

<http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-falcons6oct06,1,6423662.story>

LOS ANGELES

Falcons Delay Bridge Lighting

Planners postpone the illumination of the Vincent Thomas Bridge so that the pair can mate and raise young in peace.

By Deborah Schoch
Times Staff Writer

October 6, 2003

In deference to a pair of peregrine falcons, the long-awaited addition of decorative lights on the Vincent Thomas Bridge will wait until next summer so that the birds can mate and nest in peace.

Supporters of the lights had hoped to see the outline of the region's largest suspension bridge glimmering with small blue lights by New Year's Eve. They believe the display will help transform the little-known bridge across Los Angeles Harbor into a citywide landmark.

Now, with falcon mating season looming in January, planners have delayed the start of the \$870,000 city project until any young falcons take wing by July or August 2004.

San Pedro teacher Louis Dominguez, who has spent 15 years lobbying for bridge lighting, said he is not overly concerned by the postponement. Falcons are still protected under the state Endangered Species Act, he said.

"And even if they weren't, no construction worker is going to want to go up there while they're nesting," Dominguez said. Nesting falcons, he noted, are "quite fierce."

The harbor area has become a haven for the once-rare peregrine falcons, with six pairs making their homes on bridges, cranes and nearby buildings. They typically favor tall structures and have also taken up residence on the Bay Bridge in San Francisco Bay and on the Coronado Bridge in San Diego.

The majestic raptor plummeted toward extinction in the early 1970s because of weakened eggshells caused by the now-banned pesticide DDT. The nationwide effort to save the bird is one of the 20th century's environmental success stories. The falcon was removed from the federal list of endangered species four years ago.

The birds nesting on the Vincent Thomas Bridge are among the harbor's veteran falcons, with the female residing there more than a dozen years, falcon experts said.

Their nicknames are Scratchy and Itchy, largely because the female defends her high-rise turf with beak and talons.

"All the workers know her. The painters know her real well," said Carl Thelander, an Ojai-based wildlife biologist who has worked extensively with the harbor falcons. He has

encountered the female while traversing the bridge's catwalk.

"She screams very loudly. She kacks at you. Then she flies right at you at eye level and bops you in the head," Thelander said.

Such tactics have proved successful in warding off threats, and the pair generally produce one or two fledglings a year. But the bridge has proven a treacherous training ground for young birds, who typically need to land on hard surfaces when making their first flights, Thelander said. So many fledglings perished in the harbor that researchers now take them to a special site in Lompoc where they can learn to fly and live on their own.

Harbor falcons typically lay their rounded eggs in gravel, dirt and even trash, said retired electrician Jeff Sipple, a volunteer field researcher for UC Santa Cruz and an expert on the harbor population.

The Vincent Thomas female laid four eggs in a specially placed nest box this year, but they never hatched, apparently because of disturbances from construction workers, Sipple said.

The 1,500-foot bridge, a major truck conduit, has been a factor in environmental decisions before.

The California Coastal Commission four years ago rejected an earlier lighting plan because of concern that its 120 floodlights and other fixed-beam "skytrackers" would distract migratory birds traveling along the Pacific Flyway.

A more subdued plan approved this year calls for 160 small blue lights tracing the bridge's outline and powered by solar panels.

At first, those lights were to be ready by the end of this year, before falcon nesting season, but planning delays ensued. Now officials hope to begin work next July and finish before the end of 2004, said Theresa Adams Lopez, a spokeswoman for the Port of Los Angeles.

The project is staunchly supported by the residents of San Pedro, who started raising funds in the late 1980s. Money for the work will come from the community, the city, the port, Caltrans and other agencies.