

THEY'LL SOON HAVE NAMES, along with their own website and webcam. The media will be after them, anxious to tell their story. A big gala will be held in their honor. Wilmington's peregrine falcons are almost famous.

Like their celebrity counterparts in New York's Central Park and elsewhere, the hope is that the public will fall in love with them and become increasingly invested in their well-being. A touch of the wild in the urban landscape.

The city is in the process of adopting the pair – a male and female – as its own. The couple is, after all, one of only five peregrine falcon pairs confirmed in Delaware. If it weren't for the artificial nesting box placed for them on the 19th floor of the Brandywine Building, they wouldn't be here at all.

The secret of their success

Peregrine falcons nearly disappeared from the planet in the 20th century. The sleek, swift birds of prey – the fastest flying birds on earth – hovered near extinction by the 1970s. Since then, however, they have rebounded in spades – a true wildlife recovery success story.

While they have perched above the Wilmington streetscape for about a decade, most people are just now beginning



KIM STEININGER

Female peregrine perches on the 19th floor nesting box with her mate in flight in the background.

to really see them. And that's exactly how Bill Stewart, conservation chair of the Delmarva Ornithological Society, wants it to be.

"Once the word gets out there – there's a ton of 'fal-coholics,'" Stewart says. "We're hoping this project will raise awareness of people who were completely unaware that there were falcons in the city. Once they get awareness, then they get ownership. It builds from there."

Coming this March, Wilmington's peregrines will star in their very own reality show, as the new webcam records

and broadcasts their every move live on their very own website. Stewart wants everyone to tune in. And, he hopes that in a few months, the city's hurried and harried pedestrians – generally focused only on what's in front of them – will start looking in a new direction: up.

Vital stats

Wilmington's nesting peregrines are full-time Delawareans; they live here year-round. Stewart says they were first spotted in 2003, but are not the first to call the building home.

"There was activity beginning in 1998," Stewart points out, "and that prompted people to start watching." That pair tried to nest on top of the roof, but the United States Fish and Wildlife Service installed a nesting box on the 19th floor in 2000."

Stewart's not sure how old the two birds are, but says peregrine falcons can live well into their 20s. That's if they make it through their first year, a Herculean task for peregrines. For example, of the four peregrine chicks that were hatched in the Wilmington nest in 2009, none survived.

