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Delayed hatching and subsequent infanticide by urban-nesting Peregrine Falcons

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February 2024



In association with the London Peregrine Partnership, I have been monitoring a Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* nest site on the Civic Centre in Morden, Surrey, since the nest was established in 2015. The nest is covered by a webcam operated by Merton Council. The 2023 season saw a changeover in the occupying pair. Both male and female of the new pair were in full adult

plumage, so at least two years old, although they appeared inexperienced, particularly the male, who was very keen on courtship displays and little else. The female's behaviour also suggested she was inexperienced, as is outlined below.

A clutch of three eggs was laid in the nest during 2nd–7th April 2023. The birds did not appear to start incubation for some days after the last egg was laid and it was difficult to ascertain when incubation actually began; while the female incubated fairly consistently, she would leave the eggs unattended for long periods and the male contributed little to incubation. A frequent situation would be the female incubating through the night, as is expected, then leaving the nest and eggs in the early morning, after which they were often unattended for up to three hours. This is usually the period when a male Peregrine would take over incubation. The female would also leave the eggs at other times during the day, though for shorter periods, often for an hour or more. Initially, this coincided with quite cold weather. If the male was present, he would generally go in the nestbox, but just stand around (sometimes treading on the eggs) and then leave after a few minutes. He continued to scrape the gravel in the nest area frequently and would court the female if she was present. Eggs being left unattended for long periods is unusual, as female Peregrines tend to be very possessive of them and males often have difficulty getting an opportunity to incubate despite often being keen to do so (Ratcliffe 1993).

While Peregrine eggs typically hatch between 28 and 36 days from the time incubation begins, observations from webcams show that this period may stretch for longer during exceptional circumstances. For example, at a nest with four eggs in Leicester in 2022, the loss of the breeding male and subsequent arrival of a new male in early April disrupted expected incubation

behaviour. The first egg was laid on 24th March and incubation commenced immediately. However, the two chicks that did hatch did not appear until 9th May, 46 days later (and 38 days from when the fourth egg was laid) (<http://leicesterperegrines.org.uk/may-2022>). Another pair in northwest England incubated for 38 days (Judith Smith, Manchester Raptor Group pers. comm.).

In Morden, it was assumed that incubation had been unsuccessful by the 43rd day and that the eggs would not hatch. However, on the 44th day, 21st May, two chicks did hatch, followed by the third the next day.

Shortly after the first chick hatched on day 43, the male arrived at the nest with a Common Starling *Sturnus vulgaris*, which was taken away by the female, leaving the chick unattended. The male seemed unsure of what to do, went into the box and then picked up and removed the chick (plate 64).



64a & b. Male Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* removing first chick from its nest, Morden, Surrey, May 2023.



The second chick hatched later the same day. When the female was away from the nestbox, the male picked the chick up and was in the process of removing it when the female returned. She grabbed the chick and managed to retrieve it from the male (plate 65), brooding it for a short while before leaving again, at which time the male returned and removed it, as he had done with the first chick.



65. Female Peregrine retrieving second chick from male, Morden, Surrey, May 2023.

The third chick hatched the following day and shortly after, while the female was away, it was also removed by the male (plate 66).



66. Male Peregrine removing third and final chick from its nest, Morden, Surrey, May 2023.

None of the chicks were killed before being removed from the nest and it is not known whether the male subsequently killed them nearby, ate them or simply dropped them somewhere. They were not seen again.

It appeared that all the chicks were normal and healthy, despite the interrupted incubation schedule; when one was given the opportunity to feed by the female it did so.

Infanticide in Peregrines is not unknown – a female Peregrine in Pittsburgh, USA, routinely ate her chicks when they hatched, though this was clearly aberrant behaviour (see www.birdsoutsidemywindow.org). Though still apparently rare, there have been cases when a bird has taken over a site during the season and killed chicks that were not their own. For example, in

2016, an intruding female at Norwich Cathedral attacked and killed older chicks from another pair at the fledging stage (<https://bit.ly/3vyajno>). In Morden, several intruding male Peregrines were sighted at or close to the nest site in 2023 and there may have been extra-pair copulations (Drewitt 2014). This may have triggered such infanticide, although generally Peregrines are very protective of their chicks and will successfully foster or cross-foster chicks (Mizera & Sielicki 2009).

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Ed Drewitt and Stuart Harrington (London Peregrine Partnership) who reviewed my draft and suggested amendments.

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