

The Peregrine

Audio Escape Trail

Text Version

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Italic text indicates excerpts from J.A. Baker's *The Peregrine* (1967), read by David Attenborough.

Non-italic text indicates surrounding script, written and read by Jack Monaghan.

Introductory Track

Welcome to The Peregrine audio trail, a celebration of local author John Alec Baker.

J A Baker, as he was known to his readers, lived his entire life here in Chelmsford. In 1967 he published *The Peregrine*, a searingly poetic account of an obsessive ten years of bird in the Essex estuary. It became one of the most popular bird books in the country, and inspired many of our modern nature authors.

This audio trail includes six extracts from Baker's book read by Sir David Attenborough. I recommend you follow the circular route along the river shown on the map on the trail website, and stop to listen to each extract at the locations marked.

The extracts can be found on numbered tracks below the map. Each one begins with a short introduction, and ends with instructions to guide you to the next listening spot. Music will continue to play for several minutes after I've stopped speaking, so that you can listen as you walk along the trail. Click or tap on the number to the left of the track to begin playing, and tap again if you wish to pause.

To start the trail, walk to the location marked 'one' on the map. This is at the back of the university building, next to where the river Chelmer pools to form a large pond, opposite the Mill House hotel. Once you get there play track one.

1

Track 1

The Peregrine is the fastest animal in the world. When it drops from the sky to catch its flying prey it can reach speeds of over 200 miles an hour, faster than a speeding train. And yet Baker, when observing and recording these birds in the Essex countryside, was still. Motionless. Standing on the ground, watching them fly. I invite you, now, to share in his moments of stillness with the world's fastest animal - beside that same river he waited and watched by.

Baker's book is written as if a diary of half a year of hawk sightings. He begins in Autumn, following a male peregrine, known as a tiercel. The following passage lasts a little over five minutes, and both this and all the following excerpts are read by Sir David Attenborough.

October the 1st

Autumn rises into the bright sky. Corn is down. Fields shine after harvest.

Over orchards smelling of vinegary windfalls, busy with tits and bullfinches, a peregrine glides to a perch in a river-bank alder. River shadows ripple on the spare, haunted face of the hawk in the water. They cross the cold eyes of the watching heron. Sunlight glints. The heron blinds the white river cornea with the spear of his bill. The hawk flies quickly upward to the breaking clouds.

Swerving and twisting away from the misty lower air, he rises to the first faint warmth of the sun, feels delicately for winghold on the sheer fall of sky. He is a tiercel, lean and long and supple-winged, the first of the year. He is the colour of yellow ochre sand and reddish-brown gravel. His big, brown, spaniel eyes shine wet in the sunlight, like circles of raw liver, embedded in the darker matt brown of the moustachial mask. He sweeps away to the west, following the gleaming curve of water. Laboriously I follow his trail of rising plover.

Young peregrines are fascinated by the endless pouring up and drifting down of the white plume of gulls at the brown wake of the plough. While the autumn ploughing lasts, they will follow the white-bannered tractors from field to field across the valley. They seldom attack. They just like to watch.

That is what the tiercel was doing when I found him again in the alder. He did not move from his perch till one o'clock, when the tractor driver went home to his lunch and gulls

settled to sleep in the furrows. Jays were screeching in oaks near the river. They were looking for acorns to bury in the wood. The peregrine heard them, watched their wings flashing white between the leaves. He flew steeply up into the wind, and began to soar. Turning, drifting, swaying, he circled up towards the burning clouds and the cold swathes of sky. I lowered the binoculars to rest my aching arms. As though released, the hawk swept higher and was gone. I scanned the long white spines of cirrus for his thin dark crescent shape, but could not find it. Faint as a whisper, his harsh exultant cry came drifting down.

