountaintops to nest in towns and cities the length of Britain.

London, Derby, Bradford, Wakefield and Glasgow are only a handful of the places



Stooping to conquer: starlings scatter as the bullet-like outline of a peregrine falcon—capable of hurtling through the skies at a staggering 240mph—invades their airspace

where it is common to see peregrines hunting over the city skyline. An intriguing modern development is the Christian bent in the birds' choice of nest site: Chichester, Winchester and Ely Cathedrals are some of the religious buildings where peregrines have elected to breed. We can also now enjoy their domestic dramas from the comfort of our own sitting rooms, thanks to many places livestreaming video footage of parents and offspring.

This restoration of the raptor is one of the great stories of British environmental action. For once, the symbol and the living reality converge completely: a peregrine is nothing less than a wonder of evolution. It has a reputation as the fastest bird on Earth, with recorded speeds of 240mph during its famous stoop. No less remarkable is the creature's astonishing strength. One story that holds me in thrall concerns peregrines that carried adult black grouse to their nest on the Bass Rock from the Scottish mainland. The equivalent would be for a 12-stone human to fly several miles carrying an adult goat between their legs.

One of the striking aspects of these stories is not that the bird finds its prey easily, but that every item is hard won. I've watched peregrines for decades, sometimes daily, and seen them hunt hundreds of times. I've never once seen a kill. One compelling story

of the challenge it involves entailed a bird spiralling down a mine shaft for 360ft underground as it pursued nothing more than a morsel: the intended prey was a skylark. The moral of the piece is that peregrines work hard for their living.

One unforeseen benefit that flowed from the crisis of historical decline was the attention it drew from an officer of the Britvic bottling company in Chelmsford. For 10 years, J. A. Baker cycled out from his hometown to look for peregrines wintering along the Essex coastline. After completing five drafts, in 1967 he published his classic book *The Peregrine*. It is widely regarded as a gold standard in Nature writing and remains an inspiration to authors and filmmakers worldwide. The peerless bird is matched by peerless prose. 'Like the seafarer, the peregrine lives in a pouring-away world of no attachment, a world of wakes and tilting, of sinking planes of land and water,' Baker writes. 'We who are anchored and earthbound cannot envisage this freedom of the eye. The peregrine sees and remembers patterns we do not know exist.'

Mark Cocker is a naturalist and multi-award-winning author of creative non-fiction. His latest book, *'One Midsummer's Day: Swifts and the Story of Life on Earth'*, is out in paperback (Vintage, £10.99)