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# *Falcons*

*Magazine*



*Winter '90*

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# The Falconers Magazine

It is twelve months since we launched the Falconers magazine and it is going from strength to strength and we are here to stay. Some complaints have reached us, always via a third party, that some of you are not happy with the magazines article content. The Falconers magazine is a medium through which, we hope, all people with an interest in raptors, be they eagles, falcons, hawks or owls can express their opinions and tell us about their birds and experiences with them. If the magazine was exclusively about one or the other of these types of birds it would have no appeal for the keepers of the other types.

As for the quality of articles, if these people would like to contribute to the magazine we are always open to ideas and fresh material.

Anyway onto nicer things. The Photographic Competition results are on pages 12 -13 and our thanks to the sponsors, Swarovski, Ben Long and Bob Dalton.

The magazine now has 16 pages of full colour and we have some really good articles and pictures. Hope you like it folks. Well all that remains is for me to wish you all a Merry Christmas and happy hunting. See you in the New Year.

David Wilson Editor

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# THE FALCONERS FAVOURITE COMPANION

by Emma

No other bird seems to arouse a falconers passion in quite the same way as a Goshawk manages to do. Up until recent legislation changes the Goshawk was probably the most widely used bird in the sport of Falconry in Great Britain. Just about every Falconer seemed to have one. Even Gilbert Blaine, whose love of the peregrine Falcon is probably unrivalled, normally kept one.

I, who have spent most of my adult life flying longwings, have one. The appeal of the Goshawk is very hard to define. Their bad points certainly are very bad and they seem to have more of them than most other hawks. Yet when they are going well they are a pleasure to fly. What can be more encouraging than that silly high pitched twittering that emits from a Goshawk when it is obviously pleased to see you.

Once out in the field the hawks attitude changes and it becomes the mania-



Above:  
Adult Female Goshawk



Left:  
Juvenile Female Goshawk

cal killing machine that, as falconers, we love. We learn to live with the days when it can't seem to catch a cold, much less quarry. Forget the hours it spends up a tree sulking for no apparent reason and ignoring us completely. Also forget the lacerations obtained when taking it off quarry and a foul temper is upon it.

The Goshawk, as a falconers bird, still is the ideal bird for the falconer with limited land to hunt over and will tackle just about anything that moves. In recent years of course supply has been a major problem to those that would like to fly one. Now, thankfully, captive breeding is coming on stream and the recognised clubs are able to import a few eyass and passage birds each year.

In the wild we appear to have a growing population again, so perhaps it won't be too long before it will be possible to take a native eyass under licence. Or is this being too hopeful?



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# JUST FOR A LARK

by Derry Argue

It is rumoured that a major oil deal was clinched some years back with the gift of three illegally taken gyrfalcons to an Arab sheik. The story has credibility for the gyrfalcon is a magnificent looking falcon and the ultimate symbol in the Middle East. Personally, I would not want one, even as a gift.

Weighing in at up to 3lbs (1.4kgs) the gyrfalcon is not an over-sized peregrine but a gigantic merlin. A very big female merlin might weigh ten ounces (280 gms); but it packs more fire and guts into this little package, weight-for-weight, than any gyrfalcon. Slightly bottle-shouldered, neither the gyrfalcon nor the merlin are designed for soaring. They do not "wait on" like the peregrine and its close relatives. The merlin hunts like a little spitfire, cruising fast over the countryside to surprise any small bird in the air.

Traditionally, merlins were trained and flown at the moulting lark in late July

through to early September. At that time of year there are plenty of young larks about and adult larks are moulting the first and second primary feathers of each wing. Unless handicapped in this way, the lark is near impossible for a merlin to catch in straight pursuit. Even so, the match is a fair one and many more larks beat the merlin than are killed. If not lost, trained merlins were simply released at the end of the season.

These days I suspect that lark hawking with a merlin is just a fond memory. (I'd be delighted to be proved wrong!) I know of only one person in the country breeding them and I am told the market price is "around £500 each" for captive bred birds "if you could find one". In my teens, I was able to purchase merlins from my gamekeeper in Yorkshire for £1.25, including carriage by British Rail to my nearest station!

The merlin usually nests on the ground

in deep heather on the moors if it cannot find an abandoned crow's nest somewhere. Young merlins for falconry were taken just before they could fly. I had an Irish setter trained to point as they are not easy to find in long heather. One year I rung so many for the British Trust for Ornithology that it rather messed up their statistics and the apparent population explosion had to be explained in Bird Study.

The young falcon would be flown "at hawk". Training took an experienced falconer about 14 days, though I know of one man who regularly completed the job in under a week. The bird's metabolism is so fast that it is possible to get in three training sessions per day where you might achieve one with a larger falcon.

The flight of a merlin after a lark is a magical sight. The lark takes to the air like a little helicopter; the merlin strives to follow, gaining height by flying in circles around and below the quarry. The lark is safe so long as it flies upwards in a straight ascent. The merlin cannot match its aerobic powers. But sooner or later, one must fail. Either the merlin gives up or the lark is tempted to drop like a stone for some small patch of cover far below. If the lark drops, the merlin does not follow immediately but pumps wings harder to gain a foot or two of extra height. Then, rolling over backwards like a diving fighter plane, the bird rapidly works its wings with powerful strokes to gain momentum in a headlong downward stoop after the prey. There is a strike, a wrench, jinking, curling, diving, and then perhaps another ringing flight all over again. A kill is almost an anticlimax. Here is coursing indeed but with a third dimension.

All the while, the falconer is following the flight below. Breathless, he clatters over fences and walls in a mad desperate dash to keep up with the flight. Although the aerial combat appears to take place in a vertical direction, the slightest breeze wafts the two birds along at quite a pace. Trying to follow what is going on in the sky and cross country at a full run has its hazards. The higher the flight goes, the smaller appear the two contestants. If they decide to drop, they could come down anywhere within hundreds of yards, perhaps to be lost forever. No telemetry in my youth! To my mind, larking with a merlin takes some beating.

Some flights are no more than a head-to-tail chase at ground level. These do not



*The late Grant Fiske with his Gyrfalcon*



rate at all. It is the ringing flight of the merlin after a rising lark which offers the true magnificence of the sport culminating in that vertical stoop downward after the falling quarry.

Louis XIV is reputed to have followed merlins at the winter lark. This is the cream of the sport, certainly unknown in Britain. Years ago I applied for, and got, a licence to take a cast of merlins for this sport. The aim was to fly these two birds together at the full winged, mature lark. I argued that less than half young wild merlins made it through their first winter and nearly half the survivors would be dead a year later. I got my licence and the birds but my dreams and hopes were dashed by a back injury which put me in hospital for two months.

Falconry as we all know is never predictable. Anything can and does happen. Larking with my merlin in Connemara one day, the falcon was taken by a wild female sparrowhawk. I shouted and ran up to where the two birds wrestled amongst the heather, not quite sure who had caught whom. The sparrowhawk let go and my merlin was safe, apparently unscathed. The second time the little falcon was struck down and chased by semi-tame Luger falcon my host kept at liberty. The third accident was, unfortunately, fatal. It happened like this.

For days I had tried to get some real sport with my merlin but I could not get a ringing lark. Somehow, something always seemed to go wrong. Then, one morning, everything fell into place. A lark flew up and the falcon was in pursuit, I knew this was it. The two headed for the heavens in classic style and my pulse began to race. It was a cold sparkling September day, as still as possible, and the two seemed all set to reach the clouds. The flight was a good one and the day so still I had no need to run to watch the sport. Up and up they went until I felt sure I would lose my bird. Then, just as they were almost out of sight of the naked eye I saw first the larger bird, then the lark, dropping earthward. Both fell almost to the ground before the lark thought better of it and tried to ascend again. But it was futile. A cut, a jink, a head-to-tail chase, more cut and thrust. Then both dropped like stones and I could see the lark was making for a small quarry, just a shell hole. I ran as fast as I could to the spot and saw the tawny shape of a fox slink to a hole beneath a hawthorn bush. By this time I was closer. I could see no sign of the birds. Then a muffled croak below ground. I dashed to the hole. The faint tinkle of a hawk bell and the rancid stench of a fox's den. Then all was quiet. "Those who live by the sword shall die by the sword". That night I waited up for the fox and shot it as the light faded but I never saw my merlin again.

*Portrait of a Merlin*



*A young Irish boy and his Merlin*



*Merlin on its kill*





## 1990 NORTH AMERICAN FALCONERS FIELD MEET

Open to NAFA members only this years meet will be held at Woodham Oklahoma from Sunday November 18th to Friday November the 23rd.

Woodward is about two and a half hours drive north east of Oklahoma City on the US 270 at the junction with the 15.

Various airlines including Continental & American fly from Gatwick. Continental being the least expensive, with an advance booking special fare of around £350 return.

All the usual car hire facilities are available at Oklahoma City with Hertz & Avis offering an all in price of around \$230 per week. This includes collision damage waver which is vital.

The headquarters hotel, the Northwest Inn, is already fully booked but there should be space available at others in the town try Way-farer Best Western from \$31 (0101 405 256 5553) or the Hospitality Inn from \$18 (0101 405 254 2964).

Registration is from Sunday evening with free beer etc, Thanksgiving dinner on the Thursday is being organised by one of the members and should prove interesting, the meet finishes with a slap up banquet on Friday.

There will be sales tables available Sunday to Thursday selling a wide range of Falconry related items plus a raffle each night culminating with the major raffle on Friday.

The raffle is a major source of income for NAFA and goes a long way to funding the meet. Quality items, which need not be Falconry related, donated to the raffle will be appreciated and the donor acknowledged so dont forget to pack something in your suitcase.

I am again responsible for hawking party liason so let me know when you arrive if you are having trouble finding a group to go hawking with or have accommodation or transport problems. Mary is as usual in charge of the organisation and allocation of sales tables. No charge is made for tables but a suitable value raffle prize is expected.

Take some warm clothing because temperatures could be below freezing particularly at night with bright sunny days and maybe even shirtsleeves at mid-day.

There should be enough quarry within reasonable distance to satisfy everyone.

The headquarters has a restaurant and pool and the town has eating places to suit all tastes.

U.K. and European NAFA members wishing to travel to the meet should contact Kathy at Alec Bristow Travel Esher on 0372 63672 for flight information and bookings.

If you would like to join NAFA and receive four good publications each year send an stamped envelope to NAFA UK. Abbey Bridge Farnhouse, Colonels Lane, Chertsey, Surrey KT16 8RJ.

### ALL THE FUN OF THE FAIR

The Falconers Fair, earlier this year, was just the beginning of hopefully a long acquaintance with game fairs. The Falconers Magazine was able, with the help of Ron Morris and Tony Scutt, the game fair organizers, and Brian Paterson, who does the flying displays, to attend numerous other fairs throughout the year. These were all held in the grounds of some of the most beautiful stately homes in the country and a big thankyou must go out to their owners.

There were hundreds of exhibitors, with a huge array of wares and also plenty of entertainment and displays in the main arena, these usually started at 11 am and carried on throughout the day, all of the fairs were two day events and they all had a good turnout, the weather was mostly good but even when it was bad people still braved it.

Some of the things to be seen were, flycasting, sheep dog demonstrations, Beagle, Otter and Fox hounds, gun dog scurrys, axe cutting and chain saw displays, huskies and of course the flying displays. As Brian tells us, these are not Falconry displays, he gives a brief history of falconry and the basics of how he trains and gets his birds fit, Brian provides us with one of the most entertaining and informative flying displays in the country.

For more information about the game fairs, venues and dates please see the February issue of The Falconers Magazine.

### RAPTOR RESEARCH FOUNDATION

The annual meeting of the Raptor Research Foundation will be held from Wednesday October 24th to Sunday October 28th 1990 at the Allentown Hilton, Allentown, Pennsylvania. The meeting will focus on the re-habilitation, biology, ecology, and conservation of raptors with an emphasis on methods for educating the public. Write to R.R.F. C/O HOPE CARPENTER, RD#1, BOX 1470, MT. BETHEL PA 18343 USA.