The jays were silent. One flew heavily up, carrying an acorn in its wide-open bill. Leaving the cover of the trees, it rose high above the meadows, making for the hillside wood four hundred yards away. I could see the big acorn bulging its mandibles apart, like a lemon stuffed in the mouth of a boar's head. There was a sibilant purring sound, like the distant drumming of a snipe. Something blurred and hissed behind the jay, which seemed suddenly to trip and stumble on the air. The acorn spurted out of its bill, like the cork out of a bottle. The jay fell all lopsidedly and thrashing, as though it were having a fit. The ground killed it. The peregrine swooped, and carried the dead bird to an oak. There he plucked and ate it, gulping the flesh hastily down, till only the wings, breast-bone, and tail were left.

Gluttonous, hoarding jay; he should have hedge-hopped and lurched from tree to tree in his usual furtive manner. He should never have bared the white flashes of his wings and rump to the watching sky. He was too vivid a mark, as he dazzled slowly across the green water-meadows.

The hawk flew to a dead tree, and slept. At dusk he flew east towards his roosting place.

Wherever he goes, this winter, I will follow him. I will share the fear, and the exaltation, and the boredom, of the hunting life. I will follow him till my predatory human shape no longer darkens in terror the shaken kaleidoscope of colour that stains the deep fovea of his brilliant eye. My pagan head shall sink into the winter land, and there be purified.

To continue the trail keep the river on your left, and follow the path that leads behind the university building. You will pass one bridge without crossing, and take the second bridge you come to marked with a cycle path. Be careful of cyclists as you cross this second bridge, the next stop is just across the river, and to the left.

This is the longest section of the trail, at around half a kilometer, or a third of a mile. As you walk, observe the wildlife on route living between the town and the country, descendants of those birds Baker saw.

The music will continue to play so you can listen as you walk. If you would prefer to pause the track you can do so by clicking again on the icon to the side.

When you reach the next listening point click on Track 2, to hear the next excerpt.

2

Track 2

This second excerpt comes a month later. With the weather getting colder Baker has a surprisingly close encounter, and witnesses the tiercel peregrine seeming to play rather than hunt.

November the 11th

Wisps of sunlight in a bleak of cloud, gulls bone-white in ashes of sky. Sparrows shrilling in tall elm hedges near the river.

I moved slowly and warily forward through the flicking shadows of twigs, and crept from cover to find the tiercel perched on a post five yards in front of me. He looked round as I stopped and we both went rigid with the shock of surprise. Light drained away, and the hawk was a dark shape against white sky. His sunken owl-like head looked dazed and stupid as it turned and bobbed and jerked about. He was dazzled by this sudden confrontation with the devil. The dark moustachial lobes were livid and bristling on the pale Siberian face peering from thick furs. The large bill opened and closed in a silent hiss of alarm, puffing out breath into the cold air. Hesitant, incredulous, outraged, he just squatted on his post and gasped. Then the splintered fragments of his mind sprang together, and he flew very fast and softly away, rolling and twisting from side to side in steeping banks and curves as though avoiding gunshot.

Following him across the river meadows and over the fields by the brook I found eight recent kills: five lapwings, a moorhen, a partridge, and a woodpigeon. Many fieldfares flew up from the grass. Golden plover and lapwing numbers have increased, and there are more gulls and skylarks now than there were a week ago. Fifteen curlew were feeding in stubble near the brook, among large flocks of starlings and house sparrows.

At one o'clock I flushed the hawk from a post by the road. He flew low along a deep furrow of ploughed field to the west, and I saw a red-legged partridge crouching a hundred yards ahead of him. It was looking the other way, oblivious of danger. The hawk glided forward, reached one foot nonchalantly down, gently kicked the partridge in the back as he floated slowly above it. The partridge scabbled frantically in the dust, wings flurrying, righted itself, stared about as though completely bewildered. The hawk flew on without looking round, and many partridges began calling. He swooped down and kicked another one over as it ran towards the covey. Then he flew off towards the river. Peregrines spend a lot of time hovering over partridges, or watching them from

posts and fences. They are intrigued by their endless walking, by their reluctance to fly. Sometimes this playful interest develops into serious attack.

