

Falcons given a foothold

The arrival of two peregrine chicks marks birds' return to the region.

By Mark A. Fletcher
News-Leader

It was hunted, poisoned and almost driven to extinction.

Friday, the federally endangered peregrine falcon returned to southwest Missouri.

The Missouri Department of Conservation and Southwest Missouri State University received two 35-day-old birds and hope to eventually reintroduce a total of 16 birds to the area.

Sunvilla Towers, an SMS apartment building, is home for the two birds. It's one of Springfield's tallest buildings, and tall buildings simulate the falcons' natural cliff-dwelling habitat.

Working from an apartment room-turned-falcon-monitoring office, SMS graduate students and assistants will monitor the falcons via three cameras mounted on the roof.

The two chicks were placed in one of two "hack boxes" — simulated nests — on Sunvilla's roof. The birds will be kept in the hack boxes until they're ready to fly.

The falcons are being released in the city because urban areas have fewer falcon predators, and there is an abundance of starlings and pigeons here for the peregrine falcons to eat, said Jim D. Wilson, a Conservation Department ornithologist.

The falcons will fare well in the center city because it keeps them away from human hunters and great horned owls, which tend to prey on



young peregrines, said Dr. Don Moll, professor of biology at SMS.

Peregrine falcons were once native not only to Missouri, but to all of North America and the world.

Following World War II, however, their numbers began to decline. Two factors in particular — the use of the pesticide DDT and habitat destruction — were the major culprits.

After DDT was banned in 1972, their population rebounded, the Conservation Department said.

Peregrines hunt while flying and prey on other birds. They make a streamlined dive, called a stoop, often reaching speeds of 200 mph.

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Teaming up with state ornithologist Jim Wilson (right), project coordinator Krista Deckard puts one of two 35-day-old falcon chicks into a "hack box" on the roof of Sunvilla Towers on Friday. It's part of an effort to reintroduce a small population of the endangered birds of prey to the area.

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The falcon hits its prey with its foot, stunning or killing it.

Although adult peregrines prey mostly on birds like starlings and pigeons, young peregrines' feeding habits are a little different, Wilson said.

"When they're young (and) they're first learning to feed, they take what's easy for them, like chimney swifts and various kinds of songbirds," Wilson said.

In other restoration projects, peregrines haven't affected songbird numbers, Wilson said.

Area bird watchers are encouraging the project.

"We're very supportive of it," said Debbie Good, owner of Wild Birds Unlimited in Springfield. "Some of the birds they'll be taking, like starlings, are detrimental to our native North American birds," Good said. "The way I see it, we're restoring a balance."

At this point, Wilson can't tell if they're male or female, but the breeders told him both falcons are male.

The project also has opportunities for average citizens to participate.

After the birds are released, volunteers will watch where they fly, and make sure they eat and stay hydrated, said Krista Deckard, project coordinator.

"We have a hotline for people to report a sighting if someone sees them," Deckard said. "We'll come out, and we'll confirm ... it is our bird. (And) if someone sees one on the street ... and (it) can't fly back up, call that hotline so we can come get the bird." The hotline is 836-6147.

The peregrines for Springfield's reintroduction program were purchased from breeders Vic and Jan Hadaswick of Centerville, S.D.

The falcons are "wild raised," which means "they (almost) never see anybody," Jan Hadaswick said. "Only time they see us is when we ... trim their beaks and talons."

Wilson would like to see peregrines established in Springfield, but "the really ultimate thing would be to have peregrine falcons colonize out from these urban areas."