



This Old Nest

Once you've found the right home, why move? That seems to be the logic followed by gyrfalcons (*Falco rusticolus*) in central-west Greenland. A cliffside dwelling inhabited by the birds for about 2,500 years was recently discovered there, making it the oldest raptor nest on record that is still being used today.

Kurt Burnham, a biologist with the High Arctic Institute in the United States, had been studying the falcons for almost two decades when he decided to estimate the age of a number of nests by carbon dating their guano.

Because the region's cold, dry climate inhibits decay, the waste has reached heights of over a metre at some nests.

"It has to have taken many years for that much guano to accumulate," Burnham says. "But I never had any idea that we would come up with a number like 2,500 years old."

He discovered three additional nests dating back over 1,000 years, one of which contained a 600-year-old gyrfalcon feather.

Nesting gyrfalcons seek out cliffside nooks with overhangs that provide shelter from snow and rain.

"They need areas that are extremely well protected, which is probably one reason we're seeing them come back to use these sites for thousands of years on end," says Burnham.

But now the gyrfalcons' domain is under assault. As climate change takes some of the edge off the Arctic winter, aggressive peregrine falcons are encroaching on their territory.

If this continues to occur, the gyrfalcons may face hostile eviction and the cold reality of having to find a new home for the first time in thousands of years.



Gyrfalcon chicks quite literally follow in their forefathers' footsteps.