From this second listening spot across and to the left of the cycle bridge, continue along the trail keeping the river once again on your left, houses on your right, and following the path that takes you back towards the university. The next stop is at the weir, where the water rushes below that first bridge we passed earlier.

Our trail will follow this well-laid path. It is fully accessible and has regular benches. If you would like a wilder walk, and have suitable footwear, there are several paths leading deeper into the reserve you will pass on your right in this and the following sections. If you choose to take these, select the remaining excerpts whenever you find a suitable place to stop and to listen.

3

Track 3

This third excerpt is later in November. Baker sees another male, and later a female or falcon peregrine. The latter of these Baker discovers in a rather intimate, hidden moment in this bird's daily routine.

November the 28th

Nothing was clear in the tractor-echoing dreariness of this misty day. The thin and faltering north-west wind was cold.

At eleven o'clock a peregrine flew up to one of the line of tall pylons that extends across the valley. He was blurred in mist, but the deft bowing and fanning of his wings was instantly familiar. For twenty minutes he watched the plover feeding in the surrounding fields, then flew south to the next pylon. There he was silhouetted in an owl shape against the white sky, his sunken head rounding out into high curved shoulders and tapering down to the short blunt-ended tail. He flew north again, moving up above the shining mist-coils of the river, the red-gold burnish of his plumage glowing into dimness. His wings rowed back with long powerful strokes, sweeping him easily, majestically forward.

I could not follow him in such poor light, so I went down to the brook, thinking that later he might come there to bathe. Blackbirds and chaffinches were scolding in the hawthorns by North Wood, and a jay was perching in alders and looking down at something. Keeping in the cover of hedges, I went slowly along to the thick mass of hawthorns. I forced my way into them till I could see the fast-moving water of the brook, which the jay had been watching. Through the dark mesh of thorny twigs, I saw a falcon peregrine standing on stones, a few inches from the water, looking intently at her own reflection. She walked slowly forward till her large, wrinkled yellow feet were immersed. She stopped and glared around, then raised her wings at a steep angle above her back and waded carefully out into the water, stepping gingerly on the small gravelly stones as though afraid of slipping. When the water was nearly up to her shoulders, she stopped. She drank a few sips, dipped her head beneath the surface repeatedly, splashed, dowsed and flapped her wings. Blackbirds and chaffinches stopped scolding, and the jay flew off.

She stayed in the water for ten minutes, gradually becoming less active; then she waddled heavily ashore. Her curious parrot-like amble was made even more ungainly

by the weight of water in her feathers. She shook herself a great deal, made little jumps into the air with flailing wings, and flew cumbersomely up into a dead alder that overhangs the brook. Blackbirds and chaffinches started scolding again, and the jay came back. The peregrine was huge with water, and did not look at all happy. She was deeper-chested and broader-backed than the tiercel, with a bigger hump of muscle between her shoulders. She was darker in colour and more like the conventional pictures of young peregrines. The jay began to flutter round her in an irritating manner. She flew heavily away to the north, with the jay screeching derisively in pursuit.

Staying on this East side of the river, continue along the tarmac path with the river on your left. The path moves away from the river for a short time, but you'll find our next listening spot where it joins it again. Stop where there's a bench on the right of the path, opposite a deep inlet of the river, which breaks the far bank.

4.

Track 4

This excerpt comes from a frozen December that must have made Baker's day of standing and watching numbingly cold and uncomfortable. In this section Baker gives a rare and enticing glimpse into his inner life, on these solo treks through the estuary.

December the 29th

The fields were covered by three inches of snow, glittering in the powerless morning sun. Many birds have gone, or have been silenced by the cold. There was no ease or comfort in the bleak, tense air.

