

Peregrine Watch returns to Lake Place Park

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Courtney Johnson and Jennifer Stoltz of Grand Marais had a pleasant surprise Thursday while visiting Duluth.

They got to view peregrine falcons downtown, getting a close-up view through equipment provided by Peregrine Watch.

"I had heard somewhere that there were peregrine falcons in Duluth," Johnson said. "But I had no idea I could come here and watch them. This is wonderful."



Stoltz agreed.

"It's nice to be able to see them, to see the babies," she said, referring to four balls of gray fluff in a nesting box fastened high on the side of the Greysolon Plaza building.

"We just banded them yesterday, so we know there are three females and one male," Peregrine Watch naturalist Julie O'Connor said.

Peregrine Watch naturalist Julie O'Connor hoists Jake Ford, 5, of Stillwater, Minn., to spotting scope level Thursday afternoon so he can watch peregrine falcons. [STEVE KUCHERA / NEWS TRIBUNE]

This is the second year that Peregrine Watch, a collaborative effort between the city of Duluth and the Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory, has set up spotting scopes in Lake Place Park so anyone can watch the peregrine family. Last year, more than 3,600 people watched the falcons through a scope. This year, the program has increased its staff and hours, and more than 250 people have used the scopes in the program's first five days.

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"Lots of people are coming back, checking on the birds," O'Connor said.

And the program went high tech this year — placing a small camera in the nesting box to monitor the birds. Some viewers Thursday alternated between watching the falcons through the scope and via a small monitor.

"She [O'Connor] was just saying they are trying to get the images on the Web site," said Lee Ormand of Duluth. "That would be neat."

Ormand was a dedicated, if not obsessed, bird watcher as a child. "My parents thought it was unhealthy, so they took my bird book away," he said. But he'd never seen a peregrine until Thursday.

"They are cute — floppy with huge feet," he said of the chicks. "I'm happy they are still around."

Peregrine are impressive hunters — catching small birds in flight, often in dives that can exceed 200 mph. But their population was almost wiped out, largely because of DDT use. The ban of DDT helped the birds recover enough to be removed from the federal Endangered Species List in 1999. There are

about 43 nesting pairs of peregrines in Minnesota, 30 in Wisconsin and an estimated 3,000 birds across North America.

Efforts to help peregrine falcons recover included placing nesting boxes in likely nesting locations. The Greysolon Plaza building received its first nesting box in 1992. This is the fifth-straight year that falcons have hatched young in the box — 16 in all.

This year's chicks hatched on May 15 and 17. They'll probably begin flying between June 19 and 26 — what O'Connor calls fledge week.

Meanwhile, viewers are able to watch the adults chase predators away, hunt and feed their young.

"The chicks are growing significantly every day, we see more and more of their fuzzy little heads peeking up over the edge of the box with each passing day," O'Connor said.

As people stoop to peek through the scope or watch the young on the monitor, O'Connor and other watch personnel talk about peregrine behavior, food, habitat and history — including the known history of two of the 16 young who have been banded at this nest box. One from 2005 was spotted in the Twin Cities, alive and well, last year.

One of last year's females hasn't fared as well. She was found in the Twin Cities last fall, just days after starting her migration south from Duluth, with a badly broken wing. She has undergone two operations at a rehabilitation center.

"The goal is that she will be released to the wild," O'Connor said.

Many of the people who stop to view the peregrines have questions about the birds.

"The most common question is 'Do they eat seagulls?'" (They don't — preferring smaller species, such as pigeons), O'Connor said.

"The other big question is 'Is this your job?'" O'Connor said. "I try not to giggle. It is, and I love it."

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