Brian with one of his display Lanner Hawks



## TWYFORD WILDLIFE AND ANIMAL PARK

Bryan Paterson is known to us as a Falconer but in reality he is passionately interested in all animals, although falconry is his first love. He has recently opened what most of us would expect to be a falconry centre but it is an Animal Park, containing all kinds of animals from the everyday to the exotic.

There is a Hawk walk containing a variety of Birds of Prey and Brian gives talks on animals in captivity, Birds of Prey and falconry and flying displays in the seated area throughout the day. As you walk through the park though you realise this is going to be no ordinary visit because Bryan has a marvellous thing called a petting house, where children (and adults) can go and handle all sorts of animals, from rabbits

to Pot Bellied Vietnamese Pigs and Pygmy goats, from Tarantula to a scorpion.

For those of you who like snakes, Bryan has a Royal and a Burmese Python, which you will also be allowed to touch.

Bryan is in the process of building a nocturnal house for Kinkajou and a walk through tropical house, he has also built a wall with recesses, to simulate the living conditions of the Chin-chilla, which lives on rocky mountain faces.

It is well worth a visit as there is something for all the family, definitely a day out with a difference.

For more information please telephone: 0386 443348 or write to Bryan at Twyford Wildlife and Falconry Centre, Norton, Evesham.



*New Zealand Falcon*

## UNUSUAL PHOTOGRAPHS



Left:  
Please find enclosed a photograph taken this year at a continental Re-habilitaion station. As you can see this Black Kite was not so black, it was quite stunning.

Philip Gowdy



### UNUSUAL PHOTOGRAPHS

If you have an unusual bird please send details along with a photograph to CTC Publications, Dalkeith House, Dalkeith Place, Kettering, Northants NN16 0BS.

Left:  
"SIBELLA" is a King Vulture who was seen by Mr Tropierno at a dealers and as she was in poor condition and had suffered from frost bite took pity on her. We trained Sibella up and to say she responded well is an understatement. You could not get a more friendly bird. She is not unusual but I thought your readers would like to see her.

G McCommick, Colchester Zoo





## WINTER WEEKENDS

Winter time, dark, cold, crisp mornings, just the time when weekends are precious. Two whole days when you don't have to drag yourselves out of bed at 6.30am. Two whole days when, even if the alarm goes off, you can just snuggle up and drift back off to sleep in one another's arms? Whole days when, after a little loving perhaps, one can lay luxuriously in a warm and cozy bed and perhaps idly chat and plan how the rest of the weekend is to be used up. Perhaps this week we could do the household chores between us and then get ready and go out for a pub lunch, in the afternoon we could take the dogs for a gentle stroll then get back home before it's dark to have tea and toast in front of a roaring fire. In the evening we could go to the theatre or the cinema or meet friends, knowing that it doesn't matter if we 'burn the midnight oil' because we know we can lie in on Sunday morning. In fact if we wanted to we could lie in bed until 11 or 12 O'Clock. We can have a full Sunday lunch and then go and visit family in the afternoon. We could settle down for a pleasant evening together talking about the deep and significant things that make for stimulating and invigorating conversation.

Who the hell am I trying to kid!!!....

Reality is somewhat different. Oh yes .... the weekend can go pretty much as planned but unfortunately it's not so much fun when you complete the tasks alone, it's not so much fun to have a lie in bed when your spouse has vacated it at the crack of dawn not to return until after dark, it's not much fun when, having slaved all day to do the necessary cooking and cleaning tasks that make a home a pleasant place your spouse returns home with wet and smelly dogs, socks and wellies that make short shrift of all your hard work. It's not much fun when your spouse is too tired to go out or, if he does agree to, he wants to be home and in bed early ready for a crack of dawn start on the Sunday, or because he is too 'knackered' after his days enjoyment. It's not much fun when the stimulating conversation of the evening turns out to be a blow by blow, step by step account of his days activities.

No - its definatlely not much fun. These cold and crisp winter mornings when you're married to a man who is obsessed with birds - even if they are of the feathered variety. No weekends are not so much fun for me - even if they are pure ecstasy for him, for winter weekends mean that the hawking season is with us once again .....  
Damn it!

by Jo Glover





Here are a selection of some of the photographs entered in the Photographic Competition.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank everybody for participating. For results, turn to pages 12 & 13.



Deanne Hemming with her 8 year old Buzzard.  
*Photo: Paul Hamming*



17 year old female Golden Eagle. *Photo: A Gates*



Young European Eagle Owl. *Photo: M.Allison*



3 year old female Peregrine. *Photo: C. Llewellyn*



3 months old female Kestrel. *Photo: N.J. Cotereil*





*1st Prize. A male common Buzzard. Joanne De Nobriga.*



*2nd Prize. Juvenile female Goshawk just contacting her quarry. Mr M J Fox.*



# PHOTOGRAPHIC COMPETITION RESULTS

The photographic competition was a great success, with a lot of entries, all of a high quality. The panel at Swarovski, who donated the first prize of a pair of binoculars in a leather case, were very impressed and found the judging extremely difficult. The winning entry was judged on its content and composition.

**1st.** Joanne De Nobriga receives a pair of binoculars with leather case donated by Swarovski.

**2nd.** Mr M. J. Fox receives a top of the range Falconry glove donated by Ben Long.

**3rd.** Mr S. Benjamin receives a book "Traite de Fauconnerie" donated by Bob Dalton.

*3rd Prize. Female intermewed Eyass Merlin just at the beginning of stoop. Mr S Benjamin.*



*4th. Female Sparrow Hawk.  
Mr. D. Canning*



*5th. One and a half year old Male European Eagle Owl.  
Janine Jarden.*



*6th. Stroma, One year old Female Lanner falcon.  
Mr D Sim.*



*7th. Six week old Female Snowy Owl.  
Mr J Stott*



# THE FALCONERS DOG

PART 2

DERRY ARGUE

These days it is not generally realised that at one time nearly all the shooting in Britain was done over pointers and setters. These dogs were considered to be the easiest of all Gundogs to train. Every country landowner worthy of the name kept his kennel of pointing dogs, his stable of hunters, perhaps a pack of hounds and a few dozen gamecocks for the pit out at walk.

The change came with two world wars. Those who had trained and handled these dogs for generations were killed at the front, or came home to find the old job gone and the dogs disposed of. Farming changed too, becoming more efficient with fields of rough grass and rushes that provided good game holding cover disappearing before the plough. Dogging on the moors also went out of fashion; those who had the time and money to shoot were no longer the younger, fitter sportsmen, but the middle-aged over-weight industrialists who were barely able to walk as far as the butts to shoot driven birds!

All that is changing. My own falconry was learnt in the fifties and sixties when captive breeding was a rather silly idea. Like flying to the moon. Everyone knew it couldn't be done. In that respect, progress is good, but along the way sportsmen seem to have lost the affinity they used to have with the natural world and that is a pity.

There are those who get their greatest thrill out of catching a waterhen with a sparrowhawk. When they have done that they want to catch a dozen, twenty or even a hundred in a day! To my mind, that is not what sport is all about. If the catching ever becomes easy, the goal posts ought to be moved to give a better chance to the quarry. If you can catch a waterhen with a spar (and they are not difficult) then the next step ought to be a blackbird (assuming you are appropriately "licensed to kill"!), or even a partridge.

If you are of that school of thought then you are a man after my own heart for sooner or later you are going to find yourself flying

a falcon at game, preferably a peregrine at grouse or partridges. For that game it has to be one of our traditional breeds, the English, Irish, or Gordon setter, or the pointer. I say 'has to be' because if you aspire to greater style in your sport you will sooner or later arrive on the vast lunar moors of the north where birds are scarce and space infinite. I know very little about the imported HPR breeds and what I do know does not tempt me to learn more. Even the name "pointer-retriever" seems provocative to me as it implies that our own native breeds, which have done successive generations of sportsmen throughout the English speaking world well enough for several hundreds of years, don't retrieve! What a defamation! Thankfully, falconers are not usually interested in that though I suppose it might come in useful if the telemetry breaks down!

It is often a surprise to people new to bird dogs to learn how the dogs vary in their character between strains and breed-



*"F.T.C.H Migdale Beanagn - Typical modern field trial English Setter"*

*Photo: D.Argue*



ing. That alone is reason for taking a glance at the pedigree and then, making sure that there are none of those damning "Ch's" (Show Champions) in the breeding, consign that libelous scrap of paper to the bottom of the bureau draw where, hopefully it will become lost forever. The reason for the diversity of type amongst bird dogs is that years ago pointers and setters were kept by the landed gentry who tended to keep and breed what suited them best with an inevitable degree of inbreeding. Quality became associated with certain external characteristics, such as the red colour of the Irish setter. If only it were as simple as that!

Gordon setters, for example, are actually English setters bred by one family, the Dukes of Gordon at Fochabers in Banffshire, over a period so that the dogs became a distinct strain. Take care, though, that you distinguish between shows and working Gordons for the two are as different as chalk and cheese. There were many similar families of English setters, probably the same in Ireland with the breed which became the Irish setter. Compare working and show Irish setters and you will notice a distinct difference. This is because the successful show Irish were all descended from a single family of Irish setters at the beginning of the century. Again, these dogs are considered useless for work. This

diversity of type is only sensible in a country which varies so much as the British Isles. A dog which is ideal for the wastes of Caithness or Sutherland is not necessarily suitable for the four acre fields of South Devon! It is only the show fancy that insists on unifying everything under a uniform Breed Standard.

The true bird dog is a mix of contrasts. As might be expected of a dog bred in this country for hundreds of years, most possess a profound wisdom and incredible loyalty to their owners. They ought to be extremely sensitive and responsive to their handlers; almost nervous and highly strung like the best bred Thoroughbred race horse. On the other hand, they usually have a passion for game which is extraordinary. The first is needed because they must respond to handling over distances of hundreds of metres. The second maintains their keenness to hunt for game at a fast pace for long periods over ground which holds few birds.

Almost any dog could be taught to point. I once trained a lurcher, mostly pure greyhound to hunt and point grouse in an afternoon and I have seen a working collie do it naturally much to the annoyance of the shepherd who wanted the dog to put his mind to more serious things. I regularly have pointer and setter pups hunting and pointing at three or four months of age.

There is nothing special about pointing. I vividly remember a goshawk "pointing" a rabbit in a patch of nettles! Most wild predators "point" for a short period before attacking their prey and there is even a story of a pig that was taught to point in half an hour! No, the difference is the way the bird dogs do it; they will hunt for and find game where any other breed would fail. That is the difference.

Of course, breeds which have been bred over centuries for such specialised work have many other unique characteristics. Last year I sold a young dog to a man who shoots grouse on one of the Scottish islands. This year he came back to me full of praise for the dog. "But he has one fault", he admitted to me. "Sometimes when he is pointing a grouse, he leaves the point and runs off as fast as he can and, like a sheep dog, comes in ahead of us so he is facing us". My reply was that he could count himself a very fortunate man because, as I know from past experience, the Hebridean grouse run like hares before a pointing dog. This circling or heading birds as it is called used to be taught to a dog so that birds running ahead could be held until the Guns got within range. This pup had worked the problem out for himself and had learned to do it on his own which just shows how clever even a young dog can become. If only their owners showed as much intelligence!

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*Little Owl*

## THE LITTLE OWL TONY TURK

Pallas Athene, daughter of Zeus was said to sometimes appear as an owl, Little Owls are common around Athens, hence the generic name Athene. Noctua refers to night or night owl. Athene was also the goddess of wisdom from which the term 'wise as an owl' originates.

Local races of the Little Owl are widely distributed over central and southern Europe, N.W. Africa and Egypt, to S.W. Asia. Eleven sub-species are recognised, ranging from the British birds belonging to the dark western race *vidalii* to the pale sand form of eastern Mediterranean *lilith*. Previous to its introduction the Little Owl had been recorded only as a rare visitor.

There have been many attempts to introduce them into the British Isles, one of the earliest recorded releases was by Charles Waterton from his home at Walton Hall in Yorkshire during 1843. Only five birds were involved, which originated from Rome. The introduction was unsuccessful.