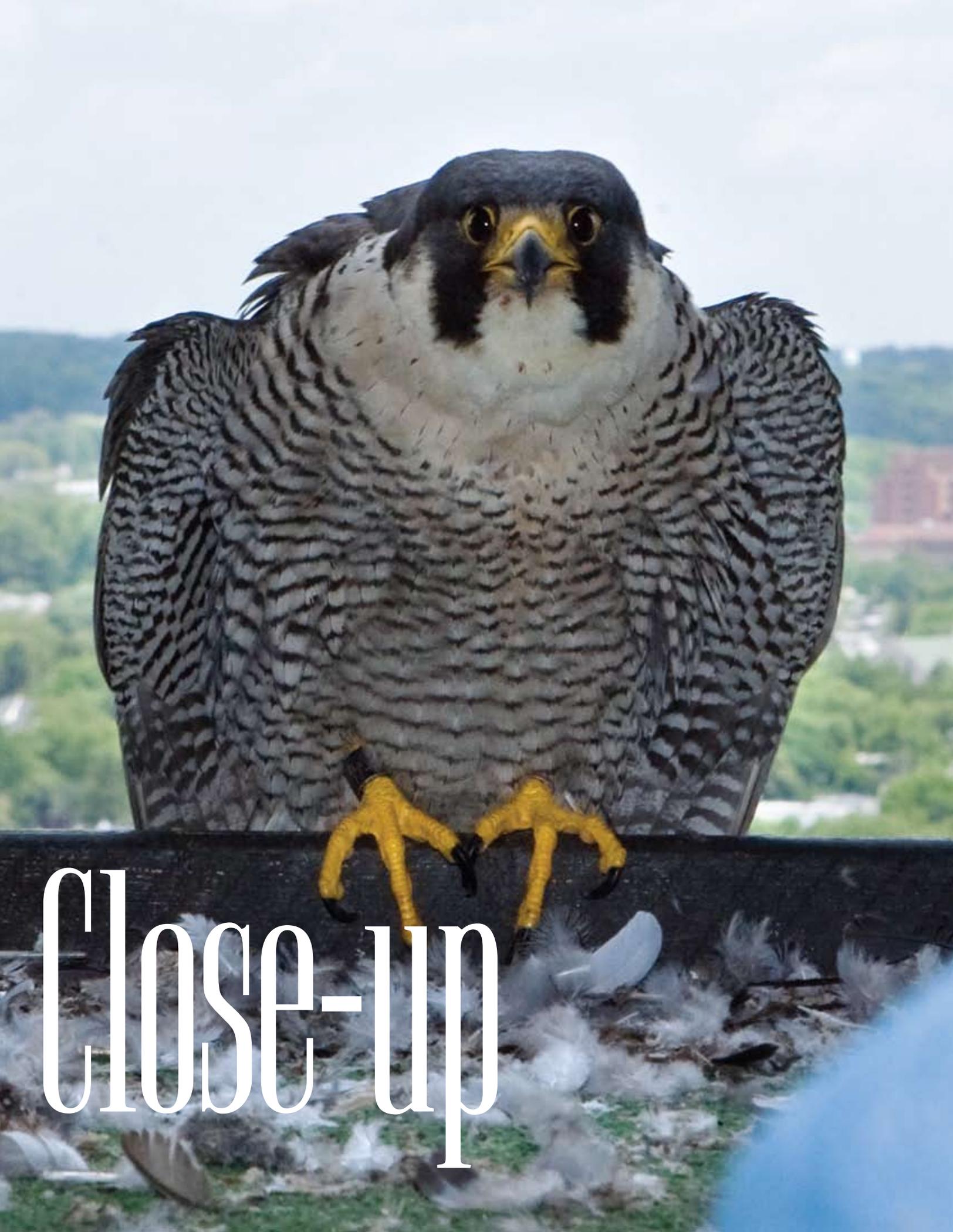
"Mortality is high in their first year," Stewart notes sadly. "Here, for example, this year – one hundred percent mortality. But when they get past their first year,

A pair of peregrine falcons, who have been nesting on Wilmington's Brandywine Building for about a decade, will soon be famous.

Ready for their

BY BETH SHOCKLEY

Photos by Kim Steininger



Close-up



SANDY CLARK

“Once the word gets out there – there’s a ton of ‘fal-coholics,’” says Bill Stewart, conservation chair of the Delmarva Ornithological Society.

when they get past a first migration, then they do pretty good.”

Peregrines in Delaware: where they are

The pair of Wilmington peregrines is one of just five confirmed nesting pairs in the First State. “In Delaware, peregrine falcons locate where there are artificial nesting boxes,” says Anthony Gonzon, wildlife biologist with DNREC’s

Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program. “They need boxes to nest on man-made structures. Otherwise, they favor cliffs.”

Gonzon says in addition to the Wilmington pair, there are nesting pairs under the Reedy Point Bridge, which carries Route 9 over the C&D Canal, and in the Little Creek State Wildlife Area in Kent County. Gonzon says another pair is reported to nest on the Delaware Memorial Bridge and a new pair was spotted in 2009 on a power line transmission tower south of it.

According to Gonzon, another pair of peregrines tries to nest at the C&D Canal’s Summit Bridge, but they’re not yet full-time Delawareans. Few really are. Peregrine falcons don’t really pay much attention to state lines when looking for places to nest or feed.

“Peregrines would mostly just be traveling through Delaware – not staying,” says Stewart. “They like to nest on rocky cliffs, ledges, that’s why the Potomac is

such a good place, because there are lots of outcroppings, rocks and cliffs.”

