

Banded and bristling

A team pays a visit to a family of falcons at Greysolon Plaza, banding the chicks and angering the mother

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Clint Austin/News Tribune

A peregrine falcon chick after getting banded at Greysolon Plaza Friday afternoon.

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Wearing a climbing harness and roped to a secure anchor, Rob MacIntyre went over the edge of Greysolon Plaza's roof Friday morning.

Several feet below was his objective -- a nesting box sheltering four peregrine falcon chicks.

And screaming in anger above him was their mother. Swooping down, she dealt MacIntyre's hard hat an audible blow.

She continued screaming and swooping as MacIntyre and Amy Ries, both from the Raptor Resource Project, lowered themselves to the nesting box and quickly loaded the chicks into a pet carrier.

Within minutes, the two rejoined Raptor Resource Project director Bob Anderson on the building's roof to band the chicks, which will let them be identified and tracked.

"Looks like three girls and one boy," Anderson said after a quick peek into the carrier. A closer examination revealed two females and two males.

"He looks healthy," Anderson said as he carefully removed the first chick from the carrier.

About 22 days old, the chick was halfway to being able to fly. Covered by white down with brown wing and tail feathers sticking out, he had the sharp talons, curved beak and intense eyes of a hunter.

Although only three weeks old, the chicks are nearly full-grown -- females weighing about 36 ounces and males 26.

As Anderson held the male and Ries recorded data, MacIntyre affixed two bands to the bird's legs -- one with a letter and two numbers large enough they can be read with binoculars or a spotting scope.

In addition to receiving its bands, the male also received a name -- Dudley, in honor of Duluth resident Dudley Edmondson.

"He was the first person to contact us about peregrines in Duluth," Anderson said. "He was the contact person who made this all happen."

After Edmondson's report of peregrines, the nesting box was installed on Greysolon in 1992. It sat unused until four years ago. The birds have used it every year since.

"We're thrilled," Greysolon resident manager Miriam Burke said. "We're privileged to have the birds here and to see them. The folks in the building feel a sense of pride."

They can also feel lucky. Peregrines almost vanished from the eastern and central United States in the 1960s, largely because of DDT use. A ban on the chemical, reintroduction efforts and artificial nesting boxes such as the one on Greysolon helped the birds recover.

"Each year we seem to have more nests," MacIntyre said.

Today, there are about 43 nesting pairs in Minnesota and 30 in Wisconsin among an estimated 3,000 birds across North America.

The Raptor Resource Project works to preserve falcons, eagles, ospreys, hawks and owls. It began in 1988 by releasing falcons into the wild. Now, in addition to banding birds, it monitors existing and probable nesting sites and helps with nesting boxes. The organization has banded more than 50 peregrines this year.

"That's really cool," Anderson said. "Just a few years ago we had none."

On Friday, MacIntyre named one of the Greysolon females after one of his helpers.

"Carly, you have a bird named after you," he said.

Carly O'Connor, 12, beamed.

"It's not every day you get to hold a peregrine falcon," she said later. "I'm glad we got to do it."

Carly was on the roof with her mother, Julie O'Connor, whom the city of Duluth is paying to show Lake Place Park visitors the peregrines through a spotting scope. After weeks of watching from afar, she was pumped to see them up close.

"It's beyond words to look at them nose to nose," Julie O'Connor said. "It's an exhilarating experience."

After each chick was banded, MacIntyre placed it on a towel. Sitting up, the chicks expressed their displeasure through the rapid "kak-kak-kak" call of their species.

"That's quite a chorus," said Burke's husband, Ed.

"You can hear the difference in the pitch between the males and females," Anderson said. The higher-pitched cries came from the smaller males.

The team banded the chicks in less than 30 minutes, and Ries and MacIntyre left the roof to return the chicks to their nest box. Again the mother peregrine screamed, scolded, stooped and nailed MacIntyre's helmet.

She landed on the nesting box to check her chicks before MacIntyre even climbed back onto the roof.

"This turned out perfect today," he said as he gathered his gear.

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Bob Anderson (from top), Amy Ries and Rob MacIntyre prepare to retrieve four peregrine falcon chicks from the nest box on the Greysolon Plaza.



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Bob Anderson controls the talons of a peregrine falcon chick while drawing blood for DNA research while banding the family at Greysolon Plaza Friday.



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Carly O'Connor, 12, of Duluth gets to hold one of the peregrine falcons that she helped researchers band Friday on the roof of Greysolon Plaza. The researchers named one of the female birds after her.



Clint Austin/News Tribune

A peregrine falcon chick gets banded on the roof of the Greysolon Plaza Friday morning.



Clint Austin/News Tribune

The mother peregrine falcon guards her nest on top of Greysolon Plaza Friday morning.



Clint Austin/News Tribune

Raptor researchers Bob Anderson and Rob MacIntyre band a peregrine falcon chick on the roof of Greysolon Plaza Friday morning.



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A peregrine falcon chick waits to be placed back in the nest box after being tagged by researchers on the Greysolon Plaza Friday morning.