

SURVEY OF THE PEREGRINE FALCON AND OTHER RAPTORS IN
THE PROPOSED SUSITNA RIVER RESERVOIR IMPOUNDMENT
AREAS: INTERIM REPORT

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RIVER RESERVOIR IMPOUNDMENT AREAS

Interim Report

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Introduction:

The area of the Susitna River from the proposed damsite at Devil's Canyon thence upriver through the Denali site which will back water up to within 10 or so miles of the Susitna Glacier, and the adjacent region of the proposed power lines from the Devil Canyon Site, was surveyed by helicopter between 10 and 15 June 1974. Of principal concern in this study, especially as regards the regions to be inundated by the placement of dams, was the locations of cliff nesting raptors within the canyons, in particular the peregrine falcon. The peregrine was of primary importance because of the nature of its seriously declining population levels. Further, Alaska is one of the last strongholds of this species in the United States and thus a knowledge of the distribution of the species within the state is necessary for its management. Although most other large rivers within the state have been surveyed for their avifauna, the Susitna River is largely still unworked ornithologically.

Previous observations along the Susitna suggested that perhaps peregrines could occur along certain stretches of the river owing to the physiography of the canyon walls. A local falconophile also indicated that he thought he had seen peregrines in Devil's Canyon previously. Thus, the chances of finding a small population of peregrines seemed good.

Methods:

The canyons were surveyed by use of a Bell 206-A Jet Ranger helicopter. Daily flights were made from Talkeetna and most sections of the four damsites were surveyed at least twice; several areas were scrutinized four times. The helicopter was flown slowly past the cliffs and as close to them as could be safely done. In most cases this amounted to 30-50 feet from the cliffs.

The only area not surveyed, because of lack of time, was that portion of the power lines running north of Cantwell along the general course of the Nenana River through McKinley Park and Healy. Parts of this region appear to contain excellent peregrine habitat.

Results:

No nesting peregrines occurred within the area of the four damsites in 1974. A single adult male was found roosting on a cliff about 4 miles upriver from the Devil Canyon Dam axis and a sub-adult non-breeding peregrine was seen about 15 miles upriver from the Devil Canyon Dam axis. It is doubtful if a peregrine population, as such, breeds in

The impoundment area of the Susitna River. Because of a lack of previous sightings or observations of breeding peregrines in the Yentna - Chulitna - Susitna - Matanuska rivers drainage basin, this entire region seemingly represents an hiatus in the breeding range of the species. The Nenana River, however, may yet be shown to have breeding peregrines. Ornithologically trained persons have worked, however, along that portion of the river between McKinley Park and Healy and although they have seen gyrfalcons occasionally, they have failed to see peregrines.

The only breeding large falcon found was the gyrfalcon. Two nests of this species were found within 6 miles of the Devil Canyon Dam axis. This species will probably be little affected by the presence of dam since both nests were back from high water limits about 1/2 mile and their food derives from the surrounding alpine regions. It is doubtful that they would enter the canyon to hunt except on a few occasions.

The one cliff nesting large bird most effected by the dams will be the raven - substantial populations occur there. This species is mentioned because its nests are used by other raptors, peregrines, and gyrfalcons and thus the placement of a raven nest may permit use of a ledge or area that was formerly unsuitable to either falcon. However, since neither falcon was found nesting in the canyons proper there is little chance that these nests would figure importantly to their population structure. Ravens were common in the lower 70 miles of the dam area. Fifteen nests occurred in that area for an average distance of about 4.6 miles between nests.

The nesting areas of three pair of bald eagles occurred in the dam-sites in 1974. Additional eagles may occur in other years but it appears that the population is low and probably not a significant loss to the species since they nest more commonly along the river below the canyon and also along the Nenana River near the upper end of the Denali site.

Golden eagles frequently occupied upland cliffs around the periphery of especially the Denali site. Since it is not known where these birds obtain their major foods, in the valley along the river or in upland alpine areas, statements about the impact the Denali site will have on them would be speculative.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

On the basis of the 1974 findings it is concluded that the impact of the damsites along the Susitna River to peregrine falcon populations will be negligible. The impact of damsites on other raptor populations

is also seemingly minor although essentially no data were acquired on the tree nesting raptors.

Harlan hawks and goshawks were seen along the river but their population sizes are unknown.

The only ecological equivalent to a raptor that will be significantly impacted is the raven but it exists in numerically healthy populations in regions adjacent to the river and the habitat created by the raven along the river is seemingly not used by other raptors.

In view of the lack of data for the Nenana River north of Cantwell it is recommended that the power lines be located adjacent to the highway or at least avoid placement along the river. Any peregrines that may occur there have doubtless accommodated to the presence of the highway and the addition of a power line will probably be non-significant to them.

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