

The Hawks of May

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For about an hour we tramped across the stony fields at the edge of the Forest of Darchichou, raising only dust and a few larks. No dogs were with us, so we walked loudly and quickly through the ripe winter wheat that in mid-May was ready for the harvester's scythe. We were trying to flush quail, if there were any quail, before they could run away. It was five in the afternoon on the Cap Bon peninsula of Tunisia, about 165 kilometers - 100 nautical miles - southeast of Marsala, Sicily, and my hunter's concentration was waning from the unremitting beauty of the place. The wheat was gold, the caliche soil brick red. A rectangular minaret in the village of El Haouaria gleamed white in the setting sun. The azure Mediterranean was slowly turning gray as clouds crept in from the sea.

Aleya Samoud, my host from the nearby port of Kelibia, set the pace to my left. His nephew Chedli walked zigzags through the grain to my right, beating the stalks with his wooden staff.

Suddenly we heard that familiar, breath-stopping, staccato thunder of quail on the rise. Instincts take over at times like this: I picked out one of the two quail, raised my elbows, and - my hands came up empty. I didn't have a gun. No one had a gun. The only gun was an ancient double-barreled shotgun Aleya had left in the truck.

Instead, Aleya went through the moves of a javelin-thrower and let fly from his right fist a feathered missile. The foot-long sparrow hawk locked on to one fleeing quail and matched him turn for turn. Before his low-flying quarry had gone 50 meters (150 feet), the hawk had seized the quail in his talons and gone to ground in a low hedge.

It was the first kill of the afternoon. We had found quail, but it was a day for hawks.

Whether one hunts with a goshawk in Europe, a Cooper's hawk in North America, or an eagle in Central Asia, employing a diurnal hunting bird of the zoological order Falconiformes is falconry. The strong and graceful peregrine falcon, *Falco peregrinus*, is the best-known star of the sport, partly because it is found on all continents and large islands except Antarctica: The word *peregrine* itself means "foreign." Archeological evidence from ancient Sumeria attests to the enduring popularity of hunting with them.

But men hunt with many raptors besides the peregrine. In Europe, there are goshawks. In Africa, there are harriers. And on both continents, as well as in Soviet Central Asia, there are Eurasian sparrow hawks, *Accipiter nisus*, the bird the Samouds and others use for hawking in northeastern Tunisia. It, too, has hunted with men for ages - no one seems to know how long - and can even boast of an archeological record: The ancient Egyptian gods Ra and Horus were depicted as humans with sparrow-hawk heads, and the hieroglyph for an individual's soul was often a sparrow hawk with a human face.

From Morocco to Afghanistan, the Middle Eastern countries are renowned for their devotion to falconry. Countless are the paintings and photographs of elegantly robed kings, amirs and shaykhs with their regal birds of prey held high. Though realistic, images such as these can leave a Western viewer with the impression that falconry in the Arab World is for the elite, that only the wealthy keep and hunt hawks.

Based on my experience in Tunisia, this is a mistaken impression, reinforced, perhaps, by European history and by our contemporary perceptions of falconry. Yes, it was the Arabs, most likely the Muslim military elite, who introduced (or reintroduced) falconry to Europe, but it was the European aristocracies who dominated the sport until it began to die out in the 16th century, when guns finally and irrevocably replaced hawks and the gunsmith supplanted the mews keeper.

When I went to Kelibia, a town of about 30,000, to meet falconers, I expected them to be wealthy, leisured, and a bit more enthusiastic about sport than about working for a living. My preconception of Tunisian falconry was of the North African equivalent of fox hunting in Virginia or of a wild boar hunt on a noble French estate.

I was wrong.

Kelibian hawkers run the gamut of local income levels and occupations. Of the hunters I met at eight o'clock one Sunday morning in a rustic sidewalk cafe in the middle of town - the regular hour and locale for swapping hawking stories each spring - one was a small-businessman who had, for several years, organized the annual June hawking festival in El Haouaria; one was a retired medium-acreage landowner, wearing a traditional *Chechia* hat and *jebba* robe; and another was a self-employed auto mechanic with a one-room garage, too much work and not enough free time to hunt. Even the boy serving mint tea joined in the conversation about hawking. These men all shared a passion for falconry, and each insisted that his pursuit of the sport stemmed from family tradition, and not from his social or financial status, real or imagined.

