

Environmental News::

Peregrine Falcons in the Pisgah: No Longer Endangered, but still Sensitive Chris Faulkner

Every year on January 15th Steve Longnecker, a local Brevard rock climber, volunteers to post signs on trees at the base of Looking Glass Rock. In big bold black letters backed by a bright orange background the sign says, "Area behind This Sign Closed Temporarily to Protect Peregrine Falcon Nest Sites." These signs are sponsored and enforced by the US Forest Service and the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission.

Looking Glass Rock, which is near Brevard North Carolina, is one of the most visited rock climbing areas in the Southeast. The north face of Looking Glass, which is home to some of the most classic climbing routes in the country, is also home to the once endangered Peregrine falcon.

Peregrine falcons (*falco peregrines anatum*) were one of the first species in the United States to be protected by the National Endangered Species Act, which was passed in 1973. Due to a successful recovery, Peregrines were removed or delisted from the Federal and Threatened Endangered Species List on August 25, 1999.

Some people wonder what the big deal is about the birds, but for rock climbers in North Carolina, the birds create closures amidst some of the most desirable climbing areas in the East. The posted areas of Looking Glass Rock, Whitesides Mountain, the North Carolina Wall (Linville Gorge), Shortoff Mountain, and the Big Lost Cove Cliffs are closed from January 15th to August 15th every year. These areas make up a majority of the most desired climbing areas in North Carolina.

The reason that these closures are still necessary is because the US Forest Service's biologists, along with the NC Wildlife Resources Commission's biologists, believe that the Peregrines recovery is not yet strong enough to warrant delisting of the bird in North Carolina. As a result Peregrines are still listed as sensitive on the regional forester's sensitive list and the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forest Sensitive List.

It seems that every season someone who is uneducated to the Peregrine closure is seen climbing in closed areas. You may ask yourself, "What impact does this have on the Peregrines?" Not only are these very nervous birds, their instincts can cause them to be both very territorial and protective of their progeny. They lay their eggs on flat surfaces below rock overhangs that that have been established as their "eyrie" (nesting place).

Seeing or even hearing climbers can mean death for eggs or immature Peregrines. There is no nest involved, only a flat surface with a shallow depression that the birds have made known as a "scrape." An excited parent bird can easily dislodge an egg accidentally.

After the eggs have hatched is another critical time. A young Peregrine can be frightened to the point where it might panic or attempt to escape from the eyrie. Unable to fly, it would either die from the fall, be unable to kill its own food, or be unable to defend itself on the ground.

If anyone is caught disobeying the closures, the local Forest Service Enforcements will cause trouble for them. Typically a violator will have to pay thousands of dollars in fines and will serve as an example in order to discourage others from disobeying the closures.