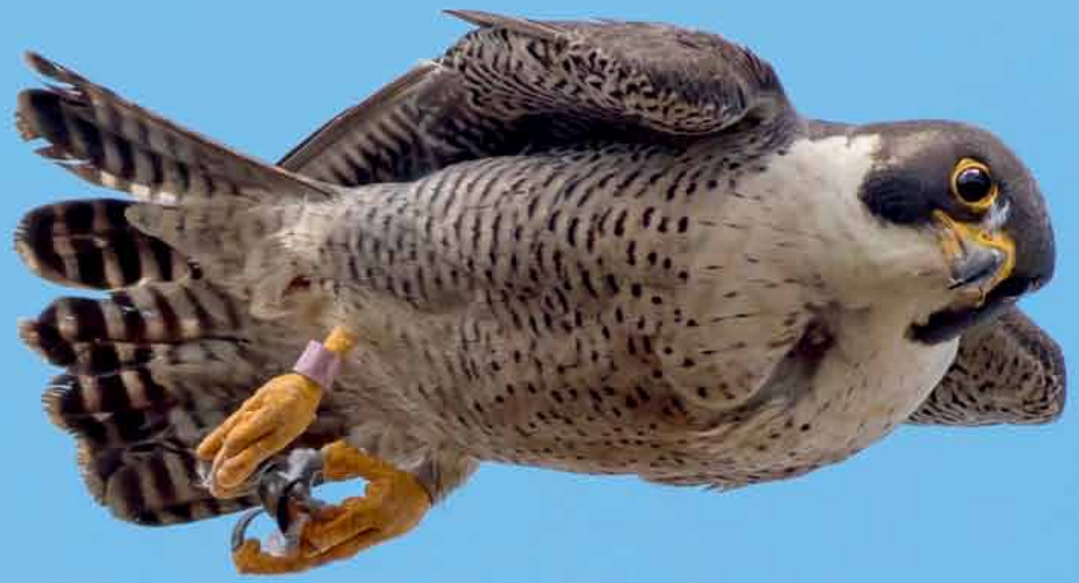
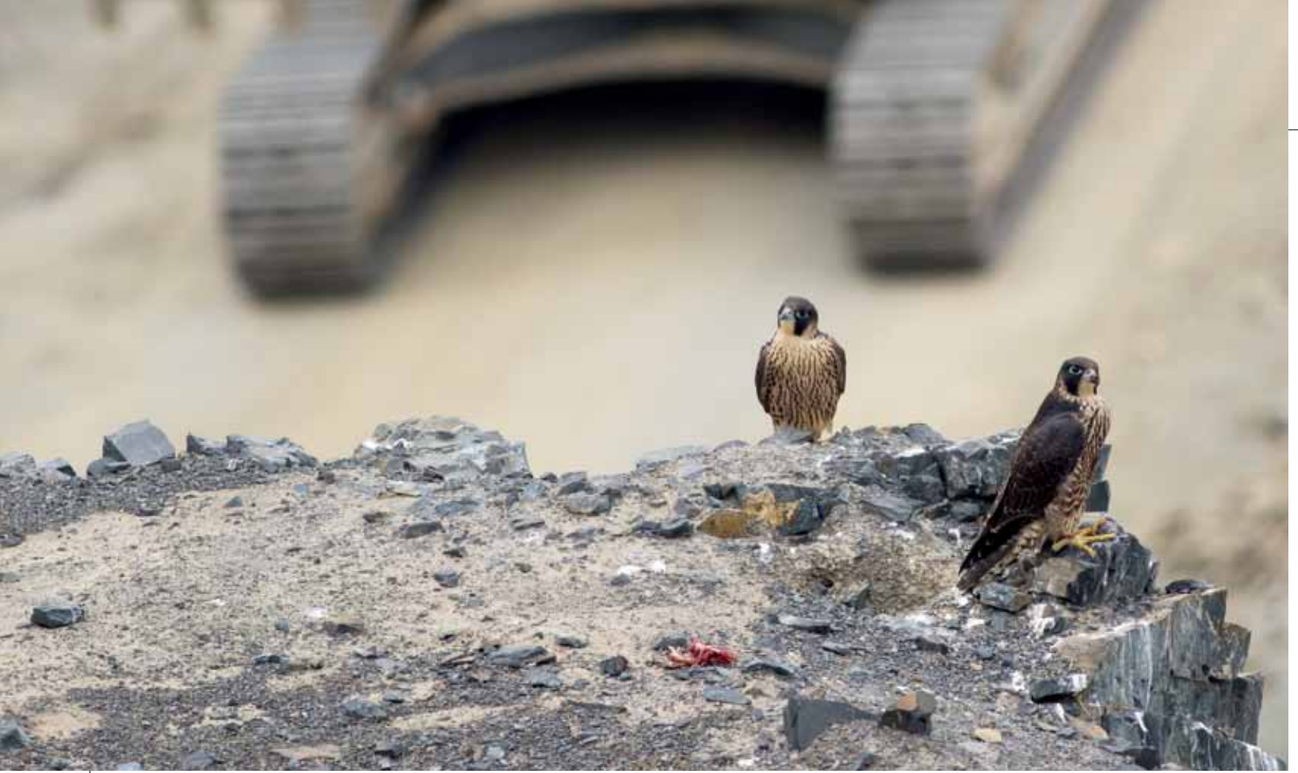


