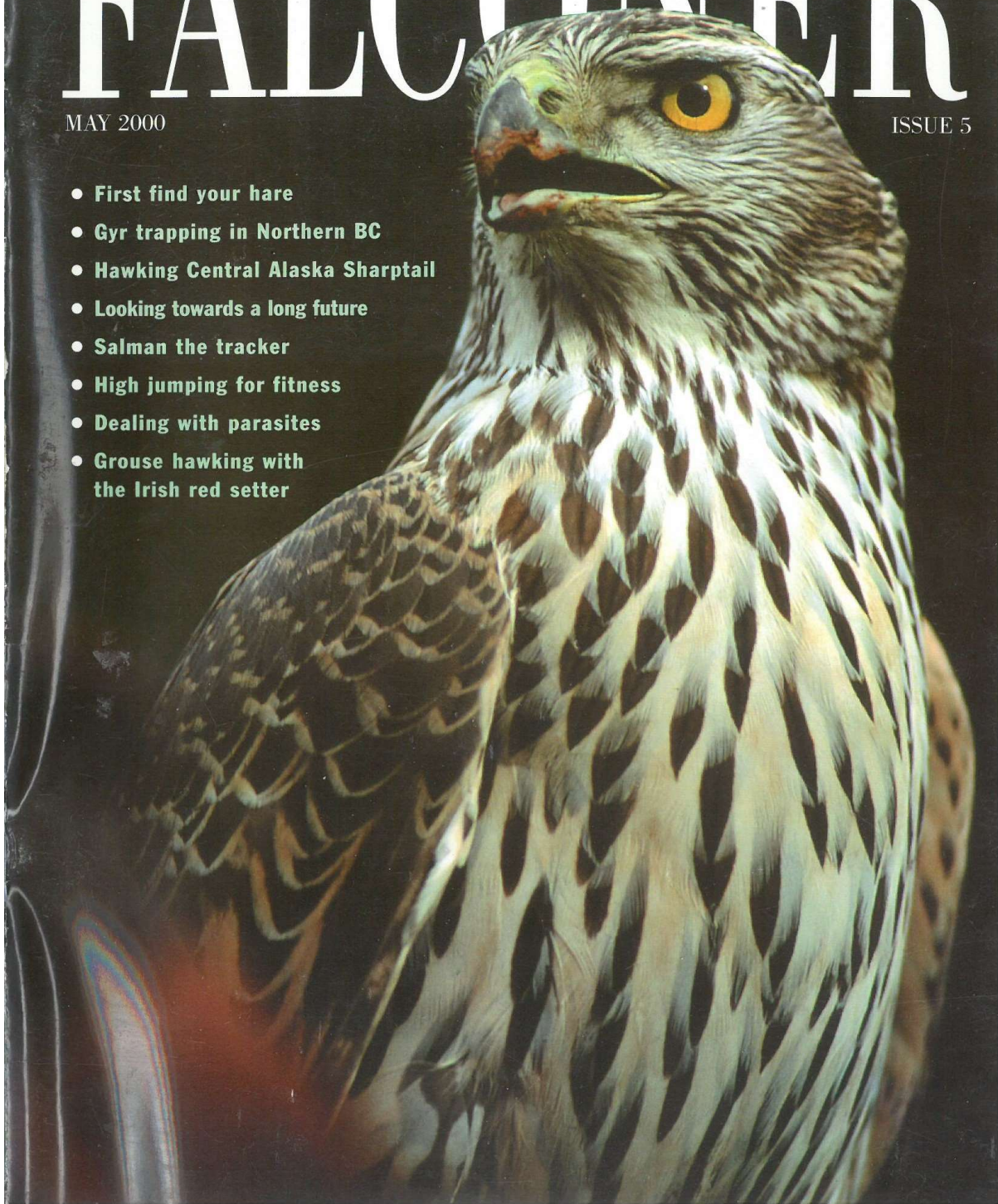


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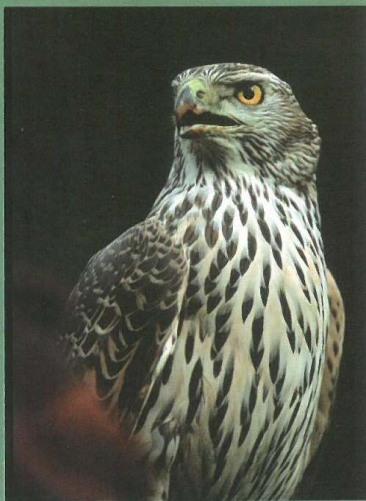
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- **Gyr trapping in Northern BC**
- **Hawking Central Alaska Sharptail**
- **Looking towards a long future**
- **Salman the tracker**
- **High jumping for fitness**
- **Dealing with parasites**
- **Grouse hawking with the Irish red setter**



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Cover photo by Seth Anthony.
Eyass tiercel goshawk.

EDITORIAL

It seems that falconry is a 'buzz' word at the moment and there is a growing interest in it on a worldwide scale. With its prominent presence on the Internet, *International Falconer* is becoming the first port of call for many companies, agencies and individuals wanting to find out more about this most ancient of fieldsports. These enquiries range from teenagers wanting to acquire their first hawk, to international film production companies wanting to produce documentaries on houbara hawking in Arabia. I think there will inevitably be a major growth in the sport in future years. On the whole I believe it is a good thing and we need to look at this increased interest positively. I for one am confident that it will in the long run be to the sport's advantage.

A full year now down the line and the support for *International Falconer* just gets bigger and bigger. We have a truly diverse mixture of articles in this issue with contributions from Britain, Ireland, USA, Canada and Arabia. It's also great to see the first article from one of our lady falconers - Marylin McEvoy McGee.

Neil Forbes' article on parasites is particularly close to home and I urge you all to really 'take on board' the information and advice he gives. 'Pascoe' the eyass white jerkin pictured on the last front cover, recently died from one tick bite. "Should we be concerned about parasites?" - most definitely so.

Best wishes and have a good and speedy moult.

Seth

IMPORTANT - NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

The Editor wishes to point out that *International Falconer* features articles from across the world which inevitably include a variety of management, training and hunting methods. Some practices in one country/state may not be legal in another. It is the responsibility of the falconer to know and strictly adhere to the laws and regulations relevant to the area(s) he/she lives and hawks in. For the good of the sport NEVER do anything that you are not entirely sure is legal.

International Falconer welcomes contributions for articles both written and photographic. Please send for a copy of our Writer's and Photographer's Guidelines before sending material.

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INTERNATIONAL FALCONER



Photo: Seth Anthony

The British Falconry & Raptor Fair

Sunday 28 and Monday 29 May 2000

The tenth British Falconry and Raptor Fair will again take place in the magnificent setting of Offchurch Park. The spring bank holiday weekend will once again see falconers and raptor enthusiasts from all over the globe converge on this world famous annual falconry event held near Leamington Spa.

Each year there is something new, something else to hold the interest of falconers and raptor enthusiasts alike. This year is no exception with a guest falconer from Austria providing two demonstrations each day in the main arena. Michael Holzfeind, from Klagenfurt, will be demonstrating his training technique for large falcons, using a helium filled balloon. Not that ballooning is new to falconers, but Michael has added one or two twists that make the display worth watching. As well as Michael Holzfeind, there will be a good selection of British falconers displaying their skills. When not flying, their charges can be viewed along with plenty of other hawks and falcons on the weathering ground.

Chris Christoforu, will once again be organising a superb display of artistic talent in the art marquee which alone makes the fair worth a visit.

The Campaign for Falconry have an increased presence this year and have laid on some seminars and workshops on falconry related topics. Breeding, nutrition, veterinary aspects and desert hawking will be amongst the subjects dealt with by leading experts in their relative fields.

Trade stands will again be there in vast numbers and staggering in

their diversity. Every conceivable topic relating to falconry and raptor keeping will be well covered. The same is true of clubs for both the established and would-be falconer to join and get benefit from.

