Peregrines Enjoy Rapid Comeback

It's fitting success in Wisconsin for nature's fastest fliers.

By Tom Davis, Contributing Editor

IT WAS as unlikely a place as you could imagine for an encounter with the wild.

After signing in and clipping the required visitor's badge to my shirt, I was led through the forbidding industrial labyrinth that is the Georgia-Pacific tissue mill. A 5-million-square-foot maze of concrete and steel, it rises up monolithically on the west side of the Fox River in Green Bay. Old-timers still call it "The Fort", not because of its appearance (although that would be fitting) but because for most of its life it was the home of Fort Howard Paper Company.

My destination is Safety Room B, somewhere deep in the bowels of the mill. Moving down one narrow corridor after another, my footfalls echoing against the stark gray walls, I'm beginning to understand the dread that a suspect about to be interrogated by the Secret Police must experience.

But then a door opens, I enter the room, and the mood inside is positively festive. There are perhaps 15 or 20 employees along with assorted media types, including at least three camera crews from local TV stations. We're awaiting the arrival of four celebrities. You might even call them royalty: a quartet of peregrine falcon chicks that, just 3 weeks earlier, hatched in a nest box high on the mill's east side.

Wisconsin Population on the Rise

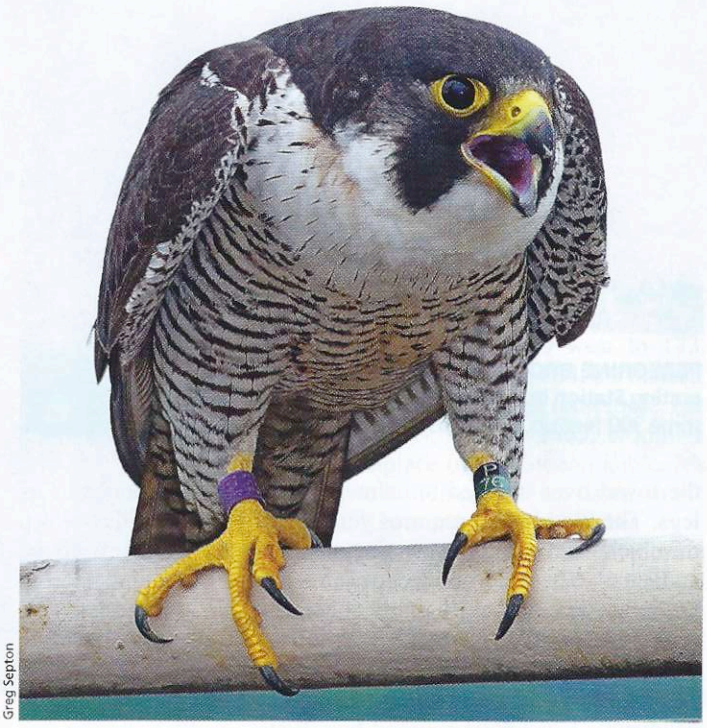
Peregrines have nested at the G-P mill since at least 2008, and as of this year there are three active peregrine nests in the Green Bay area. While the statewide numbers for 2014 are still being crunched, in 2013 there were 32 successful peregrine nests in Wisconsin (the vast majority in urban environments)—nests that produced 98 young.

And to think that just 40 years ago, the peregrine was considered extinct not only in Wisconsin but throughout the eastern United States, its population nearly destroyed by DDT and other pesticides. It's an amazing and inspiring comeback story, one that's nearly unprecedented in wildlife conservation…but back to the scene in Safety Room B.

Time passes, the anticipation builds, and at last Wisconsin's "Peregrine Man", raptor researcher Greg Septon, briskly strides in. He's accompanied by Mike Moore, the mill's environmental affairs manager. In one hand Moore carries a rectangular plastic crate not much larger than a shoe box.

Moore sets the crate on a long meeting table and while Septon lays out the equipment he'll need—leg bands, pliers and a pop-rivet gun for attaching them, syringes and vials for collecting blood, cotton balls, a notebook for recording the band numbers and other pertinent data—he fills us in on what we're about to see.

