

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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ENDANGERED PEREGRINE'S FLIGHT HONORS RACHEL CARSON, 17 YEARS AFTER "SILENT SPRING"

"Rachel," a young female peregrine falcon raised on the roof of the Interior Department building, flew for the first time this week -- symbolic testimony to the work of biologist Rachel Carson, in whose honor the endangered bird of prey was named.

"Rachel" is one of four fledgling peregrines placed in a man-made nest atop Interior's headquarters last month by Interior Secretary Cecil D. Andrus, in an attempt to restore this species to the Nation's Capital.

"Rachel Carson documented the disastrous consequences of DDT and other pesticides on the Nation's wildlife -- effects which in large part caused the peregrine to become extinct as a breeding bird in the East," Andrus pointed out at the time.

"It was her monumental bestseller, Silent Spring, that in 1962 awakened the American public to the dangers of indiscriminate pesticide use. As living tribute to Miss Carson's life, her work, and her prophecy, the first female peregrine to fly from the site of the special captive-rearing project carries her name," Andrus announced.

An employee of the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for 17 years, Miss Carson worked and wrote in a small office five floors below the spot where her namesake recently took flight.

"Rachel Carson, more effectively than any other biologist up to that time, documented the havoc that chemicals such as DDT were inflicting upon the Nation's wildlife. It is appropriate that the Fish and Wildlife Service and Cornell University's Peregrine Fund chose the name 'Rachel,'" said Robert L. Herbst, Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks.

The three female and one male peregrines are part of a joint venture by the two organizations to restore the captive-bred raptors to their former range in the Eastern United States. Pesticides and other toxic chemicals have wiped out all wild breeding peregrines east of the Rocky Mountains, making human help necessary to restore the species to its natural home.

For the past 2 weeks, while biologists have been feeding the birds by remote control and monitoring their development by television camera, the four chicks have been preening and testing their wings in a large wooden "hack box" on a corner of Interior's roof.

The crucial point in the project was reached this Monday morning (July 9), when the birds were released from their box to roam the roof and prepare for flight. With the maiden journey of "Rachel" and her siblings, another milestone was passed--one that may one day lead to the

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peregrines taking up residence in some of Washington's landmarks whose cliff-like configurations these birds of prey favor. The odds against their survival are great, however--often as many as 35 percent of young peregrines in similar projects do not live through the crucial first weeks to fend for themselves.

With luck and several years time, they may begin to raise young in an urban environment that was once their natural home. Strollers along Pennsylvania Avenue might look skyward one day to see these magnificent birds flying overhead, as they did back in 1921 when a peregrine accompanied President-elect Warren Harding's Inaugural procession down the Nation's Main Street.

For 7 years prior to the publication of Silent Spring, Miss Carson devoted her full attention to the problem of pesticide contamination of the environment. Though Silent Spring achieved national and international acclaim, it was not until years after her death in 1964 that many of the charges against DDT voiced by Miss Carson and others were commonly accepted.

During the 1950's, it had become increasingly apparent to Fish and Wildlife Service scientists that DDT and its toxic breakdown product DDE, among a host of other pesticides, were entering the food chains of birds such as the peregrine, brown pelican, osprey, and American bald eagle.

When these contaminants reached certain levels, the birds began to lay thin-shelled eggs that broke or cracked before hatching, having disastrous consequences for the survival of the species.

By 1970, the American peregrine had been added to the Endangered Species List and ambitious plans were launched to reverse its decline through captive breeding and special release projects of which the Washington, D.C., venture is the most recent undertaking.

Beginning in 1971, the Federal Environmental Protection Agency began the phase-out of DDT, and by the end of 1972--a decade after Silent Spring--all remaining crop uses of DDT had been cancelled. The ban on the persistent pesticide did little to reverse the impact of residues that had already concentrated in the fatty tissues of fish and bird life through the years, however. To this day, the future of many species whose reproduction was jolted by DDT remains in doubt.

Shirley Briggs, a colleague of Miss Carson's who is now executive director of the Rachel Carson Trust for the Living Environment in Washington, praised the decision to name one of the peregrines in her honor. "Rachel greatly admired peregrine falcons and we think it is a splendid idea to name the first female peregrine to fly in this project after Miss Carson.

"Every year she and I used to enjoy watching them fly around the Old Post Office tower and the Willard Hotel in Washington back as far as 1952, when we always had them here. She was especially concerned about the effects of pesticides on them. We hope this project will help to bring them back."

"Rachel Carson awakened the Nation through her warnings of the dangers around us," said Herbst. "We owe much to her. With the maiden flight of 'Rachel,' that debt is, in a small way, being repaid."