all good things...

The Peninsula's Peregrines

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS **ANDREW JENKINS**



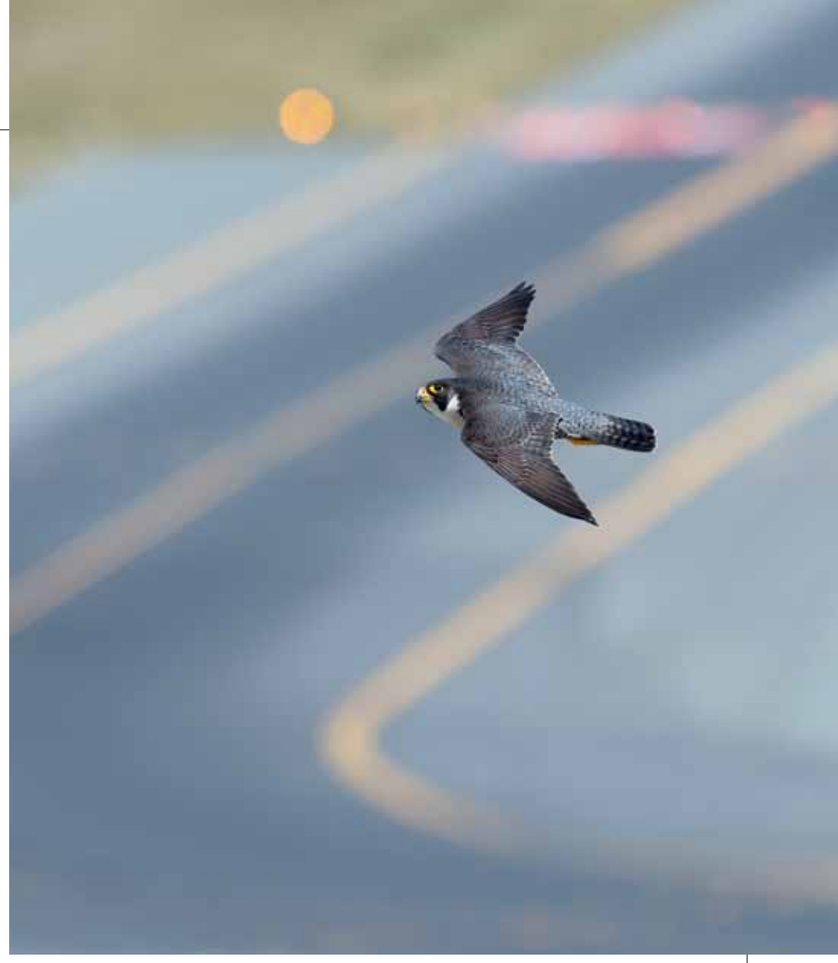
It's November 2017 and I'm driving with two young colleagues, Kyle Walker and Claire Marchant, to do field work at a stone quarry on the rural fringe of Cape Town. We turn off the main road at our destination and wave to the security guy as we breeze through the gate. Even early on a Saturday morning there is work going on, generating a shroud of fine dust that populates the first rays of sun with gilded particles. As we bump along the rough track, the road becomes steeper and wider and takes us up and then along a sunlit fence line. To our left is a harvested wheat field; to our right the cavernous maw of the quarry is becoming more distinct, revealing layer upon layer of blue-grey stone, hacked and stripped naked by yellow machines. The resulting injury is a deep, ragged bite out of the hillside.