International, national and regional levels will all be well represented.

Raptor Rescue will also have their purpose built stand and weathering which will no doubt be manned by the usual group of enthusiastic helpers. The work done by Raptor Rescue benefits all those that derive pleasure from wild birds of prey so it to be hoped that donations are generous in both their quantity and amount.

All in all there should be something for just about everyone interested in falconry and raptors. Should you require further information then call the show office on 01588-672708.

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Honeybrook Farm, the UK's largest supplier of frozen hawk food has recently launched Raptor Return, a new free raptor registration service to help re-unite lost birds of prey with their owners. Using modern internet and database technology the service will enable owners instant access to register their birds and to give notification of any losses. Further details can be found on their website:

www.honeybrookfarm.com/raptorreturn/index.html

Postal registration is also available for raptor keepers without internet access from: Raptor Return
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LETTERS

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Falconers' dogs and minorities

Dear Seth,

Roy Bebbington is quite right to challenge me when I rather cynically suggested that you would need to be lucky to get a good pup from a minority breed, in my article in the November issue (Issue No.3). My comments require explanation.

First, I do not consider the Vizsla a minority breed. It is a very popular versatile gundog on the Continent and has been rigorously selected for working ability without forgetting good looks. From his advertisement in the February issue of *International Falconer* I see that Mr. Bebbington breeds a wire-haired variety of this popular breed. As I am sure he knows, coat type is controlled by a relatively small number of genes; on the other hand working characteristics are polygenic. There are many hundreds of thousands of genes involved, perhaps millions, and no one really knows how they are inherited.

I am not a gambler but I would guess that these wire-haired dogs are something new in the UK. I have seen pictures of them in Europe and I would be surprised if their temperament was very much different to the smooth variety. The thicker, longer, and harder coat would certainly be better suited to our climate than my thin skinned English pointers (but, sorry Roy, I'm too old to change now!). So, yes, I'd agree that these dogs are probably workers like the smooth ones but I have no first hand knowledge either way. I like the smooth coated Vizsla which have the soft nature I prefer and this variety deserves similar consideration.

What I would avoid are the rare breeds of gundogs which have been 'saved' by our friends in 'The Fancy' and bred here in Britain for some time with selection solely for looks and 'fancy points'. Those genes

which control working characteristics are easily lost simply because so many of those qualities we seek in workers cannot be paraded on the show bench.

I couldn't agree more that (to quote from Roy's letter) "many of the numerically superior breeds here in the UK have suffered greatly through indiscriminate breeding". And it is not all "indiscriminate" either. The dogs the shows have ruined need no explanation from me but the selection by field trials for speed with not much thought for ease of training or handling is almost as bad. You only have to read the old books to learn what some of these were like before the fanatics took them over!

If you train them properly and give them appropriate experience, almost any reasonably intelligent dog can make an excellent hunting companion. But you do have to raise and train them properly! I will be dealing with this most important aspect of dog ownership in future articles because that really is the bottom line.

Yours sincerely,
Derry Argue

Starlings - food for thought

Dear Seth,

I was most interested by Warren Al Ross's recent article (Issue No.2) on his exploits, or rather the exploits of his merlins, in pursuit of starlings in the State of Utah. It was the most exciting as well as the most informative piece I've seen on the use of merlins for falconry in the USA. There was something in it, though, that embarrassed me. My book on merlins had just appeared and in it I had put forward a claim, on circumstantial evidence, that starlings were probably unpalatable to predators and certainly not a worthwhile quarry for merlins in

Europe, and here was a merlin-man not only specialising in starlings as quarry but recommending them as "the ultimate food source for any small to medium sized raptor." It looked as if I'd got it all wrong - unless there was considerable (and unexpected) difference between US and UK merlins and starlings. I applied to Lester Boyd for an expanded version of the views of his that I had quoted. Here is his reply:

"One of the reasons I am so slow in responding to you is I have been looking for the specific reference to uric acid levels in the muscles of starlings and can't seem to find it. I think it was actually a reference to this phenomenon in magpies, but I am not so sure. I can tell you, that for whatever reason, both magpies and starlings can taste bad to a raptor that hasn't developed a tolerance for their flavour. In fact, it is not unusual for a falcon to regurgitate a meal of corvidae, as you no doubt know. An interesting occurrence I see all the time on my farm, where I use freshly-trapped starlings in the winter for exercising my falcons is that magpies won't eat starlings. I have also observed magpies won't eat other dead magpies and ravens seem not to eat the young magpies they predate from nests here.

I know of falconers, like Warren, that feed starling routinely to their birds and find them to be good food. I just find them to be so much more useful as the ultimate natural deterrent to carrying that I wouldn't consider acclimatising my falcons to them for a food source. Another factor in it for me is I have found that quail, particularly the form we raise, are currently the most universally reliable food source for healthy raptors in captivity.

As a point of information, I have cured some falcons that were absolutely chronic carriers by using quail as the offering to pick them up with from the starling they have just

killed. I learned this quite by accident with a fine Barbary partridge-falcon. She would never try to carry a partridge, but quite often would catch a small bird when we were in the field and would usually eat it on the wing. She was also the first bird I flew regularly at starlings for exercise. Initially, I just wanted to use the starlings as an interesting alternative to pigeons and just figured she would eat the starling when she caught it and I would call her to the lure for a quail. That was the way it happened the first time, except that after she ate the starling and most of a quail she appeared to become ill and regurgitated all that was in her crop. She still had an appetite and I fed her another quail which she had no problem keeping down.

The result was the next day when she caught a starling she landed with it, plucked on it forever but would not eat it. I was reluctant to approach her because normally the first step toward her would send her off with it and my plan was that she should eat it so I could call her to the lure, top her off with quail and call it a day.

I am a patient person, but with the

wind-chill factor that day at about 20° below I finally decided to move in on her. To my surprise she made no effort to carry and when I got to about 10ft from her she left the starling and flew to my glove for the fresh quail I held. She finally got so she would do the same no matter what she had on the ground even if it was something she had always liked before. It was at that point I realised that the taste factor of starlings might have some potential in the scheme of things.

A variation of this happening was another bird that I had managed to make into a devout carrier, but she would go cache the starling rather than let me approach her, and then she would come to the lure. She was the most difficult of all the falcons I have used this technique with and the only one that was not cured of carrying. She does, however, by her behaviour with starlings, support the premise that starlings taste bad by comparison with quail.

I routinely see merlins chasing starlings in this country and have just assumed that they have accepted them as food because that's mostly what we

have. (I have wondered if the apparent acceptance of starlings as prey by merlins, peregrines, and prairie falcons in this country has arisen because we have destroyed the vast majority of the habitat essential to our native bird species by our reprehensible agricultural practices). Perhaps, in the UK, as you suspect, there is an abundance of other birds that are preferred and the merlins just don't have to utilise starlings.

I am frustrated that I can't find the reference to uric acid levels in the muscles of various birds, but that still may not be the reason they taste bad. Obviously, I am convinced that they do, and suppose it could be demonstrated experimentally, but I'm not sure it's worth the trouble."

That just about wraps things up, I think. I am very grateful to Lester for giving a conclusive and interesting answer. When you have a problem, there's nothing to beat asking the best person to answer it.

John Loft
Lincolnshire, England.

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FIRST CATCH

by Martin Hollinshead

The brown hare (*Lepus capensis*) – magnificent, mighty, and misunderstood. No other British falconry quarry causes so much confusion. Can it be caught, can't it? Is it sporting, isn't it? The fact is, we don't understand hare hawking at all and the lack of literature on the topic underlines the fact.

Naturally, brown hares do get taken by British falconers. But how many of these are the result of chance encounters and a big dollop of luck? The typical British hare flight is an exciting happening during a 'take what comes' day. The idea that hare hawking is a skilled discipline, requiring dedication and planning, is an alien concept. Part of the problem is that the hare has fur. In Britain, specialised falconry belongs to things feathered and is the domain of the longwinger. The fur-hunter is normally the rabbit hawker, and his sport will allow itself to be squeezed - if a little uncomfortably - into a 'general purpose' file. Hare hawking is different. Push all you like, the brown hare won't go in!