Between 1874 and 1900 Lieutenant Colonel E.G.B. Meade-Waldo released approximately sixty five birds from Edenbridge in Kent. The first nest was discovered in 1879 and by 1897 they had reached the outskirts of London.



*Barn Owl and young.*

*Photograph by M. Allison*



But the most significant introductions were by the 4th Lord Lilford, who released a great many Little Owls into the surrounding parkland of Lilford Hall in Northamptonshire. Forty were liberated in 1888 alone. On April 23rd 1889 one of his keepers discovered a nest of two eggs in an ash tree in the deer park, four young subsequently fledged from that nest. This is the earliest recorded breeding in Northamptonshire.

From these releases the Little Owl spread throughout the country, reaching Scotland in the 1920's. By 1976 the British population was considered to be between 7,000 and 14,000 pairs.

In 1935 because of growing demands for the Little Owl to be added to the list of pest species, due to the assumption that it was a 'wholesale destroyer' of game and poultry chicks, an investigation into its prey was proposed. Miss Alice Hibbert-Ware M.B.O.U. was appointed by the British Trust for Ornithology, to carry out the study. During 1936 and 1937 her findings proved that there was negligible destruction of game, poultry or wild birds of all age and showed that except in abnormal circumstances Little Owls feed almost wholly upon insects, earthworms, other invertebrates and small mammals.

Britain was not the only island where this little predator was introduced on the grounds of 'improving' the fauna. From 1906 to 1910 a total of 219 were released in various localities in New Zealand, proba-

bly to help curb the unwelcome attentions of the small birds on orchards. The New Zealand countryside was to the Little Owls liking and is now regarded as common on South Island. More recently it has been introduced on North Island where its status is, as yet, unknown.

Preferring open habitat, parkland and meadows with a scattering of trees and copses, the recent introduction of 'set aside' and the move towards more diverse farming methods may help to increase a population which has fluctuated greatly since its initial boom in the 1920's. From the mid 30's a decline in numbers was noticed. Although this decline has not yet been studied it does seem to follow the pattern of the Barn Owl which also declined from relative abundance in the 1930's, almost certainly due to adverse weather conditions. However, the Little Owl is much more adaptable than the Barn Owl, being willing and able to take a wider range of food.

Then came the 1950's and 60's which we all now associate with toxic chemicals, which had a serious effect on our bird of prey populations. More recently the loss of the old elm trees, a great favourite for nest sites, has added to the pressure on this adaptable bird, for although the majority of nests are found in trees, old buildings, cliffs and even rabbit hutches are used.

Clutches of six and seven eggs have been recorded in captivity and in the wild but

four seems to be the average. The twenty eight days incubation, usually, starts with the first egg, as with most owls but sometimes may be delayed until the clutch is complete. There does not seem to be the same need for asynchronous hatching, probably because of the more diverse feeding habits and therefore a more reliable supply than say the Barn or Snowy Owls, which are more specialist feeders.

Males have been known to share the nest site, which is unusual for owls. The owlets grow quickly, in captivity a check must be kept as if rung a day too soon the ring will slip off, a day too late and the bird will certainly be too large to ring. The seventh day from hatching is usually about right. After thirty to thirty five days of intensive feeding, in the later stages by both parents, the young leave the nest. Within two months they will disperse. It has been estimated that 60% of young Little Owls die within four months of fledging.

As adults are non-migratory and can live for up to 17 years, suitable territories become hard to find.

Being more diurnal than our other owls, with the possible exception of the Shorteared, the Little Owl is frequently seen perched on a fence post or dead tree, patiently waiting for a beetle to cross open ground or a vole to carelessly appear from cover. I hope the Little Owl will be here for the foreseeable future as this is a rare case where, in my opinion, an introduced species has enriched the country, rather than deplete it.

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## BASIC REQUIREMENTS OF CAPTIVE BREEDING OF BARN OWLS (TYTO ALBA) BY JIM SMITH

Enclosure. I recommend a minimum area of 16 cubic metres, with floor area of 8 square metres, with the enclosure measuring 2 x 4 x 2 mtr, at one end and a sheltered area be constructed by means of a weather proof covering extending over the enclosure to one metre from the end, at the front of this covered end place a 2 x 1 mtr board to form a seclusion area from ground to roof, leaving an equal space for access.

In the secluded area fix a nesting platform 1mtr square with 15cm board fitted to the exposed side forming a nest tray. Around the remaining walls fix a shelf 25cm wide, 130 cm from the ground. In the nest tray place a piece of carpet like material, on this a layer of moss peat approx 10cm deep.

At the opposite end of the exposed area of the enclosure, place a perch approx 60cm from the end and 60cm from the roof. For feeding I use a 30cm concrete slab placed approx 50cm from the ground on a glazed

pipe or like, this will also stop rodents removing the food meant for the owls.

The base of the enclosure can be of your own choice, suitable to its surroundings. I consider that either three quarters ballast or pea shingle are suitable and give excellent drainage.

The wire mesh used, again can be of your own choice, but a good quality weld mesh is recommended. If you do not have room for a double safety door, I recommend a door of only 130 cm x 60cm be used this hopefully would minimise the possibility of your owl flying out over head when the door is opened.

Owls to be used, make sure that the birds selected are of the best stock available, i.e. from unrelated parents. If replying to a for sale advert where pairs are advertised, make sure that you can inspect both pairs of parents and make a note of their ring numbers for future reference.

Although the Barn Owl with European

origin (due to its darker colouring) tends to be popular in some quarters, I feel that the lighter coloured English type is preferable.

If you purchase a pair together all well and good, you can place them in the enclosure at the same time but if you can only purchase them separately always place the male in the enclosure first. If the female were to be placed in the enclosure first, this could create problems when trying to introduce the male.

Feeding requirements: Generally used are dead day old chicks, or dead mice, different breeders of Barn Owls tend to have a preference for either chick or mice, or a mixture of both giving a variation in the Owls diet.

Records: If you successfully breed from these birds, a complete documented record should be kept. The young birds should be close rung, the rings can be obtained from the British Bird Council.



Having read with interest 'Tiercels' article 'Memories of the Arco desert', in the summer issue of the 'Falconer', I hope the following account of the sport which I and a group of friends experienced in Scotland this year will be of interest to those readers of "The Falconers Magazine", who are keen on game hawking.

In September 1989, I was fortunate enough to secure the shared rights to a grouse moor in Sutherland for the 1990 season.

Having made a number of trips north in the early eighties, usually during late September and October, I had some previous knowledge of grouse. These early trips had produced some exciting flights and a few kills, but obviously did not produce the consistency and confidence to be seen in hawks entered early in the season. We were therefore fortunate to be able to begin hawking at the start of the season this year.

Preparations duly completed new hawks trained, old ones moulted (or almost) dogs fit, equipment repaired or replaced, my son and I drove the twelve hours north to meet our friends, settle in and start hawking.

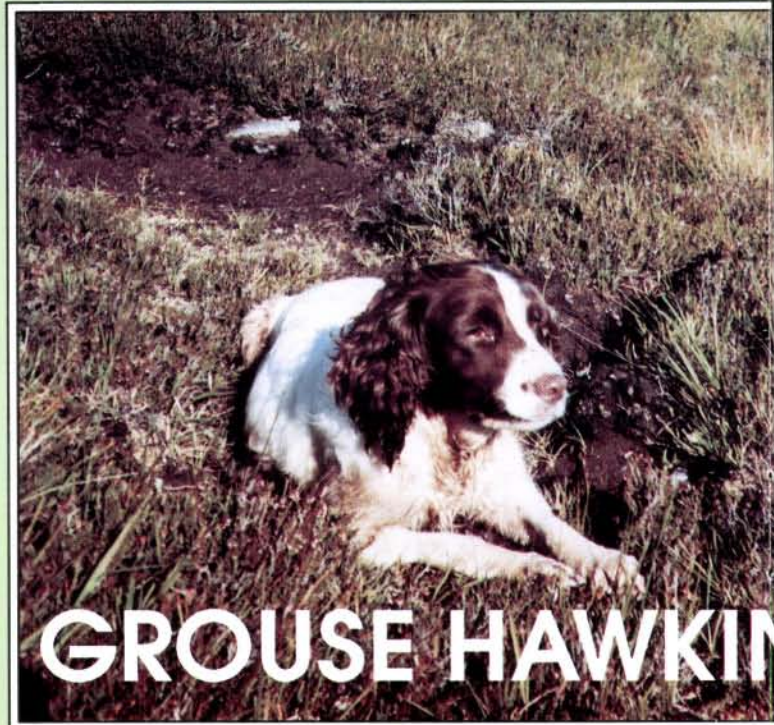
Nigel Deacon, Brian Hitchmough and I opened the season on the 13th of August by taking a brace and a half of Grouse with three intermewed hawks, two tiercels and a falcon. Nigels falcon flew first, badly placed for the first flush she tail-chased her grouse into the distance, as she returned we managed to flush another

grouse under her which she stooped and bound to neatly. Moving on, Brian Hitchmoughs GSP provided us with a fine point between two hummocks, my old tiercel 'Piper' mounted nicely to about 300ft, and just as he swung in over the dog, we achieved a perfect down wind flush, which resulted in a beautiful stoop and bind. I then flew the second tiercel, which took a young grouse from a large covey of at least a dozen birds.

Throughout our stay, I kept a daily diary of events, the following two entries will I hope help convey some of the enjoyment we experienced.

Saturday 8th September 1990

Out to the Lock Sainn dam at the south eastern edge of Big-house for 2.00pm. Wind - moderate north westerly becoming westerly. Nigel flew his eyass falcon first at a snipe we had walked upto and had seen put in. The hawk mounted nicely and after some initial difficulty, I put up the snipe with the spaniel, a fine stoop, followed by a pretty mounting, twisting flight, out across the Halladale strath ensued, the hawk finally giving its best at about 800 ft. I flew "Mey" (my eyass falcon) next over a point on the peat banks, this resulted in a classic text book flight, 'Sian' held her point beautifully, the hawk mounted perfectly to about 500ft, Nigel, Nick and I formed a line at 50-60 yards in front of the point, as the hawk crossed over-head and upwind of us, a perfect downwind flush a beautiful,



Nick Wilkinson's intermewed Falcon

wings fully closed, vertical stoop and the grouse was struck hard and bounced off a peat hag as the falcon rushed past, quick throw up, a short scuffle and she had him. Nigel's eyass mounted perfectly over the next point, the grouse flushed well but put in almost immediately, the hawk remounted immediately and took her grouse on the re-finish.

Following a long walk around Loch Sainn, Meg (the spaniel) flushed three grouse which were put in and were marked down. Nick put his hawk up and following a point from 'Sian' the grouse flushed on a sidewind. The hawk stooped

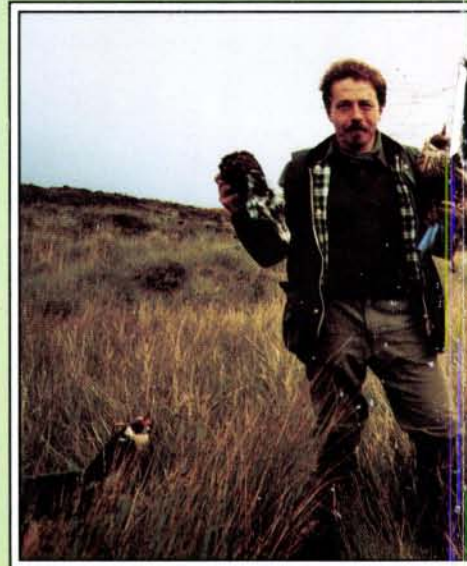
and hit one hard, as she threw up and turned in to him on the ground, the grouse recovered and beat her to a burn, the spaniel found it quickly and it was re-flushed to be taken by the side of the Loch.