We park near the top of the quarry, gathering our gear as the engine ticks into rest and the dust we've kicked up settles. Outside, the sounds of crunching rock and clunking metal echo around the blasted amphitheatre. The overall impression is of a dead place, ravaged by human industry and beaten into apocalyptic submission. Remarkably, however, there is life here. Helmeted Guineafowl cluck and fuss in growing panic at the top edge of the quarry, a pair of Blue Cranes call from a fallow field nearby, Egyptian Geese honk raucously from the bowels of the pit and a Familiar Chat flits from perch to perch among the rubble.

After a while a loud, insistent whining emanates from the mine. Static at first, it changes pitch erratically as it begins to move. Suddenly the muscular back of a Peregrine Falcon, and then a second, is picked out by the sun and the two birds converge over the void. In a frantic but still precise manoeuvre, the incoming male transfers the semi-plucked body of a Common Starling to the outgoing female and the latter, screaming in excitement, turns and glides back towards a sheer section of the quarry. Five minutes later she leaves the rock face again, still carrying the prey and calling loudly, and flies directly to a cramped and heavily polluted ledge, to be greeted by four hungry nestlings.

Having monitored this territory annually for the past 15 years, I'm familiar with where and when the Peregrines here typically breed. With the nest site located quickly and easily and the scope used to verify that the chicks are the ideal age for ringing, we drive further up in the quarry and prepare for the abseil. Normally at this stage I would rappel down to the nest, bag the chicks, jumar back up with them, ring them and return them. However, I'm still recovering from recent back surgery and am in no shape for such physical activity. This is where Kyle and Claire come into their own; Kyle has kindly offered to do the rope work and both will help with handling and processing the chicks.

With the confidence of youth, Kyle dons a harness and heads down to the nest, dealing easily with the quarry's loose rock and a barrage of verbal and physical abuse from the hyper-defensive adult falcons, as well as the tricky task of catching and transporting the four feisty youngsters. Soon all the chicks are on the tail-gate of the bakkie, ready for ringing. Each is sexed (they are all males, weighing about 500–520 grams) and then fitted with numbered and coloured ring combinations. An hour later we're done and heading for the next site on the list.



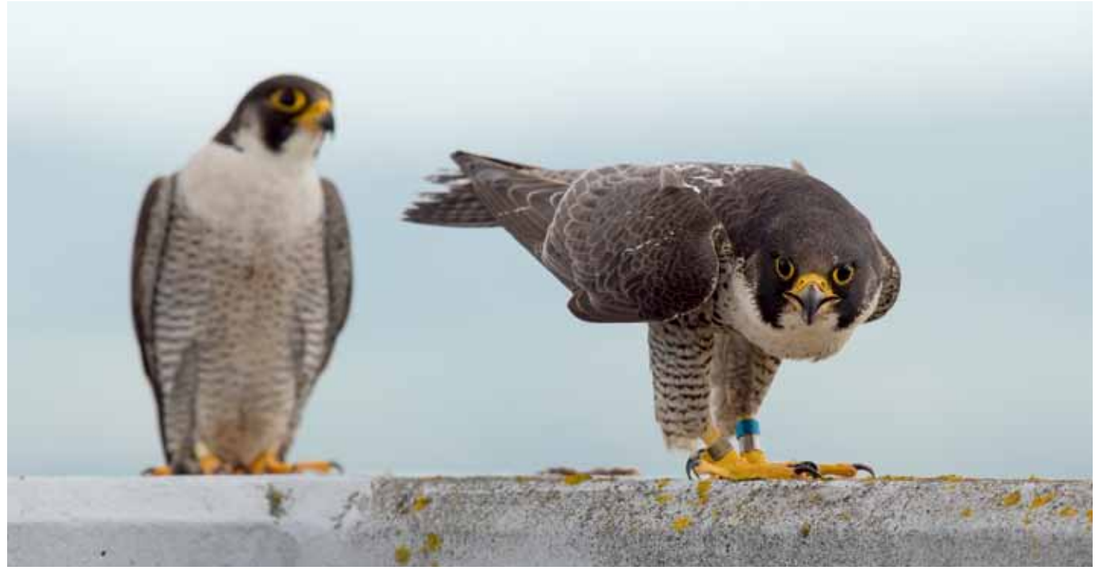
above *Air traffic control: a male Peregrine cruises over Cape Town International Airport.*