Serious hare hawking is a complicated business requiring many factors to be taken into account. The most obvious of these is the animal's size and strength. With the exception of golden eagles, the average hare

hawk is tackling an animal many times its own weight. A typical British brown hare weighs 3.5kg (7lb 10oz), possesses Herculean strength, and will fight until the end. Thus, the matching of inexperienced birds to inexperienced hares is vital. But first the quarry must be caught and this is where the sporting side of the challenge shows itself. How does a defenceless, above-ground-living, non-hole-using, non-climbing prey animal survive? Simple, by being uncatchable – or almost. The brown hare combines staggering speed with supernatural agility. From flat out to dead stop, from swinging left to swinging right, from running to leaping. When Nature designed *Lepus* she made a statement – 'match that!' The hare's speed and manoeuvrability requires the falconer to assess hawking conditions with surgical precision. He will need to weigh up the landscape, consider the wind conditions, and even balance the type of surface the action is

taking place on. Now we start to see the true nature of hare hawking.

On the other side of the Channel all of this is understood, and in Central Europe we find the hare occupying a position where there is no room for doubt. Hare hawking is a firmly established sport, is discussed and re-discussed, and is there every time the ground game enthusiast takes up a pen. It's a true love affair. Elevated to towering heights, the brown hare isn't highly prized, it's worshipped. Much indeed can be learned from our Continental cousins, and while falconry matters tend to do the Atlantic leap to Britain and then the Channel hop to the Continent, this is certainly one aspect of modern falconry that would benefit from doing the last bit of the journey backwards.

First Find Your Hare

Any discussion on hare hawking – any discussion on any hawking – has to begin with acknowledging the

YOUR HARE



Photo: Martin Hollinshead

need for sufficient quarry. As one lurcher-owning friend so aptly put it:

'Once a hare's dead, it's dead'. At a recent club meeting a group of falconers confessed to being desperate to 'chase a few hares' but they never saw any. Were they flying over poor hare ground, or just not looking properly? The fact is, for such a big animal the brown hare can easily appear absent where it is common. The falconer not used to hare hawking, perhaps more geared to rabbits and their ways, can have hares at hand and not know it. The rabbit hawker has been educated to ignore the open fields. He finds the short winter wheat and plough about as inviting as a cold shower, but that's exactly where he's got to look. He's got to develop an eye for a form-squatting hare, and learn that so many hares aren't there until you tread on them! It is true that in some areas hares are struggling and that there has been a general decline in numbers. However, many districts

boast very strong populations and on many shooting estates, where measures taken to protect game birds also benefit the hare, *Lepus capensis* does very well indeed.

A Few Essentials

How to make a successful hare hawk? How to ruin one! One of the things the newcomer to hare hawking finds most difficult to grasp is the importance of supplying the bird with suitable slips – and recognising these slips when they come! Favourable slips build confidence and enthusiasm. Poor slips, that have the bird working its heart out for nothing, destroy it. For the falconer normally involved in less regimented hawking, the discipline this calls for is difficult to adjust to. But the move must be made or the only thing guaranteed is failure.

And the bird must be fit enough for these slips. There are few areas of hawking where fitness is more important. Fitness not only helps the

bird deal with the quarry's speed, but also protects it from the physical punishment it deals out. There are numerous recipes for fitness. My own approach involves lure pursuits, an angle that comes with a bonus. As power develops so does the bird's readiness for instantaneous glove departures and chases.

A matter not to be overlooked is the bird's willingness to commit itself to this intimidating quarry in the first place. It's time to grab granny's fur coat and get stuffing! Big lures will help the bird feel more comfortable with hares, and feeding from dead hares is also an option. Whatever approach is taken, some kind of formal introduction is recommended.

In The Field – Basic Considerations

The open country kingdom of the brown hare can easily lure the novice hawker into a lackadaisical approach to his hunting. However, out there on that 'nothing can go wrong', 'what

could be easier' arable are matters that require careful consideration. A major concern is wind! Windy-weather flying poses a huge problem because flights into the wind render the bird useless, and any other kind of flying is difficult to arrange. The most obvious ploy is to seek sheltered fields or at least corners where a high hedge or belt of trees offers some protection; it's surprising how 'right' a well chosen field can be on the 'wrong' day. And hares know all about wind breaks too. During unsettled weather hares will also seek shelter, making that 'right' field so very right! Where trees are available they offer a further possibility – flights from a high look out. Because they put the bird at a great advantage, tree-flights make windy-weather hawking far more feasible. With no trees and no shelter, things become more tricky and that 'other kind of flying' I referred to needs to be used. If the bird can't fly against the wind then the obvious move would be to let it fly with it – downwind flights. This approach encounters two problems: the hare has to be forced to run in the right direction, and, flying with the wind robs the bird of control. Beaters will normally ease proceedings over the first hurdle; unlike the lone falconer who never gets served what he wants, a line of troops will push the hare where it has to go. Next issue, control. Being slipped straight from the glove, on flat terrain, and with a strong tail wind, puts the bird in a poor position for any last-second manoeuvres by the quarry; the hare throws in an anti-predator move, and the bird overshoots. To win back the control, the bird needs height, and this height can be gained by going about things in what would appear to be the most insane manner – by releasing the bird into the wind and with its back to the fleeing target! Now, the bird goes up and round, or up and over – it much depends on the strength of the wind and the bird's experience and individual style – and this helps it set up its approach more carefully.

Another angle, quite literally, is

to fly the bird across the wind. With this method, the beaters work into the wind, while the falconer keeps pace some way ahead and on one of the flanks. Because the bird is ahead of any hares flushed, it can use the wind to attack across the field. The rule with this type of flying is: the stronger the wind, the further ahead of the beaters the falconer has to be.

The falconer's considerations continue with terrain. Uphill flights have to be avoided at all costs. Very few patches of ground are totally even, and see how steep a flat field appears when you're at the wrong end of it! The experienced hare hawker carefully assesses every bit of ground.

Slipping Distances

With these few comments on wind and terrain in place I can now introduce the business of slipping distance, or at least excuse myself for manoeuvring around it. 'At what distance will she take on a hare?' This must be the most common question the hare hawker has to answer. And the discussion it opens leaves the poser of the question wishing he'd kept quiet! Slipping distance is not something that's static, it alters with the prevailing conditions. For one hare, 20 metres might be appropriate, for another, 60 metres – or more. And more than wind and terrain need to be considered. What about the hare itself? Is it panicked and running quickly, or moving away with less urgency? Can it speed up if it wants to? A hare's performance is influenced very much by the type of ground it's running over, rough ground slows it, smooth, firm terrain gives it winged heels. It's a bold falconer who feels comfortable discussing slipping in terms of distance alone.

Flying 'Out of the Hood'

This is a topic that always generates a good deal of debate. The principal is straightforward enough. The bird is carried hooded in the field and only unhooded when a suitable flight opportunity presents itself. The advantages over the

bareheaded approach are many. The most obvious point in its favour is that the bird is kept from bating at unsuitable hares; and being constantly restrained on the glove doesn't do anything for the bird's eagerness to chase when it is finally allowed to fly. Bating also uses up vital power reserves – reserves the small bird will need when it eventually makes contact with that big hare. Then there is the problem of restless behaviour caused not by quarry but by tempting perches. The bird that is used to having a lot of freedom might decide that the nearby woods offer a better hunting environment, especially if hares are proving hard to find. Disadvantages? There are just two, one the falconer has no power over, one he has to try and smooth out. In order then. Hares squatting tightly in their forms are often seen only by the bird. It much depends on the field, but a big 'red' hare has a chameleon-like ability to blend with its surroundings. Our second hiccup is to do with the hood and the speed with which the falconer has to remove it. If the bird is not unhooded swiftly enough, then a border-line slip will become an unsuitably long one. Even though the braces of the hood are loosened enough to allow the hood's immediate removal, getting the hood-hand to operate speedily and accurately is a real reaction-tester.