Members of some 20 Kelibian families practice sparrow hawking each spring. They carry on a town tradition, the origins of which seem lost in a long and complex past. Floor tiles in a Roman villa unearthed in the town in the 1960's show a falcon and trophies of the hunt. And according to tradition, the *burj*, or citadel, of Kelibia was home to great aficionados of falconry. It was the Ottoman Turks who built the *burj*, atop an earlier Byzantine outpost, in the 16th century, and since the Turks were - and some would say still are - among the most avid falconers in the world, perhaps the local Kelibian passion for birds of prey can be traced to them, if not to earlier inhabitants.

The ontogeny of Kelibian falconry is intriguing because it seems that townspeople and villagers on the rest of the Cap Bon peninsula are not infected by the sport. Larbi Samoud, an active 84-year-old hawker, has lived in Kelibia all his life. He says sparrow hawking is practiced only among people from Kelibia and El Haouaria, towns where Turkish strongholds once stood. "Twelve kilometers [eight miles] to the south in Menzil Temime, or 30 kilometers [19 miles] to the west in Sidi Daoud, no one hunts with the *saf*," says Samoud.

Saf is Tunisian Arabic for sparrow hawk. "In French, it's *é pervier*, and in classical Arabic it's *baashaq*," Larbi Samoud told me. The *Saf* resembles the North American Cooper's hawk and the Levant sparrow hawk, found east of Tunisia, but is smaller than either of its cousins. Only a foot long, it has short, rounded wings and a long tail, two body traits that give him great maneuverability. He commonly lives in woods near open fields, and hunts by cruising low over hedges and meadows in search of smaller birds and the occasional rodent. Like other hawks, the female sparrow hawk is larger than the male and makes a more determined hunter.

Eurasian sparrow hawks pair anew each year, nest in Europe in summer, and then, with their young, traverse the 140 kilometers (87 miles) of open sea between Sicily and Cap Bon, arriving in Tunisia in October. Some have traveled long distances by then. Larbi Samoud once trapped a hawk wearing a tag with strange writing on it that turned out to be Cyrillic: The hawk had been banded in the Soviet Union.

In March, the hawks reverse direction, flying far on days when the north wind gives them added lift for soaring. It's in mid-March that Kelibia's falconers descend on the Forest of Darchichou to trap hawks for spring hunting.

Unlike falconers who raid nests to take eyases, or immature hawks, Kelibia's hawkers trap full-grown hawks and train them for only two weeks before hunting them in April and May. They use two methods of capture. In one, nets measuring about 12 meters by four (39 by 13 feet) are erected near trees where hawks are likely to roost. If a hawk flies into the net, it collapses around him. In another, more time-consuming but more reliable method, a blind is constructed behind foliage and a net trap is set up in a clearing. On a clear day with a northerly wind, the trap is baited with a live quail, dove or pigeon. When a cruising hawk approaches, the hunter in the blind jiggles a string tied to the feet of the bait bird, making it move enticingly. If the hawk plunges for the kill, the hunter tugs a separate line to spring the net.

The first objective in training a wild-caught hawk, or haggard, is to get him to feed from the hunter's hand. The Samouds don't wear protective gloves, preferring instead to have direct tactile contact between man and bird. (The obvious results are the scratches that decorate the Samouds' arms and wrists each spring.) Once a hawk has learned to cross a dark room to feed on the fist, the hunter begins to train him in a courtyard. Jesses, small silk and leather straps, are attached to his legs. They trail a light line of two or three meters (6 to 10 feet) to keep the hawk from flying off unexpectedly. Finally, a feather-light brass or silver bell is tied to the base of the hawk's tail to signal his location when he flies into brush or high grass.

Larbi Samoud's son Aleya and his grandnephew Chedli invited me on a hunt using two male haggards they had recently trained. The three - or five - of us set out for El Haouaria; Aleya held Chedli's hawk while his nephew drove. "My *saf* is very high-strung," he said, explaining why his own bird was confined to a cage in the back. "If mine rode in the cab, he'd scratch our eyes out."

While driving through the forest, Aleya sighted a peregrine falcon circling over a dense thicket. As we watched, the falcon stooped Stuka-like toward an invisible target

in the brush.

"The *borni* flies high and then plummets suddenly to the earth," said Aleya, using the Tunisian Arabic word for falcon. "But our hawks, we throw them at the quail. You'll see."

