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# *Peregrine Quest: From a Naturalist's Field Notebook* by Clayton M. White

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Peregrine Quest: From a Naturalist's Field Notebook.** 2006. Clayton M. White. Western Sporting, Rancho, WY. \$32.95. 390 pages. ISBN 1-888357-09-6.

It is good to know what you like early in your life; then you can accomplish much with it. Clayton White found that he liked falcons early in his life and has been traveling the world or, as he says, following "trails" ever since: "In a sense, one's life experiences are like a series of interconnected paths, or trails, each leading from the past to the future in directions that are sometimes familiar, sometimes unexpected. This book is about those trails and how I have found meaning in life's expressions" [page xxi]. It is very important to read the prologue of this book because it provides the reader with a frame of reference for the author's experiences as he presents bits, chops, chips, and flakes along the way. Oh, that we all better understood our motivations for doing the things we do each day! The lifetime of biological research summarized in the field notebook section comes out as brilliant flashes of insight scattered in the mundane movements and data recording of a field biologist's day-to-day life. This book is worth reading for those insights alone.

Early on, White witnessed the decline of the Peregrine Falcon to dangerously low population numbers across broad bands of its range. He clearly admits that this decline allowed him to see the world through the eyes of this wandering bird, which is probably the most widely distributed species of terrestrial vertebrate on earth. His own peregrinations for this wandering bird have taken him nearly from pole to pole. From Alaska and the Aleutians to Argentina, Australia, the Amazon, central Asia, and Fiji, White has literally gone to land's end to understand this bird on its own cliffs.

In all these travels, Alaska clearly holds a special place in White's psyche. Perhaps the interconnected trails he speaks of earlier converge there, as do the ranges of several of the Peregrine Falcon subspecies that he loves. Others might have found professional, parsimonious, and effi-

cient satisfaction by learning of relatedness from tubes of tissue in a laboratory. White first went to the birds on the cliffs, riverbends, and islands where he filled the tubes; then he sought secondary confirmation (or sometimes refutation) of his ideas about phylogeny, ecology, and life history from the lab-bench sequencers and computer simulators. He experienced the search in real time and space, and loved the research at scales not relevant to day-to-day encounters, but informative in a reductionist modality. He sought out collaborators for his field research and for the lab work as well. A thoughtful reading of his sections labeled "Side Trips" and "Postscripts" will give you access to White's aesthetic, earned by working both with falcons and with an amazingly wide variety of people.

Because he worked with such a high-profile conservation icon as the Peregrine Falcon, White can also speak of dealing firsthand with politics and decision-makers. He pulls few punches in noting the relative intelligence and honesty of the various players with whom he rubbed shoulders during his quest to help the falcons recover from decline. And amid all this self-interest, bias, and fervor, White concludes that the amazing return of the Peregrine Falcon from the brink of annihilation to the brink of building cornices and far-flung cliffs worldwide may have simply been a natural event, not necessarily mediated by the watchful care, which scientists predicted would be needed based on results from countless surveys, artificial rearings, and transplantations. However, it is quite clear that he would agree with a paraphrasing of Thomas Jefferson that "the price of free falcons is eternal vigilance." By carefully watching the individual components of the living world, namely species, we will gain confidence (and inspiration) that we will see positive changes, which will indicate that more efforts such as White's are needed. Read the book.

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