



## Chapter 3

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# Territory and Travels

As the fastest of raptors, peregrines should have few enemies. Yet, there are a number of carnivores, mammals as well as birds, that occasionally make a meal of a falcon. Quite apart from nestling losses to the treacherous great-horned owl, the odd adult falcon, defending its territory, may end up in the clutches of goshawk or eagle. However, in open combat, the peregrine's major enemy is its own kind. On the breeding grounds, pairs fight fiercely over eyrie sites and the chance to procreate, male against male, female against female. In the Canadian Arctic where territoriality has been studied closely by Gordon Court, Mark Bradley and Robin Johnstone, competing falcons of both sexes do not hesitate to strike and grapple with each other, sometimes leading to fatalities. In downtown Edmonton, where peregrine breeding sites are hotly contested each spring, at least two females have been found dead near the nest ledge and partly eaten, probably by the victorious falcon.

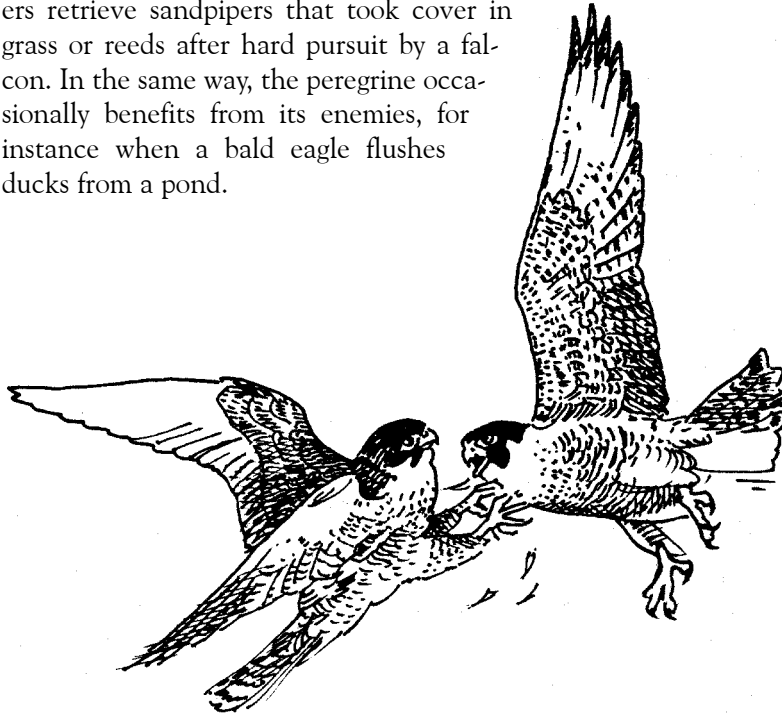
Outside the breeding season, intraspecific conflict between peregrines is relentless. Ever jealous, falcons attract falcons. If you watch one of them, sooner or later you'll discover another. He or she may join a hunt in progress or try to steal a kill. During winter, territorial falcons make their most vigorous flights evicting their own kind, usually their own sex. A male and a female, not necessarily a mated pair, may tolerate each other although she might rob him of his prey. Adults also evict and/or rob immatures. The fact that some first-year peregrines starve is because they are excluded from the best hunting grounds, which are dominated by adults.

Competition for food, not for territory, also exists between peregrines and several other predatory birds that take the same species of prey. Piracy, or klepto-parasitism as the experts call it, is a com-



mon offense. The more powerful raptors seldom pass up a free meal if they can take it by force from their smaller kin. As detailed in several chapters, the bald eagle is the peregrine's nemesis wherever the two share coastal habitat. This ancient enmity is no longer a fact of life in much of western Europe, where the sea eagle was extirpated centuries ago. There, the female peregrine is now the undisputed queen of birds. Her dapper little king does not lack for enemies, though, even in the eagle's absence. Buteo hawks can constitute a serious nuisance. Also the harrier, if persistent, sometimes manages to chase a tiercel off his catch, forcing him to hunt again.

No better or no worse than its enemies, the peregrine is not above piracy itself. It is quick to commandeer prey from any smaller falcon or hawk. Merlins, kestrels and sharp-shins are just as quick to comply for fear of becoming prey themselves! Peregrines even steal mice from the hard-working harrier! Stooped at repeatedly, the hawk reluctantly jettisons its catch. Half the times the tiny morsel falls into dense vegetation where it is lost to both. In his turn, the smart hawk sometimes gains by following the peregrine. I saw harriers retrieve sandpipers that took cover in grass or reeds after hard pursuit by a falcon. In the same way, the peregrine occasionally benefits from its enemies, for instance when a bald eagle flushes ducks from a pond.



## Hurrying home

In temperate and maritime climates, such as along the Pacific Coast, adult peregrines are home bodies that stay all year near their nesting territory, keeping the place occupied and jealously guarded at all times. By contrast, in the Far North they are inveterate travelers that have always bred as close to the permafrost as possible. Like other Arctic migrants, they hurry home each spring to take advantage of the rich food resources, unlimited spaces and long daylight hours of the thawing barrenlands. Their first priority is to establish a territory. Competition can be intense. On the plus side, arch enemies such as the great-horned owl and the bald eagle are absent from the treeless tundra and ice-bound coasts. Serious antagonists such as the gyrfalcon and the golden eagle are few and far between. In favorable weather and with sufficient prey, the peregrine's breeding cycle is completed in the shortest possible time, about three months. Before the brief northern summer has come to an end, the falcons hurry south again. Forced to skip temperate regions, which are occupied by other peregrines, some of these long-range migrants cross the equator to winter deep in South America.

During the few weeks that migration takes place, peregrines can turn up anywhere, although they tend to follow traditional pathways along coastlines, lake shores or mountain ranges. They are not afraid to fly over wide expanses of water. There are numerous reports of falcons alighting on the masts of ships far from land. Some stayed aboard for several days, during which time they made brief forays to hunt small sea birds. The most impressive record is of a peregrine that boarded a freighter 750 miles (1,200 km) west of Africa and disappeared a few days later when it was still more than 600 miles (1,000 km) from South America.

Along the eastern U.S. coast, young peregrines, during their first fall migration, may leave Atlantic headlands to fly to Florida and Cuba over the open ocean, hundreds of miles out at sea. Pushed by tail winds, they remain airborne during the night when warm air currents over the water allow them to soar and sail. This surprising travel pattern was discovered by William Cochran who trapped young falcons on Assateague Island, Maryland, and fitted them with tiny radios attached to a tail feather. The birds were subsequently tracked