Hazards

Before moving on to the final part of this review, a comment or two on potential hazards. Leading the list is the size and strength issue and a problem unique to hare hawking – hard ground. A hare crashing about all over a hawk on soft ground is worrying enough, but when the same sequence is being danced on a drought-hardened or frozen floor, worry gives way to horror. Hard ground, small birds and big hares is the ultimate recipe for disaster.

And while a hand's on those sedatives, what about wire? The way in which a hare will weave back and forth through fencing or closely hug a fence-line can be the undoing of a hawk. And wire isn't easy to avoid. A

flight might begin in a 'safe' field but finish along the wire-boundary of another. Pursuits near wire prompt the most tortured expressions. Roads need to be considered too. Don't think for a minute that a hard-pushed hare won't take to the tarmac. And, as with wire, a distant road isn't necessarily a safe road. The oddest things happen when hare hawking and I've had birds and hares end up in the most peculiar of places.

Last But Not Least – The Hawks Themselves

The ultimate hare hawk is the golden eagle and this bird is the first choice of many Continental hare hawkers. But golden eagle falconry isn't everyday hawking, isn't the type of hunting the average falconer could commit himself to. So let's look at better known and more available species. The contenders are easily lined up. All of the species normally flown to rabbits – the goshawk, red-tailed hawk, ferruginous hawk and Harris' hawk – will also make hare hawks. However, while males of all will, if at times with difficulty, account for the smaller quarry, it is fairly obvious that only females should be considered for brown hares.

A starting point for a closer look needs no pondering, the goshawk's long tradition of use demands a show of respect. Goshawk and brown hare are old adversaries. It's the goshawk, not the golden eagle, that hare-loving Continentals have most frequently matched against the hare. The eagle is relatively new on the European falconry scene and before it arrived, *gentilis* was king. Nor has the goshawk been completely overshadowed. For the falconer who really understands his subject, the not very big, not very glamorous Central European goshawk can return surprising results. Nevertheless, in Britain, where there has been less devotion to the hare, it has to be recognised that the goshawk has not realised its full potential. Evidence of this is found in the writings of our most respected falconers and Woodford (*A Manual of*

Falconry, 1966 edition) tells us: "The female goshawk that will take brown hares regularly is rare."

The redtail enters the picture almost exactly where Woodford leaves off. This New World buteo joined British falconry as a 'meer buzzard' but quickly established itself a tough customer who could add the 'regularly' bit to British hare hawking. It had already made its mark as a hare-catcher in the United States where it had demonstrated its skill on the sagebrush hare (black-tailed jackrabbit), and even squared up to the mighty prairie hare (white-tailed jackrabbit). And with the brown hare it was just as eager to try out its secret weapon – a grip that could crush rocks! This is the redtail's most outstanding feature as a hare hawk. It flies hard and it chases far, but it's only when contact is made that it can show its real value. Hares that break free from other hawks are in deep water with the redtail.

Heavier than the redtail, the ferruginous hawk is the North American buteo that seems to offer still more. And in many areas it does. It has that wonderful combination of speed, endurance, and determination. The downside is the bird's small foot span, which definitely puts it at a disadvantage when it comes to dealing with big quarry. The ferruginous hawk will take brown hares but it is perhaps best reserved for the experienced hare hawker who's looking to scratch that itch for something different.

Last of our band is the Harris' hawk, the easygoing beginner's choice that's ready to play with a well-concealed ace. Rough encounters with brown hares will shake the mettle of most birds and, if we use the Harris'-sized gos as an example, we can allow Woodford's earlier discussion to continue. Many eyas goshawks will take a hare or two before getting a bad kick in the inevitable tussle. They will then refuse to fly them again. Even a good goshawk that is wedded to hares will give them up after she has been knocked about. And the same holds true for the redtail; for all its power,

it too will have its enthusiasm diluted by brutal 'meetings'. The Harris' is different. In experienced hands, the Harris' gets ready to tighten its belt and take off the gloves! And now, as Jykle becomes Hyde two and a bit pounds of parabuteo gives one of the toughest lagomorphs on the planet the shock of its life. The Harris' isn't just courageous, it's a never-give-in superhero.

Closing Note

A full examination of hare hawking lies beyond the scope of this article. However, I hope this piece has at least drawn attention to a neglected aspect of British falconry and highlighted its intricate nature. There is indeed a little more to hare hawking than many accounts indicate. An in-depth look at the topic can be found in my latest book, *The Complete Rabbit and Hare Hawk*. ■

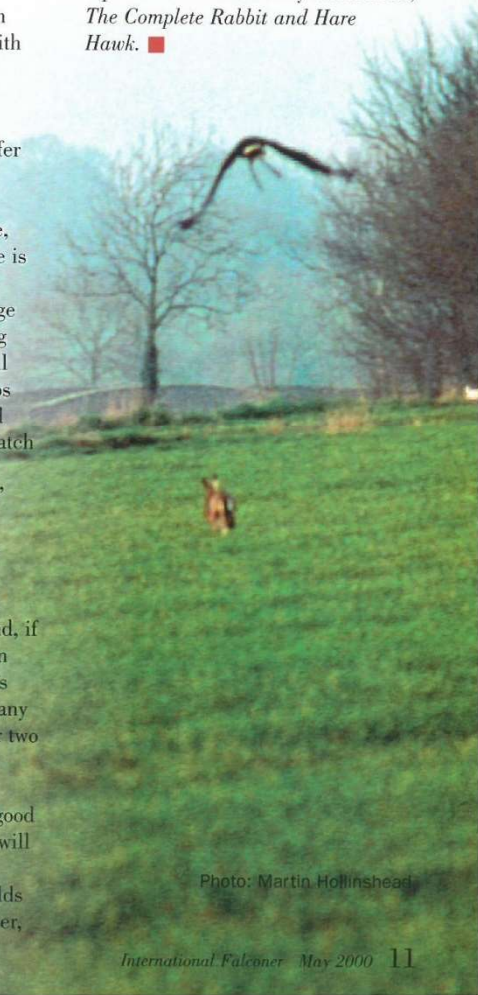
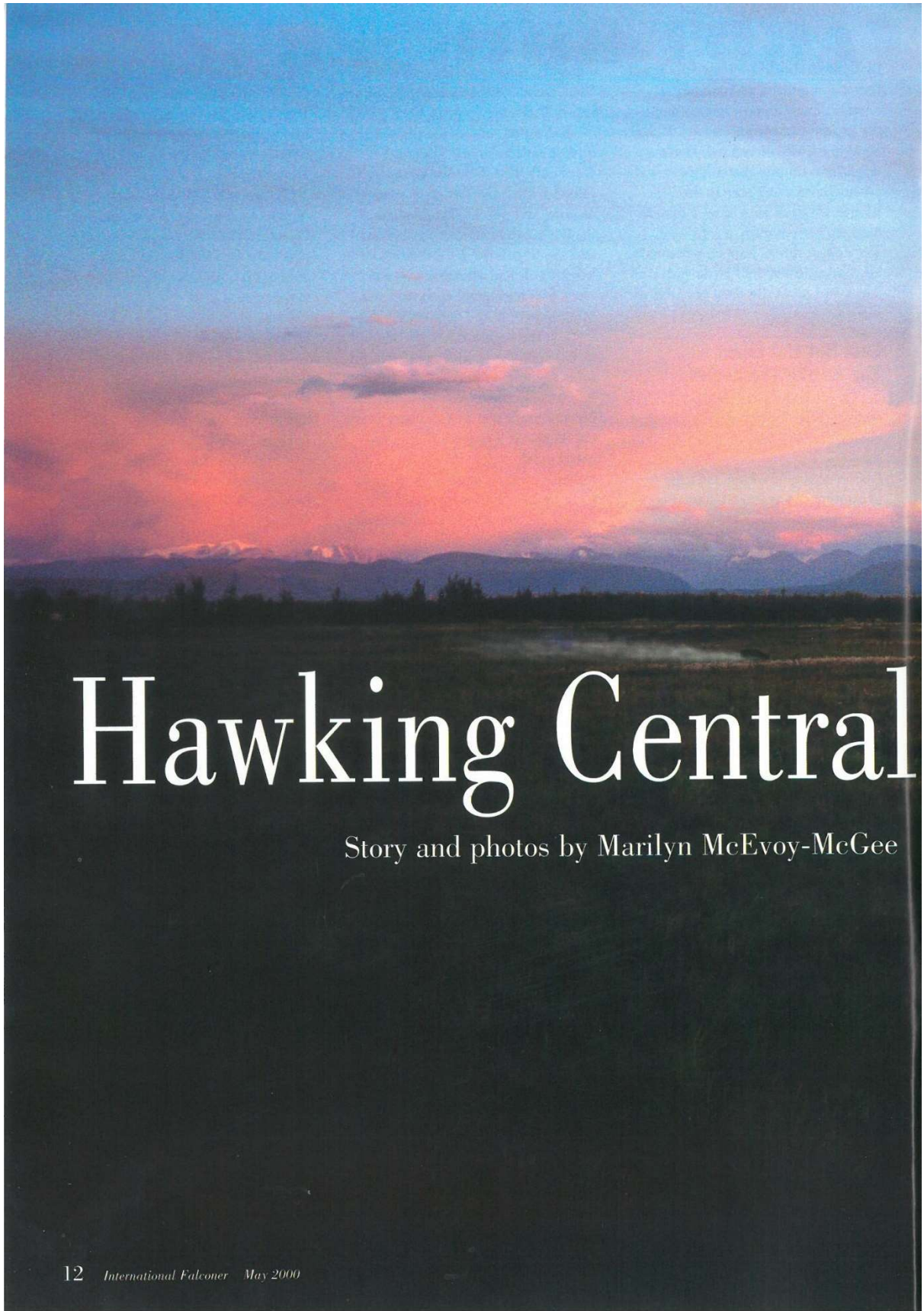