Meet and greet

Sitting on his man-made cliff, the male peregrine fixes his steely-eyed gaze at the street below. He looks up, begins preening under one wing. Then, suddenly, he launches skyward in pursuit of prey flying at high altitude. He’s so fast it’s very difficult to follow him, especially watching through a spotting scope. A moment later, he’s entirely out of sight.

Not surprising, since peregrine falcons are the fastest animals on earth. They’ve been clocked doing more than 264 mph during a “stoop,” a dive from a high place usually in pursuit of prey. Their nasal anatomy, designed not unlike a jet engine, protects them from damage from extreme air pressure changes.

“The peregrine falcon is an awesome bird of prey,” says Craig Koppie, a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. “There is no other species de-



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Adult female carries a pigeon with one of her “kids” in hot pursuit.



Adult female peregrine is about to dive bomb photographer Kim Steininger.

KIM STEININGER

signed to do what they can. They are built for speed and engage in spectacular aerial dives to capture their prey like no other. It defies the imagination.”

“I’ve seen them at Reedy Point take out a duck,” Stewart echoes. “It’s like an explosion.”

Contrary to popular belief, peregrines rarely – if ever – eat mammals like rats or squirrels, preferring a diet mainly of other birds – such as pigeons. Stewart says peregrines capture their prey in mid-air and have a specific method of catching it when they’re diving at speeds of more than 200 mph.

“As they come into their prey, they throw their talons out to the side, and hit the bird – usually its wings – with their talons, knocking them off balance,” Stewart says. Once they snatch the prey up in mid-air, he says they take it back to their perch. “If the prey is not already dead by then, they will break its neck cleanly and quickly with their beak. Pretty humane, quite frankly,” Stewart adds.

To find out which birds become dinner for Wilmington’s peregrine falcons,

Stewart points to the edges of the top floor of a parking garage next door to the Brandywine Building. “If we were to walk around the perimeter of the parking garage, we’d find feathers of yellow-billed cuckoo, flickers and pigeons,” he says. “They usually eat on the building ledges or in the box, and when it gets windy, the feathers blow away and collect along the edges and crevices of the parking garage.”

Stewart’s not sure why the hapless yellow-billed cuckoos are a favorite meal for the peregrines. “They eat a lot of them. My opinion is that they’re just the right size bird for a meal. Cuckoos are commonly found in the tops of trees. With peregrine eyes, they can see them. And then, it’s done.”

Back from the brink

Peregrine falcons have made an astonishing comeback in the last two decades. They were placed on the endangered species list in 1970 due almost exclusively to the use of the toxic pesticide DDT, Koppie says. They were removed from the list in 1999 and have since recovered

quite successfully. Koppie estimates their numbers have increased about 25 percent since they were delisted.

“Since 1999, peregrine pairs continue to rise in all the geographical regions,” Koppie says. He should know. He has spent more than 30 years in recovery and management of both the peregrine falcon and bald eagle, in charge of monitoring and banding peregrines in the mid-Atlantic region. Located at the USFWS’s Chesapeake Bay Field Office in Annapolis, Maryland, Koppie monitors peregrine nest sites for productivity, assesses the general health of chicks and bands young peregrines.

A falconer himself, Koppie has been integral in establishing the peregrine presence in Wilmington. “Falcons usually lay three to four eggs,” he says. “However, I have witnessed four nests that laid five eggs each. Of those, two nesting pairs successfully hatched and fledged all five young. One of those nests was at Smith Island [on Md.’s Eastern Shore], and the other in Wilmington.”

Like everyone else familiar with them, Koppie was saddened by the loss of 2009’s

four peregrine chicks in Wilmington. He was the one who banded them.

Banding

Banding involves careful handling of young peregrines. “To safely band the chicks, they must be between 18 and 30 days old,” Koppie says. “Band size is specific to gender, and the sex of the bird cannot be ascertained until 18 days of age, when the chicks can just begin to move about.” He adds that banding falcons requires extreme care, “both for self protection from parental aggression, and to insure that the young do not fledge prematurely or fall off the ledge.” It’s common for young peregrines, in fact, to fall out of their cliff nests. Usually, they’ll get caught in mid-air by their parents and put back in the nest.

