

GLASGOW PEREGRINE PROJECT – JOHN SIMPSON

As a long-standing SOC and Central Scotland Raptor Study Group (SRSG) member, I monitor Peregrine sites in west Loch Lomond, continuing a study started by John Mitchell many decades ago. Like many Peregrine populations, my birds have undergone a long-term decline.

In 2022 and for the first time, there were no active sites in my area. With birds reported breeding in the city of Glasgow after years of absence, I instigated a study to identify all known nesting locations and to see if there is any immigration into the city from further afield. The food supply and nesting opportunities seemed plentiful, so are hill Peregrines moving in to exploit these resources?

With the sad passing of Iain Gibson later in 2022, I took over as SOC Clyde Area Local Recorder. The opportunity arose to bring all the city's conservation bodies together with the aim of enhancing ornithological recording and from there, the Glasgow Peregrine Project, a SOC-led initiative, was born. The vision: conservation through collaboration, coordination, and cooperation.



Peregrine © Steven Mcgrath

The project builds upon some excellent work by Steven Mcgrath, a Glasgow cabbie with a long-standing interest in the city's Peregrines and someone who has championed their conservation interests. He has established the history of our colour-ringed female, 'L7'. Fledged from a nest on Norwich Cathedral in 2019, she has flown the 380 miles north to Glasgow. Steven maintains contact with the Norwich team and has established a Facebook page with colleague David Hodge called Glasgow University Peregrines to post pictures that support the project aims and objectives.

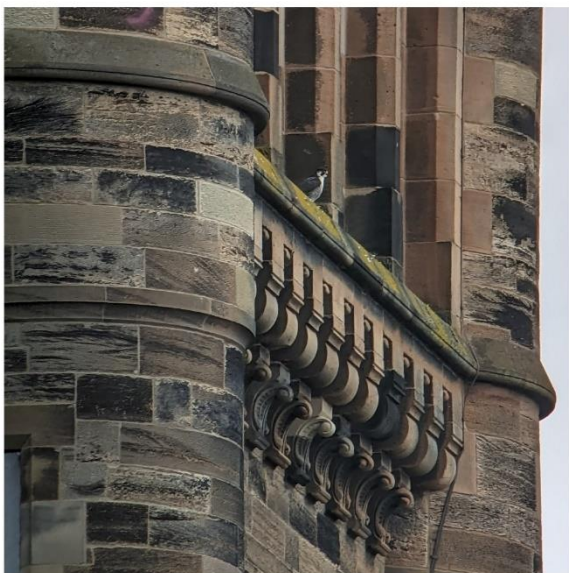
Many hours of raptor work have established that the birds are the only pair in the city. They tried to nest initially at Glasgow Cathedral in 2021 but failed. 2022 saw the birds take over an old Raven's nest at Glasgow University and they successfully produced three young. However, an early fledging bird that grounded itself in these iconic surroundings saw the involvement of Clarke Elsby, the University's building surveyor, who supervised the return of

the chick to the nest area with the help of Mark Rafferty of the SSPCA, Steven Mcgrath and David Hodge. Given that the Raven's nest is in an inaccessible part of the Gilbert Scott Tower, Clarke took the initiative and arranged for the provision of a new nest box, complete with nest cams. It is likely that in time, the Raven's nest will disintegrate, and the birds will hopefully move into the Rolls Royce option provided by Clarke.

In late February 2023, I found that last year's nest was still very much in favour and looked the likely nest site for the approaching breeding season. By 19th March, I noted copulation at the University and Kelvingrove Museum, with both adults making repeated visits into the Raven's nest on the Gilbert Scott Tower. All was looking good for a 2023 breeding attempt. The birds' excited high-pitched calls echoed around the quadrangles and coupled with low flights around the University grounds, made for a memorable experience.

By 3 April, breeding was well underway and coincided with a visit by Bob Doris MSP, the Scottish Government Species Champion for Peregrine Falcon. The visit was supported by me, Paul Baker from the SOC Clyde Branch (who just happens to work at the University), and SRSG Parliamentary Officer Kelvin Thomson. Other key partners were invited, and the birds really performed for the assembled visitors. It gave the visit team the opportunity to discuss Peregrine conservation issues both locally and nationally and allowed for the public to view the birds for the first time.

It was at this point that the organised Peregrine Watches started, with no more than a couple of telescopes and willing volunteers, including SOC Clyde Branch Chair Zul Bhatia, who drew on his decades of engagement experience, inviting passers-by and those who picked up on the social media feeds to observe the birds.