Photo: Martin Hollinshead



Hawking Central

Story and photos by Marilyn McEvoy-McGee

We cruise slowly, but still the dust billows, partially obscuring our view. Ahead of us, long thin fingers of deep black shadows reach across the gravel road, stretching darkness from one grass field to the other as the setting sun tinges the bottom of the clouds pink and turns the sky first mauve, then purple. In the last light of the evening we drive back to our cabin, contemplating the events of the day, this sublime scene unfolding before us. We see the snow covered peaks of the Alaska Range reflecting sunset colour through a rosy haze of road dust: It is the perfect ending to a near perfect day of sharptail grouse hawking in central Alaska.

Alaska Sharptail



Photo: Stan Osolinski - Oxford Scientific Films

Twenty miles (32km) east of Delta Junction, Alaska, the 'Delta Agricultural Project' unfolds its fields of barley and hay grown ripe during long, warm summer days that farmers use to fatten livestock or sell on an uncertain market. In autumn, these crops attract huge flocks of migrating Canada and white-fronted geese, ducks, sandhill cranes, numerous passerines and of course, raptors. Many fields, though, are fallow - government subsidised CRP (Conservation Reserve Program) land - cut and allowed to grow wild. Thickets of knee-high brush are the land's attempt to return itself back to the forest it once was: a succession of endemic and introduced grasses, wild flowers, willow bushes, and tree saplings. Some fields are nearly impassible, in an auto or on foot, while other tracts have been cut periodically, providing bumpy yet drivable fields and forage for sharp-tail grouse. In the mornings and evenings, our quarry move out of tree rows bordering the fields to feed; it is in fields of intermediate height, six - twelve inches (15-30cm), cut and left to grow for a year, rather than freshly mowed fields, or more mature ones, that hold the best chance for a successful flight.

Since late afternoon we've been bouncing around and zig zagging across a medium-high field in our Jeep Cherokee, while 'Sue', our seven year old English setter, quarters in front of us, sniffing for flocks of sharp-tail feeding in the open. As we diligently sweep the field between two tree rows, we slowly make our way into a light breeze watching for 'signs' from Sue. Occasionally her tail wags in a fit of frenzied excitement, or she'll point a spot for several seconds before realising the grouse have moved. These actions frustrate and encourage us, but our desire to find a flight for the falcons keeps us moving, hoping that soon we'll see Sue's tail point skyward, her head and front leg indicating the quarry we so urgently seek.

Falconry is not an easy sport to pursue here in Alaska, a vast wilderness where game is sparse,

weather conditions harsh, and roads intermittent at best. Sharp-tail grouse and ptarmigan are available, however, for the classic 'longwinger' seeking upland gamebirds in the open. Ptarmigan hawking is best done when there's snow on the ground; falconers pursuing this quarry must be willing to travel long distances and don snow shoes. These arctic grouse can sometimes be hawked from our limited winter road system, and even though one of the three ptarmigan species can be found just about anywhere in Alaska, it is best to have access to a snowmobile, or an airplane on skis, if there's to be any appreciable success with this quarry.

For falconers seeking sharp-tail grouse, probably the best place to hawk them is the great expanse of farmland near Delta Junction from the middle of August through September. The 'barley project' as it's known locally, is the only large-scale agricultural area in the state other than the Matanuska Valley near Anchorage. The experiment, initiated in the 1970's by Governor Jay Hammond gave momentum to commercial farming in Alaska while still providing some economic opportunity for a few hardy farmers, much of it has returned to a semi-wild state and the project is considered, by some, a failure. Several farmers have become 'ranchers', and today herds of buffalo, elk, reindeer, even yaks, can be seen grazing in fields crisscrossed by tree rows and game fencing.

Dragging giant chains between them, teams of D-8 bull dozers etched farm land from 60,000 acres (24,280ha) of mostly black spruce and tundra in the Tanana River valley. Debris was burned, and the levelled land was sectioned off into approximately, one and two thousand acre (400ha and 810ha) parcels. Strips of forest were left along the rivers and creeks in the area, and new property owners were required to create a 'wind row' of trees every half mile (0.8km). The tree rows vary in thickness, composition and age. Some are only one or two trees wide, contain mainly spruce saplings and

low brush, and are so sparse you can drive through them from one field to another. Other rows are 30ft. (9m) across supporting not only spruce, birch, aspen and cottonwood saplings, but mature trees as well, some over 50ft (15m) high. Most rows are a thick tangle of trees and dense undergrowth littered with the burned and decaying remnants of the original forest, a nearly impenetrable, ankle breaking jumble of dead wood and live foliage. Willow and alder abound, and open patches of Labrador tea, blueberries, high and low bush cranberries, raspberries, rose hips, and a variety of wildflowers and grasses are interspersed throughout. Every tree row is a diverse habitat providing excellent forage and cover for sharp-tails. Flushing grouse from the more mature rows is extremely difficult, however, and a grouse will propel itself from the trees in a long arcing glide, only to rocket back in several hundred feet (100m) away. Experience has taught us to hawk grouse in adjoining fields as they glean grasshoppers and forage. We have just turned at a tree row when Sue gets her first hard point, 300yds. (275m) out, in the cut grass and shrub stubble field.

While Sue points the grouse, I watch as Dick Musser, my partner, quietly steps out of the Jeep, eases the door shut, and slowly walks, half crouching, to the rear of the vehicle for one of his two jerkins. By the time he gets the door open, Sue is wagging her tail and creeping, trying to refine the scent of grouse she was sure was there just a minute ago. She bolts into a run down-wind, then slams to a stop in a different place. She holds this point for several seconds, only to repeat the process a third time. Clearly there is a flock of grouse here, but the intermittent breeze and dry weather make it difficult for her to hold on to individuals. Dick picks up 'Odo', a white, three year old, captive-bred jerkin. He removes the falcon's hood as I snap 'Stormy', our one year old pointer pup onto a 75ft. (23m) check cord. Anxious for her to scent grouse, I lead her out of the Jeep, wondering

how she will react. Upon setting feet to ground, Stormy faces the breeze, stands rigid, and points a confirmation of Sue's wild actions.