Koppie says a lock-on aluminum USFWS migratory bird band is placed around the right leg and a pop-riveted color band is placed on the left. For special research projects, a transmitter is attached to track movements over great distances.

The best part of the banding process for Koppie is seeing the young peregrines return. “I especially enjoy the times when I encounter one of the young that

I banded several years earlier and is now a breeding adult having young of their own,” Koppie says. “It’s a very rewarding feeling.”

Migration

Peregrines, Stewart says, tend to migrate as individuals, and generally, only when they are young. “We don’t know where they migrate to,” he says. “That’s why they are banded.”

Koppie says the most recent banding

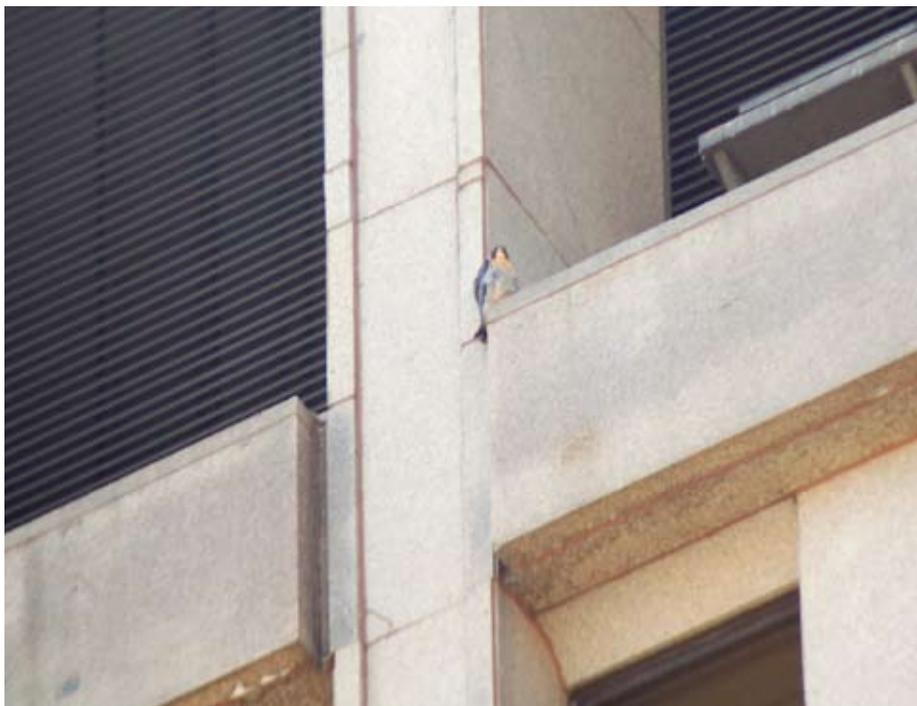
recovery information shows a general pattern of north-south movement. “In the Chesapeake Bay falcon population, parents that can be identified at the nest are individuals from New Jersey, Virginia and New York, and one new female from Canton, Ohio, now nesting on the 301 River Bridge in Maryland.”

Stewart points out that of all of the Wilmington peregrines banded so far, none has been reported back in Delaware. “Which is good in one way because



KIM STEININGER

One of five young peregrines who fledged successfully in 2008.



SANDY CLARK

Adult perches near the nesting box on the 19th floor of Wilmington’s Brandywine Building. The other adult is feeding the chicks.



KIM STEININGER

Adult female screams at Craig Koppie, a biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, who has banded all of Wilmington’s peregrine falcons, including the ones in this nest.



Adult male soaring with juvenile female.

KIM STEININGER



SANDY CLARK

Bill Stewart uses a spotting scope to check out activity on the nesting box.

usually when they're reported back, they're dead," Stewart says. "They could end up anywhere."

