

Return of the Peregrine Falcon

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ABSTRACT

Community action to restore the peregrine falcon to the Okanagan Valley was initiated exclusively by private funds. Nine young were released in 1998, and more are planned for subsequent years. A spin-off public environmental education campaign on endangered spaces and species directed especially at school children includes celebrities and a broad selection of sponsors and supporters.

Key words: *Falco peregrinus anatum*, Okanagan, peregrine falcon, reintroduction.

The Okanagan Valley, B.C. is 1 of the 4 most endangered ecosystems in all of Canada. It is also 1 of Canada's favourite tourist and retirement destinations. More and more of the valley's unique habitat is being developed every day. Among the many threatened and endangered species in the valley, few are as captivating as the *anatum* peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus anatum*).

A unique and amazing project is sweeping the Okanagan. Following the example of the Canadian National Peregrine Recovery Plan, 9 young peregrine falcons were released in July 1998 from the roof of Landmark II in Kelowna. The plan is to release birds for at least 2 more years in the hope that we can bring the magnificent *anatum* peregrine back to breed in the valley it once inhabited extensively. This is the first project of its kind in British Columbia, and the only peregrine recovery project in Canada to be initiated exclusively by private funds. The successful reintroduction of this species in British Columbia will complete *anatum* peregrine recovery in Canada from coast to coast.

Upon researching the natural history of the falcon in the Okanagan we learned that this valley had once been home to several pairs of *anatum* peregrines, but no breeding pair had been seen here since 1959. Organochlorine residue (DDT) was the primary factor in the deterioration of the *anatum* peregrine falcon population, not only locally, but throughout North America.

Falcons adjust very well to human encroachment and, based on this fact, their chances of survival are extremely high. In an effort to reintroduce these birds, a method known as hacking was developed. This procedure has been incredibly successful in almost every major city in Canada, but had never been attempted in British Columbia. Young falcons are

placed in a "hack box" to help protect them from predators and the elements, and are introduced onto the top of a high building, man-made tower, or, very occasionally, a cliff. "Hack attendants" feed the birds through a chute. The birds are then released, instinctively learn to fly, and eventually migrate south. A small percentage of the birds return to the general location from which they fledged and establish a territory.

The Canadian experts in peregrine recovery advised us to conduct this project in an urban setting rather than at a natural cliff site because of the large owl population in the valley. The young falcons, without the protection of adult birds, make easy prey for owls and many other predators. Urban recovery projects have proven to be effective in other Canadian cities.

DESCRIPTION OF EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES

The peregrine falcon has become the focal point of a valley-wide public environmental education campaign. A series of 3 educational units on endangered species and spaces of the valley for grades K-3, 4-9, and 10-12 have been created with Vancouver Foundation funding. These are integrated with the British Columbia school curricular objectives and are available in French or English. These units will reach more than 30,000 students in 3 school districts this year, and act as a follow-up and reinforcement to live interpretive presentations done by a renowned local British Columbia Parks ranger, Blake Dixon. Blake and his falcon Nikita will visit more than 40 schools throughout the Okanagan over the next few months. This spring the project will feature a "Name the Falcon" contest, an Okanagan Endangered Wildlife art contest, and a Robert Bateman National Wildlife Week writing contest. These educational contests allow the students to become actively

involved in the project. Next fall we will also be providing schools with materials and professional assistance to apply for funds from agencies such as Habitat 2000 and the Evergreen Foundation to create and/or restore habitat on their school grounds.

To provide a focus for all of the positive action these educational activities are generating, we will be hosting an Endangered Wildlife Festival in Kelowna this spring. The honorary chairman, Robert Bateman, and the British Columbia Minister of Environment, Cathy McGregor, will both be attending. YTV has confirmed their support of the event and is acting as the exclusive national television sponsor. This will enable us to bring the educational opportunities of the festival to youth across Canada and to provide national recognition for festival sponsors. YTV began running 30-second commercials about the event in February. Sun FM 99.9, a very popular radio station in the valley, has committed to becoming the exclusive radio sponsor, and the Kelowna *Daily Courier* will be the print sponsor. An art festival, habitat creation/restoration contests, field trips, and nature exhibits will be among the many educational activities this festival has to offer. The winners of all educational contests will be personally congratulated by Robert Bateman at this event.

A documentary—*Return to the Valley*—has been created by Shaw Cable exclusively for this project. It has been entered by Shaw for the prestigious Omar Girard award. The video provides an excellent overview of what the project has accomplished in Kelowna. (Copy available upon request).

SUMMARY

The Return of the Peregrine Falcon is an innovative project that is having a discernible impact on our human and natural community. It is a catalyst for positive environmental change throughout the Okanagan Valley. Our team is lead by distinguished Canadians including Robert Bateman, the honorary chairman, and Gordon S. Court, leading Canadian peregrine specialist and scientific advisor to the project. David Suzuki's office recently called us requesting an essay from Kelowna students to be used in his upcoming book.

The Return of the Peregrine Falcon project is about far more than bringing back the peregrine—it is about learning what we can do to protect other wildlife species in the valley that are at risk. It promotes learning about what we can do to make the Okanagan a healthier place for all living creatures. Its key objectives are:

- To establish a breeding pair of peregrine falcons in the Okanagan by the year 2000.
- To educate the public, especially children, about the importance of wildlife conservation and the need to create a sustainable balance between the needs of human and wildlife communities. ("I cannot imagine a more perfect tool than the peregrine falcon to capture the imagination and hearts of young people." – Robert Bateman, Honorary Chairman).
- To help conserve rare and endangered wildlife and wildlife habitat in the Okanagan Valley for generations to come.

It is our goal to have several breeding pairs of falcons living in the valley they once inhabited extensively and to have the community actively involved and dedicated to wildlife conservation.