Odo sits on Dick's fist momentarily before flying to the Cherokee's roof, his favourite launching spot. With Sue on point 200yds. (183m) away, Dick and I walk slowly towards her, Stormy impatiently straining at the leash,

'flash pointing' the grouse every few yards (3m). We stop 100ft. (30m) out and turn, just in time to see Odo take off. He flies low across the field, past us, over Sue, and heads west towards the next tree row, pinning the grouse. I wonder if he's going to land in the trees, or is pursuing something we can't see, when, at a quarter mile (0.4km) out, he suddenly pitches up, circles around, and heads back to us,

gaining altitude all the way. We jog to Sue, letting Stormy take the lead. Slunk low, moving fast, the pup continues into the wind with the utmost of caution and a certain amount of grace, until the rope is stretched and she's almost to the spot where we think the grouse are hiding. Afraid she will flush them, I pull Stormy to me. She quivers in anticipation, but holds, honouring

Dick Musser holds dogs, Stormy and Sue while jerkin Odo stands on a sharptail grouse he has just caught.



Sue's point.

Odo is 500ft. (153m) above us and we halt, waiting for him to get up-wind before our flush. "Get the birds Sue," Dick yells when Odo's position is right. Falconers and dogs rush through the grass, forcing three sharptails to fly in different directions. "Ho Ho Ho," we yell, watching Odo on folded wings, stoop out of the sky, then pump vertically after the grouse flying cross-wind towards the farthest tree row. Another grouse speeds down-wind to the trees behind us; the third heads for the setting sun. I focus on Odo as he hits the grouse with tremendous force and pitches up for a second strike. A stream of grouse feathers waft on the breeze, but the grouse doesn't hit the ground as expected, and only appears to dip a wing before zooming away to the spruce thicket and safety. Odo, like most gyrs, loves to chase his quarry, especially so early in the season; he is undaunted by the sharptail's attempt to evade his sharp grasp, and certain death. They both quickly disappear over a small hill in front of the trees. Seeing this, I resign myself, certain there will be a long hunt for the falcon. Odo is also fond of diving into the thickest of brush, and much to Dick's chagrin, 'rat hawking' his quarry until he finds it, or gives up in frustration.

Not wanting to flush any more grouse, I grab Stormy, kneeling quickly to the ground, and hold this position while Dick looks for Odo. Expecting the jerkin to remount after a short tail chase to the trees, I hope for a reflush from the tree row, or a flight on any remaining grouse in the field. It is not meant to be. As Dick walks over the top of the hill, Sue runs back scenting more sharptail. With a falcon no longer overhead, the grouse whir into the sky, cackling displeasure, all four sailing into safety behind me. Dick appears briefly to the east of the hill, waving me in his direction, before disappearing behind it again. Disappointed at the turn of events, I slowly walk across the field and around the hill.

I assume Odo is in the tree row,

on the ground, stalking 'his' grouse, and that we'll have to find him with radio telemetry, our precious daylight, and the chance for a flight with 'Buddy', Dick's other jerkin, slowly sinking in the west. I'm surprised to see Dick grinning, and Odo on his fist, as I approach. "We got one!" he says pulling a sharptail from the back pocket of his vest. I let Stormy run up to him; Dick holds it out for her to smell the still fresh scent. "I screwed up and didn't let Odo crop up in the field," Dick says. I feel bad for Odo, but can see he's busy tearing a pheasant leg apart, unconcerned by any remorse.

"Oh well, next time," I say, relieved there is still time for another flight. We walk back to the car, Dick recounting Odo's flight, as I try to keep pace with his long, quick steps.

It is the first grouse of the season, and Dick's exhilaration is contagious, we've been training diligently for this moment - and he is animated and happy: eyes bright, face flushed and smiling. "I was on slightly higher ground, but still had to stand on tip toes to see what happened," he says wiping away a few strands of silver, sweat plastered hair from his face with a quick swipe of his right hand. "Before the sharptail could make cover, Odo struck with a short hard stoop, quickly followed by a 'whip around' and bind - that grouse only needed six more feet (2m) to safety!" he shouts with uncontained excitement, stopping to look at me with eyes wide and sparkling, a slight crinkle of skin forming at their corners from the grin that seems permanently fixed on his face. "I thanked the Lord for the grouse's life and vowed it would not go to waste," he says, quietly, more serious now, turning his attention to Odo. Dick offers the remaining tidbit of pheasant to his charge, softly "chup, chup, chupping," to Odo in the language of imprinted falcons. He cleans the jerkin's beak with his finger tips, expertly slips the hood over the bird's head, and gently sets him down on the block in the back of the Jeep.

Within minutes, Sue is again searching the field, eager to get

grouse scent in her nose, and we're anxiously, almost impatiently, following behind her in a teeth jarring race towards the setting sun. I see my tiny face, a jiggling reflection in Dick's sunglasses, each time he turns to me and rattles off bits of sharptail grouse trivia. Before joining Dick as his hunting partner, I held the impression that this grouse was introduced to Alaska, and only recently declared a huntable species. He laughs when I tell him this. The Alaskan sharptail grouse (*Tympanuchus phasianellus caurus*) is indigenous to Alaska; a separate subspecies, mostly inhabiting the area between the Alaska and Brooks mountain ranges in central and northern Alaska. It is smaller than the Canadian, or lower 48 subspecies, averaging in weight from 24 to 26oz. (680g to 737g). Last year we saw Buddy catch a 28.5oz. (808g) grouse, the largest one Dick has seen. "Remember? That flight happened just before sunset too, except it was in cold spitting rain," he says, slowing the Jeep. Our attention returns to the field, and I quickly forget the conversation when I see Sue's tail gyrating in front of us.

With only 15 minutes of daylight left, we make the turn around the end of a tree row to get into the next field, only to find our way nearly blocked by a thick growth of shoulder-high aspen saplings. It thins out into knee-high grass and shrubs, but it's hard to get a good flight in this kind of cover unless the falcon can bind to the quarry before it dumps back in. It is, however, the best thing going at this time of day, and since Sue appears to be scenting something, we stop, agreeing it's our last chance. With Dick methodically working to get Buddy on the wing in the fading light, I watch Sue work the brush patch with her nose close to the ground, her tail cranking continuously, afraid she will flush grouse before Dick can get the jerkin off his fist. Sure enough, a grouse springs from the saplings and is gone, almost as quickly as it appears; fortunately, Buddy, now unhooded, ignores it as if sensing there might be more. Dick admonishes Sue for

her sloppiness, even as she continues to quarter the brush. She quickly points another grouse, and we freeze to avoid flushing it prematurely.

Mounting quickly into the breeze, this seasoned jerkin of seven years is 600ft. (183m) above us in seconds, ready for his turn to hunt. Dick flushes the grouse; the jerkin responds by slamming it back into the saplings, pitching up, and waiting-on at 400ft. (122m) for the reflush he knows will follow. "I've got a mark," Dick yells, frantically scrambling through the dense growth, almost invisible in the waning light. Buddy is directly overhead when Dick reflushes. The sharptail flies towards the tree row, 200yds. (183m) away, instead of dumping back into the heavy cover. The flight takes it over open, freshly plowed ground; we expect Buddy to stoop, knocking the grouse to the ground, and then 'winnow' down to it like we've seen him do so many times before. In my mind the grouse is caught and I can hear triumphant whoops of joy from Dick, but for some unknown reason, Bud's stoop fails to make contact, and he misses it by several feet (1m). Disappointed "Ohhh's" from us, and the prrrrrt, prrrrrrrt, prrrt of grouse wings punctuate the silence of the sunset as the sharptail flies into spruce trees and dark shadows. Buddy lands on the Jeep roof before flying to Dick's fist, and a quail wing which he devours quickly. Dick secures the jerkin's swivel and leash, his attention concentrated on the task. "We can't do any more than that," he says to no one in particular. Dick places the shiny, black hood gently on Buddy's head, and finally looks at me. He sighs in resignation, and smiles weakly in an attempt to hide his disappointment.