Friday 14th September 1990

Out to Raphan for 2.30pm - Wind light south westerly. We walked through the forestry furrows and on to the flats around Loch Na Cloiche. I flew "Mey" first over a point from "Sian", she crossed the dog and mounted directly into the wind, holding position about 400ft above us, beautifully downwind flush, vertical stoop with an attempted bind, the grouse

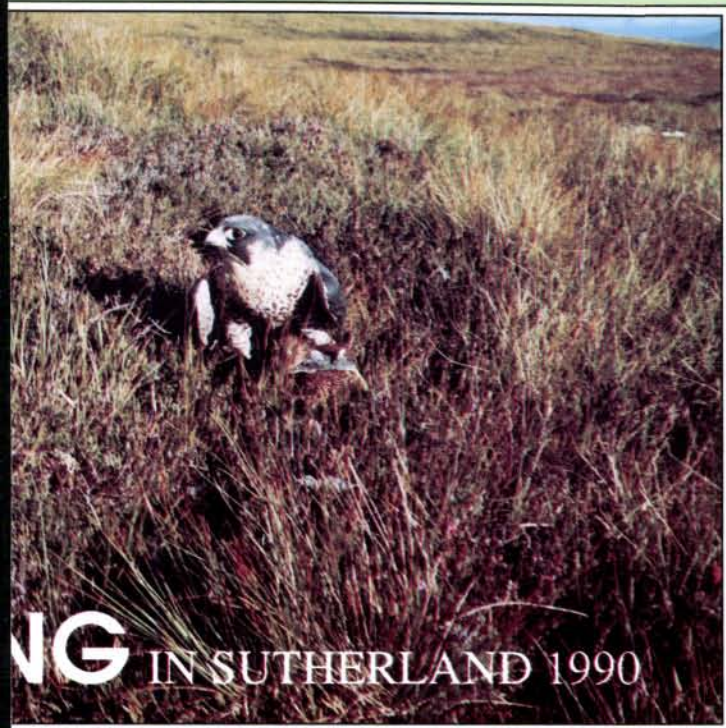


'Mey' with the Grouse killed in the stoop on September 8th



David Myatt and Nigel Deacon, the hawkers





## NG IN SUTHERLAND 1990

on a fine Grouse watched by Meg

was hard hit and was taken at the edge of a reed bed 30 yards further on.

Nigel flew his eyass next, she mounted very high and well upwind of the point, for some reason the grouse flushed prematurely resulting in a long pumping downward stoop. It took us a little time to find the hawk who was busily plucking her grouse in a hollow in the peat by the burnside. Both grouse and hawk were wet, she had presumably taken him in the water. Nick flew the next point, which turned out to be a lark, surprisingly, the hawk stooped hard, barely missing the lark, and even more sur-

prisingly she then proceeded to ring up after it like a giant Merlin, only leaving it after they had gone up to a tremendous height.

Returning to the vehicles, we accidentally flushed a grouse which was marked as it put into a reed bed. I put "Mey" off and as she was mounting, "Sian" came on point between us and the reed bed, nothing lost we formed a line in front of this point, the grouse flushed well and the hawk hit it a terrific blow and tried to put into the reeds. The hawk threw up, turned over and followed him in, when we got to her she was plucking it on the edge of the burn, my

best brace of the trip!

Throughout the year, great emphasis had been placed on planning and preparation, with as little as possible left to chance. Two excellent eyass falcons, one bred by Nick Wilkinson, Nigel Deacon and myself by A.I., out of their hard flying peregrines and one bred by Linden Homes out of his successful flying hawks, were to be the success stories of the holiday, both killing over 20 grouse each. Nicks 2nd year falcon, which had waited on high and consistently in its first year season, never really attained a tremendous pitch, perhaps due to the moult, but nevertheless took 17 grouse and 1 teal. Four other hawks, most of which had previously been flown at other quarries and most of which were not flown after the first fortnight, including my eleven year old tiercel, took a further 9 grouse between them, giving us a total of 35 brace of grouse and one teal in 33 flying days.

The dog work, that vital ingredient to success, was provided by Brian Hitchmough with his very superior, hard going and wide ranging G.S.P. bitch, 'Purdey', thanks Brian! And by Nigel Deacons excellent pointer "Sian", both of these dogs worked tirelessly to provide the points and both of them, at times with the assistance of my spaniel, served grouse, after grouse to the hawks, providing some spectacular stoops and kills. The spaniel proved invaluable for rapid re-flushes following the

inevitable put-ins during the first few weeks and when on less than ideal ground.

The main thing we learnt this year is that - Early success with eyasses breeds confidence, well timed and accurate flushing and if need be, re-flushing, to achieve a kill, soon resulted in high mounting and improving footwork. By the end of the trip both of our eyass falcons were waiting on beautifully and killing grouse in fine style, with luck they should both go on to make excellent game hawks in future seasons. The whole holiday was a learning process for the future for hawks, dogs and falconers, with luck we can build upon what we have learnt and keep improving in the years to come.

Grouse numbers continued to be good (1988 and 1989 both being very good years in parts of Caithness and Sutherland) the only disappointment being the weather which put a dampener on the last week of the trip, with high winds and rain making the life difficult for both hawks and dogs. This terrible weather also made life uncomfortable one afternoon for one falconer (who shall remain nameless) who was very nearly swept away fording a river in full spate to retrieve his hawk on a kill.

Wild falcons, Hen Harriers and deer were abundant, Eagles, Merlins and the occasional Osprey were seen and out on the high ground there are grouse .....

by David Myatt



with a Grouse each - 14th September



'Sian' on point!



# Raptor

by *ROBIN HAIGH*

'Training and taming, better known in falconry parlance as 'manning', when used in combination with judicious weight control are the three regimes used to turn a novice raptor into a well behaved and efficient falconers bird. To use any one without other is about as sensible as trying to manage the U.K. economy solely by the use of interest rates! But enough of this political stuff! Too little attention paid to manning and too much to weight control in the early stages may produce aggressiveness, screaming and 'tree top sulking' later on. Unfortunately weight loss is all too frequently used by the inexperienced, incompetent or just plain lazy falconer as a substitute for manning with potentially dire results.

Have you noticed how it is always the breeders fault when a bird starts to scream or becomes aggressive. Surely it must have been hand reared by the breeder, it must be an IMPRINT, demand your money back, your local 'expert' will tell you. How can a parent reared bird start to scream? The answer is 'very easily' for screaming initially is innate response by the bird to hunger!

Later on when screaming becomes a habit it may be induced by sight of the falconer even when the bird is not hungry and at this stage is almost impossible to cure. Parent reared, creche reared, hand reared, branchers or passagers can all be made to scream if the weight loss regime is too severe. I would go as far as to guess that in the majority of cases screaming and aggression in the bird has been provoked by the falconer.

Imprinting and screaming are not necessarily related but hunger, screaming and aggression definately are.

Imprinting occurs relatively early in the birds life whilst screaming may not develop until later.

This is not meant to be 'a how to train your bird article' more of 'a how not to encourage it to scream'. So how do you start when you have collected your bird direct from the breeder, I am assuming you have a fresh bird and not a bird that has been previously manned or handled for that comes complete with all faults, most of which may prove incurable!

After examining the bird at the breeders and satisfying yourself that it is in suitable condition, take the time to weigh it and fit proper Aylmeri anklets, the type that are held on by adhesive and one large eyelet. Don't be tempted to use those that are fixed by a car type rivet, yes they are easier to put on but like the false aylmeri types of jesses are inherently more dangerous in that due to their length they are far more likely to become hooked up.

Carry your purchase home in a good strong cardboard box, never wood, lined with carpet for grip and with 6 or 8 square airholes cut just above the floor for ventilation. Turn the bird loose in an enclosed aviary for a week to let it settle down and feed ad lib. I would not recommend the traditional method of keeping the fresh bird tethered to a bow perch for this means that the bird can be given no settling in period and manning must proceed from day one otherwise it may spend all day bateing at every unusual sight and subsequently ruin its feathers and temperament.

The day you decide to take the bird up don't feed but after catch-

ing the bird fit the jesses through the eyelets then swivel and leash and weigh it again. Weigh every day from now on and make a daily chart. Take the bird indoors on the glove. It must not be turned loose in an enclosure again until it is responsive to the glove.

Let me explain this further, I prefer to keep trained birds loose in an enclosed aviary rather than tethered to a perch. There, at least, they have the choice of where they wish to sit, in the sun, in the rain, out of the wind or whatever, they also have freedom to bathe or take limited exercise.

Those species that do not take kindly to our cold damp winters, Harris Hawks in particular, will do much better in an enclosed aviary than restricted to a ground level perch.

Once the bird is manned enough to sit steadily on a perch it can spend part of each day in a purpose built secure weathering enclosure that keeps it safe from other predators, both two and four legged, and gives protection from sun and rain. Until then I keep it tethered to its bowperch or whatever type in an enclosed aviary away from disturbing visual stimulae. The first time with the bird on the fist try and find yourself a comfortable chair, spread liberal amounts of newspaper on the floor an up the wall to catch the mutes and simply let the bird sit on the glove while you read or watch the television. You may wish to hold meat in your gloved hand but at this stage hunger is probably the last thing on the birds mind and only gets in the way.

Domestically produced birds are much smaller than their wild taken counterparts and will allow the rapid progression from sitting on the fist to walking around indoors, to introduction to family pets and eventually outside to traffic. All this may be accomplished within a couple of sessions on the fist.

No attempt should be made to cut the birds weight at this stage and do remember that any change in management is likely to produce a setback in manning. The place that the bird becomes most used to in the early stages is the quarters that it spends most time in. This is where the first serious attempts at getting it to feed on the glove should be made and most will start within a couple of days.

Change location for the next feed and the bird will be more hesitant, but persevere. Try and feed at the same time each day.

After a couple of days carrying and feeding on the fist try an easy step from fence to fist while offering food and gradually extend the step to a jump, then to a flight each time for a reward. No more than three flights per feeding session and always finish on a positive note. The golden rule is if you say to yourself 'just one more time' then don't!. All this can be achieved with almost no weight reduction. The more time the bird spends in your presence the better for you cannot make it too 'tame'. Very little weight reduction is required with an aviary bred raptor to encourage it to fly long distances to you but the bird must have been made as tame as possible and exposed to every manner of animal or machine that it may come across in the vicinity of its hunting field.

The first time flying loose should always be in an environment





*Eyass Male Harris Hawk*

that the bird has been used to during training. Up to this point any weight reduction has been very gradual but this is the time when a deliberate reduction in the birds weight is permissible.

If the manning has been correct and enough time given to training on the creance then there should be no problems and as the bird will have never been more than slightly hungry and ready for its feed at any time during training there will be no encouragement to scream. There are no prizes for training too quickly but to keep to the creance too long before entering the bird quarry can produce frustration which may also lead to aggression and screaming.

Aggression is the likely result of failure to enter at quarry soon enough, the busier the bird is kept the less likely it will be to become aggressive.

Some of the weight reduction that may occur during training can

be recovered as the bird becomes more experienced and reliable, it will often fly somewhat heavier at the end of the season than it was at the start.

Remember that the amount of energy used on cold days is much greater and this must be taken into account during training, this particularly applies to the smaller species which may appreciate being fed twice a day. An underweight bird is more likely to scream, become aggressive and to suffer health problems.

Although I am aware that many will jump up and down and write furious letters to the editor (before you do, ask yourself if you have ever taken a birds weight down too low during initial training) but it has to be said that a screaming aggressive raptor is more likely to be the product of an incompetent falconer than an experienced breeder.

As veterinary practices which specialize in birds of prey seem a little thin on the ground, we feel it would be a good idea for falconers to help each other by writing about any ailments their birds may have had. We would like you to tell us how you came to notice something was wrong, symptoms, how the illness was diagnosed and, if possible, by whom and of course, the treatment and ultimate outcome.

We would also like to hear about how you have overcome non-medical problems.

We would like to start a problem and answer page as well and want to hear from both people with problems and people who feel qualified to advise them.

Please write to CTC Publications, Dalkeith House, Dalkeith Place, Kettering, Northants., NN16 0BS.



# Everlasting Memories

## Mark Hinge

The song "Oceans Apart", rang in my ears at the leaving of Portsmouth on January 22 1990, aboard HMS BRISTOL, embarked for a global circumnavigation. I was a lucky fellow.

