

THE ROLE OF THE ALASKA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME IN RAPTOR MANAGEMENT

Jerry D. McGowan

Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Fairbanks, Alaska

Abstract: Raptor management in Alaska involves numerous government agencies, private consulting firms, and biologists from universities in Alaska and elsewhere. Communication and cooperation among all interested parties are necessary for effective raptor management. Overlap in interests and responsibilities among the regulatory agencies emphasizes the need for well-defined areas of responsibilities, commonly accepted management plans and policies, and free exchange of information. Programs of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game are concentrated in the areas of habitat management, permitting, and population assessment. The Department accepts the lead role in habitat management on State lands and administration of the falconry program. A new system of recording raptor nesting information has been developed. In all aspects of raptor management, the Department stands ready to cooperate with other agencies to the fullest extent possible.

Interest in birds of prey increased markedly in Alaska during the last decade. Before the early 1970s the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and a few individuals affiliated with various universities accounted for all raptor work in the State. During this period the Department sponsored biological studies of goshawks (Accipiter gentilis) (McGowan 1975a, 1975b), gyrfalcons (Falco rusticolus) (Roseneau 1972), and peregrines (Falco peregrinus) (Haugh 1976a, 1976b). Until 1972, permitting requirements for all nonendangered raptor species rested solely with the State. In 1972 an amendment to the Migratory Bird Treaty with Mexico placed all species of Alaskan raptors on the migratory list and consequently, brought the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service into all aspects of the permitting process. In the late 1970s, implementation of Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act served to make all Federal and many State agencies consider impacts of their respective programs on endangered species. Today, the Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, Forest Service, Department of Fish and Game, at least two private consulting firms, and a number of university-affiliated individuals are involved with raptor programs in Alaska. Together these programs range from biologically oriented research to complex State-Federal permitting systems based on statute

and regulation. Given this situation, it is important that the roles of each management agency be mutually understood.

Title 16 of the Alaska Statutes charges the Department of Fish and Game with management of all raptor species and specifically addresses the protection of endangered species habitat. In accordance with these mandates, the Department's raptor programs are of three types: habitat management, permitting, and population assessment. The purpose of this paper is to clarify the role of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game in raptor management.

HABITAT MANAGEMENT

The Department recognizes that maintenance of suitable habitat for all raptor species is the single most important aspect of management. Currently, habitat management by the Department involves review of activities proposed for State lands that may affect raptors. State land disposals, military maneuvers, and construction of roads, pipelines, and communication sites are frequent topics of such reviews. Through this process, involving both the Department's Game Division and Habitat Section, stipulations are recommended or imposed that will ensure maintenance of suitable raptor and prey species habitat and prevent excessive disturbance during critical nesting and brood rearing periods. Stipulations arising from the review process take into account status of the species involved and whether proposed activities will have long- or short-term effect. Although the Department has not officially adopted specific guidelines pertaining to habitat management, recommendations developed by the Arctic Peregrine Recovery Team are used when peregrine falcon habitat is involved. Situations involving other species are handled on a case-by-case basis.

Important raptor habitat exists on both private land and lands administered by all levels of government. Because on a statewide basis numerous agencies are involved in raptor habitat management, the responsibilities of each agency should be clear and the various agencies must work cooperatively to ensure the welfare of raptor populations. When State land is involved, the Department will continue assuming the lead in the review process, although assistance from other agencies is beneficial and welcomed. When possible, the Department will assist in management programs for non-State lands. As part of implementing a State endangered species program, official approval of the Peregrine Recovery Team's recommendations pertaining to land management is being sought. Similarly, a policy used in Oregon and Washington for bald eagle (Haliaeetus leucocephalus) habitat protection is being considered for these eagles in Alaska. It is hoped that eventually both State and Federal agencies will operate under similar basic policies.

PERMITTING

State and Federal permits are required to hold any bird of prey in Alaska, to conduct studies that involve harassment or handling of the birds, or to collect eggs or parts of raptors. State permits pertaining to these activities are of two types--scientific-educational and falconry. Although procedures for issuance differ with the type of permit, all State permits are issued by the Commissioner of Fish and Game.

Scientific-Educational Permits

Scientific-educational permits apply to all situations in which raptors are taken or handled for any purpose other than the practice of falconry. The Department considers requests for scientific-educational permits only after the applicant possesses the appropriate Federal permit obtained from the Fish and Wildlife Service. Before a State permit is issued, the application is reviewed by Game Division biologists to determine the effect of proposed activities on raptor populations. State permits are usually very specific and accommodate only activities proposed by the applicant.

Although the dual permitting system gives the Department final authority over many activities involving raptors, instances of disagreement between the Department and the Fish and Wildlife Service are infrequent. Raptors account for only a small portion of the Department's permitting function, and problems result when applications are not handled in a timely fashion. The dual permitting system undoubtedly causes some frustration among applicants, and attempts are now being made in our Juneau office to expedite all aspects of the Department's permitting function. Many of the problems encountered in the past will be eliminated if applications are submitted well in advance of the field season. In a broad sense, however, subjecting applications to independent scrutiny at both State and Federal levels is beneficial in that ill-founded projects and unreasonable desires of special interest groups are eliminated.

