

WINGBEATS

Issue 2026 3





The Return of the **FASTEST BIRD ON THE BLOCK**

RAPTOR Inc. Helped Bring Peregrine Falcons Back to Cincinnati

From Plummeting to Soaring

By the 1960s, peregrine falcons had vanished from the Midwest. Their demise wasn't due to hunters. Nor bulldozers. The culprit was the chemical DDT. Like the better-known bald eagle story, DDT climbed the food chain and left peregrine eggshells thin and fragile. By 1970, the speedy falcons were gone from the eastern U.S., and the federal government called the species "Endangered."

"Hacking" is an informal rehabilitation and falconry term for transitioning a young bird to independence.

The bird lives in a protected open-air enclosure, fed by humans but without direct contact, and gains experience through free flight.

Leading the peregrine comeback was Tom Cade of Cornell University and a team of ornithologists and falconers. They established a Peregrine Fund, which then led the effort to "hack" captive-bred peregrine chicks in nesting boxes on high ledges. This process enabled helpers to feed the chicks with minimal human contact, using a slot in the box. This ensured that the chicks would stay wary of people.

That successful story of feeding peregrine chicks on ledges came home in 1990 and 1991, when thirteen peregrine falcons were released in downtown Cincinnati. RAPTOR Inc. volunteers, working with the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, watched those youngsters take their early, wobbly swings at freedom from their building ledges in the city.

A first nesting pair followed in 1993. They were Falcor, a male peregrine or tiercel, who had been hacked in Cincinnati, and Falcar, a female from Michigan. The pair settled in and raised chicks in a nest box atop the PNC Tower at Fourth and Vine Streets. RAPTOR Inc. monitored the site from 1993 to 1999.

Cliffhanger in the City

Peregrines don't build nests. They find a bare, gravelly ledge. That would be a sheer cliff if they can find one, or maybe a tall building if they couldn't. Cincinnati's peregrines treat the local skyline like a mountain range, stooping at up to 200 mph or more between skyscrapers the way their country cousins streak through canyons. In 2016, a pair nested on the 11th-floor window ledge of the Mercantile Library at 414 Walnut Street, and the pair kept returning. But an open ledge is an exposed ledge. Eggs on a cold, damp surface can fail even with attentive parents.

So, RAPTOR Inc. built a sturdy, gravel-lined nest box where the falcons already liked to be. It gave some shelter, the same trusted view of wide-open sky, plus inside access for staff and volunteers. The pair moved right in.

This publication was formerly called "Hackback," which is bringing a bird back under human control after a setback.

Four Eggs and a Mother's Day Surprise

In spring 2025, the din of nearby construction drove the Mercantile pair, Juliet and Beck, from their beloved ledge to a site behind a nearby air conditioning unit. That nest failed. But peregrines are stubborn in the best way. The pair returned to the Mercantile nest box in 2026.

Back in the RAPTOR-built box, Juliet laid an egg on April 2, and by April 9, the clutch was four strong. The first chick fittingly hatched on Mother's Day, a second the next morning, and a third soon after. Three healthy eyases. That unhatched fourth egg went to research at the Cincinnati Museum Center.

Banding: The Tiny I.D. That Tells a Big Story

At about three weeks old, our Mercantile chicks received some bling. RAPTOR Inc. volunteer Jeff Hays banded the trio, Min, Jin, and Lee, named for author Min Jin Lee, whose Fall 2026 exhibit is coming to the Mercantile Library. Too young to fly, but old enough to be sexed by leg width, the chicks received lightweight, uniquely numbered aluminum bands. These lifetime bracelets provide permanent identification and help researchers track individual bird movements.

RAPTOR Inc. has banded raptors and released them into the wild since fall 1994. Every band we place on a bird is a data point, with every band recovered a chapter we wouldn't otherwise read.

Little Brother Hitches a Ride

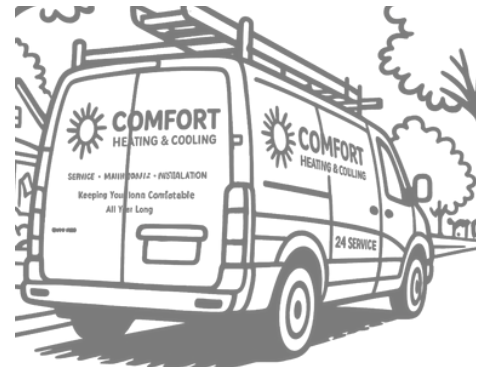
Fledging is the awkward teenage phase of falcon life, and Lee took it somewhere unexpected. An HVAC contractor finished a job at a worksite downtown and noticed a bird on the roof of his service van. He figured it would flap off the second he pulled away. It did not. That bird gripped the roof rack the whole way to Reading. He was a hitchhiker with no thumbs. Kids these days! That escapade earned Lee a few days at the RAPTOR Hospital before his discharge with a clean bill of health, and a ticket back to his family at the library.