Perhaps my Lord Admirals wouldn't like me to call this deployment a 'holiday'; workwise it certainly wasn't, but leisure time in harbour gave me the opportunity to passionately follow my obsession of Falconry and Conservation. Pre-sail correspondence with the British Field Sports Society, Embassies and through contacts of my Falconry friends, gave me hope of early meetings with Falconers overseas. I knew that whilst away, the ship was to be in Port for limited periods so I had to work hard and fast at finding my "Prey". Previous deployments to Africa and the Baltic regions had been fruitful, and had given me the opportunity to meet many people,



*Fish Eagle taking prey at demonstration of flight at Fuji Hawk Centre Singapore*

sample their Wines (another obsession!) and talk birds. Seeing or flying was the Treat-of-the-meet. This deployment, was to be no exception.

I cast off with a good wind and favourable tides .....

The first foreign visit was a 3 day stop-over at Jeddah in Saudi Arabia; if only I had previously read Mark Allens book on Arabia! I join in Thesigers words and wish I had learnt in advance, of these mysterious and wonderful people. I was fortunate enough to meet, via an United Arab Emirate student of my ship, an Arab called Kalid, he took me to the outskirts of the rich city and showed me a beautiful female Saker recently named "Sun", she was to be sent near to Dubai, on the east side of Arabia, for his brother to fly. A lovely bird indeed, not yet fully trained, Kalid hoped she would hunt the diminsing Houbara in the UAE

that coming winter. Beauocracy curtailed a long stay in Saudi (and photographs for that matter) and I vaguely remember practically the whole British Ex-Patriots community raiding my Mess and before I could get leave to head in-land to seek another Saker, Saudi dissolved in a haze.

Southern India however, saw some wonderful sights, particularly the Fish Eagles around Cochin, which circled the ship whilst in dock. They watched our every move. Our first night ashore indulged a feast of Tandoori Curries and fishy things. Bribes and promises were made to find Falconers and eventually a Taxi driver (well his vehicle did have a form of an engine) knew of a "Bird Man". He promised to take me there the next day. As part of the

deal we had to watch a Kipling performance of Mongoose versus Cobra. The Cobra came second. Surprisingly no monies changed hands so I guessed I was onto the real thing. Dawn rose, and I eagerly got ready for a long journey ahead, then, I damned Ghandi's Revenge, that Tandoori something or other had hit me hard. We sailed two painful days later, from now on

I was a devoted Roast Beef and Yorkshire Pud man.

Singapore was a tremendous success. Bouncing about on a bus from Sembwang through the Island, via a taxi ride, with unprintable offers of hospitality for Sailors, to the beautiful setting of the Jurong Bird Park, to see species of every type imaginable. Preywise: Condors, Vultures, Imperials, Steppes, Tawnies, Brahmy Kites, Bald Eagles, Sakers, Lanners, Luggers some class Peregrines to name but a few, the list was endless. To top it all off the park was set in a jungle of heat flower and feather. The flying demonstration was given by a lass called Ima (see photograph) and after the enthralled cosmopolitan crowd left, we spoke at great length. Some of their staff had previously worked at Weyhill and had much enjoyed "English Falconry". Their breeding scheme was excellent and

sponsored by Fuji Films, Steve and Emma Ford have a gloved fist in the Hawk Centre, they were both absent the day I visited - I suppose they knew I was coming! If you ever get the chance to visit Singapore, the bird park is a must. Also if the family get bored of bird-talk you can always send them shopping in the many cheap Plazas, or even to the Crocodile Farm next to Jurong. Feeding time is all the time - so watch your step.

Through the Far East for a 17 hour fuel stop at Dutch Harbour in the Aleutian chain and the chance meeting with Steve Fuchs who had a splendid Alaskan Falcon. Genetically she was a Gyr flying at 3lbs and she put up a spendid flight amplyfied by the crisp snow covered mountains. Her bag to date was just over 30 in 3 seasons, not vast number but the flights must have been spectacular to watch. Surely to own such a bird is enough to turn most people green with envy. I certainly was but that was due to the sea-state prior to arrival in Alaska - now that was a rough sea, but that's another story.

Heading south past Canada to California, I met with John Aiken of the San Francisco Zoo. John's exciting Bald Eagle programme was still in it's infancy, backed up with a dedicated staff and huge CCTV coverage. Their building project was on a memorable scale and I burnt off yards of Video footage. What a wonderful place they have (or will have after driving home some more nails!). The San Fran Bird of Prey and Conservation Centre housed smashing pairs of Redtails and Harris Hawks, Great Horned Owls and Prairies, also a cheeky crow called Jim. Incidentally, the North American Falconers Association is a tremendous organisation, if you venture westward make contact prior to arrival, you'll not regret it. The staff at California's premier Zoo made my visit to America complete. Thanks Guys!

Months later having sailed away, I returned home to be greeted by my lovely wife; the children ran towards me, and still were good to the fist, eager to see their presents! My good friends at the New Forest Owl Sanctuary in Ringwood listened to more sea stories and watched my unprofessional edited video. We all agreed that wherever you may be, whatever you might do, the trait and love of Falconry is throughout the World and that Falconers alike are aching to exchange news, views and ideas. I learnt much.

Back home in green fields and heathered landscapes of Wales make me recall and smile at our fortune in having a truly wonderful sport and an environment with fine species to share and conserve.





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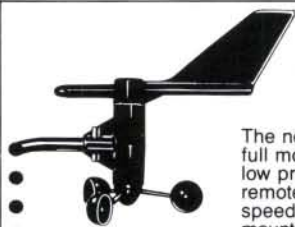


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# THE RED KITE IN WALES

*Mike Everett*

It is difficult to believe that any falconer in his or her own right mind would want to fly a Red Kite. In fact, if you were given a list of British raptors and asked to grade them in some sort of 'falconry merit', I imagine that the Red Kite would be at or very near the bottom. That doesn't make the bird some sort of low-grade raptor, of course - and it does actually have a famous historical association with falconry.

This association though, featured the kite not as a hunter but as quarry. In the Middle Ages, royal falconers reckoned that the ultimate kill for a really good falcon (presumably this would normally have been a Peregrine) was a wild Red Kite. This was partly due to the size of the kite, but rather more to its wonderful flying ability and, in particular, its superb agility in the air. A falcon which succeeded in taking a Red Kite was clearly something rather special and was held in very high esteem.

Once you have seen a Red Kite going through its paces, you can easily see that those old falconers had a point. Among birdwatchers, devotees of the kite will argue that while it might not be able to match the sheer speed of a stooping Peregrine, or the almost unbelievable power flying of a hunting Hobby, it is easily the equal of any other soaring raptor - better than most, in fact - and that when it comes to manoeuvrability it is second to none.

This effortless soaring and fine tuned control, using the wingtips and an extraordinarily flexible tail, equips the Red Kite perfectly for its role as an all purpose raptor able to forage widely with a minimum expenditure of energy. Kites are essentially opportunist feeders and versatile enough to make use of whatever source of prey is available to them. High soaring is an important hunting technique which enables the bird to use its superb eyesight to find suitable food over a wide area: it is particularly useful in the kite's scavenging and carrion-feeding activities. Welsh Red Kites scavenge widely and frequently visit refuse tips; on the higher open ground where they do much of their foraging, they rely heavily on the steady supply of carrion from a huge sheep population. In fact, sheep carrion is the single most important food resource of Red Kites in Wales and, like Golden Eagles in parts of western Scotland, they rely on it to a great extent in winter where natural prey is scarce. When, centuries ago, the Red Kite was a very common and widespread bird in Britain, it was well known as a scavenger in towns



*Red Kite*

and cities, much as its close cousin the Black Kite still is in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Red Kites are also very competent "active hunters", using gliding flight at lower altitudes to catch small rodents and young rabbits in the open. The element of surprise is important when they hunt in this way, as is their phenomenal agility - both things compensating for the fact that they are not particularly powerful raptors. This same agility (which extends even to occasional bouts of hovering) and the ability they share with many large broad winged raptors to produce bursts of great speed over short distances also makes them quite good bird catchers. They are quite capable of taking birds in flight and kill a wide variety of small species, in Wales even up to the size of Jays and Woodpigeons, and are also successful and persistent pirates,

robbing crows and others almost at will.

Nowadays, nobody seriously regards the Red Kite as a threat to either livestock or gamebirds. It was not always regarded in this way and in Britain it was constant and deliberate persecution (which began long before the "vermin era" of last century) which, by the early 1900's had all but wiped out the Red Kite as a British breeding bird. All that was left was a pitiful remnant in a remote part of mid Wales: we shall never know just how small that remnant was, but our best guess puts it as low as between four and eight breeding pairs.

*Photograph by M. Wilding*



The story of how those last survivors were protected and how numbers crept up, painfully slowly for a long time, is one of the great epics of 20th century bird conservation - and, since it really began in earnest with the formation of the first "Kite Committee" in 1903, one of the longest. Much of the glamour and publicity which has surrounded the Osprey story has passed the Red Kite by, but secrecy and a low profile have always been very important elements in successful kite protection. No closed shop was ever as firmly barred to outsiders as that run by the protectors of the Red Kite, a small and dedicated band of enthusiasts, supported by landowners and backed to the hilt by Welsh farmers. The birds undoubtedly owe their survival, through thick and thin, to this approach. Today, Red Kite conservation is the responsibility of the Nature Conservancy Council and the RSPB, but close local support is still a key element. There are now over 60 breeding pairs and in 1970 70 young were reared - the most this century.

The recovery of the Red Kite has been a long, slow business, a fact which this year's figures can easily obscure, and has been beset by problems. These problems are by no means over. There appear to be no recent instances of

deliberate persecution, but Welsh kites - no fewer than 18 of them in the 1980's - are depressingly regular victims of illegal poisoning directed at crows and foxes, innocent victims (and ones we can ill afford to lose) to scandalous misuse of poisons in the countryside which has been revealed as a nationwide problem. Even two birds from the reintroduction project (see below) have been poisoned in this way. Egg-collecting too is still very much with us and shows a worrying upward trend: there have been 80 known instances of egg thefts since 1960, but 48 of these (including eight in 1990) have occurred since 1980. In terms of known rates of Red Kite productivity in Wales, these robberies have had a very small effect on the population - but they are still losses which should not happen. Society outlawed egg collecting over 35 years ago... It is of course impossible to guarantee the safety of every single nest and very difficult to catch more than an occasional thief. Nest protection schemes are also extremely costly and one of the worst aspects of egg collecting is the way in which it ties up resources which conservationists would much prefer to use elsewhere.

Welsh kites nest either in the famous hanging oak woods of the hill valleys or in smaller groups of trees, but they use well timbered areas very little for hunting - this is done over open valley farmland, up on the high sheep-walks on the hills and in the highly productive, prey rich zone between the two known as the ffridd. Habitat loss through blanket afforestation and increasingly intensive farming methods all work against the Red Kite, so somehow retaining existing forms of land use in upland Wales must be vital to their long term survival. From the kite's standpoint, sheep farming is very desirable. Pressure on hill farmers and the need for them to have some realistic hope of economic survival, added to the conservation problems of birds like the Red Kite, produce a land-use equation which is very difficult to solve to everybody's

satisfaction. New moves towards creating Environmentally Sensitive Areas, and the idea of "set aside" on farmland, may yet provide some answers and work to the kite's advantage.

For years, the low annual output of young kites from the Welsh population has given cause for concern. Some means of boosting this to the sort of level achieved by kites elsewhere in Europe (which would greatly improve the

bird's situation in Wales) has to be found, but it would be quite wrong to assume that captive breeding and release programmes would provide the answer. The low output was long believed to be associated with a shortage of prey affecting chick survival, a view supported by current research, and it is this problem which has to be solved first. Some form of supplementary feeding may provide one answer; another, working successfully so far, involves hand rearing of small chicks through the most crucial period and then returning them to their nests at a later stage, when their chances of successful fledging are much greater.

This research and its follow up action is still in an early phase, but the results so far give cause for optimism. Meanwhile, the Red Kite story has entered a new and exciting phase with a joint NCC-RSPB programme to re-introduce the birds to suitable parts of Scotland and England starting in 1989. Here too it will be some time before we can assess the success of the experiment, but the results so far are most encouraging. Perhaps, in the lifetimes of many of us, the Red Kites great rarity here might become just another memory. I hope so.