"No one knows whether they migrate or disperse over the landscape," says Gonzon. "A pair in Maryland – one was believed to have been fledged in Delaware. But there's not a point A to B migration."

Stewart says the Wilmington per-

Peregrine Falcon Fast Facts

- The fastest flying birds on earth, exceeding speeds greater than 200 mph.
 - Catch their prey in mid-air.
 - Live an average of seven to 15 years.
 - Wingspan is about three-and-a-half feet.
 - Weigh about 2 pounds.
 - Females are larger than males.
- As part of their mating ritual, males have been known to throw dead prey to the waiting talons of a female in mid-air. The female will catch the prize upside down.
 - More than 1,600 breeding pairs exist in the U.S. and Canada.
 - Are found on every continent but Antarctica.

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egridines have a pair bond and seem to like where they are just fine. “In the fall and winter, these guys do nothing but eat and hang out,” he says. “They like hanging out here in the winter. They stay together and they’ll hunt together sometimes. But if there’s bad weather they’ll get inside the box.”

The project

As the winter progresses, the pair will be doing a lot more than just hanging out and eating. Because they are year-round residents, people who will be following them online and in person are in for a real peregrine education. The webcam project will go live on March 1 – July 31, enabling viewers to see the “courtship, laying of eggs, the brooding of the eggs, hatchlings, fledglings, it all happens during those months,” Stewart says.

DuPont Clear Into the Future

Partners on the project include the DuPont Clear Into the Future program, The Delmarva Ornithological Society, DNREC and USFWS.

Earlier this year, Stewart approached DuPont, which funded the first year, including the camera and the hosting of the live streaming video. He also secured DNREC’s Gonzon to be one of the experts on the advisory council.

People can tune in by visiting the websites of Clear Into the Future, DOS or DNREC.

“You can watch it for as long as you want,” Stewart says. “It’s going to be live. It archives every five minutes, which



Adult female with one of her chicks in the nesting box.

KIM STEININGER



History of Delaware’s Peregrines

Before 1964

Peregrine falcons breed on cliffs in the Appalachian mountains, including in Pennsylvania and Maryland. This population is wiped out by reproductive failure (eggshell thinning) caused by DDE, a breakdown product of the pesticide DDT.

1972

U.S. bans most uses of DDT.

1974-1992

A private group, The Peregrine Fund, breeds peregrine falcons in captivity and releases them widely in the U.S.

1980

Peregrine pairs nest successfully in coastal New Jersey and southern Quebec.

1987

A peregrine nest with three young is found on the Delaware Memorial Bridge, probably the first ever in Delaware.

1991-1992

A pair of peregrines is first noticed at the Brandywine Building in downtown Wilmington. A nest box is installed for them.

1997

A peregrine is observed roosting on the Brandywine Building, but evidence of breeding is not reported.

1998 -1999

Peregrines make unsuccessful nesting attempts each year.

2000-2001

Peregrines are present in downtown Wilmington, at least from September through March.

2002-2008

A pair of peregrine falcons raises 3-5 young birds each year.

will allow viewers to go back if they miss something – like the appearance of the first hatchling – or want to see it again.”

Stewart says links will also take visitors to a separate Wilmington peregrine falcon website that will provide information on their history, falcon facts, images, a blog and a special educational feature.

“The education component is one of the most important things for me,” Stewart says. “In a couple of years we will have a state-of-the-art curriculum for elementary and middle school educators. So if they choose to do something related to the falcons, they can go in there and get lesson plans.”

Famous falcons

The challenge of turning the almost famous pair of Wilmington’s peregrines

into “celebrities” is one Stewart relishes. Top of the list in the process is giving them names. There will be a contest for that. “His first name might be Caesar or Rodney. But we’ll need to get a girl name.” The naming part shouldn’t be difficult. Or the cam or the website or the big party in their honor. What will be difficult but most rewarding, at least for Stewart, will be to achieve his ultimate goal: for people passing by the Brandywine Building to look not just ahead, but also up. **OD**

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