

A high flyer who fell for falcons

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by Cameron Smith

It was a wild, rollercoaster ride before Mark Nash met his first peregrine falcons and even now, seven years later, he can't find the words to fully explain why they completely took over his life.

The ten-metre cigarette boat that he once owned is long gone. So are the Corvette, the pricey clothes, and the high-flying lifestyle. In their place are an old Dodge pickup with 450,000 kilometres showing, blue jeans and T-shirts, and a wage that he claims is less per hour than that of a kid flipping hamburgers — although he admits to calculating his wages on a 70-hour week.

All that remain from his days on the fast track are trophies that never leave his person — the \$10,000 wristwatch, the \$8,000 diamond ring, and the \$600 Mont Blanc fountain pen — and the legacies: rueful memories of a brush with near bankruptcy, and the affable, street-smart business sense that has served him so well as a founder and the president of The Canadian Peregrine Foundation.

The peregrines, a male from Akron, Ohio, and a young female from Williamsport, Penn., arrived on his office window ledge at 18 King Street East in Toronto in 1995. They mated, and hatched two chicks, and from that point on Mark Nash was recruited, body and soul, to their service. They were the first pair of the peregrine falcon subspecies *anatum* to nest in southern Ontario in more than 30 years. The *anatum* is one of three peregrine subspecies native to Canada. Neither of the other two nest in Ontario.

The *anatum* was almost wiped out by DDT. By the late nineteen seventies it had been declared extirpated (eliminated) from Ontario. Now the province lists it as endangered, with only 35 mating pairs in Ontario.

Credit for rescuing the peregrines has to go to the federal government's peregrine breeding centre at Wainwright, Alberta, which opened in the mid-nineteen eighties and closed in 1996. During its operation, 4,000 peregrines were released, 600 of them in Ontario.

The big question remains: What happened to them? Unquestionably, a lot of them died. It's been estimated that only 20 per cent of juveniles survive. Other birds of prey, especially great horned owls, kill them. And many juveniles kill themselves learning how to control their tremendous speed, slamming into cliffs, trees, and buildings.

Also, since peregrines migrate to Latin American countries that still use DDT, some probably are poisoned. But all this doesn't account for the scarcity of the birds.

Enter Mark Nash. The foundation has pioneered the use of satellite tracking with juveniles. It acquires chicks, mostly from breeding centres, raises them at cliffs in the wild or on highrise buildings, and once they have learned to fly, attaches transmitters to their backs.

The transmitter harness is sewn on with a cotton thread that disintegrates after the transmitter battery expires, about a year later. Transmitter signals are tracked by satellite.

So far, only six of fourteen peregrines fitted with transmitters have died, and only one of eight juveniles in this summer's program was killed. So the mortality rate is far lower than expected.

However, the price of peregrine information is high. Each transmitter costs \$6,000, and satellite air time runs at about \$9,100 a year for each transmitter. But interest is enormous. The foundation's web site at www.peregrine-foundation.ca contains information about the travels of each bird and, says Nash proudly, "Last year there were 17 million hits at the web site from 217 countries."

The foundation also has developed student work books, and Nash has visited 1,100 elementary schools over the past two years to talk about peregrines, and to deal with such basic concepts as biodiversity, ecosystems, and bioaccumulation of toxins.

"It's a blast," he says. It also was a blast when he had his Corvette and cigarette boat, he adds, "But this time, it means something."