

History of Peregrine Falcons at One YMCA, Charter House, Watford town centre

Breeding Peregrines are a relatively new avian arrival in Hertfordshire. Sightings of this rare and iconic species in the county were few and far between at the early part of this century.

Peregrine numbers had reached a low point in Britain the 1960s due to human persecution and the impact of pesticides in the food chain. Improved legislation and legal protection has helped the birds to recover, and their numbers are increasing. However, they are still persecuted - birds are illegally killed to prevent predation on game birds and racing pigeons. Eggs and chicks are also stolen for collections and falconry.

Traditionally they breed in wild habitats such as on the ledges of mountain crags, coastal cliffs and quarries. However, in recent decades they have started to colonise high buildings and other tall structures in more urban locations like high-rise residential and office blocks, cathedrals and churches.

Until recently, One YMCA's Charter House hostel, providing accommodation for those experiencing homelessness, in the centre of Watford has been the highest structure in the town. As early as 2014, sightings of single Peregrines perched on the roof were being reported, with a rumour of a pair there in the spring of 2015.

Two years later, was the first ever confirmed breeding of the species in the county when two young birds were seen with their parents on the roof by local birdwatcher, David Denham. The next proven successful breeding was in spring 2019 when three young were seen. This was followed by two chicks in 2020, four in 2021 and three in 2022. Local ornithologist and licensed bird ringer, Barry Trevis, obtained the permission from the owners to closely monitor the breeding of the birds at the site and a camera was fitted overlooking the nesting ledge for this purpose. This led to seven of the chicks being ringed. Ringing helps to record the movements and survival of birds. Interestingly the two parent birds were already ringed with the female having been raised in a nest at Derby Cathedral in 2011. The male was strongly considered to have originated from Brighton, hatched in the same year as his mate.

Early in 2024 a special nesting tray was placed on the roof. From initial scrutiny of the birds around this it appears that the ageing pair have been replaced by a new, unringed couple which are now spending much time around the tray and breeding this year is looking very likely.

Barry Trevis - 11 March 2024