In a dive, a falcon can reach speeds above 160 kilometers an hour (100 mph). That ability allows it to capture quarry that can actually outfly the falcon in level flight. The sparrow hawk, on the other hand, relies on surprise, speed and agility to overtake its prey.

Near the new El Haouaria pumping station for the Algeria-to-Italy natural-gas pipeline, Chedli pulled over on a dirt road. Though heavily cultivated, land in the peninsula is rarely fenced, so hunting access is easy. "Some farmers a few years ago tried to ban hunting in much of Tunisia because they said it damaged their crops," Larbi Samoud had told me. "But the agriculture ministry looked into the situation and determined it didn't hurt the crops, so the ban was lifted."

Aleya breeched his shotgun, inserted two home-loaded cartridges with light charges, and walked off in search of a lark. Young hawks should be fed twice a day, and care must be taken to see that they get enough sand, gravel or bone in their food for proper digestion. Giving the hawks fresh meat - from the hand, of course - just before hunting is thought to stoke their raptorial instincts. But Aleya's powder charges were too light or his aim faulty: After two attempts to bring down the same irate meadowlark, he gave up. "These hawks can hunt hungry," he said.

After an hour we had little to show for our efforts but sore ankles and dusty shoes. Then, as we moved along the edge of a wheat field bordered by a patch of thistles, we flushed a small covey of quail that promptly scattered. First Aleya's bird took one. Then it took another. Then Chedli's hawk made a beautiful strike only three feet above the ground, and tumbled into a scrubby tree with his prize. We found him with the prey clutched in his talons, looking smug as his bell rang softly in the breeze.

Pride is as fleeting as frightened quail, however. On his next turn, Chedli's *saf* was in full-throttle, low-altitude aerial pursuit when it crossed paths with a singularly immobile donkey. The hawk pulled sharply upward, his jesses trailing straight down, and barely avoided the beast's long ears. The donkey didn't budge.

All in all, Aleya and Chedli took eight quail, losing only the one the donkey had blocked for. "If you get four or five, it's a good day," Aleya said, quickly adding that exercise and the joy of being outside were as important as taking home the makings of a feast.

"Fifteen years ago, two men and two hawks could go out and get 80 quail in a day if they wanted," said Larbi Samoud when we returned. "But today there aren't many game birds left, and there are fewer hawks, too." Population pressure has reduced the numbers of wildlife species in all of Tunisia. As more land is brought under cultivation, as more roads are built and as more cars roll on them, the natural habitat for game disappears. Worse, a growing threat exists from pesticides and herbicides. When toxic chemicals enter the food chain, it's the larger animals higher on the chain, like quail and hawks, that cumulate the poisons and suffer most.

Larbi Samoud, a poet as well as a falconer, likes to tell the story of 'Am 'Ali ben Nar, who so loved his *saf* that he kept and hunted it year after year, until finally the bird died at age 33. But 'Am 'Ali still couldn't give up his hawk, so he placed it lovingly in a lacquered box and buried it with honor in a wall of his house. Years later, a perplexed descendant, doubtless thinking of treasure, found the hawk's coffin during a remodeling.

Scientists estimate that the normal life span of a hawk in the wild is only three years. In captivity, small falcons and hawks rarely live longer than a dozen years, even under favorable conditions, so the story of 'Am 'Ali ben Nar, like many, most, or all hunting stories, contains a healthy dash of exaggeration.

Nevertheless, the story shows how strong the attachment between a Kelibian falconer and his hawk can become, just as the telling of the story - over cups of tea and an exchange of cigarettes in a small sidewalk café - shows how the man-bird relationship engenders a broader one among hunters themselves. In Kelibia, that broader relationship doesn't require a country club membership nor the formalities of, say, tee times and score cards to reach fruition. In the end, falconry - perhaps all hunting - is a cultural act more than a sport.

Given the strong bond between man and bird, at least as perceived by men, it makes sense to expect that most Kelibian falconers would follow 'Am 'Ali's example and keep their hawks several years.

Sensible, perhaps, but incorrect. Each spring, once the quail are few, the wheat is cut, the days get hotter, and the hunters start remembering all the mundane tasks they've

put off for two months, they take their hawks out to the little Forest of Darchichou one last time, untie their jesses and bells, and release them to the north wind.

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