

THE PEREGRINE FALCONS OF ST. MICHAEL AND ALL ANGELS CHURCH, MOUNT DINHAM, EXETER

1. PEREGRINES IN THE U.K



The Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* is the largest resident falcon in the U.K., and feeds exclusively on birds caught in flight, often after a dramatic dive or “stoop”, reaching speed of up to 150 mph.

Peregrines are traditionally found on coastal cliffs and upland crags. This has resulted in a geographical distribution in the U.K. broadly restricted to the coastlines of the south and south-west England, Wales, Ireland and Scotland and upland regions in the north, the north-east, Wales and Scotland.

The species came close to extinction in the U.K. and many other parts of the World through a catastrophic decline in the late 1950's, due to the effects of pesticide contamination in their food chain.

Following the banning of these pesticides and increased legal protection in the U.K., Peregrines began to recover their numbers and re-colonise their coastal and upland habitats.

Having almost returned to capacity in these traditional areas, they began to move inland into lowland areas during the 1980's to occupy quarries, both derelict and active.

In a more recent trend since the late 1980's, an increasing number of Peregrines have established territories on man-made structures and in urban environments.

In order for peregrines to establish a new territory prior to breeding, they require a secure nest site (traditionally steep cliff faces) on which to rear their young, open country over which to hunt and a plentiful food supply (usually birds).

As the population has increased, these requirements are increasingly being met in a wide variety of built environments. Peregrines now breed in many towns and cities using buildings, such as churches, warehouses, tall chimneys, and tower blocks; on industrial plants such as power stations, chemical processing plants and cooling towers, and in open country on pylons, radio masts, viaducts and bridges.

The 1991 National Peregrine Census revealed that seven successful nest sites had been on buildings and other built structures. By 1993, this figure had risen to 12 pairs on man-made sites including buildings, bridges, railway viaducts, pylons, industrial towers and tall chimneys.

The recovery of the Peregrine is today considered to be a conservation success story, with the most recent Census in 2002 revealing a current U.K. population of 1,402 breeding pairs, of which 62 were on man-made structures.

Nick Dixon, 2014