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AFRICAN PEREGRINES A POPULATION UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

The Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus* is one of world's fastest animals, catching its bird prey mid-air in breathtaking high-speed dives or stoops. Drawn by its charisma, its general rarity, and its spectacular lifestyle, ornithologists and enthusiasts around the globe have tracked the fluctuating fortunes of the Peregrine, from its darkest days in the mid-1900s, to its increasing success over the last two decades. Despite being the subject of so much study, both academic and applied, there is still a lot to learn about this remarkable bird.

For example:

- How will Peregrines adapt to a **changing climate**?
- How do pristine, unmanaged African Peregrine populations compare with northern ones, and how do **urban and rural populations** persist here?
- Why has there been **rapid expansion** of Peregrines into urban areas around the world?
- Can the Peregrine, like other apex predators, be used to **reveal the deeper ecological undercurrents** of global environmental change?

These and other intriguing aspects of falcon biology and conservation are the subject of a long-term study of Peregrines in the Cape Town area by Dr Andrew Jenkins: this study has been ongoing at the FitzPatrick Institute for more than 20 years. This population of nearly 50 breeding pairs (and growing!) is surveyed annually, nestlings and adults are fitted with individually unique colour bands, and the fortunes of these marked birds are monitored throughout their lives. Yearly expenses for the project run to about \$8 000, with fuel, custom-made colour-bands, and occasional items of capital equipment being the major budget items.

The primary conservation drift here is simple – we cannot conserve populations successfully if we do not understand how they work. By determining the fundamental drivers of growth, stability and decrease can we anticipate responses to change and manage accordingly. The demographic principles established in long-term studies of marked animals may be used to direct the conservation of closely related species for which such information is unavailable. For example, understanding the dynamics of an African Peregrine population could contribute to how we approach the development of a conservation strategy for the very rare and enigmatic Taita Falcon *F. fasciinucha*.