The Peregrine Falcon Survived At Idaho’s Birds of Prey Area
by Lee Foster

“Saving the peregrine falcon from extinction has been the finest conservation success story in the history of wildlife,” asserted Morley Nelson.

Nelson, of Boise, a well-known raptor expert and one of the founders of the The Peregrine Fund, was one of the guiding spirits behind Idaho’s 485,000-acre Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area along 81 miles of the river. He also helped found the World Center For Birds of Prey, a major research and breeding facility near Boise. He persisted in these efforts until his death in 2009.
I had the good fortune to spend a day with the aging but charismatic Nelson, who did so much to reverse public opinion about birds of prey, or raptors, as they are sometimes called. Raptors include eagles, falcons, hawks, and owls. I also had an opportunity to spend a day with Larry Ridenour, one of the rangers patrolling this vast area for the Bureau of Land Management, the overseer.

The meeting with Nelson took place at the Center, which the public can visit and tour. Later, we boated through the Birds of Prey terrain. Anyone in the public can participate in concessionaire float trips or jet boat trips along the river, guided by naturalists.

The day with Ridenour was a trip by car, the dominant mode that the public uses to explore the area.

This special area of Idaho hosts one of the densest population of nesting raptors in North America, and possibly on planet Earth.

**Changing Attitudes Towards the Peregrin Falcon**

“The old attitude toward eagles, falcons, and hawks was simple and simple minded,” explained Nelson. “The attitude was: shoot them because they are eating our food. This was largely misguided. They ate relatively little of our food and definitely kept the natural environment in balance by eating rodents and rabbits. My own grandfather, a good man, typified that attitude. He was a farmer and rancher in North Dakota. To him, every raptor was a ‘chicken hawk.’ He shot every one he could.”

“The new attitude,” Nelson continued, “is: let’s preserve these magnificent soaring birds, let’s live with them, let’s admire their special role in the environment.”

Nelson recounted how in 1960 over 12,000 eagles were killed in Texas in a massive campaign to eliminate eagles. One man in Wyoming boasted that he alone had killed 750 eagles in that state.
Another devastating factor in the decline of raptors was the use of DDT, which accumulated in the birds and caused their egg shells to become fragile, breaking before hatching.

The most endangered of the raptors has been the peregrine falcon. The original population of an estimated 4,000 pairs of nesting birds in the U.S. had dropped to 60 by 1960. All peregrine falcons had died out east of the Mississippi, where there were a known 300 nesting pairs in the 1940s. Western states peregrine populations were declining precariously.

The Peregrine Falcon Fund

The Peregrine Fund, a group instrumental in setting up Boise’s World Center for Birds of Prey, reacted to this tragedy by developing an extensive captive breeding program for peregrine falcons. Peregrines hatched in captivity were released throughout the United States in the known historic range of the bird. More than 4,000 peregrine falcons have been raised and released. Many pairs of the released birds are nesting successfully, even in urban areas, where they feed off of pigeons. By 1996 the known nesting pairs in the west was 828, in the central states 62, and in the east 104. Morley Nelson hoped that the peregrine falcon could eventually be taken off the endangered list.

In the Boise region a pair of peregrines nests right in town. Another pair nests at a sugar mill in Nampa, a small town west of Boise.

Peregrines are raptors, or birds of prey. In the Birds of Prey National Conservation Area, many of their raptor cousins also nest. In fact, the area, as mentioned, is the densest nesting concentration of birds of prey in North America and perhaps the world. More than 800 pairs of falcons, eagles, hawks, and owls gather here each spring to mate and raise their young. May is the ideal month for a visit.

Floating the Snake River

A day of floating on the Snake River or driving through the Birds of Prey National Conservation Area is a remarkable experience. The area was set aside by Congress
to be managed by the Bureau of Land Management for the purpose of protecting the raptors. Naturalists accompany the boat trips to help a traveler understand the 14 species of raptors that either live here permanently or migrate through each year.

