

## In the Valley of the Moon

By Jenn Dean and Andrew Weiner

Two peregrine falcons flew high above the red alders and Douglas fir of the Northern Cascades. The male dipped and soared, as he had for several weeks. He flew spirals, and made steep dives. “Wichew!” he cried. The female, watching, suddenly knew this was her mate, her mate for life.

They scanned the cliffs for an abandoned nest to make their own. High above the Snoqualmie River, below the falls, they saw white stains and a gathering of branches and twigs. There was barely enough room for the two of them. Just beyond the nest the sheer wall fell two hundred feet. Perched on the jagged rock they sensed this was home. Precarious, perhaps, but safe from predators.

In the early winter they hunted, flying at dawn and dusk, striking and capturing small birds in midair. Folding back their tails and wings and tucking their feet, they dove at nearly two hundred miles an hour. The male struck a robin with his clenched foot, then turned to catch it as it fell from the sky. He passed the bird to the

female, who flew upside-down to receive the food.

In late March, while winter winds still blew and snow fell around them, the female laid her three eggs. The eggs were mostly white, with red and brown markings. While she sat on the eggs, the male perched on the very edge of the cliff, chest out. Across the river eight year-old Faye and her grandfather, along with a dozen others, kept a close watch.

The male hunted while she kept the eggs warm. Sometimes the male would strike a swallow or a mockingbird or a sparrow. Some days he caught nothing. The falcons huddled together on the edge of the cliff, hungry and cold.

Warm spring days came, melting the snow in the Cascades. The waterfall became a raging torrent. Many tourists came to see the famous waterfall. The tourists didn't notice the nest, so tiny and so far away. But Faye did. She came every day after school with her grandfather. She scanned the tree tops to find the male falcon. “Look, Grandpapa!” whenever she spied him. He was usually poised on his favorite branch in his favorite tree as he looked for something to eat.

“Good eyes, Faye,” her grandfather would always say.

One day at the end of April, Faye and her grandfather noticed something different. The female wasn't the only bird on the nest. There on the tiny perch, hundreds of feet above the rushing river, inches from the cliff's edge they saw three chicks covered with creamy-white down. With feet almost too big for their bodies, they squirmed and squawked. “We're alive,” they seemed to scream, “and we're hungry!!” Faye was so excited she jumped up and down.

The next day the male flew from the nest in search of food. Buffeted by the wind, he soared high above the river. He searched for a bird, or even a mouse or squirrel. Suddenly he saw a bird flying in the distance. Diving at top speed he struck the sparrow with his clenched foot, then turned to catch it as it fell from the sky. He plucked it, and then the female pulled the meat from the bones and fed it to the chicks. They growing chicks ate but were barely satisfied. The male would have to hunt again soon.

The next morning the male saw a pigeon in flight, and dove to stun the bird with his foot. A large shadow passed over him. A bald eagle was trying

to catch the falling pigeon, too! The large birds dove at the same time, nearly tangling their wings. They screamed in flight. The eagle grabbed the pigeon with its talons, and swooped out of the falcon's reach. The peregrine flew back to the nest without any food.

Faye worried the chicks would go hungry. They certainly looked hungry! That night the spring full moon rose high above the Snoqualmie Valley. The chicks huddled with the female, hungry and cold under the pale moonlight. By morning they were starving. But the next day the male didn't catch anything. The female even left the nest to hunt, but she caught nothing, too.

The birdwatchers gathered every afternoon that week, and still the pair caught nothing. The chicks grew weaker and weaker. Faye worried. “Grandpa, can we leave them something to eat?” Her grandfather patted her shoulder. “They'll be fine, Faye. Nature will take care of them. You'll see.”

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