

A good home for peregrines . . . and a bonus for Woking

John Bannister

“What hope is there for a youngster these days to get onto the property ladder?”

With the steady rise in our population since the organochloride pesticide scourge of the 1950s and 60s, coastal haunts are now over-subscribed. You can't get a rocky ledge with a sea view anywhere for love nor money.

So we've moved inland to urban locations and onto man-made cliffs.

After all it will still only take us less than an hour to get to the beach and food is more plentiful in suburbia.”



Life is just as tough for young peregrines as it is for their human equivalents. So we in Guildford Environmental Forum (GEF) decided to lend a helping hand.

It has been known by peregrine watchers for a long time, over many years in fact, that a pair of peregrines has fancied a tall office block in Woking near the station. Sixteen storeys high with fine views in every direction and plentiful food supplies all year round. Woking shopping centre is immediately below. The office block in question is Export House, which used to be called the BAT building, but British American Tobacco moved out. When approached, BAT had said no to a nest box for peregrine falcons as they might pose a risk to their employees – a total lack of understanding of risk on BAT's part. (They were quite happy one presumes if their employees smoked.) But the birds kept on trying despite BAT's obduracy and their eggs kept being flooded or human disturbance meant they were abandoned. Export House roof is covered in air conditioning units, telecommunications masts and cabling, which need maintenance from time to time.

Peregrines are Schedule 1 birds and you need a licence to approach them or their nests and any disturbance is illegal. Therefore GEF decided last June to step in and make a new representation, this time to Woking Shopping, owned by Woking Borough Council who also own Export House, all under the collective management of an enlightened man, Martin Pooley, Head of Operations. Martin's response was instantaneous and totally positive. He would welcome a nest box for peregrines and his view was fully backed by the council.

Getting started

Over the following months we put together a team of six experts and went to work. The six were Nick Dixon (urban peregrine specialist), James Sellen (wildlife photographer working at the nearby WWF HQ), Denis Corley (friend and long-time peregrine enthusiast), Richard Denyer (Woking bird ringer), Jason Fathers (Wildlife Windows Ltd and nest box builder) and myself (a peregrine fanatic) acting in a co-ordinating

role. Many meetings and site visits led to a decision to install a nest box in the side of Export House at the highest level, facing north-west, accessible from the utility floor just below roof level. The utility floor houses equipment such as lift controls, air filters, pumps and other electrical units. Nick weighed up all the evidence on the birds' use of the building and gave us a report suggesting, after much deliberation, a small locked room on the utility floor giving access to the ventilation panels that circle Export House. The box would be installed through one of the ventilation panels, giving direct access to the outside ledge which we knew the birds used. He sketched out the design and recommended Jason to build the box. They made a fantastic team. Because a pair of very broody peregrines was right there literally on top of the chosen spot, a camera would go in with the box and be fitted out for WiFi. Our aim was to have the box in place in time for the March 2016 nesting time.

An expensive business

The cost of working safely at high levels on buildings is not cheap. One of the existing panels had to be removed and replaced with another metal panel cut out to take the nest box. Power had to be laid on for the camera, an expensive item in itself, and WiFi. If I told you that the installed cost was in excess of £8,000, those of you who have worked in industry won't be surprised. In fact Woking thinks it's getting a good deal, because if all goes well it will be the only place in Surrey with a webcam broadcasting from a peregrine falcon nest box with young. The business potential is enormous as people visiting Woking will celebrate the peregrines, all adding to Woking's impressive environmental record – namely the town centre energy plant that provides heating, cooling and electricity to many buildings in the town and huge arrays of solar PV (which they embraced from the beginning, unlike Guildford). It's a nice feature that you can see solar panels on the website looking through the nest box. Woking will join the likes of Chichester, Norwich and Derby Cathedrals, and an increasing number of churches, structures and quarries.

Woking Shopping hopes that the shopping footfall will also be increased.

GEF, its members, the Community Foundation for Surrey, the Surrey Bird Club, Woking Shopping and Woking Borough Council have all contributed to the cost of the box and the live streaming. We are very grateful in particular to Nick Dixon and Jason Fathers, who have given the project the benefit of all their experience.

Joyful results

Four eggs were laid on successively 23rd, 24th, 26th and 28th March. Both the falcon (female) and the male (tiercel) shared incubation, which started on 26th March. Three eggs hatched on 1st and 2nd May but one failed to hatch. Unfortunately the last chick was noticeably weaker and survived only a few days: if a chick doesn't thrust up a gaping beak the adults can't feed it. The two healthy chicks (called eyesses) are now growing steadily, requiring ever more hunting trips by the adults to satisfy them. The eyesses' covering of white down will be gradually replaced with flight feathers.

Pigeons are the favourite food, which are caught in the air using the element of surprise by stooping at high speed and coming from behind and underneath, but over 100 bird prey species have been recorded. Prey is plucked and the flesh pulled off using the powerful hooked beak while standing on the prey. Tiny pieces are delicately placed in the beaks of the young.

All this has been followed on the webcam by thousands of enthusiasts. The young will learn how to feed themselves and be tempted to fly by the adults calling and leaving prey away from the nest. Once airborne they will be shown how to hunt by the adults dropping live prey. GEF, the RSPB and Surrey Bird Club members have been on hand since early May with telescopes and notepads/smartphones speaking to visitors in Woking, showing them what's happening in the air and at the same time the activity going on inside the box via WiFi. The live website has been active since mid April at www.wokingperegrines.com

A follow-up talk

Nick Dixon gave a fascinating and entertaining talk on Urban Peregrines' to a packed audience on 4th May. He showed superb photographs of many types of man-made structures with nesting peregrines, including a floating lifting crane which moved around Southampton Water and made a trip across to the Isle of Wight with the nesting peregrines on board! The first record of UK peregrines nesting on man-made structures was in 1981 and since then the use of man-made structures, including quarries, has risen as a proportion of the total number of UK nesting pairs, which stood at 1,505 in 2014. The peregrine population continues to rise and England has now overtaken Scotland and Wales for breeding pairs, with the latter countries actually showing a decrease in recent years.

Young peregrines don't have an easy time growing to maturity. Some studies show 60% will die in the first year from colliding with overhead wires or other man-made structures, from starvation and still from persecution. Even a small accident will mean unsuccessful hunting and starvation.

The eyesses at Woking will be fitted with a BTO (British Trust for Ornithology) ring plus a coloured ring easy to read with a telescope. This will help the BTO to follow their progress. The tiercel at Woking has a BTO ring, but it cannot be read with a telescope.

The young will stay around until July and beyond, so there's a great deal more viewing still to come.



Sixteen days old and ravenous