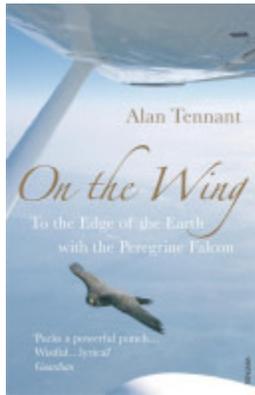


Book Review – On the Wing – To the edge of the earth with the peregrine falcon by Alan Tennant

Review by Chris Hope, Master CFI



When I picked this book up, I was expecting a story about flying from some northerly point to some southerly point, following the birds. I was expecting something like “Father Goose”, by William Lishman. Lishman’s book follows his account of training geese to fly south. And there was some of that. But there was a lot more as well.

In the late 1990s, there was strong interest in knowing where the peregrine falcons on Padre Island in southeast Texas came from, and where they went to. People interested in that sort of thing knew that there were peregrines in northern Alaska as well as in Mexico and Central America. Did these birds migrate regularly? Did they come from the north and stay? Did they make the entire journey, or just fly the northern leg or the southern leg?

Alan Tennant’s main interest seems to be snakes – particularly Texas snakes. But as an outdoors-type person who makes a living from his passion for nature, you take your paychecks as you find them. So he finds himself in the backseat of a somewhat dilapidated

Cessna 172, listening to the signals of transmitters that have been attached to various falcons. The question at the moment, is “what percentage of these falcons hang around south Texas and what percentage take off for destinations unknown.” And for reasons never explained to the reader, and apparently not to the author either, the research is being conducted by US Army chemical warfare team. So, there is no interest in following the birds – only in determining if they seem to be leaving the area, and noting their direction of flight.

But Alan and pilot George Voss have more curiosity than that. Alan is a bit of free-spirit individual, at home in the wilds of Alaska or sitting on a sand dune watching a hurricane make its way on the Texas coast. And George, who owns the plane that the Army has chartered, has made his home in the air for the last fifty or so years, and his little Cessna, held together mostly by faith, is his only real friend.

The two watch one of the birds fly off to the northwest, and decide they really want to know where this bird goes, and what it sees, and what it experiences. So, with not much more planning than that, they head toward Oklahoma. Not surprisingly, they eventually find themselves in Canada (did someone mention Border Crossing and all of

those pesky regulations?) and then back into the US as they enter Canada and then Alaska. They have no money to speak of – only their own savings, so sleeping is often on the floor and food (and beer) come from cheap dives and airport vending machines. And aircraft maintenance seems to come from the same sources – cheap dives and airport vending machines.

The following spring, Alan finds himself guiding tourists in Alaska, and as he watches the young peregrine fledglings, he wonders if they will be flying south, this summer, or if they wait a year, and how they actually journey. So, it is once again into the air with George, this time all the way to Belize.

The story is about the birds, but it is also about Alan's discoveries about himself, and his realization of George's motivations. And it is about how these birds, and many other animals, have flown and walked through and over their habitat for generations untold, and why that is coming to an end. Forested nesting grounds, both in the north and south have been harvested, and the land and water have been tainted with industrial and petroleum runoff. Will the peregrines be able to continue to journey in the future? Will these amazing birds still be alive in the future?

An excellent book on many levels.
Enjoy.

Chris loves to read, write, and fly, but not necessarily in that order

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And here are more favorites: www.ChrisHopeFAAFlightInstructor.com/books/books.html