

WILLIAM A. BURNHAM (1947–2006)

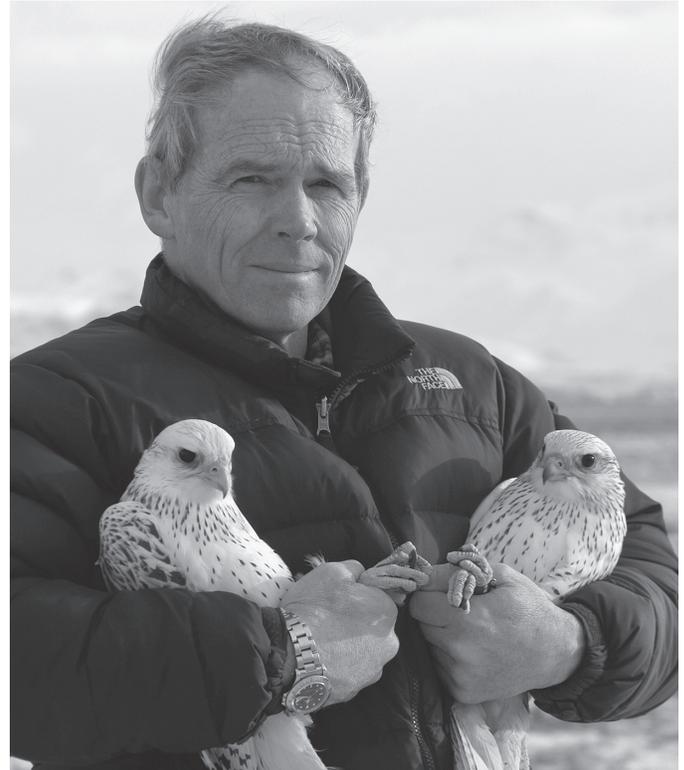
William A. Burnham died on 16 October 2006 after an eight-month battle with brain cancer. During his too-short life, Bill made many contributions to the field of raptor biology, including captive breeding and re-introduction to restore populations of raptors. He loved Greenland and its wilderness as much as he loved its falcons. His master's thesis recorded his pioneering work on the virtually unknown tundra peregrine falcon of West Greenland. He practiced the sport of falconry all his life. He trained many different kinds of raptors, both falcons and short-winged hawks. His tireless efforts provided important support for this little-known sport.

Bill grew up in Pueblo, Colorado, and when he graduated from Southern Colorado State College, he had already made his first trip to Greenland. After completing an MSc in Zoology under Dr. Clayton White at Brigham Young University in 1974, he earned a PhD in Wildlife Biology at Colorado State University in 1984. He joined the Peregrine Fund, based at Cornell University, in 1974 to establish its western peregrine propagation facility at Fort Collins, Colorado. In 1983, when the Peregrine Fund's eastern program at Cornell consolidated with the western operation, Burnham was placed in charge of finding a home for the new facility. He spearheaded the move in 1984 to Boise, Idaho, where he helped create the Peregrine Fund's World Center for Birds of Prey.

Bill wrote more than 90 scientific papers and one book, *A Fascination with Falcons* (1997), which described his many adventures in various parts of the world that he visited to foster raptor conservation and sound environmental management. However, he is perhaps best known as the dynamic leader of the Peregrine Fund/World Center for Birds of Prey, in Boise. This unique organization, with an annual budget exceeding US\$5 million, 50 employees in the United States, and many more around the world, carries out raptor restoration projects in North America (Northern Aplomado Falcon and the California Condor) and elsewhere.

Bill's tireless energy resulted in establishment of raptor research and restoration projects in areas as widely distant as Central America, Africa, and Asia. He knew the importance of developing local talent to run these projects. This did not, however, preclude his direct involvement in projects when the need for his expertise demanded it. He climbed both tall trees and cliffs with skill and verve. As Frank Bond related at Bill's memorial service, one outing had Burnham flying from Boise to the Philippines to band young in a Monkey-eating Eagle nest, some 80 m up in the tropical foliage. He scaled to the nest, banded the young, and returned to his desk in Idaho 60 hours later!

Burnham showed the same doggedness of purpose in Greenland, where he pioneered searches for peregrine eyries, collecting samples of the prey species and banding the young. He put in blistering 14-hour days, stopping only to brew up his ever-present coffee over a willow twig fire.



Bill Burnham with two captured gyrfalcons (Photo: Kurt Burnham).