opposite *Active quarries are a harsh but productive environment for nesting Peregrines. Recently fledged juveniles are quite used to the loud mining machinery (above). Nest ledges tend to be small and exposed (below).*

previous spread *Whoosh! A male Peregrine shoots past in a carefully controlled dive.*

I've discussed the rationale behind my work on Peregrines in previous articles (*Africa – Birds & Birding* February/March and April/May 2010 and *African Birdlife* July/August 2017), but basically this is a long-term investigation into how the Peregrine population of the Greater Cape Town area works. Using structured annual nest monitoring and an individual-based colour-ringing scheme, I aim to identify the factors that control falcon numbers and the frequency and success of breeding attempts and also to define the characteristics that distinguish successful birds from less successful ones.

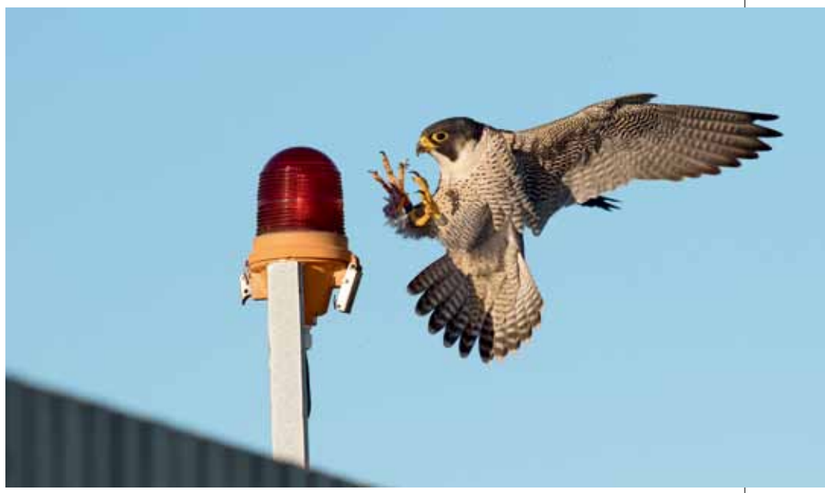
At the end of 2019 the project concluded its 31st consecutive field season, having ringed more than 900 falcons and amassed over a thousand pair-years of territory monitoring. In addition to family and close friends who have provided critical core support, many people have >



assisted me over the years. For the most part, however, this has been a solo effort and three decades of watching, hiking, climbing, trapping and ringing have taken their toll. My back problems in 2017 were preceded by knee issues in 2015 that also required surgery and these physical frailties have eroded my ability to function effectively in the field. Even after I reached out for assistance, the quality of data collected has dropped off in the past few years as coverage of the less accessible nest sites has started to fall away.

It's mid-morning in September 2019 and I'm combating heavy traffic on my way to hospital – thankfully this time for Peregrine purposes and not my own! The commute out to the Cape Flats used to take no more than 30 minutes, but it's now more than an hour since I set out and I still have some way to go. Eventually I make it up onto a hospital roof in Mitchell's Plain and can once again focus on falcons.