Falconry Permits

Before 1970 raptors could be held for falconry in Alaska under terms of a permit issued by the Commissioner of Fish and Game. After amendment of the Migratory Bird Treaty with Mexico in 1972, the Fish and Wildlife Service began developing falconry regulations with nationwide

applicability. In 1978, when Federal regulations were completed, the Department developed falconry standards in compliance with Federal law. These standards were subsequently adopted by the Alaska Board of Game. Today, we operate under a joint State-Federal falconry permitting system that essentially incorporates Federal regulations in their most liberal sense, although some State requirements are more stringent than those imposed by the Federal Government.

State regulations restrict falconry permits to Alaska residents. Applicants must pass a difficult written examination covering raptor identification and natural history, care of raptors in captivity, falconry techniques, and pertinent laws and regulations. Applicants must provide facilities that meet standards outlined in the regulations, and before a permit is issued, facilities are inspected to ensure that these standards have been met.

State regulations provide for possession of goshawks, sharp-shinned hawks (Accipiter striatus), red-tailed hawks (Buteo jamaicensis), merlins (Falco columbarius), kestrels (Falco sparverius), and gyrfalcons.

Falconry permits are of three types (apprentice, general, and master), and the number and species of raptors that may be possessed are determined by the type of permit. Each falconer is issued and accountable for special, numbered falconry bands that are to be attached to raptors immediately upon taking. Falconers are required to report annually the number and status of raptors taken. Regulations further require that falconers report immediately upon taking, transfer, escape, or death of raptors. Records are maintained at the Department's Regional and Headquarters offices and at the Fish and Wildlife Service's Enforcement Branch in Anchorage.

The Department assumes the lead role in the falconry program. Prospective falconers are referred to Department biologists, who inform them of the various requirements, administer the required written examination, and inspect holding facilities. On matters pertaining to falconry, biologists in our Regional offices deal directly with falconers, our Headquarters staff in Juneau, and Fish and Wildlife Service personnel in Anchorage.

Although we feel that certain aspects of the Federal regulations are too restrictive, the joint permitting system is workable. The impact of falconers on raptor populations has been negligible. The sport is not widely practiced in Alaska, and most falconers are Fairbanks or Anchorage area residents. Since 1978, 23 falconers have taken 25 raptors (18 goshawks, 3 gyrfalcons, 3 merlins, and 1 kestrel). Currently, the 16 active falconers in Alaska hold a total of 6 raptors (4 goshawks, 1 merlin, and 1 kestrel). Overall, the Department views the falconry program as beneficial in that it provides clear-cut procedures for issuing permits or rejecting applicants, accountability of

all raptors held by falconers at any time, increased willingness on the part of falconers to volunteer information regarding illegal activities involving birds of prey, and continuation of this age-old sport by qualified individuals.

POPULATION ASSESSMENT

During the late 1970s, budget and manpower constraints plus overriding problems with other wildlife species forced the Department to eliminate raptor survey and inventory programs. Fortunately, this coincided with increases in field studies initiated by other agencies and private consulting firms. As a result, the body of raptor information has continued to increase despite the reduction of Departmental involvement. We have an ever increasing need for raptor information, particularly nesting data, and we hope that raptor population monitoring on State lands will be incorporated into our new Nongame Program.

Despite the lack of specific field studies, records of raptor nest locations have been maintained. These data are essential if the review process is to adequately address protection of raptor habitat. Although there is a need for such information throughout the State, most of our data pertain to areas north of the Alaska Range. Because new data are collected annually by workers throughout Alaska, nesting records require frequent updating. Our nest record file has recently been revised by transcribing nest locations on 1:63,360 scale topographic maps and using a numbering system for nest sites that we hope will be adopted by other workers. If adopted, this system should reduce the work involved in annually updating files, make data more readily usable, and facilitate coordination among agencies. Any information collected or on file at our offices is available to other workers and agencies concerned with raptor management. Likewise, we request that data and reports from outside the Department be made available for entry into our records.

LITERATURE CITED

- Haugh, J.R. 1976a. Tanana River of Alaska. Pages 254-256 in R. Fyfe, S.A. Temple, and T.J. Cade, eds. 1975 N. Am. Peregrine Falcon Survey. Can. Field-Nat. 90(3):228-273.
- Haugh, J.R. 1976b. Populations and reproductive changes in Alaskan arctic peregrines. Can. Field-Nat. 90(3):359-361.

- McGowan, J.D. 1975a. Nesting habits and reproductive success of goshawks in Interior Alaska. Pages 147-152 in J.R. Murphy, C.W. White, and B.E. Harrell, eds. Population Status of Raptors. Raptor Res. Rep. No. 3, Raptor Res. Found., Vermillion, South Dakota.
- McGowan, J.D. 1975b. Distribution, density, and productivity of goshawks in Interior Alaska. Alaska Dept. Fish Game, Proj. Prog. Rep., Fed. Aid Wildl. Restor. Proj. W-17-3 through 6, Job 10.6R. 58 p.
- Roseneau, D.G. 1972. Summer distribution, numbers, and feeding habits of the gyrfalcon (Falco rusticolus L.) on the Seward Peninsula, Alaska. Unpubl. M.S. thesis, Univ. Alaska, Fairbanks. 124 p.

proceedings of a symposium and workshop
RAPTOR MANAGEMENT AND BIOLOGY

in

Alaska and Western Canada

held February 17-20, 1981, in Anchorage, Alaska

Proceedings edited by

Wilbur N. Ladd

and

Philip F. Schempf

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Anchorage, Alaska

Juneau, Alaska



U. S. Department of the Interior

Fish and Wildlife Service

Alaska Regional Office

Anchorage, Alaska