He could outwalk anyone and still observe and photograph the myriad wonders and wildlife of the Low Arctic terrain. He became a strong advocate for wilderness and for common-sense conservation of nature. He led by example: the successes of his Peregrine Fund's raptor restoration projects have no equal.

Bill first went to Greenland in 1972 and participated in the Greenland Peregrine Falcon Survey for many years. He established the High Arctic Institute at Thule in 1993 with his son, Kurt. He became a Fellow of AINA in 1998 and was a Fellow (Nonresident) of the Explorers Club of New York City, which granted him its Lowell Thomas Award in 2004.

In 1974, near the beginning of a career imbued with a love for Greenland and the Arctic, Burnham and Steve Sherrod searched for falcons by sailing around Disko Bay, where they visited with the legendary Hannibal of Sarraq. In the foreword to a biography of Hannibal written after his death in Copenhagen in 1986, the Danish government's Minister for Greenland, Tom Høyem, wrote: "Ukuelig, begejstret, udmyg er de 3 ord som bedst karakteriserer Hannibal Fencker" ["Indomitable, enthusiastic, [and] humble are the three words that best characterize Hannibal Fencker"] (Hall, 1987). How strange that these same words also best characterize Bill Burnham, whose life was briefly touched by the famous outpost manager.

In a classic "selling iceboxes to the Inuit" episode at Sarraq, Burnham and Sherrod sold Hannibal the fiberglass

kayaks they had constructed earlier. Thrown into the deal from Hannibal were a sealskin anorak and pants. I heard that Bill had to store these items in a freezer after many complaints about their odor in the Colorado summers!

Bill spearheaded efforts to restore peregrines through captive breeding and release to the wild. The Peregrine Fund hosted a celebration with more than 1000 participants in August 1999, when the federal government removed the peregrine from the endangered species list. Peregrine restoration has been described as one of the greatest conservation stories of the 20th century. After the 1999 celebration, Bill co-edited the book *Return of the Peregrine* (Cade and Burnham, 2003), which described this magnificent accomplishment with language of outstanding beauty.

Bill's work in Greenland began with rigorous backpacking trips to seek out the endangered peregrine falcon. In later years, he applied modern remote sensing techniques (e.g., satellite-receiving microtransmitters) to learn more about gyrfalcons and peregrines. For the last 14 years, Bill and his son, Kurt, studied falcons in the Kangerlussuaq (Søndre Strømfjord) area of central West Greenland, as well as near Pituffik (Thule) in Northwest Greenland. North of Pituffik, they found the northernmost nesting peregrine falcons of the Nearctic. In 2001 they traveled the long and arduous route from Kangerlussuaq to Pituffik in an open boat. On the way, they conducted a survey of falcon nest sites in the Ummannaq District. This was actually a re-survey of the precise locations described by Bertelsen in the early 1900s (Bertelsen, 1921). They found few falcons nesting, but of even greater interest, they found nothing at the once-populous seabird colonies listed by Bertelsen. Cliffs where vast numbers of gulls, guillemots, murre, kittiwakes, and fulmars had once nested bore mute testimony to the modernization of Greenland. Debate about the cause of this catastrophic disappearance of birdlife suggests causes ranging from the deadly nature of modern-day hunting technology to disturbance by increasing numbers of tourist ships sailing close to the cliffs.

In autumn 2004, Bill realized a life's dream of trapping and banding gyrfalcons in East Greenland (see photo). He, son Kurt, and Peregrine Fund helpers set up two stations, one at Constable Pynt and the other at Kap Tobin, just east of Scoresbysund. They banded and took genetic samples from many migrants. The work continued in 2005, with other Peregrine Fund personnel.

We extend our deepest sympathy to Pat, Bill's beloved wife of 40 years, and to their son Kurt. We share their loss. Franklin Delano Roosevelt once said that there is no indispensable person. Maybe not, but I believe that Bill Burnham came as close as one can to being indispensable to all the work that he was involved in, not only in the Arctic, but in all aspects of raptor conservation. Through his presidency of the Peregrine Fund, Bill was able to mould a strong conservation organization that has the staff and tools to survive into perpetuity, which was always his dream. He was a big man, who routinely gave credit to others for things he did. Any person attempting to continue the sort of work that Bill accomplished will have very large mukluks to fill; it will take an extraordinary person working full time to equal that dynamic and unique man.

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