

Falcons Roost at Xcel

PEREGRINES POWER PLANT PROGRAM SUCCEEDS

BY BOB ANDERSON

The peregrine-utility program began 20 years ago when an employee of Northern States Power, now an operating subsidiary of Xcel Energy, reported a peregrine falcon at the Alan S. King Plant in Oak Park Heights, Minn. The peregrine falcon species was highly endangered at the time and I initially thought that particular bird was probably a Cooper's hawk, another species commonly mistaken for the peregrine falcon. To put the peregrine's status into perspective, last year more than 300 young falcons fledged from 110 sites in the central United States and Canada. But in 1988, just 12 falcons fledged from only five sites. Twenty years ago, the future of the species was still much in doubt and it seemed unlikely that a peregrine falcon had turned up in Oak Park Heights.

However, a photograph taken by employee John Migler confirmed that the mystery bird was, in fact, a peregrine falcon.

Elated by the news, we watched her for several days to determine her favorite perches. She displayed a clear affinity for the handrail of the catwalk on the 400-foot level of the 800-foot stack. The Raptor Resource Project arranged a meeting with then-plant manager Tom Thompsen and plant engineer Mike Miser, who both agreed to let us install a nest box. The peregrine-utility program had begun.

The following spring, observers witnessed two falcons at the nest. The female was Mae, a daughter



The King plant in Minnesota was the first plant to install a nest box for falcons.



Nora, a nesting falcon, is one of the beneficiaries of a coordinated recovery effort. PHOTOS COURTESY OF XCEL ENERGY

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of MF-1, whom we bred and released in Minneapolis. MF-1 was the first peregrine falcon to return to breed in the wild after the species' extinction east of the Mississippi River due to DDT. The extensively used pesticide interfered in the eggshell formation of meat- and fish-eating birds. It would be difficult to exaggerate DDT's effect on the peregrine falcon. In the early 1940s, a Wisconsin biologist named Joseph Hickey determined that there were more than 200 pairs of peregrines east of the Mississippi River. By 1968, they were gone. Mae, the first falcon to nest at a power plant, pioneered an unusual marriage between industry and conservation that would prove critical to bringing the peregrine back.

Over the next few years, Mae and her mate successfully produced babies each spring. NSP biologist Dan Orr suggested mounting nest boxes at other plants. The King power plant nest box and additional boxes quickly became home to nesting peregrine falcons. NSP's Sherco plant nest box came online in 1992, followed by Minnesota Power and Light's Cohasset facility; NSP's Blackdog, Monticello and Prairie Island plants; Dairyland Power's Alma plant; NSP's Riverside and Dairyland's Genoa plants; and Alliant Energy's plant in Lansing, Iowa. In 1998, we worked with the NSP King plant to install an Internet-available camera. As one of the world's first nest cams, the King site attracted more than 1 million visitors the first year, temporarily making NSP one of the world's busiest corporate Web sites.

As other power companies began following NSP's lead, we began fielding calls about peregrine falcons and power plants on an almost daily basis. In 2004, the Raptor Resource Project worked with

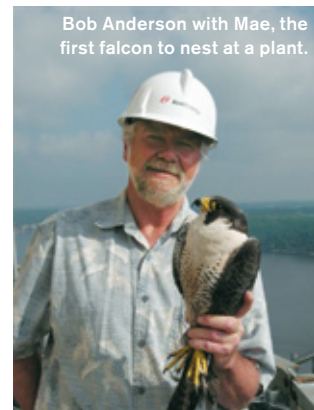
the Electric Power Research Institute, Dan Orr and John Thiel, Dairyland Power's biologist, to produce *Attracting and Managing the Peregrine Falcon* at Electric Utilities. This manual, which can be downloaded free from EPRI's Web site, provides guidelines for establishing and maintaining nesting peregrine falcons.

As the number of peregrines nesting at power plants increased, it became clear the industry was a key player in peregrine recovery. Between 1990 and 2007, according to statistics from the Midwest peregrine falcon database, more than 880 falcons were banded at utility facilities and smoke-

stacks – over 25 percent of the entire population. Falcons hatched at smokestacks comprised the second-largest group, and more smokestack falcon chicks successfully leave the nest than do falcons hatched on buildings, cliffs, and bridges.

It is important to remember that this program began with the best of intentions. When the Raptor Resource Project representatives met with employees and managers at the Alan S. King plant back in 1998, we were all concerned with restoring the peregrine falcon population. The King plant could have turned our proposal down – it must have seemed risky to turn a smokestack into a home for such a highly endangered species – but they chose to work with us instead. Our utility partners have helped the peregrine-utility program grow from one peregrine falcon nest box at one plant to peregrine falcon, owl, kestrel and even osprey nests nationwide. Sometimes we hear that power companies join the utility-peregrine program just for the positive PR. That isn't true. However, when we review the tremendous contribution that the electrical generating industry has made to the return of the peregrine falcon, they certainly deserve recognition. Thanks for all you've done. ☺

Bob Anderson is director of the Raptor Resource Project based in Decorah, Iowa.



Bob Anderson with Mae, the first falcon to nest at a plant.

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