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Author: Hunt, W. Grainger

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CELEBRATING THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE RAPTOR RESEARCH FOUNDATION

W. GRAINGER HUNT[1]
The Peregrine Fund, 5668 West Flying Hawk Lane, Boise, ID 83709 U.S.A.

Our organization, now 50 years in motion, began in the urgency attending the historic crash of Peregrine Falcon populations. When Joe Hickey called the world's experts to the University of Wisconsin in 1965 to seek the cause, the roles of DDT and dieldrin had yet to be examined. Events at that historic conference, however, included the presentation by Ian Prestt and Derek Ratcliffe showing a stunning geographical correspondence of cereal farming in Great Britain with declines among bird-eating raptors, a powerful demonstration implicating tiny, unseen molecules in the disruption of ecosystems. Minds might have raced to food-chain biomagnification, but such understanding, now familiar, was still far from mature. A day or so later, a small group of attendees met to discuss the real and present need for an organization focusing on the science and conservation of birds of prey. Five months passed, and in February 1966, Don Hunter, Byron Harrell, and Paul Springer signed the documents incorporating the Raptor Research Foundation. And here we are, thriving as is obvious, with robust attendance at annual meetings, a strong international breadth of membership, a scholarly journal with worldwide authorship, and all the advantages of instant, global communication.

Saving the peregrine remained the primary focus of RRF during its early years, with prolific exchanges of ideas and information permeating its meetings and the pages of *Raptor Research News*, the precursor of our *Journal of Raptor Research*. Surveys for remnant pairs, evidence of contamination, and refinement of the technology of captive breeding were at center stage through the early 1970s. A look back at those days would find our organization immersed in a diverse array of activity, all connected to what became a satisfying endpoint—from field biology to chemistry and physiology, from experimentation to population ecology and advocacy, and ultimately, to restoration.

While this first dragon was being slain, the much larger world of science was undergoing profound change. Biology was building upon the very recent elucidation of the DNA code and the details of protein synthesis, the nuts and bolts of evolution. The year 1966 brought two seminal books: David Lack's *Population Studies in Birds* and George Williams' *Adaptation and Natural Selection*. The first expounded upon the principle of density dependence, and the second placed the Darwinian concept on workable ground that bound together the sciences of evolution, ecology, behavior, and more. Soon we had John Maynard Smith's game-theoretical approach to life-history strategies. It was during this period that the first photographs of our planet were taken from space, and people began to more fully consider the biosphere as an integrated whole, an evolutionary masterpiece that could be damaged, and that some forms of damage could be severe, yet difficult to diagnose. I am of the opinion that the peregrine conference and the concurrent birth of the Raptor Research Foundation were working parts in this awakening.

The subject matter of RRF has thus diversified to its present pursuit of all forms of raptor-related science. While many projects explore the factual details, others expound upon them to find conceptual insights. And why are raptors so instructive? Perhaps it is because they tend to be long-lived, they are observable, conspicuous enough to be individualized with leg bands even at a distance, most hold readily definable territories, they leave prey remains as evidence of their diets, they are large enough to carry powerful, long-lasting radio transmitters that show

[1] Retired; email address: grainger@peregrinefund.org

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their movements over a wide range of spatial scales, and they are predators—some quite high in their food webs—and may thus reveal the presence, accumulation, and effects of contaminants. We do well by studying them.

RRF is, of course, intrinsically dedicated to raptor conservation, and so we monitor populations, analyze their demography, and find ways to mitigate where indicated. Our membership has been highly successful in identifying and helping to eliminate serious threats to raptor populations. One example was the discovery through radiotelemetry that the pesticide monocrotophos in Argentina was killing wintering Swainson's Hawks (*Buteo swainsoni*) migrating from northern California. Another was the extraordinary detective work and experimentation that revealed the role of the veterinary pharmaceutical diclofenac in driving populations of Asian vultures to near-extinction. And yet another was the establishment of lead-based ammunition residues as virtually the only obstacle to self-sustaining condor populations in North America. Among dozens of other potent, human-related mortality agents worldwide, we find carbofurans that threaten African vulture populations, new-generation rodenticides, electrocution, wire strikes, vehicular collisions, and wind turbine blade strikes, each with its own set of challenges. With these, and the ubiquity of habitat alteration, and the acceleration of climate change, the need for RRF's scientists will remain.

Lastly, and still firmly in the realm of conservation, it is essential that, if raptors are to endure the present flood of environmental perturbation, the public must come to like them, take pleasure in the details of their wild existence, and insist upon action (or inaction) on their behalf. Fortunately, raptors do lend themselves quite appropriately to such appreciation. Here, we have adventurous fathers going off to spectacular, three-dimensional foraging, while even more powerful and resourceful mothers stay home to nurture and defend, both sexes formidable toward trespassers, yet absurdly gentle in the presence of offspring. Raptors are also beautiful, and that never hurts. So, as we do the science, let us not forget the larger audience whose attitudes will ultimately determine the fates of raptor populations. Let us bring the worth and wonder of raptors into the minds of everyone we can, and through whatever medium is at hand. Our research, our meetings, and our journal articles are foundational, but in matters of conservation, they may only be first steps.

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