We drive back to our cabin transfixed by the pink and purple light of the fading sun. Our feelings are mixed, bitter-sweet: We're happy with the great flight and take by Odo, but a little disappointed in Bud's performance. We talk about the whys and what-ifs, but mostly we stare straight ahead in silence, awed by the sunset. We're both grateful the

allowed, beginning August 10th, during a two week extended falconry season that opens prior to gun season, when the daily limit goes up to five. This was Dick's 13th, and best, season.

This was my second year hunting grouse with Dick in central Alaska, time well spent gaining valuable field experience, learning first hand,



Photo: Dick Musser

Stormy and Sue sit in their crates after a successful day of sharptail grouse hawking with jerkins Buddy and Odo.

jerkins flew on wild quarry, and that neither were lost, or attacked by an eagle or great horned owl. We're thankful for what this day has given us, and eagerly anticipate our grouse dinner, wondering how we will cook it. As the last colour disappears from clouds and mountain tops, Dick parks the Jeep in front of our temporary home.

During the three weeks we hawked the Delta barley project, the two falcons took 16 sharptail grouse. We barbecued, baked and stewed the majority of them, never tiring of the bounty provided for us; the falcons ate their share, the dogs got theirs, nothing went to waste. On five occasions both jerkins killed a grouse, the legal limit on three of those days. Two sharptail per day are

the subtleties of sharptail grouse hawking, training for the day when I'll be pursuing upland gamebirds with my own gyrfalcon. Each season was an adventure of a lifetime, and I am grateful for the opportunity. The fiery sunsets over the mountains, the great flocks of reeling waterfowl, wild peregrines, redtails and northern harriers, thunderstorms sweeping across the fields - these were the 'desserts' before our grouse meals - falconry, our daily sustenance. ■

The final chapter

Looking towards

by Nicholas Kester

As we finish this short series of articles, there is a certain sadness in the knowledge that, with great reluctance, Andy Reeve has decided to retire his fifteen year old goshawk, known affectionately to everyone as 'the old girl'. An old leg injury, caused by simultaneously footing a racing rabbit and a stationary tussock of grass, and from which she recovered, was not helped by a further bite by a stoat, which has left her with less than perfect footing ability. But there is also optimism, for she has bred before and hopefully will again.

At the very end of the last article we looked forward to entering our parent-reared goshawk and to the use of the barometer as an aid to hawking excellence. The art of flying a goshawk, indeed any hawk, is the ability to constantly question our own and the hawk's performance, and to strive for better flights. Often a day concludes when we think we have anticipated everything - food, weight, company (expected or otherwise), quarry, temperature - and still the hawk flies like a wet weekend. Why?

It is Andy's theory, and only continued observation will prove it so, that barometric pressure has an effect. Birds of prey have tiny lungs and require huge amounts of oxygen to propel them towards hunting success. If it becomes difficult to take on-board sufficient to perform to maximum capacity due to the barometric pressure reducing the oxygen available, it stands to reason the hawk will think twice about attempting the flight or look less enthusiastic in the chase. The reverse should also apply. We agreed that we would record more

specifically this season and review our findings next spring.

"Too much time is spent on the creance, go out and hunt. But first decide what it is you want to hunt."

Simplistic but often overlooked advice. In this first season, you and your hawk will be made, or wrecked, by the decisions you make at the outset. We spend a great deal of time hoping for the all-round paragon that legends are made of. More realistically, if you live in rabbit country be content with a great rabbit hawk. Don't expect the occasional flights at pheasant to be the stuff of bar room applause. But don't accept lesser quarry as second best.

Goshawks are not stupid. Why, they might argue, should I chase a pheasant at 40 mph for half a mile when I can have a moorhen at 10 mph, twenty yards away? You will provide the motivation for your hawk which is both the flight and the reward. The better the former, the greater the latter. We can specify quarry and we can also enable a refusal mechanism. If you have the misfortune to kill a moorhen, take her off it as quickly as possible. Moorhens submit easily; but her pleasure in the kill will be negated by the absence of a reward which you will deny her. When you kill a cock pheasant, let her settle. Her adrenalin rush will take a while to calm; eyes blazing, crest up, she will sit back on her tail as her talons continue to kneed the hapless quarry: Take her off too soon and not only will she be virtually catatonic on the fist (I have actually had them fall over in this state) but you are denying her the key reward: pleasure

in the kill. Make in and open up the head and neck and allow her to take her fill. Then go home. Do not offer her a leg or open up the breast. Thereby lies disaster for she will see you do this, will enjoy the feed and come to associate the back end with the reward. It is the head you want



the hawk to foot. Pheasants fight back and wrong footing may result in her eventually giving up the flight, turning more readily to hens and eventually refusing cocks once and for all. But in the first season, inexperience, which is the desire to survive, drives them to attempt

A LONG FUTURE

everything. We should capitalise on this. The same applies to rabbits, and of course, hare.

"People often ask when they should move to multiple kills," says Andy. "This is when experience comes in. Hopefully this hawk will not be their first, and they have

the fist, or the way she hits cover. Whatever, you will know. But don't be greedy. You have fifteen years to up the score. The first season is about laying the foundation stones for the future not for breaking them on the altar of your vaunting ambition.

single (some would say bloody) mindedness. The male was handled by all and sundry, but never slipped at anything other than rabbits.

"He used to fly them with predictable juvenile enthusiasm," says Andy. "But it was only after his fifteenth kill did I notice a real



Photo: Seth Anthony

learnt to be in-tune with her needs."

There is no fast rule, and no way of telling when the moment arrives. But it can be on or about fifteen head. She will fly more confidently, with an aggression not seen before. Everything will appear the same but different. Perhaps it is her speed off

Some three years back Andy bred a male goshawk to fulfil two desires. Firstly, to man and train a hawk that anyone could fly. Secondly, that this hawk should only fly rabbits because too many people had said "male gosses rarely take rabbits". Both ambitions were satisfied through

difference. Then, instead of occasionally grabbing them and letting go, he became totally focused. It was time to consider moving to a second kill."

What about getting them off the kill?

"Never a problem. One of the

really great things about parent-reared hawks is that they move almost confidently back to the fist. Stepping up, as always, in the uncertain anticipation that there might just be a reward hidden there."

Field craft and patience go hand-in-hand. But excessive company is not conducive to good hunting. Blundering about shouting your mouth off over the possibility of this warren being active or not before inserting the ferret is hardly the way to get a good slip. Coffee housing (very much a foxhunting expression, but equally appropriate here) your way away from the meet as you decide who is to take the first flight, and with the wind in your back, is unlikely to help you to flush the first pheasant. Extreme? Perhaps. But we have all seen it done and lamented those who do not treat the countryside, the quarry and their hawks with the respect they deserve.

There is a wonderful saying that "he who hunts alone, hunts best". Unfortunately, this usually results in less well manned goshawks. So if you want to excel at field meets, hawk in company, but in silence!

Manning and fitness are the bedrock of all falconry. Achieving them usually results in marital despair or unemployment. An experienced (and self-employed) member of the British Falconers' Club shared the following sentiment with me last season when I asked him how his hawk was going?

"Fantastic, but I am broke."

Which about sums it up.

Everything usually goes well until December when the short days make life miserable for our working austringer who tries everything in his power to keep his hawk fit. Falconry magazines are full of the merits of jumping, mechanised lures and the like. Andy reckons to call his hawk to the fist and at the final moment throw a dead pheasant high into the air so that the goshawk has to rapidly change direction to connect with it. But make sure you judge this correctly as you could end up pole-axing her with a mis-thrown decoy.

