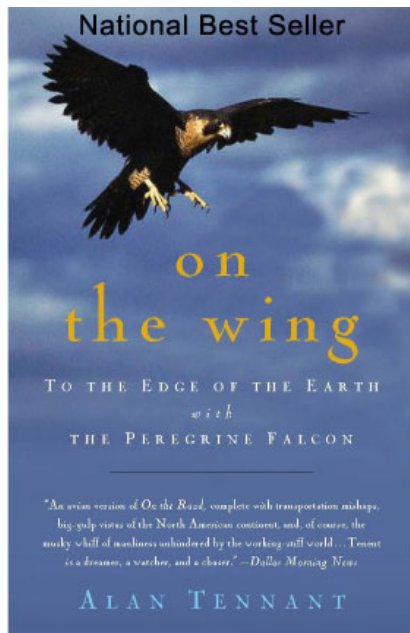


Book Review- On the Wing: To the Edge of the Earth with the Peregrine Falcon

JoAnn Hackos May 31, 2020 :



Some of the fun of reading **On the Wing** is reading about the incredible adventures of the author, Alan Tennant, and his erstwhile companion, George Vose, the pilot of an ancient Cessna Skyhawk. Their adventure begins on Padre Island in south Texas. Tennant is banding tundra-race Peregrine Falcons (*Falco peregrinus tundrius*) as they stopover on the flats of Laguna Madre, waiting to head north to breeding grounds in Alaska. The goal is to learn where and how they migrate. He attaches radio transmitters to the birds so that they can follow them north by airplane.

Tennant's account is fascinating, not only for what we learn about Peregrine Falcons but all the interesting information he includes about the places he visits and the birds he sees. He provides a wonderful account of all the passerines, including the warblers and the buntings, as they cross the Gulf of Mexico and land exhausted and hungry on Padre Island. Of course, their weakened state makes the songbirds prey for the falcons.

As Tennant captures and releases the falcons, we learn up-close details of their personalities and their appearance.

"Then, trying to remember everything, I paused to admire her. She was the darkest peregrine I had ever seen, heavily barred below, with a uniformly black cap and nape, unlike the pale-cheeked, glaucous-backed

tundra birds I was used to seeing here. I could have studied her all day, but I took a breath and stepped backward into the wind, setting her lightly out onto its current.”

Tennant moves from direct description of his tracking activities to interesting accounts of the history of falcons and details about the land they traverse on their way north and again back south to the Caribbean and South America. We learn how falconers helped to save the Peregrine Falcon from its near extinction in North America as a result of DDT poisoning. We learn about their incredible eyesight, which gives them images at least eight times clearer than our own. We learn about the phenomenal speed of their dives on prey.

On the Wing is an entertaining story of a particular group of falcons that Tennant and Bose follow in the old Cessna all the way to Alaska and then south again into Central and South America. Their adventures include not only trying to find the very fast-moving falcons heading north or south but navigating a series of tiny airports to refuel and repair the plane. At one point they are shot at by drug smugglers, and they almost collide with airliners at the Belize airport.

If you want to learn a lot more about Peregrine Falcons, you will enjoy Tennant’s account and the myriad of information he provides. But you will also love the adventure of the journey, with all the foibles of lost and found again migrating birds and all the near-miss events of flying an old plane with an ace but also an old pilot. **On the Wing** is so much fun to read that you’ll want to read it again.

Also, consider joining our Evergreen Audubon Nature Book Club. We meet on the first Monday of the month, and we read wonderful books like this one.

I have included below an excerpt that Tennant introduces us to in **On The Wing**. It is from one of my favorite poems by Gerard Manly Hopkins and focuses on falcons.

*I caught this morning morning’s minion, kingdom of daylight’s dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn
Falcon, in his riding*

Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding

High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing

In his ecstasy!

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS, “The Windhover”

Tennant, Alan. *On the Wing*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, September 2004.