

# PEREGRINE FALCONS HARASS NESTING GREAT HORNED OWLS

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The 1984 owl banding weekends produced a new and surprising experience — particularly notable because it was repeated on four different occasions.

As we approached a Great Horned Owl nest with Bob Robinson, south of Young on 6 May, the adult female owl flushed from the nest. Almost at once a good-sized raptor appeared out of nowhere, swooped around the owl and fanned its tail as it banked. The raptor chattered in a frenzied fashion. We could see a black face patch, but the bird did not make a vertical stoop as falcons usually do. It made four passes around the owl.

With Chris Thompson south of Kelliher on 13 May, we had an almost identical experience. This time we had excellent views of the black moustache marks of the Peregrine Falcon, which made about six passes near the owl. With John Gillard near Crescent Marsh west of Saltcoats, also on 13 May, another Peregrine appeared just as the owl left the nest, and made about three passes at it. With Scott Bridge east of Domremy on 19 May, a Peregrine suddenly appeared and made a single pass near the female owl as she left the nest.

The suddenness of the appearance and attack, the vocalizations, and the flight patterns were identical each time. Never did the Peregrine seem to make contact with the owl or scatter feathers, nor did it show any interest in the nestling owls.

We also encountered a dried Peregrine carcass, impaled and twisted on a barbed wire fence in open grassland habitat west of Colville on 24 June. We estimated that it had become entangled in flight one or two months earlier.

While our sample is small and perhaps not appropriate for statistical analysis, Peregrines harassed the female owl at 4 of 104 successful Great Horned Owl nests in 1984, in sharp contrast to 0 events at 1640 successful Great Horned Owl nests in previous years. This is statistically highly significant ( $x^2 = 60.88$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $P$  less than 0.001). Only twice before on owl banding weekends since 1958 had we even sighted a Peregrine Falcon, both at some distance from any known owl nest.

All four Peregrine Falcon—Great Horned Owl encounters were within similar aspen parkland habitat, where there are no possible or potential Peregrine nesting sites available. The maximum distance between encounters, from Domremy to Saltcoats, was about 240 km, so we presume that four different Peregrines may have been involved. Clearly the Peregrines were in migration. One expects them to hunt mainly near marshes, but only at the Saltcoats nest was there a substantial marsh nearby.

Why did the Peregrine harass the owl? Probably for the same reason

that American Crows so commonly mob the female owl when she leaves her nest: because they are mortal enemies, as shown by crow remains in owl nests.

Why did the Peregrine not stoop at the owl in a vertical dive, and why did it not hit the owl? Probably more typical falcon attack behaviour would have been in evidence had the roles been reversed, and had the owl passed near a falcon nest.

The final speculation concerns the numbers of Peregrine Falcons. Our small sample suggests that Peregrines were more prevalent than

during the past 25 years in an area of Saskatchewan parkland for two weeks of May 1984. This could mean either that the normal wild population en route to northern territories is increasing, now that they carry a lower burden of pesticide residues, or that we have subadult Peregrines ranging over the parkland after having been released into the wild from captive rearing projects. It is possible that one or more of our birds had been "hacked out" at the Nisku Wildlife Refuge north of Eyebrow, or even from the Bessborough Hotel in Saskatoon.



*Great Horned Owl on nest*

*K. Morck*