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Attention Coolum Climbers - Falcon Nesting Season

temporary closure of a number of the higher climbs

What are we requesting?

ACAQ is asking climbers to not access **Ultraviolet**, **Drums not Guns**, **Black Leather Dungarees**, and **Powderkeg** at the southern end of the cave, and **Gothic Architecture** at the northern end. Also any linkups that end at the BLD or DnG anchors for the period from **22nd July through to the 18th August**.

There will be a second request for closure of **climbs yet to be specified from the 18th August through to the 31th October**.

What is the reason for the closure?

Under the Nature Conservation Act, we have an obligation, as park visitors, to ensure our activities do not disturb the resident pair of Peregrine falcons. Falcons are not easily disturbed by human activity except during the nesting season, when they will fiercely defend their nest site. If persistently disturbed during nesting, it is possible their eggs will not hatch, and they will fail to raise young that year. Having said that, of all the crags we share with falcons, Mt Coolum is the one case where there is no record of climbers being swooped during the nesting season, and furthermore these birds have successfully raised young every year despite the greatly increased number of visiting climbers. This is likely to be due to these birds being habituated to human presence, and the fact they feel secure within the steep and convoluted structure of the cave. However, with the further development of climbing at the cave, we must allow for the possibility that this state of affairs might not continue, and it would be prudent to put into place management plans based on their observed behaviour.

The falcon nesting season is approaching, and very soon they will be choosing a nest site. Because sub-tropical falcons are resident, not migratory, they tend to use the same site, year in, year out. This makes the process of management pretty straight forward, as all one need do is close climbs that are in close line of sight of the nest for the 65 days it takes to incubate the eggs and raise the young.

However, a question mark remains as to whether climbing activity during the critical nest site selection period at the end of last July didn't cause the birds to relocate their nest from the southern end, to a ledge in the upper midsection of the cave known as Camp 3. There are anecdotal observations from the ground, but no photographic evidence for a nest at the southern end.

This year we want to resolve the issue by ensuring the birds have the freedom to make their choice. This means minimising climber traffic at the upper, southern end of the cave, as well as keeping clear of last year's known nest site at Camp 3, for the critical nest selection period. By the third week in August we will have unequivocal evidence as to the location of the nest site.

This is the reason for the access restriction running from 22nd July through to 18th August.

What happens next?

Once we know the location of the nest we will call for a restriction on the limited number of climbs that approach "near line of sight" to the nest for the duration of the incubation of the eggs and the raising of the chicks. We know the chicks will be fledged by 31st October, so this restriction period will run until this date.

If the birds nest at Camp 3 as we expect, then climbing will be unrestricted except for Gothic Architecture. Based on last year's observations this arrangement will serve both birds and climbers well.

Are we closing the southern section needlessly?

If the birds choose Camp 3 again, then it could be argued that we needlessly closed the southern section of the cave. However, the anecdotal evidence that the birds always nested high up and to the south is out there, and although it might seem strange for them to choose a lower, busier part of the cave when disturbed at the high southern end, the only way we can resolve this issue for sure is to back-off during the period they are seeking a nest site, and observe their choice. If they select Camp 3 once again, then I don't think we need repeat the experiment next year, and can leave the high southern climbs open all year round.



Colum falcon surveying its domain from high up in the cave.

Photo: Phil Box