Interview with a Falcon

An endangered bird becomes a campus superstar.

INCE DEBUTING in 2012 to showcase the peregrine falcons atop the W.E.B. Du Bois Library, the live feed of their nesting box has become a public-relations hit and an important educational outreach. From first-time parents identifying with the falcons figuring out how to care for their brood, to toddlers who insist on watching them before breakfast, people all over the world have come to care about the rare birds in a personal way.

Three decades ago, few would have predicted the peregrine’s fate to be so luminous. Before World War II, 375 pairs nested in the eastern United States, but after the introduction of the pesticide DDT, which weakened eggshells so much that parent birds crushed their eggs during incubation, the population plummeted. By the 1960s, no peregrines lived east of the Mississippi River and the species faced extinction. The raptor’s fortunes began to turn when DDT was banned in the 1970s, but the bird needed help to reestablish itself. In 1988, captive-bred peregrines were released on campus in a hopeful experiment. Since then, falcons have been returning, not only to UMass, but also across the commonwealth, where now more than 30 pairs nest everywhere from rocky bluffs to bridges.

The first pair of falcons to appear on the live cam nested at UMass for 14 years, fledging 34 young. After the male died in January 2015 and the female disappeared, the grieving campus community worried that falcons might not come back.

Yet the following spring a new couple settled into the nest box: second-years ready to raise their first brood. And this year, they’ve returned. We “interviewed” the female, to help readers get to know the famous UM falcons.

What do you eat?
We only eat birds. We catch them in the air, in flight. We time our laying to coincide with the songbird migration north in the spring, so we have abundance for our eyasses—that’s the name for falcon chicks. We do not eat mammals or hunt on the ground; that is for hawks to do.

How do you hunt?
We strike our prey at full speed. We either snatch them at first strike or slam them into the ground where falcons can dig the meat apart. We do not think about it. Anyway, our babies need food! 

What is it like living at UMass?
There is lots of prey here and open space so we can get a good look at our quarry before we strike. Also living 28 stories in the air keeps our eggs out of the reach of egg-stealing crows. It’s good territory we have found.

Where do you go when your eyasses have fledged and you are not in the box?
At our latitude, we don’t need to go very far. Our cousins the tundra peregrines are great travelers: they can go from Baffin Island to Patagonia and back. Here, if snow makes prey scarce, we go to the coast.

Do you and your mate travel together?
We each know where the other one is but we are not right on top of each other. We like our space.

Last year the Falcon Cam webpage was viewed 288,114 times. That’s a lot of people watching you. Even Chancellor Subbaswamy has been known to keep Falcon Cam up on his desktop. Are you ever self-conscious feeding your babies dead birds on camera?

You mean that funny box? It is not in our face so we don’t think about it. Anyway, our babies need to eat!

How do you feel about the humans who come visit you to treat for mites and band your babies?
We DO NOT LIKE IT! But they don’t hurt us. It takes more than a big, clumsy leather glove to ruffle a peregrine falcon’s feathers. We call it The Hand.

How do you train for flying?
We wake up, stretch, and go for a hunt. We are warriors and hunters and kill songbirds or weak. We do not mourn. But we are loyal, and anything else you want humans to know?

Anything else you want humans to know? We are warriors and hunters and kill songbirds to eat. We do not favor our young if they are sick or weak. We do not mourn. But we are loyal, and we are good parents. There is much to learn from observing other species: it teaches respect and to value the world in its difference.

Do you regurgitate food?
No, but we prepare it. We pull all the long feathers out and then rip the meat apart so we can feed it to our chicks.

How do you train for flying?
Our chicks hold on to cables on top of the library and flap their wings against the wind. We do training exercises. Our young chase each other in the air. Sometimes we will bring back prey and make them chase us to get it.

What is the timeline for the chicks before they fledge? What about their first flight?
We hatch in early summer and fledge approximately 50 suns after. Our first flight is a jump down. If the young fall before that, they cup their wings and parachute down.

What is a typical day for you?
We wake up, stretch, and go for a hunt. We are adept at hunting so we usually get our requirements in with one kill pretty fast. We have lots of leisure time. Unless we have chicks in the nest—then we are quite busy.

What does an apex predator like you fear?
We fear NOTHING.

Sustaining the falcons and the cam is a cooperative effort of the university Libraries, Facilities and Campus Services, Information Technology, and MassWildlife, and funded by donations alone. The following helped with this article: Carol Connors, director of library development and communication; Kait Doyle ’04, collections manager for the university natural history collections; Tom French, head of the endangered species division of MassWildlife; Richard Nathhorst ’79, MassWildlife raptor rehabilitator; and KATE DOYLE ’90, manager of the Connecticut Valley District of MassWildlife.

Watch the Falcon Cam at http://library.umass.edu/falcons. On Twitter: @DuBoisFalcons.

Kate Doyle ’90, Sustaining the falcons and the cam is a cooperative effort of the university Libraries, Facilities and Campus Services, Information Technology, and MassWildlife, and funded by donations alone. The following helped with this article: Carol Connors, director of library development and communication; Kait Doyle ’04, collections manager for the university natural history collections; Tom French, head of the endangered species division of MassWildlife; Richard Nathhorst ’79, MassWildlife raptor rehabilitator; and KATE DOYLE ’90, manager of the Connecticut Valley District of MassWildlife.

Watch the Falcon Cam at http://library.umass.edu/falcons. On Twitter: @DuBoisFalcons.