Falcon Recovery Team Appointed

Alaska's peregrine falcon populations are following the same pattern which led to the collapse of peregrine falcon populations in the lower 48 states, and the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has appointed a recovery team of experts to try to arrest and reverse this decline.

The team leader is Don Frickie of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Fairbanks, Alaska; others are: Jerry McGowan of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Steve Leskosky of the Bureau of Land Management, and Dr. Clayton White of Brigham Young University.

The team will develop a comprehensive plan to reverse the peregrine's precipitous decline.

Of the three subspecies of peregrine falcons that occur in Alaska, only Peale's peregrine of the Aleutian Islands and southeastern coast is holding its own.

The American peregrine, which occurs in the coniferous forests up to the tree line, and the arctic or tundra peregrine, which occurs on the treeless tundra of northern Alaska, Canada, and Greenland, are the species the team will concentrate upon.

The arctic peregrine is smaller than the American peregrine and paler in color with a bluish cast dominating the richer browns. In habits, the two are similar, however. They are renowned for their high-speed aerial attack to catch their prey on the wing.

In the 1950's when falcons in the United States, southern Canada, and Europe went into a unprecedented population decline, those in Alaska and northern Canada seemed to be immune to the same difficulties.

By the late 60's however, even these birds began to succumb to the effects of man's activities. Along the main stretch of the Colville Rier in Alaska, for example, 25 pairs nested in 1971. Only nine nests were occupied this year.

Scientists fear that these nine pairs will be unable to raise to flight stage the average of two young per nest needed just to keep the shrunken population at its present level.

Several hundred nesting pairs of American and arctis peregrines are estimated to remain in Alaska.

The weak link in the Alaskan species of falcons' natural life cycle is their habit of migrating south during the winter. The Alaskan birds are suspected of "leap-frogging" over their southern relatives in the lower 48 states to spend their winters from the Gulf Coast to South America. On these Central American wintering grounds they are exposed to both pesticides and shooting.

Pesticides, particularly DDT and DDE, are the most pernicious factor in the falcon's decline. They cause reproductive failure. Developing embryos often die before hatching. Egg shells thin to the point that the eggs are crushed during incubation.

Egg shells from falcons in northern Canada and Alaska are now about 22 per cent thinner than they were before widespread use of pesticides began after World War II.

The new recovery team will coordinate its activities with those of the teams already established for the eastern and Rocky Mountain populations of peregrine falcons in the lower 48.

The team will try to pinpoint the Alaska birds' wintering grounds, where they are exposed to the greatest hazards, and to determine critical habitat to protect the remaining nesting sites from disturbance.