This building is home to one of my best-loved Peregrines – a male I ringed as a nestling at another hospital. He is now a breeder and one of the most confiding birds in my study population. I guess it's a bit strange to have favourites, but this little guy is so plucky he warms my heart every time I see him. The feeling isn't exactly mutual, but he tolerates my very close approach and provides some amazing photo opportunities. While his mate flies around alarm calling, he settles on the catwalk next to his nest box, barely a metre away from me, and watches angrily while I measure >



above *Wherever they live, Peregrines always gravitate to the highest perches available, in this case a warning light for aircraft.*

top *Male Peregrines typically hold back while their larger, more aggressive mates confront unwanted visitors.*

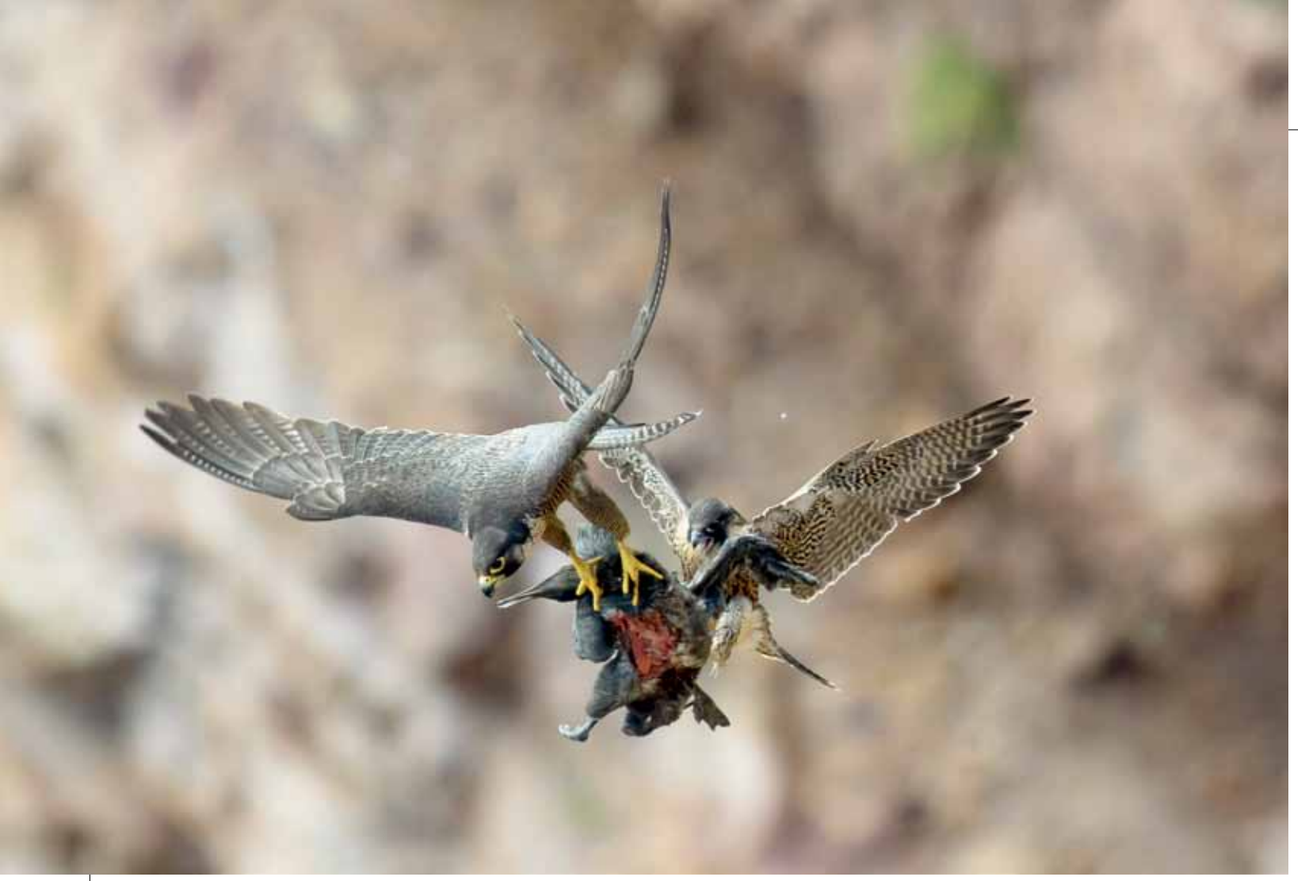
opposite *Peregrine in flight: feather perfect and cuttingly precise.*

and weigh the pair's clutch of two eggs. I take a precious moment to revel in the proximity of this wild soul before leaving, which prompts him to move to his preferred vantage point (a conveniently located aircraft warning light) to strike a pose and stare daggers at my back as I depart.