Red Kite on nest with young

Photograph by C.H. Gomersall



# A DREAM COME TRUE

## PAUL CLAY

On the 10th of August this year, whilst in the middle of corn carting for the local farmer, I saw my Mother's car pull up outside the yard presumably to give me my forgotten lunch. However I was about to be told that, through a phone call and a friends friend, I had the chance to go on an expenses paid working holiday in Scotland, on the grouse moors flying peregrines, leaving the day after tomorrow to be sure of getting on the moor on the 13th, (the 12th fell on a Sunday this year). I immediately accepted the offer so that my mother could phone the person, whom I had never heard of or met before, and tell him before he found somebody else. I worried about the boss later!

When I got home that evening I phoned my friend for some information and he gave me the persons telephone number. I phoned Ken (the persons name) and he agreed to come to my house so see if I was suitable for the job. It turned out that as he had two English pointers and two peregrine falcons, he needed one person to hold a bird and a dog while he worked one dog and flew the points. He had been let down only days before hand and, in an attempt to find somebody phoned all the falconers he knew. He phoned my friend who suggested me. So there I was with a chance to do something I had only dreamed of which is, after all, the ultimate in falconry. Anyway, after having not long completed my G.C.S.E.'s it would be a wonderful break.

The 12th came and I was up at 3.15am in order to make the two hour drive to Kens house so that we could leave for Scotland at 6.30. After 13.5 hours we found ourselves at the cottage which Ken and his friend had rented with the moor. The other party at the cottage consisted of three hawks (two tiercels and one eyass falcon). It was late so we put the hawks straight into the mews which were in the large loft of an old sheep barn. With granite walls and a weather proof roof this loft could also house two dogs. Because we were the last to arrive at the cottage all the best kennels had gone, so our dogs stayed in the car until the morning when we converted a woodshed into kennels.

On the first morning we got up and put the hawks on to the weathering ground and what a lovely sight it was, five peregrines in absolutely perfect feather and condition, all preening, rousing and basking in the sun after having their hoods removed from the night before. Later that day Ken's two falcons killed a brace of grouse and I got blooded, a lovely way to begin the grouse season. For the first 8 or 9 days the hawks weren't going very high, usually between 150 and 250 feet. However, after a spell of exceptionally sunny weather, we began to fly later, sometimes not getting on the moor until 5pm. The air was cooler and the light was slowly fading so that by the time we had a point the hood would come off and the falcon would think " Bloody hell! It's dinner time" Because we were flying later, there was definately a marked difference in the hawks performance, they would go higher and more grouse were brought to the bag.

Isla the three year old falcon, would never go really high but always seemed to get the coveys and she usually picked out a young grouse. This 'staying low technique' began to become something of a habit, whereas poor old Blanche, the one year old that needed a few kills, would have all the bad luck. Blanche would often go to 500 or 600 feet, only to have an old cock grouse rise beneath her. Although she would clout it with a thud that could sometimes (and I kid you not) be heard from 500 yards away, every time the old grouse would hit the deck, wait for Blanche to come down on what she thought was her kill, only to find when she got to stalling speed and about to land, the old grouse would pick his moment and speed off leaving the falcon no chance in a tail chase. So you can appreciate it is very difficult to make a falcon learn that the higher they go the more kills they will



*The two dogs Stan (bottom) and Ryan*

obtain. The grouse is a most beautiful bird and I hold the utmost admiration for its courage and ability to outwit a peregrine.

After a few days of me watching Ken heading the points and putting the birds up, he decided it was time for me to fly the bird. When the dog comes on point, often more than 250 yards away, it is very difficult to get round it as quickly as possible with the bird still on the fist. Ken chose to get all the way round the point and be facing the dog before putting the birds up. The reason for doing this is so that you give the dog every chance to make a mistake. Some people, however, put their birds up as soon as they see the dog coming on point and use the ringing falcon as an aid to keep the grouse from busting. The problem with this method is that if, whilst running round to help the dog flush, you excite the dog and make him put them up prematurely, not only have you wasted a point but also demoralised the falcon who would have been 9



times out of 10, out of position at the time of the flush.

So if you wait until you are completely sure of the dog before putting the falcon up, there is less chance of things going wrong, and a few false points or early flushes is enough to ruin a young falcon's attitude to game hawking for good.

So whilst running round the point the bird stayed on the fist, and once the falcon is up, you start walking towards the dog, but only taking a few steps at the time of the falcon being over your head, whilst ringing up because only at that time is she in the right position for the flush, should it happen. Once she is no longer over your head, you stop and wait until such time as she is, before walking in further. Usually you can get within 10 to 15 yards of the dog's nose. It is when you are here and you know the bird is

not going to go any higher that you run in and flush the grouse. Once the grouse gets up, the dog is whistled to drop and hopefully the bird will be successful in killing the grouse. The most important thing in killing a grouse is waiting until the bird is in the right position and getting the flush absolutely right. If the flush is wrong or the bird is out of position, 99% of the time the falcon won't even get near the grouse.

Unfortunately, not every hawking trip went as planned. One day, whilst Ken's bird was up. He must only have been about 30yds from the dog

when, all of a sudden from out of nowhere, came a young, immature, wild falcon which began to mob the trained bird. We had hoped that they would come over so that he could flush for both of them - but no way. They both flew off, miles away, until the young wild bird began to easily overpower the trained one, who, luckily, came back and was picked up slightly out of breath! However, the wild bird just continued to ring up in the sky. It was a wonderful sight, although our hearts were in our mouths as we saw Blanche gradually reduce to the size of a pinhead, considering exactly the same thing happened last year to the same bird and she was not picked up for three days.

Another time was with a wild tiercel and with the same bird. 'Bad luck Blanche' (as I called her) was ringing up to a good height when all of a sudden this tiercel stooped and hit her right in the back, taking her and us completely by surprise. Luckily we were able to lure her down before she flew off, but it could have easily been a repeat performance of two days ago.

Back at the cottage there was a certain amount of rivalry between the falconers, all good humoured though. The falconers there could certainly tell you a lot about the birds and a lot was there to be learned. Apart from falconers in Scotland, I was

introduced to Derry Argue, the well known breeder of the Llewellen Setter. He spoke to me about the times when he used to take and train sparrowhawks and merlins, and the odd peregrine, when he was younger and when the law allowed him to. He also had a pencil drawing of sparrowhawks drawn by George Lodge, with whom I think he used to be friends, Because I have a soft spot for spars I fell in love with it straight away. I also met a famous bird artist who took some 150 photos whilst on an afternoons hawking with us. The photo's were to help him with his latest book on the study of grouse.

There is no doubt that being in Scotland and meeting the people I did was fantastic. But after three weeks, I began to get itchy feet because I wanted to get the spar's third season underway, and also

rescue my pointer puppy from the family, or was it the other way round? Also, I had 'A' levels to start. However, there was one moment in Scotland that I will remember for a long time.

It was a day when the wind was immensely strong and we went very high up into the moor. We had walked for a long time, then the dog came on point. Ken took the point and walked round it, then put the falcon up. She battled with the wind and caught a massive updraft from a steep hill, and went very high, probably over 1000ft. She then drifted out of sight and, just as



*Peregrine Falcons on cage ready for a days hawking*

she did, the grouse got up ( they all seemed to be very jumpy that particular day). She then came back round the hill, still just as high. In a desperate attempt to serve her while she was so high, I let the dog I was holding go, to try and find a grouse as with the dog already out. The head keeper and I were watching from an excellent viewpoint, where we could see everything, so we thought it would be a good time to eat our Mars Bars whilst the falcon was up. The dogs couldn't find any more grouse. Still watching the bird I felt around to put my sweet wrapper in my hawking bag. I had trouble doing the button up, so I looked round and place the button easily into its hole. I then looked up again, only to find the sky where I had my eyes fixed for the past ten minutes, empty. "Where is she?" I asked the keeper. You can guess the answer: "Oh, she's down". Ken had brought her into a grouse that we killed the day before and put into his pocket, in case of emergency. Being that high was as good as any emergency, so he threw it out, and apparently I missed the best stoop of the whole holiday. It must have lasted all of two seconds at the most!

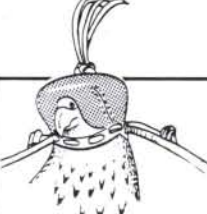
The bit of advice I could now give to anyone going grouse hawking next year is "Never take your eyes off the bird!"



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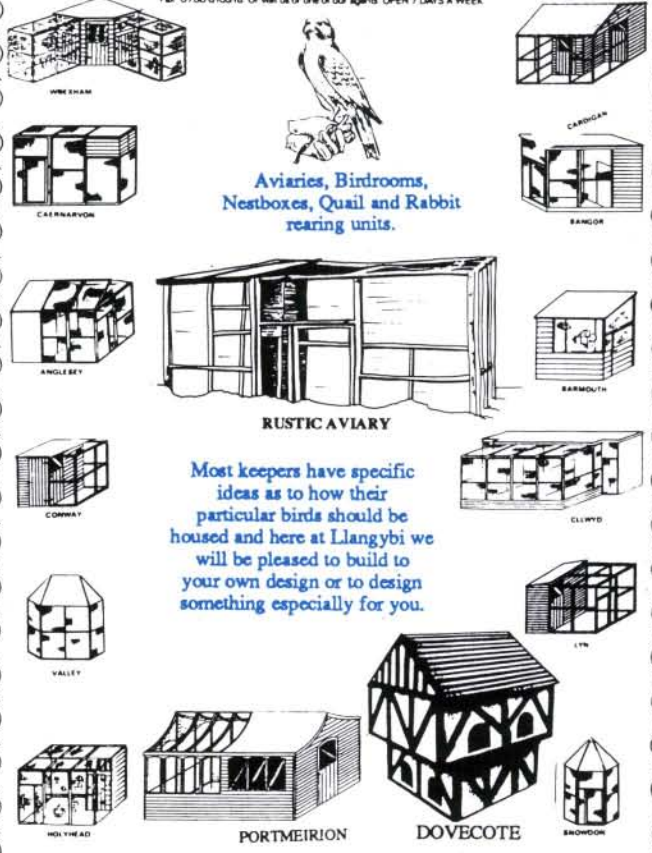
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## INSURANCE - A WARNING!

Following the article in Issue 4 of The Falconers' Magazine I can confirm Sharon O'Gorman's plea that we consider insurance for our valuable charges.

I was very grateful to Sharon's 'Golden Valley' policy having had the full value of a stolen Harris Hawk repaid quickly and with none of the usual insurance "quibbles".

However, I must caution readers to consider their actions upon losing birds.

My first action was of course to call the Police, followed by the Insurers, the DOE and the RSPCA.

The Police were prompt and took all details possible, sending a falconer, CID Officer the next day.

Imagine my surprise the following week when a colleague at work asked if it was my bird that was stolen. She had seen an article in the centre of the front page of the local free newspaper entitled "Hawk-ish", which detailed the loss, the value of the bird and the street from which it was stolen.

I live in a fairly short street and anyone knowing birds of prey could spot the "tell-tale signs" and locate my aviaries. We take a lot of care and energy to be reasonably circumspect about publicising the whereabouts and value of our birds and I quite reasonably expected some common-sense in this respect from the Police.

I wrote angry letters to both the Police and the paper.

The Police responded quickly but pointed out that in this case (I'd had a note after a week to say they'd shelved the investigation) they acted only with the best of intentions. No doubt, they said, if I'd recovered my property I would feel differently! They did, however, apologise after a fashion. This was more than I received from the newspaper who failed to reply.

I suggest to fellow falconers that if such losses are reported to the Police (as they must, if only to validate the claim on the insurers) then they are asked not to publicise the loss and explain to them the reason why. I have done just this when reporting a lost ferret recently.

Ray Marsh (address withheld!!)

## THE FALCONER AND THE PHOTOGRAPHER Peter Draper

As a compulsive photographer and lover of birds, I was grateful for the welcome into Gary Emberson's home, after deliberating for a couple of weeks whether I ought to knock or not.

