

Elegant terror on the foreshore

Nick Horten offers an alternative view on the raptor debate.

Huddling at the foot of the low sea wall, trying to avoid the cutting January wind I was enjoying a smoke and a cup of coffee with another gunner when quite unexpectedly a cock peregrine, a tiercel, flew low across the mud in front of us and flicked over the wall, passing so close between us I could have touched it.

Grabbing my binoculars from the game bag I followed his leisurely and as yet undetected progress across the inland marsh. Hugging the ground, his blue back strikingly visible, he followed the sunken course of a dry ditch towards the distant lagoon on the far side of the marsh.

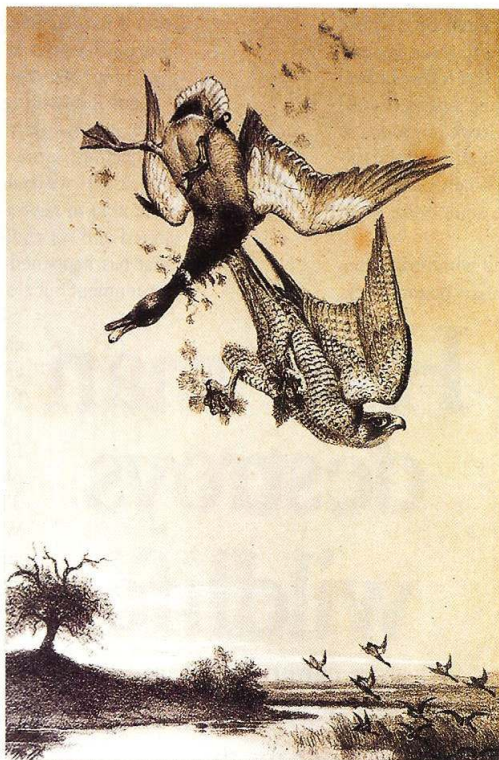
My companion, an older man who kept racing pigeons and could remember the pre-war days when over-wintering peregrines were common on the estuary, was obviously far less enthralled than I was with our point-blank encounter with this magnificent winged destroyer. "Do you know," he muttered through his balaclava, "those things always remind me of German fighter planes. Messerschmitt 109s." I had to admit as I glassed the falcon that although exquisitely graceful, there was a certain muscular, almost thuggish brutality about it, very reminiscent of a marauding enemy raider.

On reaching the reed bed surrounding the lagoon, the peregrine seemed to throw off his early morning lethargy and the stroke of his pinions increased to the more familiar shallow, shivering beat and glide, beat and glide on bowed wings before suddenly accelerating into a rapid, near vertical climb of two hundred feet or more. At the top of which he gracefully pivoted on the tip of one wing and playfully made a grab at an unsuspecting black headed gull. Panic stricken, although I suspect in no real danger, the gull almost fell from the sky in terror. But as the gull tumbled earthwards, desperately trying to make its wings work, every other bird on the marsh from goose to dunlin rushed up to meet it.

The tiercel had triggered a full scale 'peregrine panic' and within seconds of his sudden appearance in their midst, thousands of birds had become airborne. Dunlin, knot and oystercatcher raced hither and thither in huge dense flocks, twisting and gyrating to confuse the hunter, while gulls, geese and duck in milling packs seemed to be trying to gain altitude to get above the predator where they would be relatively safe.

Apparently satisfied with the havoc he had created, the black moustached raptor, Luftwaffe fighter ace Adolph Galand or perhaps Baron Von Richtofen reincarnate, mounted on high and flew off over the distant hills, a swiftly moving blue-grey crescent on whose wingtips I fancied one could just distinguish the black German crosses, before he disappeared from sight.

My path crossed that of the peregrine perhaps half a dozen times that season and each meeting was truly memorable. On one occasion, I



watched a cock pintail fly over the sea wall and out to sea at what, for a pintail, was a fairly leisurely pace. As I looked, the duck seemed to compress itself in the air, becoming visibly longer and slimmer, at the same time increasing his wing beat to an almost frenetic rate. From out of nowhere the tiercel appeared, quite literally on the duck's tail. He had not stooped but had simply overhauled the bird in level flight.

The duck tried to climb but the peregrine stuck to him like glue, balancing in the air on bowed wings, effortlessly matching his quarry's every manoeuvre. Languidly extending a lethally taloned foot the falcon actually seized the duck by the rump! But the pintail's reaction to this manhandling was almost as spectacular as the peregrine's flying ability. Deliberately stalling in mid flight, he went into a desperate power dive. Flying full tilt vertically downwards with never a check in his wingbeat, until he literally flew headlong into the sea disappearing below the surface in a gannet-like plunge.

These early magical encounters with a peregrine took place about 10 years ago and, at first, I could not understand my elderly companion's hostility towards such a magnificent hunter. But with the passing of time, and whilst still find them awe-inspiring to watch, my love affair with *falco peregrinus* is rapidly cooling.

Harassed by man since the advent of the gun. Poisoned, trapped, robbed and insidiously pumped full of toxic agri-chemicals, the truth is that we have absolutely no idea of the numbers and winter distribution of the peregrine before this persecution started, nor those to which they are likely to rise in its absence. But should this trouble the coastal wildfowler?

My local fowling club has been keeping highly detailed bag records for almost 20 years and they show a disturbing correlation when compared to peregrine numbers. The problem is not that they eat lots of duck, ours dine mainly on gulls and oystercatchers, but the effect they have on the daytime movement of the fowl. Once, passing the day on the high saltmarsh with hide and decoys could be very productive. Then the first peregrine arrived, to be joined a few years later by a female, and then by a young bird of the year.

To add insult to injury, this winter the resident three peregrines have been joined by an escaped lanner falcon! Predictably, the effect on the daytime shooting has been devastating with duck seemingly reluctant to fly at all unless it is too dark for the raptors to hunt.

Perhaps this superabundance of peregrines is an isolated local problem but if it is the precursor of a full scale return to pre-persecution numbers then the wildfowling community could, like the moorland gamekeepers, eventually find they too have an axe to grind with our burgeoning bird of prey population. □