Peregrine watch

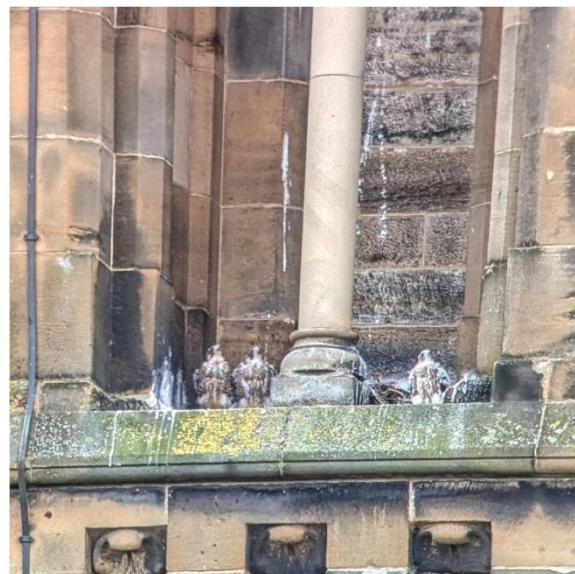
What has been an unqualified success is our partnership with RSPB. Senior Conservation Officer Toby Wilson (who is also a SOC Clyde Branch committee member) and Conservation Officer Scott Shanks, who are both based in Glasgow, have been simply superb in their support and delivery of the project. Their knowledge, patience, friendly and informative interaction have been the hallmark of our public engagement.

As we all enjoyed the summer sunshine, more Peregrine Watches were organised, and for

each viewing, which are only two hours long, over three hundred people attended! Visitors to the city arrived from all over the world and joined many of the birders from Glasgow's conservation groups. SOC HQ were excellent in recognising the potential of the initiative and supplied branded Club clothing and a banner stand to act as a rallying point for all the visitors. Glasgow Natural History Society approved a grant of £500, which was a lovely gesture, and this has been backed by pledges of more funds from other groups. However, I'm determined to show that we can produce creative and imaginative public engagement projects that publicize the SOC, advance Clyde ornithology, and make a positive conservation impact at little or no cost.

We aim to make the Peregrine Watch events free and accessible to all no matter your age or circumstance. The viewing area is an easy-to-find floorspace suitable for all standards of mobility toilets are available within the Huntarian Art Gallery next door and there are innumerable cafés and eateries locally. Scopes are provided and guided walks into the university grounds give everyone the chance to see the birds a little closer and allow for photographic opportunities. The sessions are conducted with friendly, informative enthusiasm coupled with a pride in the city of Glasgow.

Most birders will have seen Peregrine Falcons before, but not like this! The watchpoint gives visitors a wonderful vantage point to watch incubation and nest changeovers as well as prey being brought into the nest and chicks being fed by the parents. The adults would often protect the nest from Lesser Black-backed Gulls, chasing them and screaming their way up and down University Avenue toward a busy Byres Road with its many shops, bars and cafés.



Peregrine watch

Everyone who attended got to watch the birds develop over the weeks, and in late June, they produced three young, which fledged as one of the Watch sessions was underway, much to the delight of those present. I can think of no other site in Scotland that allows you to view Peregrines in the nest in such accessible circumstances. Once those eyes go to the scopes, the most common feedback from visitors is "WOW!". The café culture and pedestrianised location works so well for all and with the help and active support from Glasgow University and the Huntarian Art Gallery, Peregrine Watch has been an unqualified success and has greatly enhanced the SOC's reputation.

The three chicks, two females and one male, are the platform for the next phase of the project, which is the study of post-fledging success and dispersal of young from their natal area. This is a rarely studied aspect of their biology, and given the huge public involvement, it's the public, more specifically the city's photographers, that are making the greatest impact. Each date-stamped picture with a time, date, and place provides the evidence of the birds' presence and as I collate the returns, I would just like to say thanks for all their efforts.

The project will continue throughout the autumn and winter with several new raptor workers joining the Central Scotland team, all of whom will be briefed and commence monitoring the movements, hunting flights, roost sites and perches of each of the Peregrines. Prey range and availability will be assessed over this period too as other Peregrines are starting to appear in the city, probably from hill territories in the Clyde Area.

John Simpson
SOC Clyde Area Bird Recorder

September 2023