Gary has been handling and flying Bird's of Prey for almost 20 years now. He has had the likes of Little Owls, Kestrel's, Buzzard's, Tawny Eagles and his favourite being his Goshawk.

At present he has a pair of Barn Owl's from which he has successfully bred 12 offspring this season. The Barn Owls shown are from the last clutch in July. They were about 9 weeks old when I photographed them. These were readily flying to the fist with great ease.

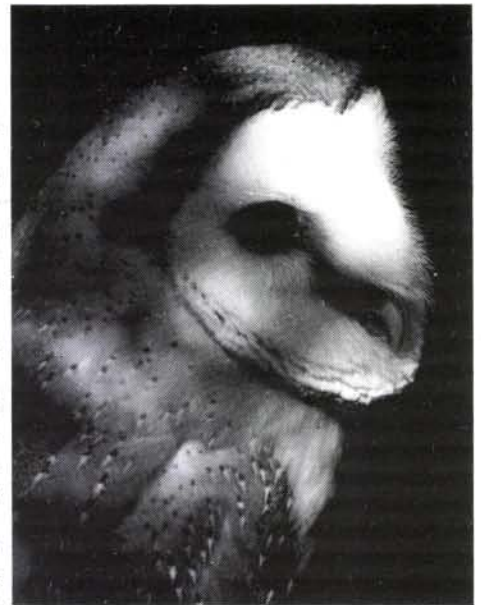
The largest of Gary's present collection is the European Eagle Owl. A male of about 2 years old, and a hand reared bird. Such an awesome size, almost looking unreal. Like a rich boy's clock-work toy from Victorian times. This bird is so eager to fly to the fist I've seen it almost lift it's perch off the ground because it caught sight of Gary with his glove on. He is flown quite freely in fields locally, from tree to tree, returning to the fist on call.

Gary also has a male and a female Harris Hawk. They are both about 3 years old and are parent reared. However they are unrelated.

The male has come on quite quickly, taking off from the perch to fist at first call. He is a gentle bird flying and landing almost cautiously. Unlike the female Harris who is turning out to be something of a handfull. She will come to the fist, but it's like she wants to kill it, landing with a loud thud. Gary tells me she is improving, "It's just a matter of spending more time with her on the fist whenever I can".

Hopefully, along with Mick Young from Colchester who fly's a Goshawk and a Sparrow Hawk, Gary hopes to start displaying his birds. Local charities are his starting point. But for the time being he still has a lot of work, preparation wise, to get on with, Monitoring bird's weight's, feeds and logging all flight's takes up time.

What more can he want? Well, next for the collection is expected a Golden Eagle. I hope he get's on with the rotweiller, who stand's guard, as well as the other bird's do.



9 week old Barn Owl

## FALCONRY ON MULL?

Moving to an Island off Scotland came as something of a culture shock after Suffolk, but the promise of watching wild eagles while I worked won me over. I did not realise just how great the raptor population was on Mull until I moved here. Golden Eagles are at saturation point. Buzzards seem to be on every other telegraph pole and there is a fair percentage of Peregrines, Merlins, Spars, Hen-Harriers and good old Kestrels. Partly I think, because of the total lack of mammalian predators, and because of the lack of homo-sapiens (during the winter months anyway).

Perfect I would have thought, for falconry. Winter proved that falconry would not be an everyday occurrence. We had six weeks of gale force winds and rain and it proved impossible to fly anything.

The Lanner was hopeless and became waterlogged in seconds, and the friends that visited from Suffolk with Redtails to hunt the rabbits on the farm, soon proved that these can't cope with the winds either.

So I figured I should look to native species, and tried a year old jack

Merlin. He was a terrific lure bird as it turned out, and laughed at all but the very strongest winds, but as it turned out he refused to chase anything faster or larger than a Sparrow.

Oh well Paul was coming up with his Peregrine, that should show us some sport ..... he came, lost his Peregrine and left, promising never to fly a bird on Mull again, but he has just bought himself a Goshawk and I bought myself a ten day old Sparrowhawk last month .....

Like the book said I reared it on chopped sparrow, and had it everywhere with me, 24 hours a day. She has turned into a beauty, and flies at ten ounces, nearly two ounces heavier than the Spar I trained last year, and I didn't have the big headache of manning the thing. She made her first kill today. The first of many I am sure.

Paul is coming up in November with his Goshawk. It would be nice to re-introduce them to the Island .....

David Rampling. Isle of Mull.



# In Reply to The Hawk Board *Alan Gates*

The recent 'HAWK BOARD STATEMENT ON THE TAKING AND CAPTIVE BREEDING OF GOLDEN EAGLES', which has been published in a number of journals and circulated by the Board, is at best a public slap on the wrists for all eagle falconers and keepers.

We are accused of complacency and with an "I'm alright jack" attitude. Our mental I.Q. is in question as to the magical mysteries of A.I. and we are guilty of manipulating the Hawk Boards' initiative to try to obtain licences for eaglets under the guise of breeding, when all we really want them for is falconry.

The impression one forms after reading the Boards statement is of a very undeserving and undesirable minority group within falconry, who are totally ungrateful of all the hard work done on their behalf.

Now although some of this criticism may well be justified on certain individuals, to publicly lay all the Boards frustrations onto the shoulders of the eagle keepers as a whole does little for future co-operation, and makes one question the real motives behind the Boards unceasing drive to obtain eaglets.

It is hardly surprising that many eagle keepers were a little suspicious at being singled out as a special case. To be rounded up and organised to form a National Breeding Scheme, especially as those calling the shots have little or no experience with eagles.

It is a very ambitious project the Hawk Board had set itself, organised breeding projects are notoriously non-productive. Falconry organisations pump vast sums of its members money into fruitless attempts, while dedicated individuals produce most of the results.

Eagle falconers have always been classed in British falconry as a somewhat odd bunch, and their sport considered hardly the real thing. If it had died out for any reason, few if any of our illustrious colleagues would have mourned its demise.

To set itself, or more precisely, the eagle keepers a three year period to ascertain as to whether the existing captive population could be made productive, was somewhat naive.

In reality and with hindsight, I suspect the Board knew full well that within a three year period the results would be very little. Enabling it to return to the NCC/

DoE condemning the existing captive population as a mish mash of mal-imprints totally unsuitable of self sustainability. Further strengthening its requests for fresh individuals from the wild to set up a new breeding project to supply the future needs of all falconers and other interested parties who require golden eagles.

As eagle keepers we are chastised for not jumping to attention and at our resistance at being organised from outside our ranks. It was demanded of us to attend a Eagle Seminar that would be about us and for us. The main aim, we were told, was to discuss and bring to fruition a National Project concerned with the captive propagation of the species.

In reality the speakers were invited to talk on eagle falconry and wild studies, with little or no details offered as to how the Board intended to set up its National Project. We have been cajoled to supply statistical information and told it is for 'our own good' that we do so.

Never once in the past three years have we ever been offered an insight into how the Board thinks or intends this National Project to be run. It talks of keeping eagles on a group basis with birds being placed with considered experts. Though it has never considered it prudent to discuss with the existing eagle keepers who it thinks these experts are. Or to the size of this Project in terms of eagle numbers, who will fund it, who will decide the allocation of progeny and above all, what is the considered annual requirement of new eagles entering falconry.

One cannot help noticing that while eagles were available on licence from the wild, only a handful of dedicated people were interested enough in trying their hand at eagle falconry. Regrettably no shouts of protest went up from eagle keepers or the Board for that matter, when the authorities decided to end the allocation of said licences. Only since the monetary value of eagles has soared do we suddenly find ourselves warranting so much concern and attention.

Sadly all this sudden attention on golden eagle propagation, driven by the urgent need to own an individual or pair is following our current strategy of raptor breeding of supply and demand. Fifteen or twenty years ago when

captive breeding of raptors was in its infancy, few concerned themselves with the possibility of over production. We were more concerned with the ever spiralling upward price, and consoled ourselves with market talk of that supply and demand would bring about sensible prices.

We are at present, and to quote from the Boards statement, 'looking at over-production in the long, and indeed short term, of most species'.

Although this is causing some concern with an ever increasing amount of these birds ending up in inexperienced hands. We seem reluctant as a body to do anything other than allow market forces and a survival of the luckiest to prevail. Agreed that after a few years of falling prices many breeders will cease producing and others will cut down on production. Unfortunately, I like many seem unable to suggest a workable solution, the saddest of all is our reluctance as a whole to bring the impending problem to the fore and discuss it. We seem to prefer to ignore the possibility in the forlorn hope it will dissipate.

With the golden eagles this complacency may be our undoing. Firstly lets look at the small and reasonably controlled rise of eagle falconry in Britain in the last twenty years. With the introduction of licences for wild born eaglets, eagle falconry was given a controllable self sustaining boost. The motives behind the allocation of said licences came under some criticism, but then no system is perfect for every individual. The wild population could easily sustain this small removal, as all were taken from eyries containing duo eaglets. One only has to read the many studies carried out by Gordon, Knight, MacNally and Tomkies to name but a few, to know that many score of eaglets perish annually from the Cain and Abel syndrome. As I believe the highest allocation of licences granted in any one year was five. It does not require a high accumen to see that falconry needs were not going to have any effects what-so-ever on the wild population.

The other advantage of obtaining eaglets from the wild was the available choice of sex. As most falconers would wisely choose a male eagle, leaving the females in the wild. Unfortunately this is a problem we will have to face with captive breeding, what to do with all the females.

As we enter a new era it is undoubtedly down to captive breeding to save eagle falconry in Britain.

The new eagles must come from the existing captive population which presently stands at fifty five. This population produced three young in 1989 and will continue to increase its output year by year.

It can be argued, but I believe that the available suitable hunting countryside within the U.K. together with all the other demands made on it from the increasing mobile urban population. Could not sustain more than five new eagles being introduced into falconry each year without the serious risk of a violent clash.

The Hawk Board disregards the abilities of the present population of eagles to sustain the needs of future demand, and it proposes to take a new breeding stock from the wild. By the time this proposed new breeding stock was mature enough to propagate, the existing captive stock could easily be producing ten to fifteen a year and rising.

This brings us back to market forces and the price that is now attracting breeders into the eagle market would soon drop, and many of these birds would find themselves in inexperienced hands.

We could find ourselves in the scenario we are presently facing with some of today's over produced raptors. Just like these species the eagle will find itself in unqualified hands which is detrimental to its welfare. Unlike falcons etc., this will not only spell danger for the birds themselves, but also their so-called handlers and the unexpected public who may inadvertently come within free range of one of these eagles.

With today's sensational hungry media, one can imagine the harmful effects this could have on falconry as a whole. I doubt then that the Board would stand up for the rights to fly an eagle free, more likely throw us to the wolves as a peace offering, claiming that flying eagles was after all, not really falconry.

Undoubtedly it would lead to the eagle and other large raptors on the Dangerous Animals Act and thus sealing the fate of eagle falconry in Britain.



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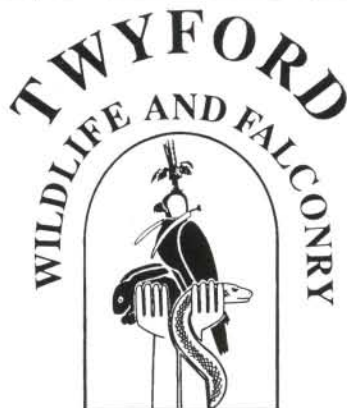
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# SOMETHING "FROM THE FALCONER'S BAG"

by Lorant de Bastyai

I can still very well recall, back in Hungary, receiving a call from my publisher some days after I had taken in the material for one of my books. He said that he would like to see me, so a couple of days later I left my secretary to take care of my office in the Bird Section of Budapest Zoo and went along to see him.

There he was, sitting behind his desk, with all the material for my book in front of him. I sat down in the chair he offered me, feeling a little nervous because I thought that he was about to make some excuse for rejecting my manuscript, but after lighting a cigarette he told me that he liked the book. There was just one thing, he would like more of the colourful falconry stories. He felt that these would appeal more to the general public than would the drier technical and training details etc., thus making the book a better seller.