A jackdaw hopped from branch to branch of a tree by the valley road, endlessly calling 'chak, chak', a hard brittle sound like the smack of wood on wood, which meant it had seen a hawk. As I went down the snow-drifted path to the brook the tiercel peregrine flew towards me from a tree near the bridge. He passed overhead, looking sideways and down. For the first time, I realised that he may watch for my arrival in the valley. The predictability of my movements may have made him more curious, and more trusting. He may associate me now with the incessant disturbance of prey, as though I too were a species of hawk. The snow will make it difficult for me to keep as close to him as I have been.

White light shone up from the snow and reflected down from the breast of the hawk a pale golden radiance, in which the interlocking hackles of dark brown and fawn seemed to be deeply embedded. The crown of his head gleamed like a pale yellow crescent inlaid with ivory and gold. Two hundred crouching mallard were black smudges in the whiteness of the snow; woodpigeons and skylarks made smaller dots and blotches. The hawk looked down and saw them all, but he did not attack. He perched in a tree near the road, with his back towards me, huddled down in the shape of a swede or a huge copper-coloured beetle. He did not see me approach, but his head turned when he heard the crunch of my boots. He went steadily eastwards, clearly imprinted on the whiteness of the snow and on the shining egg-white of the sky, but hidden at once in the black line of the woods.

This was the way he flew. The inner wings were held up at an angle of forty-five degrees to the body. They did not move far. They jerked forward a little as the outer wings swung back, and back slightly when the outer wings went forward. The outer wings flicked round with a quick sculling rhythm, flexible and willowy. No two wing-beats

were identical. There was an endless variation in the depth, speed, and diameter, of their revolutions. One wing seemed occasionally to bite deeper than the other, causing the hawk to veer and tilt from side to side. Altitude was never constant; it was always slightly rising or falling. This bird has unusual power, and a strangely individual style; he glides and rocks away from each free swing forward and sweet pull backwards of the long, tapering sculls of his wings.

I followed him east, but could not find him again. Snow clouds to the north were pale white above a counter-shading of deep blue-grey. They were very shiny and smooth-looking, and they never came any nearer. There was shooting all day in the woods, and at dusk every hedge was lined with guns. The woodpigeons have no food, no rest. Thousands fly north, thousands remain. A few feeble thrushes fed in ditches, thin-necked, with loose, pinched flanks. Two gaunt herons tottered in the shallows of the brook where water still moves freely. A wave of turquoise froze into a kingfisher standing on a stone, then broke, and flowed away round a bend of the stream.

I avoid humans, but hiding is difficult now the snow has come. A hare dashed away, with its ears laid back, pitifully large and conspicuous. I use what cover I can. It is like living in a foreign city during an insurrection. There is an endless banging of guns and tramping of feet in the snow. One has an unpleasantly hunted feeling. Or is it so unpleasant? I am as solitary now as the hawk I pursue.

Continue along the tarmac path, and stop for the next track when you reach a bridge, just as the woodland begins to broaden to meadow.

5.

Track 5

With scant observations through the first two months of the year, this fifth extract comes from a warming, early March day. In perhaps his most dramatic section of prose, Baker imagines the world from the soaring peregrine's eye, and captures the cinematic majesty of its deadly stoop. Stoop is the word given to the thrilling, lightning-fast descent of a hunting peregrine onto its helpless prey below.

The movements and the senses of the hawk are in steep contrast to Baker's own. Baker was very short-sighted, and required thick glasses from an early age. He also suffered from an arthritic condition, which caused painful inflammation in his joints, and left him incapacitated and hospitalized for weeks at a time. Was it the challenges of his own body that made Baker so marvel at the speed and dexterity of the hawk?

March the 2nd

This was the eighth successive cloudless day, and the burnished blue of the sky shone as though it could never again be hidden. The strong south-east wind was cold, but the sun's warmth made the snow seem utterly vanquished and senile, sent it slithering waterily down into the rising land.

