

Ireland's National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage

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Art and Practice of Falconry

Location	Throughout the island of Ireland<
Categories	Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe Social practices, rituals and festive events Traditional craftsmanship Performing arts
Keywords	Animals, birds, ecology
Contact organisation	Irish Hawking Club

Birds of prey have fascinated mankind since time immemorial to such a degree that somewhere deep in the far reaches of ancient history, humans sought to develop a relationship to interact and become part of their world. This intricate relationship developed over the ages as knowledge was passed down through the generations and understanding of birds of prey advanced. This partnership, which can be traced back at least 5,000 years, is today commonly known as the art and practice of falconry.

Originally a method of obtaining food, falconry has evolved over time to be more associated with nature conservation, cultural heritage and social engagement within and amongst communities.



Background information

Field sports and our connection with animals in Ireland have a long and vibrant tradition that echoes through Irish folklore as far back as Fionn Mac Cumhaill, the legendary Fianna and in specific tales such as 'The Hawk of Achill'. The practice of falconry is no exception and has maintained a steady and influential presence, possibly since Mesolithic times (archaeological remains of birds of prey have been found at various sites across the island). There are a broad archive of historical references to falconry in Ireland. These range from architecture (such as the fresco of three kings with falcons at Abbeyknockmoy, Co Galway, dating to 1400), poetry (such as J. Derricke's 1581 poem describing Irish birds of prey used in falconry), artwork (paintings, carvings, stained glass windows, tapestries) and even bureaucracy (Cromwellian maps identified hawk nest sites, young hawks were used by tenants in lieu of rent, and the activity itself was so popular by 1641 that it had to be prohibited within seven miles of Dublin, etc).

It is a traditional activity using trained birds of prey to take quarry in its natural state and habitat. Individual raptor species have evolved over millennia to fill a precise niche in terms of habitat and ecosystems and therefore lend themselves to particular falconry styles and quarry species (i.e. sparrowhawks for enclosed countryside, falcons for open moorland). The falconer therefore naturally acquires a particular and unique understanding of their place in the natural world and for this reason, falconry has been described as a specialist form of birdwatching. Following their own set of traditions and ethical principles, falconers source their birds of prey, either under licence from the wild or through trade with captive breeding establishments which are both nationally and internationally regulated. These birds then enter a process known as "manning" which familiarises them with humans, building a loyalty and trust that can last a lifetime. While the species of raptor and equipment used may vary, the training methods remain similar.

Many consider falconry as providing a connection to the past, particularly for communities where it is one of the few remaining links with their natural environment and traditional culture. Knowledge and skills are transmitted in an intergenerational manner within families by formal mentoring, apprenticeship or training in clubs and schools.

Besides the learning, skill and patience required, falconry is multi-disciplinary and requires competence in areas such as leathercraft, carpentry, tracking, fieldcraft and avian medicine. The furniture and equipment used in falconry has developed over millennia into a multitude of styles and fashions across world cultures. Falconry is an art rather than a sport – it is non-competitive, requires one-to-one tuition to learn its subtleties and cannot be practiced until a level of competency has been reached under the tuition of an experienced elder.

Field events, fairs and festivals, both home and abroad, occur every year that provide opportunities for communities to share knowledge, raise awareness and promote diversity.



Practice and practitioners

Falconry is practiced today in much the same way it always has been. The fundamentals that allow for close interaction between human and raptor have never changed. To make the partnership successful, the falconer must attend to a wide range of requirements that satisfy the bird of prey's health, fitness and genetic needs.

An extensive array of classical, well-reviewed texts prescribe conditions and techniques that allow for successful partnerships, meaning modern falconers have a rich heritage of deep historical knowledge to draw from. This includes world-renowned books by Irish authors.

The type of falconry and bird flown are defined by the landscape and the quarry available. Ireland has a mixture of countryside where our blanket and raised bogs provide ideal landscapes to fly falcons. Likewise, our woodlands, scrublands and pastures suit the flying of hawks. In the 12th Century, Giraldus Cambrensis, a visiting Anglo-Norman cleric, wrote: "This country above any other produces, hawks, falcons and sparrowhawks abundantly... most suitable for catching their prey and all to afford amusement to the nobles".

From the Medieval period up to the early 1900s, falconry was the preserve of royalty and nobles, for example, there are many historical references to hawking in the Phoenix Park and in the Curragh of Kildare relating to aristocratic falconers. Today, however, falconers are drawn from a broad cross-section of backgrounds, cultures and professions towards a common love of their art. A deep love of nature and its complex tapestry is the common thread that binds them together.



Development, transmission and safeguarding

Falconry is a living, breathing art, continuously evolving, but essentially retaining the fundamental core ethics. The practice of falconry is not a product that can be sold; rather each potential practitioner must arrive at the destination with a desire and enthusiasm to learn. When this occurs, it is important that support is in place.

Today, this support comes in many formats, including contemporary social media outlets like websites, forums, email correspondence, Facebook and Twitter. Along with modern communications, the traditional outlets of representation and support in the form of fairs and festivals also play an integral role in the falconer's diary annually.

One of the key proponents of support and representation for falconry comes in the form of national falconry clubs. The Irish Hawking Club has always placed importance on being a welcoming hub for people who have come across falconry, caught the bug and wish to pursue it. This begins with the beginner being put in touch with a licenced falconer in their area.

While falconry has a long and rich literary tradition that dates back to medieval times, it is primarily learned from other people because of the variety of disciplines it entails. The sensitivities and subtleties of training these non-domesticated creatures needs to be demonstrated carefully, with patience and deference to the bird's welfare. For this reason, not only does every falconer initially learn from another, they in turn usually end up taking on an apprentice of their own years later.

In Ireland each year, the Irish Hawking Club is represented at the main game and country fairs both north and south of the border providing support to both aspiring and experienced falconers. The Irish Hawking Club also attends international events such as the annual British Falconry Fair, one of the world's leading gatherings of falconers, as well as the International Festival of Falconry in the United Arab Emirates. In December 2017, the official theme was "Youth". This event, held every three years, is vital in passing on the element in accordance with the ideals of UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Every year on November 16, World Falconry Day is celebrated. On World Falconry Day 2014, a permanent falconry exhibit featuring historical and contemporary items and artworks relating to falconry was added to the Irish Fly Fishing and Game Shooting Museum in Attanagh, Co Laois.



Contact organisation

Irish Hawking Club

Related and supporting organisations

International Association for Falconry and Conservation of Birds of Prey

ABOUT THE INVENTORY

Ireland's National Inventory of Intangible Cultural Heritage exists to promote, protect and celebrate Ireland's living cultural heritage. It provides official State recognition of cultural practices all around Ireland.

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