PEREGRINE FALCON NESTING IN TREE STICK-NEST IN ALASKA

KEY WORDS: Peregrine Falcon; Falco peregrinus; Alaska; nest.

While conducting aerial surveys of stick-nests for a variety of raptors (Falconidae, Accipitridae, Strigidae) and Common Ravens (Corvus corax) on Minto Flats State Game Refuge in central Alaska, we observed an adult Peregrine Falcon (Falco peregrinus) apparently incubating in a stick-nest originally constructed by Bald Eagles (Haliaeetus leucocephalus; Fig. 1). The incubating bird was observed on 8 June 2007. The nest was situated in an isolated quaking aspen (Populus tremuloides) tree approximately 15 m from the ground in a 17-m tree (ocular estimates) at 64°53’09”N, 148°48’36”W. Ground elevation was approximately 110 m.

Habitat within 5 km of the nest site consisted primarily of wetland and riparian areas typical of boreal forest wetlands in central Alaska. Wetlands included broad areas of sedges (Carex spp.), low shrubland, and wet herbaceous vegetation with numerous lakes, ponds, and streams. Riparian zones included narrow bands of closed- and open-canopied forest with conifer, deciduous, and mixed stands and an understory of shrubs and wet herbaceous vegetation.

This nest had been used during the previous two years by Bald Eagles that had been successful at raising fledgling(s) in at least one year. Bald Eagles typically arrive and begin nesting earlier than Peregrines (J. Whitman unpubl. data), and, in 2007, a pair was occupying one of the two known supernumerary nests in this territory, 1.3 km away. A series of rock cliffs approximately 40 km north supported at least two nesting pairs of peregrines during 2006 and 2007 and peregrines regularly nest approximately 40 km south on cliffs adjacent to the Tanana River on the northern extent of the Tanana Flats (J. Whitman unpubl. data). Except for the lack of suitable cliff nesting sites, the Minto Flats area appears to be ideal peregrine habitat with an abundance of potential prey.

During the 8 June 2007 observation, we approached to ca. 100 m of the nest in a Robinson R44 helicopter. The bird did not move from its incubating posture so we were unable to observe whether eggs were in the nest. We returned to the nest on 2 July 2007 and found the nest vacant, so we were unable to determine the outcome of the nesting attempt.

Peregrines are known to use a variety of structures for nesting (Cade 1982, The falcons of the world, Comstock/Cornell Univ. Press, Ithaca, NY U.S.A.), including natural and human-made sites. However, there are few records of peregrines nesting in stick-nests in North America. Hickey and Anderson (1969, Pages 8–42 in J.J. Hickey [Ed.], Peregrine Falcon populations: their biology and decline, Univ. of Wisconsin Press, Madison, WI U.S.A.) cited one case of peregrines using a Bald Eagle nest and two cases of peregrines using Osprey (Pandion haliaetus) nests in the eastern U.S. in the first half of the twentieth century. Campbell et al. (1977, Condor 79:500–501) reported four instances of peregrines in Bald Eagle nests on islands adjacent to the central coast of British Columbia, and Van Horn et al. (1982, Page 154 in W.N. Ladd and P.F. Schempf [Eds.], Raptor management and biology in...