

LISTENING TAPESCRIPT

While-Listening I

I'm Professor Sam Richards, and I've come as the third guest lecturer on this course on Australian wild birds. My job is to watch peregrines in Tasmania. Of course this is not just bird watching as a hobby. This is watching them in a scientific way and doing research on them. So I'll start by giving you some background information about these magnificent birds before I continue talking about my own project.

Now, a little bit of information about the places where these birds are generally found. Peregrine falcons are found on all continents around the world, Asia, Europe and the Americas. But with one exception - and that's Antarctica. So don't go looking for them at the South Pole. You will not be able to find any peregrines in the Antarctic region. They are found almost everywhere in Australia. And it's interesting to note that the name, peregrine, comes from Latin, and it means "moving from one place to another." This is a suitable name for these birds because in most parts of the world, they migrate. But this is not the case in Australia, because here, they prefer to stay in one place.

Now, let me give you some information about the speed of these birds when they are flying. Peregrines are known to be the world's fastest creature. They have been tracked by radar and the results are very interesting. According to some, they can dive down towards the ground at 180 km an hour. However, a number of textbooks claim that their flight speed can go as high as 350 km an hour. So, we can only say that there is still disagreement about how fast they can actually fly.

OK, what about their appearance? Male peregrines are mostly red in colour, and in contrast, the female is more like brown. They are different in weight too. Female peregrines are larger than their male counterparts. In fact, the female weighs almost 30 per cent more than the male bird. While she stays close to the nest in order to protect the eggs and the young chicks, the male is mostly busy with looking for food. So the female bird takes care of the eggs and the young, but the male bird flies around and he is the one which brings the food.

So, let's look at the first days of a young bird. When the chicks are about 20 days old, they start to fly. So they fly at a very young age. By the time they are just 28 days old, they have already reached full adult size. In other words, they are fully grown. Soon after this, at about two months after coming out of the egg, they leave the nest forever. From this time on, they are on their own. But the young birds are not good at finding food for themselves, and so during the first year, about 60 per cent of them die. If they manage to live for 2 years, they generally continue to live for another six or seven years.

Ok, now, I would like to give you some information about our research. When we come across nests with young chicks, the first thing we do is catch the chicks before they are able to fly. We have to catch them at an early age. If they have learnt how to fly, then it is really impossible to catch them. Then, we attach identification rings to their legs. These identification rings are made of aluminium. They allow us to identify the birds, and to watch them later in their lives. So, first, catch the bird, second, attach the identification ring. What comes next? Because we need to know how many males and how many females are born each year, we write down the sex of the chicks. Writing the sex of the bird is a vital part of our research. The next thing to do after this is to take a blood sample from the chicks. We take the blood sample so that we can check the level of pesticide in their bodies. Peregrines can build up dangerous levels of pesticide in their blood. Can you imagine how this happens? Well, they feed on smaller animals, and the smaller animals eat crops from farms where pesticides are used. Finally, we check the birds' general health. This health checking process can take a few minutes. In fact, most of our time is actually spent trying to find the birds. After we find the birds, all the other steps I have just explained take a lot less time than this.

Well, that's all I have for you today. If you'd like to do some further reading, I'll put some material on the course website.