James Enderson, a conservation biologist at Colorado College, was a pioneer in captive breeding of the North American peregrine falcon. Descendants of his breeding line helped restore peregrines in several regions.

RAPTOR Inc.: Then, Now, and Next

A nest box, and these three newest fledged peregrines make a fine feel-good story. They're also the visible tip of 35-plus years of quiet, stubborn work.

We were there for the first Cincinnati release in 1990 and monitored those pioneers in 1991. We built the box that gave Juliet and Beck a safe place to raise a family. We banded the chicks. We even fetched one out of Reading. And



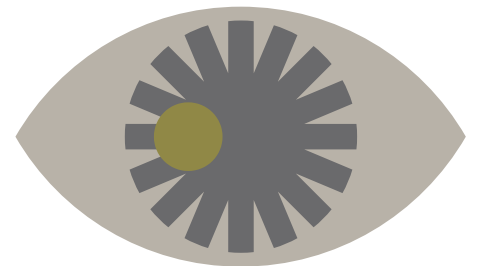
when 2025 went sideways, we waited, ready when the birds came back.

Conservation isn't always dramatic. Sometimes it's showing up, building a box, and climbing eleven stories to band a fuzzy eyas that will one day stoop over the city that saved its kind.

That's RAPTOR Inc. That's what your membership and support make possible.

The peregrine is no longer endangered, but it's still monitored, still banded, still watched.

Recovery isn't a moment, it's a practice. And we intend to keep practicing.





Credit: Hunter Mitchell



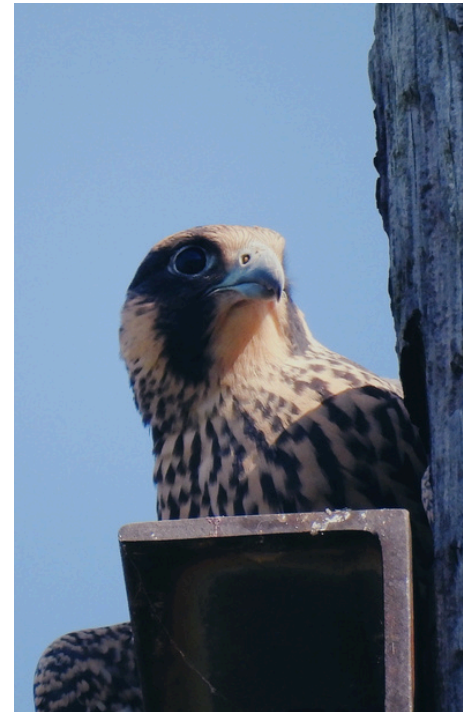
Credit: Jordan West

How Do You Clock A Falcon?

For years, guesses at a peregrine's stooping speed ran from 70 to 300 mph. In 1999, master falconer and skydiver Ken Franklin set out to pin the number down, supported by a team of mathematicians, engineers, and skydiving videographers.

A skydiver's altimeter chip, just 0.4 ounce, was fastened beneath the tail feathers of his falcon, Frightful, where it wouldn't foul her flight. Over dozens of jumps from a Cessna at 17,000 feet, the altimeter chip logged how far she fell in each given slice of time. Franklin and his videographer

wore altimeter chips too, and a fourth chip rode inside the lure that Franklin tossed to play the part of prey. Four readings cross-checked after every jump. Each time, Frightful matched Franklin's speed. A typical skydiver's terminal velocity is about 120 mph, but advanced techniques can reduce drag and increase the free-fall rate. With practice, Franklin increased his free-fall speed to 242 mph, fast enough to cover a football field every second. Frightful was there right beside him. The QR code here links to the 2005 [Smithsonian](#) magazine article describing Franklin's efforts.



Credit: Hunter Mitchell

Falcons in history

A few disputed accounts trace falconry's origins to as early as 2000 BC in ancient Mesopotamia, while abundant evidence of the practice emerges across the world between 700 and 300 BC. Centuries later, Holy

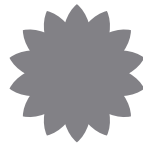
Roman Emperor Frederick II (1194–1250) elevated the practice through his influential treatise, "The Art of Hunting with Birds," even as falconry also became an icon of Arabian culture.