Woodpigeon and jackdaws went up from North Wood at midday, and cawing crows flew to their tree-top stations. Chaffinches by the bridge scolded steadily for ten minutes, their monotonous 'pink pink' gradually dying away in the sunlit silence. I saw nothing. Assuming the hawk to have soared down wind, I searched for him north of the ford and found him in the dead oak half an hour later. He flew up into the wind and began to circle. His wingbeats became shallower, till only the tips of his wings were faintly fluttering. I thought he would soar, but instead he flew quickly south-east. The lane that divides North Wood dips and rises through a steep-sided gully, which is sheltered from the wind. The peregrine has learnt that warm air rises from the sunny, windless slopes of the lane, and he often flies there when he wishes to soar.

Slowly he drifted above the orchard skyline and circled down wind, curving upward and round in long steep glides. He passed from the cold white sky of the south, up to the warm blue zenith, ascending the wind-bent thermal with wonderful ease and skill. His long-winged, blunt-headed shape contracted, dwindled, and darkened to the flinty point of a diamond as he circled high and far over; hanging and drifting above; indolent, watchful, supreme. Looking down the hawk saw the big orchard beneath him shrink into

dark twiggy lines and green strips; saw the dark woods closing together and reaching out across the hills; saw the green and white fields turning to brown; saw the silver line of the brook, and the coiled river slowly uncoiling; saw the whole valley flattening and widening; saw the horizon staining with distant towns; saw the estuary lifting up its blue and silver mouth, tongued with green islands. And beyond, beyond all, he saw the straight ruled shine of the sea floating like a rim of mercury on the surface of the brown and white land. The sea, rising as he rose, lifted its blazing storm of light, and thundered to freedom to the land-locked hawk.

Idly, indifferently, he saw it all, as he swung and swayed round the glittering gun-sight of his eye's deep fovea, and watched for a flash or spurt of wings at which to aim his headlong flight. I watched him with longing, as though he were reflecting down to me his brilliant unregarded vision of the land beyond the hill.

He passed across the sun, and I looked away to wring the hot purple from my eyes. When I found him again, he was high to the west of the sun, hidden in the excoriating blueness of the sky till the binoculars drew him down. Head to wing, like a compass needle cleaving to the north, he drifted, steadied, and hung still. His wings closed and curved back, then opened and reached forward, splaying out wide like an owl's. His tail tapered like a dart, then opened in a broad spreading fan. I could see the gaps in his wings, where the feathers he shed in December had not yet been replaced. When he banked in the sun, he flashed from blackness to fire and shone like white steel. Poised on two thousand feet of sunlit air, he commanded the birds of the valley and none flew beneath him. He sank forward into the wind, and passed slowly down across the sun. I had to let him go. When I looked back, through green and violet nebulae of whirling light, I could just see a tiny speck of dusk falling to earth from the sun, flashing and turning and falling through an immense silence that crashed open in a tumult of shrilling, wing-beating birds.

I became aware of my own weight, as though I had been floating upon water and was now beached and dry and clothed and inglorious again. The hawk had soared for twenty minutes; during all that time blackbirds had been scolding in the hedge behind me and partridges had called in the fields. The stoop silenced them like death. And then the only sounds were the whisper and rustle of melting snow – a faint fluttering like a mouse in dry grass – and the tinkle and chime of a small stony stream, bearing it down to the brook.

The hawk had gone, and I walked in the fields in a haze of contentment, waiting for him to come back.

To reach the final listening spot, cross the river at the bridge and turn left, following the river path back towards the university. Listen to the final excerpt where the river path opens up into lawn and benches.

6.

Track 6.

This final excerpt comes from the last chapter of Baker's book.

In this section Baker once again has a close encounter with the bird he has been following all through the winter and early spring. This section is a little longer than the ones preceding it at just over seven minutes. Find somewhere comfortable to listen, breathe deep, and follow Baker to the estuary edge and the sea wall.

April the 4th

Wild cherry lined the green lane to the creek with the green and white of leaf and blossom. Bullfinches puffed out black and white and scarlet, flashed, and vanished into husky calling. Colour faded to the brim of water, and the land ended.

