

2020 IMC PEREGRINE FALCON WATCHPOST / RESCUE TEAM HELLWEEK SAGA

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This spring I had determined that nest boxes on the Joseph Smith Memorial Building and One Utah Center and eyries within the greater downtown territory were not occupied by Peregrine Falcons. The species had successfully fledged and dispersed to the wild for the breeding seasons of 1986-1993, 1995, 2004-2007, 2009, and 2011-2014.

One April day, I cruised by the Intermountain Center (IMC) in Murray to check on activity in the nest box on the north face of the tallest edifice there, Bldg. No. 5. At the suggestion of a local falconer, I helped with the placement of the box pre-2010 and its move in 2014 from the original location on the east face to the north side. To the best of my knowledge, peregrines had never successfully nested at IMC. Lo and behold, a peregrine pair was on hand!

The male appeared to be an adult but the female had a lot of brown feathers on its back and a bluish-colored bill—quite possibly a 2- to 3-year-old. She looked very similar to the female in 2018 that laid, but was unable to hatch, two eggs in a nest box that I had placed on the One Utah Center. I continued to monitor the pair and luckily spotted, from a remote location, what appeared to be two downy young.

I alerted members of the Salt Lake City (SLC) Peregrine Falcon Watchpost/Rescue Team (Team) of my need for their help at IMC for the 2020 version of HellWeek and scheduled a meeting with Mark Olsen, Facility Manager III, Plant Operations, IMC, to discuss a cooperative venture to get the young airborne. Not surprisingly, the current IMC workers were entirely unaware of the nest box.

We were ready to go...maybe a little too early. Without a camera in the nest box, I had to guess, from great distance, the age of the eyases to predict the date of fledging. Miscalculation of the date of fledging was the first of what became a most unusual HellWeek endeavor.

A Team co-worker wondered if several IMC Security personnel did not get the memo about the cooperative venture between IMC and the Team—a polite way of describing the challenges between monitoring the downtown SLC and the IMC territories! IMC security personnel were concerned that the binoculars were freaking out the nurses; that situation evolved into no binoculars, scopes, or cameras on IMC property and finally morphed to no sitting/standing in one place. These restrictions eliminated the primary reason for HellWeek efforts in the past—a prime conservation outreach opportunity to inform, educate, and engage the public about these magnificent birds. Since IMC owned the nest cliff and flight practice area, we needed to comply, however, I did enlist Mark Olsen's help with the security guys at IMC.

Between July 11th and 21st, the Team repeatedly retrieved the eyases from their bumbling practice flights and returned them to the nest box for parental care. [*Editor's note: Please see the supplemental article for a detailed run-down.*] Finally, a decision was reached among the Team members and the rehabilitator that the two fledglings, now named Dot and Susie, would not be returned to IMC territory for continued and preferred parental supervision of flight training. The reason for removal was both birds were underweight and injured. Susie was diagnosed with brain injury as a result of collisions with glass walls. Dot also appeared injured as she overcame a sprain, or noticeable limp, in one of her feet during her solo flight training and exhibited burns to at least one foot, likely due to hot, roofline perch sites, etc. The Team was also reaching burn-out...the multi-week effort had been long, hot, dry and exhausting!

The IMC territory is completely different from the downtown/Temple Square peregrine haunts. IMC is reminiscent of Wyoming's Devil's Tower: a huge, tall edifice with large plates of solid glass on the east and west faces. The buildings surrounding IMC are much shorter, campus buildings. Downtown/Temple Square features buildings of comparable heights and many with horizontal ledges that can serve as potential landing sites. While both sites have plenty of glass, the major difference as a place to learn to fly is, at the IMC property, a young bird must make huge flight steps to rise up to the nest site to reach the adults for food. A series of shorter flights from roofline to roofline is more easily negotiated in the downtown/ Temple Square territory.

Nonetheless, the IMC territory is an excellent place to watch what peregrines do best which is fly like no other avian species. Lastly, I felt the birds were lucky to get out of there alive, and the rehabilitator will ensure that each will soon receive the appropriate flight/hunting training in the hands of falconer(s) for release to the wild.

On July 29, the rehabilitator said, "They are doing good, eating very well, and recovering nicely." To say the least and in conclusion, it was an experience like no other and the memory of it will last a lifetime!