In the early literature, falcon referred only to a female peregrine, with a tiercel

being a male raptor. Even today falconers use historic jargon. Do you know these terms? See Page 7 for definitions.

- EYAS
- HAGGARD
- IMP
- HARD-PENNED

Keep On Keepin' On



Credit: Hunter Mitchell

HEY, I'M Min

POSITION: Big Sister

I BELIEVE IN: learning to fly without gear

FIND ME: 11th Floor of the Mercantile Library Building

I'M A: City Girl

I LOVE TO: Play with my sibs




Min

HEY, I'M Jim

POSITION: Li/Sister

I BELIEVE IN: Being whimsy

FIND ME: acting as mediator between Sigis & Ol Bro

I'M A: middlechild

I LOVE TO: chirp




Jim

HEY, I'M Lee

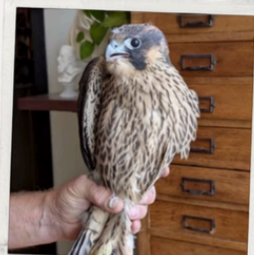
POSITION: Brother

I BELIEVE IN: Adventure

FIND ME: Hitching a ride on HVAC Van's

I'M A: Only Brother

I LOVE TO: make silly faces

Lee

Credits: Mercantile Library Instagram account, photos: Jordan West

Conservation Success All Around Town

The Mercantile Library peregrines have rightly claimed much of this issue's attention, but they occupy only one ledge in a much larger urban landscape.

In Hamilton, a pair of peregrines nest on a railroad bridge over the Great Miami River, a favorite spot for members of the Cincinnati Birders Facebook Group. Its members were among the first to call for aid when one of these Hamilton birds was injured in a train strike in 2025, and later treated in RAPTOR Hospital's ICU.

In June 2026, clear evidence told of a second downtown Cincinnati

peregrine nest. An unknown, newly fledged chick appeared near the Hyatt Hotel. For days it perched on the skylight, unreachable. Finally it settled at street level and was whisked off to the RAPTOR Hospital.

A peregrine's territory is more than a circle around its eyrie. Birds fiercely defend the immediate nest area. Broader home ranges can extend for many miles. In cities, pairs may nest remarkably close together. One study found adjacent nests as close as 350 yards apart, when the average separation was a bit under 1.5 miles.

Cincinnati's intentional plan to increase affordable housing is not designed with peregrines in mind, but every new urban nest is a

welcome reminder of the conservation recovery that began to gain momentum in the 1990s.



Credit: Jordan West

GIFTS



Thanks to the stakeholders listed on this page who unselfishly gave us generous support in the second calendar quarter of 2026.

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Osprey - \$1,000 - \$9,999:

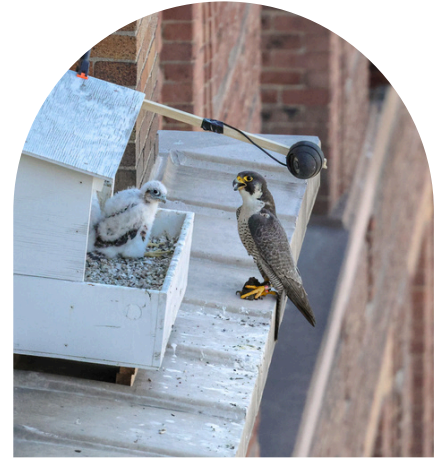
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Photo: Hunter Mitchell

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FALCONING TERMS

From Page 4

- **EYAS** – A young raptor, whether in its nest or acquired from its nest.
- **HAGGARD**– a wild hawk in it's second year or more of plumage (adult).
- **HARD-PENNED** – The stage when all feathers have grown in, either after a molt for an adult and after the downy stage for an eyas.
- **IMP** – repairing a broken feather by implanting it with a feather from the same or a different bird.

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Sponsor a Banded Raptor

Since the fall of 1994, RAPTOR Inc. has been banding birds released back into the wild. Each tiny band is a symbol of recovery and a new beginning, and every return offers clues to the our rehabilitation work and the resilience of the birds we return to nature. Through our **Sponsor a Banded Raptor** program, you can join that story. Sponsors receive a personalized certificate with the bird's unique band details (sent to the US Geological Survey's Bird Banding Lab) and a Fact Sheet that reveals what makes the species remarkable.

☐ Yes, I would like to sponsor the banded raptor species indicated below, and you will contact me to arrange an alternative if the selection(s) is (are) not available. **My \$250 payment (check or card information) is enclosed.**

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