On the day along the Snake River with Morley Nelson I saw a notable phenomenon: a prairie falcon dove on a coyote as the coyote tried to capture young falcons practicing their flying. The young falcons sometimes hit the ground as they flew, leaving themselves exposed to coyotes. The parent falcons would swoop down on the coyote at high speeds and hit the coyote with enough force to roll it over.

The other memorable experience of the day was a glimpse at golden eagles, with wing spans from 6 to 8 feet, soaring overhead. Eagles and falcons, secure and protected, are highly visible along the cliffs.

“When you get out on the river to see these birds,” mentioned Nelson, “you feel that you are a part of the environment, not isolated from it.”

Morley Nelson knews this territory better than anyone and made several movies with Walt Disney Studios on birds of prey. Though aging, he scampered over the rocks with ease. For much of the footage in his films, he was lowered over the edge of the cliffs to bird nests, camera in hand.

Morley Nelson recalled how he first became interested in falcons.

**Morley Nelson Saved the Peregrine Falcon**

“I was a boy of 10 in North Dakota,” he said. “I was taking my horse down to a watering hole, where the horse could drink and I might shoot a duck. Sure enough, a teal duck jumped up, but before I could raise my gun a falcon dove through the air, killed the teal in mid flight, and flew off. I said to myself, ‘I’d like to put down my gun and get one of those falcons.’”

Since then Morley Nelson was always active in the birds-of-prey field. He was able to imitate the melodious whistle of the eagle or the scolding call of the peregrine falcon. Nelson put his energy into many practical matters affecting birds of prey. For example, working with the Idaho Power Company, he designed power poles with
excellent nesting boxes on top. Falcons and eagles were using these poles for nesting. Formerly, the standard poles caused many electrocutions of raptors, especially in wet weather.

The birds of prey along this portion of the Snake River are inspiring creatures, true “kings of the air” as they are sometimes called.

“They inspire partly because they will take on anything to defend their nests,” said Morley Nelson. “They say to us, ‘I am equal to anything.’”

The Peregrine Falcon and Other Raptors

Although all raptors are remarkable, the peregrine falcon captures the imagination of the observer. The peregrine’s eyesight is eight times as acute as a human’s eyesight. Peregrines can see a rabbit or squirrel at a distance of two miles. They can then dive with great speed, clocked at over 200 miles per hour, to capture the prey. To survive such blinding speed they have an extra eyelid layer to keep the eye moist, nostrils that baffle the wind and reduce its pressure, and extremely hard feathers to deflect the force of the air. The beauty of peregrines, their regal demeanor, is also noteworthy. For thousands of years, falcons have been trained by man to hunt ducks and other birds. Only with the advent of the gun did the role of falcons decline as bird hunters.

Snake River Habitat for the Peregrine Falcon

Birds of prey congregate along the Snake River in dense numbers for several reasons. The deep volcanic soil on the cliff benches above the river supports large populations of Townsend ground squirrels and black-tailed jackrabbits, the main raptor food supplies here. It is a wondrous phenomenon of evolution that the young of the prairie falcon, the most numerous raptor here, and the young of the ground squirrel are born at the same time, providing predators with their prey. The Snake River gorge also offers secure nesting perches, close to the food supply. Climate and food supply are ideal for spring nesting.
Because of these factors, the Birds of Prey Area was established in 1971. Since then the population of local raptors has risen.

“We counted 50 pairs of various kinds of all falcons in 1939,” noted Nelson.

During the year of my visit, there were about 160-200 pairs of prairie falcons alone, their densest nesting place anywhere. Prairie falcons have a remarkable feeding range. They have been observed to fly out as far as 50 miles in search of prey.

The area also was supporting 20-25 pairs of eagles.

Idaho: Birds of Prey, World Center for Birds of Prey, Peregrine falcon
Touring By Car

The other way to see the area is by car, using the excellent Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area Visitor’s Guide put out by the Bureau of Land Management. The Visitor Guide has a good map in it. Get also the BLM Raptor Identification Guide. I did all that, and had the benefit of a ride with a BLM ranger who patrolled the area, Larry Ridenour.

