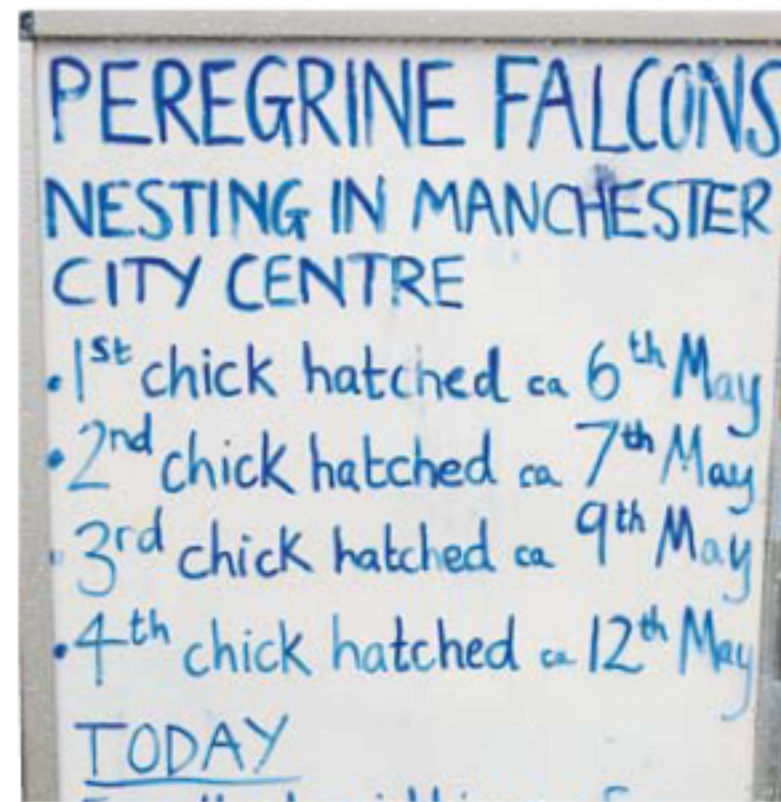


# High-rise heroes

Source talks to Sarah Williams, information assistant on the RSPB's Manchester Peregrines – Aren't Birds Brilliant project. Sarah has spent the summer watching the nesting falcons in Manchester city centre, and encouraging the passing public to get to know their feathered neighbours via a camera linked to the BBC's nearby Big Screen.



**Q What's been your role in the Manchester Peregrines project?** I'm one of three paid staff who manage the project day-to-day. That means standing out in Exchange Square in all weathers – often with a big plastic sheet over our table to stop everything getting soaked! We keep the public informed about the falcons' activities, as well as raising awareness of the RSPB and its work. We're helped by a team of RSPB volunteers, aged 18–70.

**Q How did you get involved?** I actually studied languages at university, but afterwards I went travelling to South America. I first got involved with conservation work on a project in Ecuador. I'd seen lots of amazing places, like the Galapagos Islands and the rainforest, which really opened my eyes to our environment and the way it's under threat. Before this project, I worked on promoting recycling, so I'm trying to gain as much experience as possible.

**Q Why did the RSPB decide to focus on the Manchester peregrine falcons?** They knew the peregrines had been here for about four years. Last year they had four chicks, thanks to the Manchester Birding Club putting up a nesting box, and now they've returned to the same site. Also, the peregrine falcon is a popular bird – it's the fastest in the world, travelling at up to 220 miles per hour when it swoops – and the fact that they're now coming into our cities gave the

RSPB an ideal opportunity to reach people who wouldn't usually visit our reserves or be aware of birds at all. The organisation was actually founded in Manchester, in Didsbury, so it's great that this project has been able to show Mancunians such an amazing bird on their own doorstep.

**Q What kind of reaction have you had from people in Manchester?** People have been overwhelmed and excited – often they haven't believed us at first. We've had to really encourage them to come over to the telescope and see for themselves that there's a real peregrine up there. A lot of people have come back for a second or third time, and some visit on a weekly basis to check the chicks' progress. Most people don't expect to see any nature in the city centre, but there's so much if you look far enough. I think this has opened people's eyes to notice birds and insects and so on in the future.

**Q Has the media picked up the story too?** Yes, the falcons have featured in the Manchester Evening News and they've been on BBC Northwest Tonight – the chicks were even named by viewers. Lots of people came specifically because they'd seen them on TV. It's like a soap opera, because the chicks change every day. We think we're watching them, but I think the male is really watching us – his eyesight is 300 times stronger than ours.

**Q What's the commonest question you've been asked?** Why have they chosen to nest in Manchester? The answer is that peregrine numbers are increasing, and they're searching for new territories. For them, the tall buildings of Manchester are very similar to the cliffs they'd nest on in the countryside. They can sit up there safely and observe their territory. And the food supply is great, as they catch small birds like pigeons and lapwings on the wing. It's important to note, though, that they'd never dent those populations in the city.

**Q What does the future hold for the falcons?** The chicks will learn to fly, then stay for another six to eight weeks until they've got their adult feathers and their wings are strong enough to fly away and hunt for themselves. They'll be told when to leave the nest – their parents won't tolerate them staying longer, because they do like their own space.

**Q Will you miss them?** I will. We've become very attached to the chicks, having watched them grow. We've worried when we couldn't see them, as if they were our babies too. But I think there's a good chance that the project will return next year, if the falcons come back.

For more information, visit [www.rspb.org.uk](http://www.rspb.org.uk)