Escalating levels of urbanisation have clearly benefited the Peregrines in the Cape Town area, with the Peninsula population more than quadrupling over the past three decades and the number of urban pairs increasing by more than tenfold. Ironically, while there are many more Peregrines to study in this rapidly growing city, actually studying them has become more and more difficult. Congestion on the roads means that it takes an age to get anywhere in Cape Town, making monitoring the birds increasingly time-consuming and tedious. And then there's the crime. Violent crime has become almost the norm in modern South Africa, and certain Cape Town suburbs, including some that hold breeding pairs of Peregrines, have become notorious for it.

I've experienced a near mugging while doing field work – in an incident that could have ended much worse than it did – so I've become extremely cautious about where and when I get out of my vehicle. Unfortunately the crime has also moved into undeveloped parts of the city and there are sections of Table Mountain National Park where hikers are regularly accosted and the authorities warn against hiking alone. Perhaps I'm being paranoid and my heightened fears are just another symptom of age, but doing bird research in the Greater Cape Town area is no longer as irresistibly attractive as it once was. >

A poignant moment. This is possibly the last Peregrine I will ring on the Cape Peninsula, photographed in January 2020, just after she had fledged.



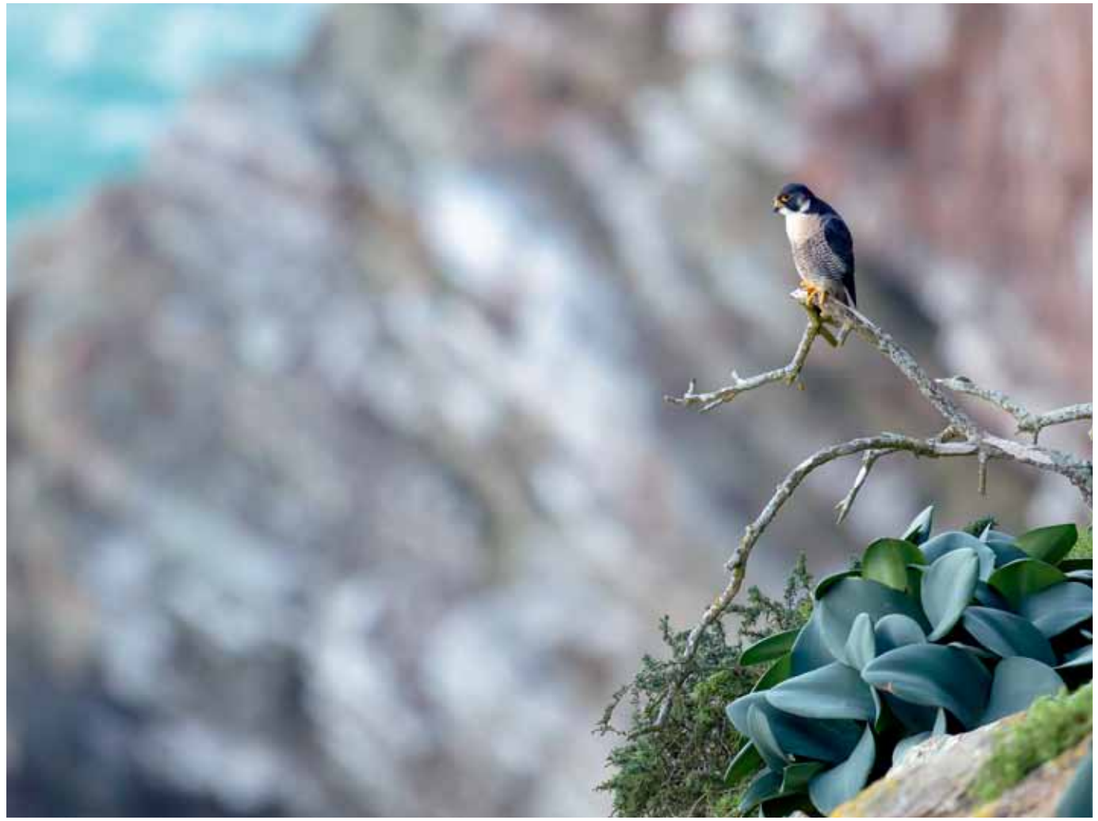
It's early morning in mid-December 2019 and this time I'm near Cape Point, close to where my life with Peregrines on the Peninsula began. This territory couldn't be more different from the quarries and buildings to the north. Although the tourist facilities of the Point aren't far away, the site itself is hidden and remote from people, and the area is profoundly picturesque and rich with nature. Cape Cormorants are nesting on the cliffs below and to my left and there is a constant buzz of adults arriving and leaving amid the whistling of hungry nestlings. Kelp Gulls and White-necked Ravens cruise the cliffs and Swift Terns and Cape Gannets scud past over the sea in ragged flocks, hugging the shore as they beat their way out of False Bay. Cape fur seals thrash and frolic in the thick forests of kelp, while humpback and southern right whales are regular passers-by as they round Cape Point.