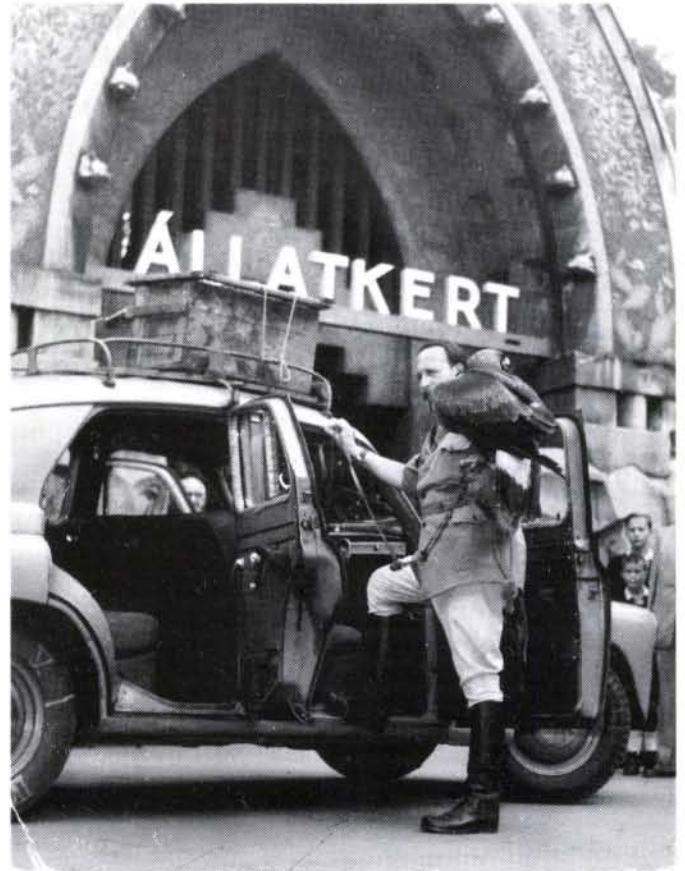
I told the publisher I had written all the stories that I could remember from the years that I had trained and flown hawks, falcons and eagles, and that for the moment I did not think I could write any more. He smiled at me from behind his second cigarette and said "I do not believe you. After all, you have spent most of your life with birds of prey, training them and observing the wild ones. Just open your falconer's bag, look into it, put your hand deep inside and you will see that you will find some interesting stories". He was right, so once again I have opened my old and ragged falconer's bag and here is the story that I found.

One fine winter morning when I was in charge of the bird section of the Budapest Zoo, I came into the main office building to find a man standing there by a huge covered wicker basket. He told me he had a bird of prey, and asked whether I was interested in having it. I was in no particular hurry to see it, as many buzzards were brought in by people during the winter months, but a few minutes later, as I cautiously drew back the basket covering, I was most sur-

prised to see, not the usual common or rough-legged buzzard but a huge eagle staring at me. The head was light-fawn coloured. I covered the basket, and told the bird section to make ready for an imperial eagle (*Aquila heliaca*) in young plumage.

On the way down to the bird compounds I asked the man where he had found the eagle, or perhaps, had he taken the bird from a nest and reared it, now not wanting it any longer. He replied that eagles did not nest in the same area from which he came, which was in the great Hungarian Plains. He said that until now he did not believe that anyone could catch an eagle with their bare hands, and that the eagles usually migrated and were not around during the winter. I did not quite believe the man, in that he had just "picked up" this bird.

The man assured me that the capture of the eagle had been quite easy. He had noticed the bird sleeping for many nights on a mound of maize straw in a stubble field, and he decided to try and capture it. He had seen the eagle hunting hares during the day-time - which seemed to me to be an unlikely thing for a young impe-



Lorant with "Harcos" outside the main entry of the Budapest Zoo (Allatkert, means animal garden)

rial eagle to do, as they usually take smaller quarry. The man went with two friends to the heap of maize straw before the eagle came to rest that night. Two of them hid in a dried out ditch about two yards away from the heap. The third man covered them with a horse blanket, throwing earth and dried grass over it, and went home.

It was exceedingly cold, but the two men waited until it was nearly dark. Then they heard the great wings of the eagle swishing through the air as it circled and landed on the mound. They had to wait a little longer as it was not yet quite dark, then they peeped cautiously out of their hiding place. They saw, with one quick flash from their torch that the bird was there. One more quick flash right in the bird's eyes from only three feet away, then they threw the blanket over the eagle. It fought back fiercely, but the two men managed to hold it down.

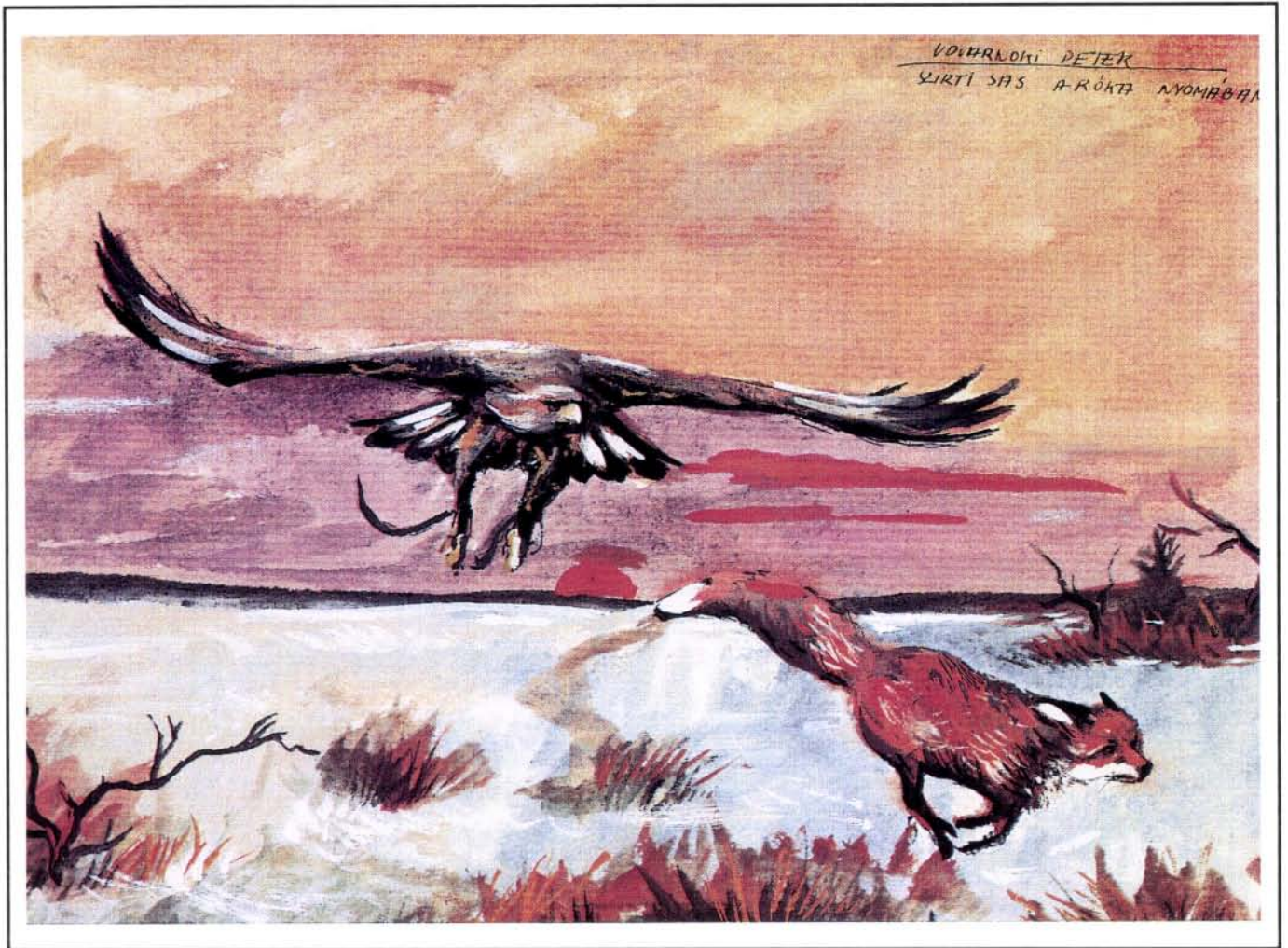
Getting the large bird from under the blanket turned out to be an even harder job. During this manoeuvre they did not have quite so much luck. The eagle's talons caught one of the men in the hand, and he had to run off immediately to find a doctor. In the end they managed to get the huge bird into a basket, and a little while later they were on their way by train to the zoo.

As the eagle was let out of the basket, in one of the great bird cages, I noticed the tail feathers



"Harcos" flying to the fist for the first time





*"Harcos" after the fox. Painting by a young Falconer Artist in Hungary*

of this bird, and I at once knew why this "imperial eagle" had been hunting the large hares of the plain. It was, in fact, a young golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetus*).

During all my years of training birds of prey I had trained many eagles, but so far only nestlings. Never a wild-caught eagle, and never a rare coloured bird such as this. The man took his empty basket, and while he was being paid a reward for the eagle, mentioned that a Russian soldier whom he had met on the train had wanted to buy the eagle. He was a Kirgis soldier who evidently hoped to have the bird for hunting, as they are used a lot in that part of Russia.

We put leather straps, or jesses, on the eagle's feet and during this operation the bird fought so hard we named him "Harcos", which is Hungarian for "fighter". The first part of training is to carry the bird on the fist for the greater part of the day. Every time Harcos bated, that is, flapped off the fist and hung downwards, he had to be put back on the fist. Every time he was stood on the thick leather glove he flew off again and hung flapping with all his eleven pounds, head downwards.

I had, as head of the bird section, a lot of work to do, so I let two young but strong falconers carry Harcos about that day. Luckily it was winter time, and fairly cold. Had it been warm the eagle might have had a heart attack with his continual exertions.

After many weeks of carrying, Harcos had to fly to the fist when called from a distance. He learned this very quickly, and seven weeks after his capture he was flying free - no strings attached to his jesses. We had permission to hunt during the winter on some ground nearby, but the eagle was not sufficiently trained as yet.

The winter passed and the spring. During the moult, in summer, Harcos was carried continuously. In order to accustom him to everything he was carried in the main street of the town. He also sat on the back of the front seat of my car, looking out of the windows interestedly as we drove along.

One day in late summer we took Harcos out into the fields. We had permission to try hawking hares on an estate. Two young falconers circled around about 150 yards away in an open area, in all about 400 yards long by 100 yards wide. I stood at one end with Harcos while the beaters came towards us, making a noise to spring the quarry. Nothing seemed to move except a Heron.

Not until the beaters were only a few yards away did one of them shout, "Mark! Hare on the right!" The hare circled however, and disappeared into some shrubs. This happened a second time.

We were beginning to think that all the quarry must have gone, then Harcos looked sharply at something far away. Through the field glasses I could see a reddish-brown animal lying close

to the ground. I was very excited when I recognised it to be a young fox, but quite well grown. Harcos was still watching and seemed uncertain whether to attack. I would have given my arm a swing throwing off the eagle, but my muscles had gone numb with the heavy weight of the bird, and I could not move my arm at all.

The beaters walked towards the fox, which waited until they were 30 or 40 yards away before it sprang up and made for cover about 90 yards away. Harcos remained still, wondering what to do. The fox was now 40 yards away and the eagle just stared at it with his neck stretched out.

Suddenly my arm came to life and I threw the eagle with all my might towards the disappearing fox. Harcos also decided he must do something, and flew with mighty wing-flaps after the quarry.

The first attack failed. The fox turned very suddenly at the last minute and the eagle's talons buried themselves in the earth. A second later the eagle was in pursuit again, and just before the fox reached cover, Harcos got up to him and bound to with a mighty grip, one foot on the head and the other on the shoulders of the quarry.

"He's got him" shouted the young falconers, running towards Harcos. We stood there admiring the eagle who sat proudly on his quarry. Harcos had now flown for us, and made his first kill as a trained bird.



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