



## Yosemite Conservancy News

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### **Once-Endangered Peregrine Falcons Flying High in Yosemite National Park Thanks to Collaborative Protection Program**

**The number of breeding peregrine pairs in Yosemite has doubled since the Peregrine Falcon Protection Program began in 2009**

**YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK, July 31, 2024** – Once-endangered peregrine falcons are flying high in Yosemite National Park with new nests and baby falcons located this spring and the number of breeding pairs doubling since 2009 when a formal program to protect them began, according to the National Park Service in Yosemite.

“It’s a remarkable comeback with new discoveries resulting from a collaborative strategy involving climbers, the National Park Service and Yosemite Conservancy,” said Alexandria Walker, Biological Science Technician for the National Park Service in Yosemite. “Peregrines hunt, soar, and nest on and around the park’s granite cliffs, domes, and spires because of a dedicated effort to protect them.”

This year, National Park Service wildlife managers in Yosemite studied 43 cliff sites, from iconic Valley features such as El Capitan, Upper Yosemite Fall and Glacier Point to locations in Tuolumne’s high country and Wawona. In 2024, they documented 17 breeding pairs, 25 baby peregrines and 15 nests. Since the official start of the Peregrine Falcon Protection Program 15 years ago when biologist Jeff Maurer launched an effort to protect peregrines through targeted closures of climbing areas, Yosemite researchers observed 51 new nesting sites.

After Maurer’s death that same year, his family made a gift to Yosemite Conservancy in his memory to ensure his work could go on. In total, Yosemite Conservancy donors have contributed \$452,000 to the Peregrine Falcon Protection Program.

“Yosemite’s successful strategy stands out for its focus on balancing falcon management and visitor recreation. While Yosemite’s walls and domes offer ideal habitat for the raptor, that rocky habitat also makes the park a coveted climbing destination,” said Frank Dean, President, Yosemite Conservancy.

“The support from Yosemite Conservancy donors for this program and the conscientious involvement of climbers, have created a sustained and successful peregrine recovery effort,” said Sarah Stock, Wildlife Ecologist for the National Park Service in Yosemite.

In Yosemite, wildlife managers survey dozens of cliff sites to search for and monitor nests throughout the season, and they impose, adjust or lift closures of climbing routes based on each peregrine family’s activity. Buffer zones designated above the cliffs prevent helicopters from flying unnecessarily close to falcon nests. This is done while closing no more than 5% of climbing routes at a time starting in March and all routes are usually back open by mid-July, once young peregrines have left their nests.

“Young falcons depend on their parents for food and protection. If climbers accidentally scare adult falcons from the walls, the nestlings might starve or be eaten,” said Sean Smith, Biological Science Technician for the National Park Service in Yosemite.



The Yosemite climbing community plays a crucial role in ensuring the success of the park's proactive, adaptive approach to protecting peregrines. In the early years of recovery efforts, Yosemite climbers worked with wildlife experts to replace DDT-thinned eggs with healthy chicks in cliffside falcon nests. Today, climbers learn about which routes are temporarily off-limits, and about the importance of respecting the closures, via signs posted near climbing routes, through updates on the Yosemite National Park website, at "climber coffee" gatherings, and during conversations with climbing rangers and with one another.

"By avoiding off-limits areas and educating fellow adventurers, climbers help ensure falcon fledglings have the best chance of survival," said Jesse McGahey, a Park Ranger in Yosemite.

The peregrine falcon, with its white chest, sharp beak and yellow eyes, glides on a 40-inch wingspan transforming into an avian arrow, skydiving in a "stoop" that can surpass 200 miles per hour. Young peregrines, called juveniles, are fluffier, with streaked coloring and a brown face mask. Peregrines prey on other birds, and on bats; they often catch their meals in mid-air.

"It's fitting that their name means 'wanderer' since they are found on six continents and often nest high above the ground. In urban areas, they make homes on tall structures. In the wild, they look for cliffs, such as the ones lining Yosemite Valley," said Dean.

In 1978, climbers discovered nesting peregrines in Yosemite after a 36 year absence. Before the mid-20th century, there were more than 3,800 adult peregrine pairs in the United States. Falcon populations plummeted in the 1950s through the 1970s, largely due to DDT poisoning. By 1974, only 324 pairs remained, with zero in Yosemite. Peregrines were declared a federally endangered species in 1970, and they were added to the California endangered species list the following year. Thanks to a nationwide ban on DDT in 1972 and concerted rehabilitation efforts, peregrines have made a comeback. Partners in Flight Science Committee estimates the population in the US and Canada to include 72,000 individuals. The falcons were removed from the federal endangered species list in 1999, and from the California list in 2009, though they remain a "fully protected" species in the state and federally protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Today the Conservancy continues to support research into their long-term health and survival.

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### **About Yosemite Conservancy**

For more than 100 years, Yosemite Conservancy has been supporting the conservation of Yosemite's natural resources and helping people develop deep ties to the park. Thanks to generous donors, in recent years, we have provided more than \$162 million in grants to Yosemite for more than 850 projects, and more than \$200 million in overall support in the past decade alone, including securing matching funds for major projects and in-kind donations of staffing, services, and park-based programming. In 2024, we are providing \$18 million in total support and funding around 60 new grants to the National Park Service for projects in the park. The Conservancy's guided adventures and art classes, donor events, volunteer opportunities, wilderness services, and bookstores help people from across the country and world connect with Yosemite. Learn more at [yosemite.org](http://yosemite.org).

Photos. [See and download photos](#)

1. Peregrine falcon juvenile in flight. Credit: James McGrew.
2. Peregrine falcon nest and babies. Credit: Julie Miller.
3. Peregrine falcon landing in a nest on granite cliffs. Credit: Peggy Sells.