The wind gusting around me is alternately ripe with the guano of nesting seabirds or tinted with the delicate pungency of the surrounding fynbos – a scent so evocative of my years spent patrolling the mountains and coastlines of the Peninsula.

The Peregrines have been quiet since my arrival, but this is surely the calm before the storm. The pair has recently fledged three chicks that I can now see perched at separate locations on the nest cliff. I'm at the cliff's northern end, where it lowers and curves out to the east, with most of the crag stretching away from me to the south. The closest juvenile is about 50 metres away, waiting patiently for breakfast to arrive.

Suddenly the storm breaks as the adult female glides in, flying head-on to me and lugging an enormous burden. Normally Peregrines fly with prey tucked neatly under their tails, presumably to reduce drag, but this cargo demands a different strategy. Grasped firmly in both feet, it is suspended beneath the female at the end of her fully extended legs, apparently providing some stabilising ballast as she careens downwind. More closely resembling a hang-glider than a provisioning falcon, she is immediately set upon by her ravenous brood. All four birds are wailing desperately and flailing around in an effort either to access the food or avoid thrashing wings and lashing talons. Camera in hand, I fire off a few shots. The adult bird is losing altitude and control and as a diminutive male fledgling grabs at the prey, she lets it go, he can't hold it and it falls onto the rocks below.

The photographs I manage to take show the female delivering an almost fully grown Cape Cormorant chick that must have weighed more than a kilogram. From analysing prey remains recovered from the nest ledge in previous years, I've known that this pair takes a good number of Cape Cormorants, but have never actually seen them brought in. I'm amazed that the falcons are capable of catching and transporting prey so much bigger and heavier than themselves, especially given that to do so they must run the gauntlet of a host of aggressive kleptoparasites like Kelp Gulls and White-necked Ravens before making it back to the safety of their home base.



above *A male Peregrine optimistically eyes Cape Cormorant nests massed on cliffs at Cape Point.*

opposite *The Cape Point female delivers a Cape Cormorant to her nest cliff, where a newly fledged male tries to grab it but allows it to drop to the rocks below.*

Some time after witnessing this event I visited Cape Point several times with my son Ruben, intent on seeing and photographing the Peregrine pair actually hunting Cape Cormorants. We focused our efforts on the west-facing cliffs where the density of nesting cormorants is greatest and saw the falcons stooping across these cliffs several times, causing cormorants to peel away in panic and dive towards the sea. Although we didn't actually witness a successful hunt, we saw the female ferrying fresh kills towards the nest cliff often enough to suggest that cormorants form an important part of this pair's diet. The weather gods denied us any usable images of what we saw, but it remains my ambition to photograph this dramatic behaviour in years to come.

In fact, this experience brought into focus something that I guess I've known for some time: not only have the constraints on my research become increasingly limiting, but my Peregrine priorities have undergone a significant shift too. I've become less interested in observation and data gathering and more interested in experience and photography. While my passion for these dynamic birds remains intact, I now want to document them in a different way. In essence, a brand of science has given way to a form of art: my commitment is now focused on the power of writing and well-crafted imagery to persuade people to care and help turn the tide of human impact. My research journey has been a long one but, perhaps like all good things, it might finally be coming to an end… ◆