The sky was grey, but brightness floated in upon the tide. Larks sang. It was the best of the day. Dusk was already moving through the distant trees and hedges. The creeks and bays were quiet and undisturbed. The songs and calls of birds blended with the sway and ripple of the tide. I had come there to search for the peregrine. It had been late when he left the valley the previous evening, and I thought he might pause to hunt along the coast before migrating. The wind had backed to the north and the day was damp and cold. But the estuary was too peaceful, the birds too much at ease. The calm and empty sky was hawkless. On the sea-wall I found the body of a carrion crow. A peregrine had killed it not many hours before. Black feathers wreathed its bloodstained bones. Its grim, skull-cracking, eye-piercing bill pointed to the sky. It was a head and wings.

At three o'clock I suddenly felt sure that, if I went at once to the coast, eight miles away, I should find the peregrine there. Such certainty comes seldom, but when it comes it is as irresistible as the downward bending of the dowser's twig. I went.

It seemed hopeless. Dark clouds gloomed low in the cold north wind, and the light was very bad. The falling tide was far out across the saltings. The fields were as grey and bleak as the distant sea. Land and sea had been beaten flat into the same dull toneless metal. I love the desolate, but this was beyond desolation. It was dead.

A shelduck lay on the mud, shining like a broken vase; green-black and white, chestnut-bronze, vermilion. Feathers had been plucked from its breast, flesh had been

sliced from the bone, deep down inside, the blood was wet. The peregrine had fed; was he still near? I clambered up the side of the sea-wall and looked cautiously over the top.

He was there, less than a hundred yards away, perching on an overhead wire, outlined against the dark inland sky. He must have flown there while I was hidden behind the wall. He faced the wind, waiting for night, drowsy and unwilling to move. A corn bunting flew up beside him, and squeezed out its parched and feeble song. When I went closer, the bunting flew, but not the hawk. At twenty yards he began to look uneasy. He drifted lightly from the wire, flexed his wings once, turned and glided down wind. I ran along the path beside the wall and saw him alighting on a fence-post on the inland side of the dyke. As I approached, he moved farther inland, flitting from post to post. When the fence ended, he flew across to a small thorn bush on the far side of the old sea-wall.

Screened by the low green bank of the wall, I stumble along on my hands and knees towards the place where I think the hawk will be, hoping he will stay there till I come. The short grass is dry and brittle and sweet-smelling. It is spring grass, clean and sharp as salt water. I bury my face and breathe in it, breathe in the spring. A snipe flies up, and a golden plover. I lie still till they have gone. Then I move forward again, very softly, because the hawk is listening. Slowly the dusk begins to uncoil. Not the short wild pang of winter dusk, but the long slow dusk of spring. Mist stirs in the dykes and furs the edges of the fields. I have to guess where I am in relation to the hawk. Three more yards, and I decide to take a chance. Very slowly I straighten up and look over the top of the wall. I am lucky. The hawk is only five yards away. He sees me at once. He does not fly, but his feet grip tightly on the thorny twigs of the bush, the ridged knuckles tense, and big with muscle. His wings loosen, and tremble at the edge of flight. I keep still, hoping he will relax, and accept my predatory shape that bulks against the sky. The long feathers of his breast are rippled by the wind. I cannot see his colour. In the falling gloom he looks much larger than he really is. The noble head lowers, but lifts again at once. Swiftly now he is resigning his savagery to the night that rises round us like dark water. The great eyes look into mine. When I move my arm before his face, they still look on, as though they see something beyond me from which they cannot look away. The last light flakes and crumbles down. Distance moves through the dim lines of the inland elms, and comes closer, and gathers behind the darkness of the hawk. I know he will not fly now. I climb over the wall and stand before him. And he sleeps.

That was *The Peregrine* by J A Baker, read by David Attenborough with additional audio by Jack Monaghan and sound design by Robert Moutrey. The audio trail was produced by Pronk Productions for the British Science Festival.

If you enjoyed these excerpts then both *The Peregrine* and Baker's second book *The Hill of Summer* are available in lots of good bookshops.

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