

Birds of prey test wings under watchful eyes

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By KELLY PEDRO

They are the fastest creatures in the world. They are the "kings and queens" of stealth.

Though both go unnoticed for the most part, we share our downtown with some pretty spectacular birds of prey -- namely the swift-moving peregrine falcon and the silent hunter, owls.

Londoners got a glimpse of some of those birds three weeks ago when a great horned owl was rescued by London firefighters and a wildlife specialist after it became trapped between two downtown buildings.

And every spring since 1996 a group of volunteers has been on the lookout for peregrine falcon hatchlings that might venture from their nest just above the TD Canada Trust sign of the London City Centre building's south tower.

For more than a decade, fledglings have been testing their wings under the watchful eye of passionate volunteers who stop traffic and carefully carry the birds back to their nests if they land on the street during one of their maiden journeys.

"We take them right back up to the roof and let them try again. It's like putting a kid right back on the bicycle," says Peter Read of the McIlwraith Field Naturalists of London and a member of Project Peregrine.

Read has been monitoring peregrine eggs and hatchlings on the ledge for more than a decade. He estimates about two-thirds of the babies end up on the ground.

And when they do, the volunteers who spend part of their spring sitting out on lawn chairs with binoculars and radios are ready to rescue them.

"Many of us think peregrine falcons are to be found along Great Lakes areas or cliffs but not many realize they can be found alive and well in our downtown," says Yvette Scrivener, regional manager of TD Friends of the Environment Foundation's western chapter, which has been financially supporting Project Peregrine.

Deemed endangered in 1978, peregrines were upgraded to a threatened species in 1999 and more recently upgraded to "special concern" status.

While there are only an estimated 1,650 breeding pairs in Canada and the U.S., that's a gradual improvement in the past 30 years.

The London nest has been the most productive in Ontario for more than a decade, says Ron Gould, a species-at-risk biologist with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources -

which started Project Peregrine after a pair of falcons was first observed at the City Centre in 1995.

Peregrines were on the brink of extinction because of widespread use of DDT, which harmed their egg production. But declining use of the insecticide has given them a chance for a comeback.

"A lot of animals and birds that are the top of the food chain are the indicator of how healthy the environment is," Read says. "They're like the canary in the coal mine."

For six years, a falcon named Penny made the ledge her home, hatching 12 fledglings until she hit the tower three years ago and broke her neck.

While Penny is immortalized at the Central Library, a new female falcon has taken her place. Read says they haven't named her yet. She arrived in January 2007, but has yet to produce fledglings.

"Twenty years ago that was almost unthinkable that we would be getting birds like this in urban areas," says Jody Allair of Bird Studies Canada.

But peregrine falcons are not the only birds of prey that call downtown London home.

There's a whole world of nocturnal hunters scavenging for food, Allair says. Though it's hard to say how many there are, eastern screech and great horned owls also call the city home.

"I think it's pretty neat that they would be living in an urban environment. The fact that they've adapted to human use of an area like a city and adapted to co-inhabit with humans for the most part unnoticed by people is pretty impressive," says Allair, who recently held a talk at the Central Library about the "kings and queens of stealth."

Owls are amazing hunters that don't make a sound when they fly, he says.

While eastern screech owls snack on mice and other rodents, great horned owls feast on rabbits and skunks.

"They specialize in skunks," Allair says.