We drove west from Boise on Interstate 84 to the town of Meridian, then south on a side road to the town at Kuna, where there is a small Visitor Center manned by volunteers. From Kuna we drove south on Swan Falls Road to the three overlooks and access areas, which are Dedication Point, Swan Falls Dam, and Celebration Park.

“You can understand the urgency with which we created this protected habitat area,” said Ridenour, as we passed farms growing alfalfa and other crops in the soft and fertile soil. “If land here can be successfully irrigated, it can grow crops. Large parts of the habitat needed for the raptor food supply were being put into farmland.”

Once the land is cleared, even if later re-purchased by BLM, re-creation of the native vegetation is difficult. Jackrabbits, the prey of eagles, need mature sage brush plants to hide from their predator.

Snake River Overlooks

Dedication Point, a magnificent overlook with the Snake River and black basalt canyons below, presents the best place to view raptors during the spring activity period.

Swan Falls Dam has both an overlook and an access road down to the water’s edge.

Celebration Point takes you down by the water’s edge to a park where Native American petroglyphs can be seen on the rock. Some petroglyphs are positively identified as probably meaning rain, for example, based on Native American traditions. Other petroglyphs are more difficult to interpret and may have been part of the vision quests or spiritual life of the tribe. Some vision quest petroglyphs have
holes in the rock, where the seeker was supposed to hold onto the rock, as a kind of ballast, when the vision became overpowering. If you’re fortunate, a park interpreter may be there, showing how Native Americans cast arrows with an atlatl or fished for salmon with elaborate traps.

A traveler coming to the region should also become acquainted with raptors at the World Center for Birds of Prey.

As mentioned, May is the best month to see the nesting birds of prey in the wilds. Adult birds are then gathering food for their young. The Center sponsors a Birds of Prey Festival during May. By July many of the birds have left the heat of the canyon, only to return the following spring. Throughout the year, the Center is a good information source on raptors, complete with guidebooks and displays.

**Birds of Prey Center**

At the Center, located on a bluff outside Boise, you can see movies about the peregrine falcon and its predicament. Via closed-circuit TV cameras, you can observe the breeding activity of various raptors. Through windows in the incubation lab you can observe how the bird eggs are hatched. On some occasions you can see a peregrine falcon, a short-eared owl, and other raptors displayed live on the gloved wrist of a handler. With the peregrine numbers approaching assured survival, the Center now concentrates some of its energy on other endangered raptor species, such as the harpy eagle from South America and the California condor.

Call ahead for the free tours, which require reservation.

Saving the peregrine falcon and preservation of a major raptor habitat is an inspiring conservation success story. In an age when environmental pessimism is so pervasive, the peregrine falcon survival can serve as an antidote to the helpless feeling that nothing can be done.

“The peregrine falcon was one of the most difficult creatures imaginable to save,” said Morley Nelson. “To save it we had to alter farming habits, preserve vast habitats, and reverse public opinion. All this needed to be done in a short time. We have accomplished our goal. We have shown that, with intelligence and concern for
the environment, man can bring endangered species back from the edge of extinction.”

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**Idaho’s Birds of Prey Area: If You Go**

The World Center for Birds of Prey website is at [http://www.peregrinefund.org/world-center](http://www.peregrinefund.org/world-center).

To drive to the Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area, travel west from Boise on Interstate 84, then south on Highway 69 at the Meridian/Kuna exit (#44), 10 miles west of Boise. Follow 69 through Kuna and continue south on Swan Falls Road to the Snake River canyon and the three access points mentioned in the article.

Be sure to bring your binoculars.

For tourism information on Boise, see [http://www.boise.org](http://www.boise.org).

The Idaho Travel Council website is [http://www.idahotravelcouncil.com](http://www.idahotravelcouncil.com).

The Bureau of Land Management information on the area is at [http://www.blm.gov/id](http://www.blm.gov/id).

See my article also on how I saw a peregrine falcon appear on a telephone pole near my local Safeway. See [https://www.fostertravel.com/a-peregrine-at-the-safeway/](https://www.fostertravel.com/a-peregrine-at-the-safeway/).