The magenta band that goes on one leg, he explains, is a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service band, while the band on the other leg is a color-coded alphanumeric marker that will allow Septon to I.D. the birds in the future (and in some cases enable him to identify them at a distance). The blood drawn from each chick will be



Greg Septon

BANDED BEAUTY named "Nora" has nested at the Thilmany paper mill in Kaukauna since 2007. Magenta band includes an 800 number to notify the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service if the bird is found dead. Black and green bands help researchers identify birds at a distance.

sent to The Raptor Center at the University of Minnesota, which maintains a genetic database of over 4,000 individual peregrines.

He further explains that the ideal "window" for banding is between 18 and 24 days of age. "When they're younger than that," he notes, "it can be difficult to sex the chicks. Female peregrines, like all members of the falcon family, grow to a conspicuously larger size than males. When they're older than that, they're apt to jump out of the nest, which means almost certain death.

"I've banded over 800 peregrine chicks," Septon adds, smiling, "and so far I haven't lost any."

Start Out Homely...End up Handsome

With that, he opens the crate, reaches in with a gloved hand and extracts what looks like a squatty—and fuzzy—miniature snowman. This tiny snowman, however, sports a pair of huge taloned feet that are several sizes too big for the rest of it, a wickedly curved beak that will also take some growing into, and an expression of severe irritation.

It strains the imagination to think that this homely, awkward creature will mature into one of the fiercest, fastest, most regally handsome birds on the planet, a bird that historically was the prized possession of emperors and kings.

As naturalist Roger Tory Peterson observed, "Man has emerged from the shadows of antiquity with a peregrine on his fist."

Now, with Moore lending a hand, Septon places the hatchling, a female, on its back in the middle of a towel, folds the top of

Sideline: Founded in 1990, Antigo's Raptor Education Group has rehabilitated and released thousands of raptors and other bird species back into the wild.

Greg Septon

PEREGRINE BROOD was banded in June at the Alliant Energy Generating Station in Pardeeville. Their nest box is mounted on the stack, some 300 feet up. The birds were 22 days old when photo was taken.

the towel over its head to calm it, and affixes the bands to its legs. The blood draw requires yet another pair of hands to keep the chick from struggling, so Septon solicits a volunteer from the audience. When the needle goes in—on the inner underside of the left wing—the chick starts squawking bloody murder. This prompts its siblings in the crate to follow suit, and suddenly it's as if someone cranked up the volume to Hitchcock's *The Birds*.

"The females are a lot more vocal than the males," Septon deadpans.

He repeats the procedure with the rest of the young, holding a cotton ball to the site of the "stick" until the bleeding's staunched. Someone asks Septon, who launched Wisconsin's peregrine recovery program in 1987 when he was with the Milwaukee Public Museum, if he always removes the chicks to a secure location for banding.

It Lessens Stress

"Whenever I can," he replies. "It's a lot less stressful on the adult birds. It's also a lot less stressful for the person doing the banding when you're not being dive-bombed by the chicks' parents!"

After the entire brood of three females and one male has been banded and blooded, Septon lines them up against the front wall for a photo session. "If one starts running," he warns the crowd, "don't move. Just freeze, and let me get to it."

But they're all perfectly obedient, unruffled by the whir and click of the cameras. When it's time to take them back to the nest, Septon asks if I'd like to tag along. Moore outfits me with a hard hat, safety glasses and ear protection, and we tromp literally from the basement to the rooftop of the city-sized mill, a disorienting trek that takes a good 15 minutes—and leaves me feeling awfully happy that I don't have to find my way out of there on my own.

Moore opens the nest box, which is built into the side of a tower overlooking the Fox River. The inside is littered with feathers—mostly from pigeons, the abundance of which helps explain why peregrines do well in urban areas. Overhead, the majestic adults swoop back and forth, their long wings scything the sky.

It's little wonder that this bird exerts such a powerful hold on the human imagination…although it's still hard to imagine that in only 3 short weeks, these four squawky blobs of down will be flying, too.