

## Eyes on the skies

**BIRD-WATCHING:**The city provides a naturalist to help birders spot a nesting pair of peregrine falcons.

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People wheeling or walking Duluth's downtown waterfront this month can catch an added attraction -- and this one is free.

A pair of nesting peregrine falcons has taken up shop on the Greysolon Plaza building downtown, making for easy viewing from the Lake Superior waterfront.

To help bird-watchers see the falcons and understand what's happening in the sky, Hawk Ridge Nature Area and the city of Duluth have teamed up to provide a naturalist with a spotting scope trained on the high-flying, fast-diving birds.

The city is paying for Julie O'Connor to keep an eye on the birds from Lake Place Park on top of Interstate 35 between downtown and the Lakewalk.

It's close-up viewing as the sleek birds perch, hunt, kill their meals and feed their babies. You may even see them chase away other predators.

"They're having a problem with a bald eagle today," O'Connor said Friday. "They keep chasing him away. They don't like him around at all."

O'Connor's seminars and spotting scope have been popular with tourists and also downtown workers out for their noontime breaks. For the next three weeks, at least one, and often both, of the adult falcons will be very near the nest, keeping track of the hatchlings.

On some days, more than 150 people stop and look through the scope to see the birds. O'Connor can help answer their questions such as what they eat (pigeons, starlings and small waterfowl) and whether the nest was put there for the falcons (yes).

"We're getting a little falcon fan club going here during the lunch hour," O'Connor said. "This great viewing should last until the hatchlings fly, by about the end of June.... They'll still be around after that, hunting over downtown, but they will disperse all over the city and won't be as concentrated."

The nesting box has been on the Greysolon building since 1992, but only in the past few years have the falcons used it with success. This is the fourth successful brood raised by the same pair, O'Connor said.

This year the pair has four chicks, which is considered a large brood.

There's also a nesting pair on the Blatnik Bridge in Duluth, and a lone male on the Bong Bridge.

"He brought a new female with him this year, but she took off and hasn't come back," O'Connor said. "They spotted her in Thunder Bay."

The birds winter in Central America.

People seem fascinated by the speed and agility of the birds, and amazed to find out they weigh only a couple of pounds.

"Genghis Khan had peregrine falcons. The English noblemen had peregrines. The peregrine has been revered by mankind throughout history," said Bob Anderson, director of the Raptor Resource Project in Bluffton, Iowa, and a peregrine banding expert. "The woodland Indians even built peregrine effigies hundreds of years ago. People today have that same fascination with them. It's nature's Top Gun in the air. Most people are in awe when they see them fly."

Anderson and crew will replace the 14-year-old Greysolon building nest box this fall and may include a Web camera for people to watch the chicks in the nest. He'll be banding the chicks on June 16.

Outside Duluth, falcons have reclaimed their natural territory along the North Shore's highest cliffs and along Mississippi River bluffs. The birds also have taken a fancy to handmade nests on the smokestacks of coal-fired power plants, such as the Minnesota Power plant in Cohasset and several power plants near the Twin Cities. The birds have nested successfully on downtown skyscrapers in Minneapolis, Milwaukee and New York City. Falcons like heights so they can swoop down on their favorite prey.

The peregrine population was almost wiped out, largely because of DDT use. There are about 43 nesting pairs of peregrines in Minnesota, 30 in Wisconsin and an estimated 3,000 birds across North America. Peregrines recovered enough to graduate off the federal Endangered Species List in 1999.

But Anderson said the success story needs to be watched closely so the birds never near extinction again.

"It's still listed as endangered in Wisconsin and threatened in Minnesota," Anderson said. "So it's not like there's a big surplus. Production is still pretty poor, so it's a slow road."