With rabbit hawks, the bunny should be thrown to left or right slightly behind the hawk's flight path.

"Calling off is boring and with a parent-reared gos that steps off kills willingly, this provides a reasonable diversion."

As for manning, the best, and now less popular, solution is to travel them on an open cage in a car. The transfer to boxes was really for the benefit of the falconer. It prevented mess and kept the valuable hawk out of sight of prying eyes. It is perhaps a solution to use the kind of car window tinting favoured by street-wise, 'kool' dudes and pop stars, which enables you to look out but prevents unwanted attention, but you must not mind being branded a poseur in your bashed up hawking van.

When we first started these articles, I was fascinated by 'Juno', Andy's sparrowhawk flown at rooks and crows. Whilst, not everyone aspires to such a challenge, they might well try this quarry with a male goshawk. But why and how?

The why is simple. Corvids are common (unlike Germany where they are protected), and they provide wonderful aerial combat when other species might be unavailable - for example partridge. Unlike longwings, open land is not required, but you must be able to get across the country. No use slipping at quarry from behind a hedge and then having to trek half a mile to follow the flight. And you do need field craft, which is the how.

It is best to start without a hawk on your fist. You will need to get as close to the quarry as is possible for that essential first slip. Crows are devastatingly intelligent birds, very wary and as will be seen, intensely loyal. To stalk them you should use farm buildings, hedges, even feeding cattle as cover. Anything that keeps you out of view until the final 20 yards. If you fail to get close enough in the early days and feel you need some help, a dead rook or crow suspended on a stick and agitated by pulling a string will help get them started onto black game. Try this

once or twice extending the distance and feeding up on the head and neck. When you actually make the slip at crows, be ready to keep up with the flight for two very good reasons: the size of the quarry and the loyalty factor.

If you examine a crow you will note its sledgehammer beak and dagger-sharp claws. So if your hawk kills you must be there to help. And as you run in keep your eyes peeled for the crow's mate, for this is when the species' loyalty factor comes in. The last thing you want is to be standing there in wonderment at having actually pulled it off, to find that on your hawk's back is the enraged spouse, beating him up with the full range of armoury at its disposal. This marital loyalty is not the case with the smaller rooks.

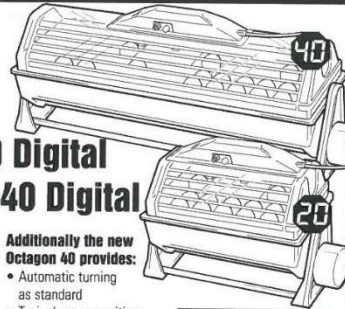
But there is a down side to hunting corvids, and that again stems from their brains. After a while they become intensely suspicious of you and your actions, so you will need plenty of land to vary the frequency of your visits. If you need evidence of this, check the annals of the Old Hawking Club, who flew rooks on Salisbury Plain. Here the quarry fled at the hawking van's very appearance on the road, let alone the site of a hooded hawk, and all sorts of subterfuge was employed to fool them into thinking they were safe. Mind you, the diaries also record the day a rook took refuge under the voluminous skirts of a labouring woman, and the party debated long and hard as to whether to go for a re-flush! I think the gentlemen of the party won, declaring a re-flush was made even more unsporting in the circumstances. History does not recount the reaction of the labouring lady. ■

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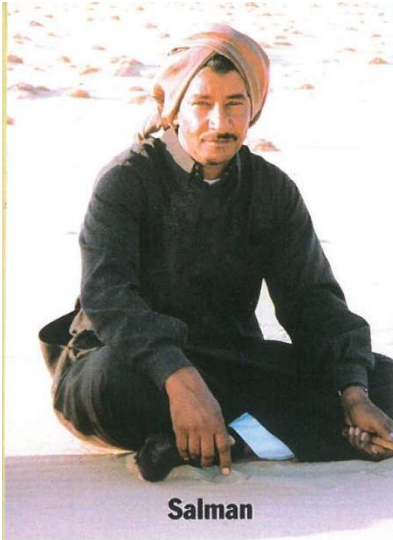
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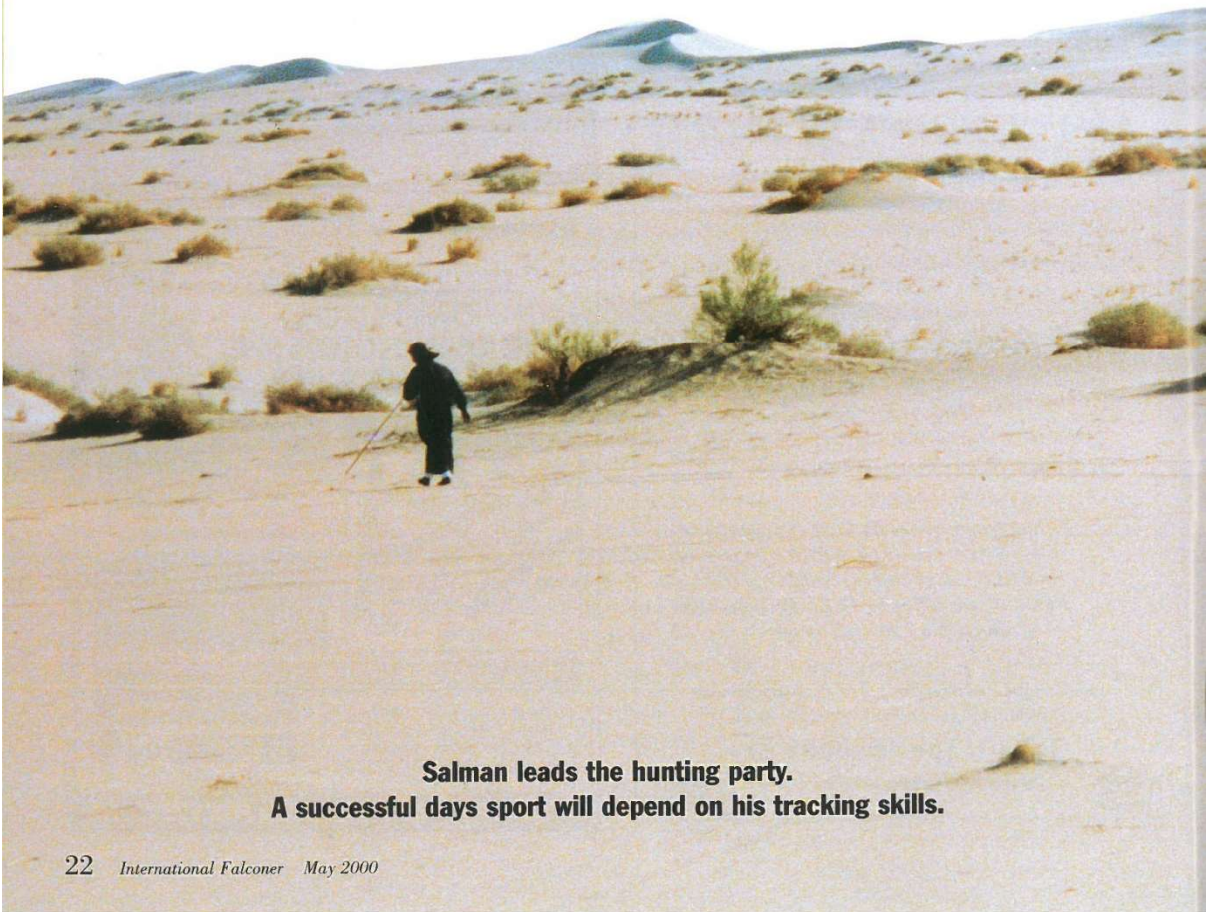


Salman

Photo: Jim Ratcliffe

'SALMAN' THE TRACKER

by Mike Ratcliffe



**Salman leads the hunting party.
A successful days sport will depend on his tracking skills.**

We lay, eyes closed, in the lee of the dune, soaking up the late afternoon warmth of the sun. We'd tracked and flushed the hare. The saluqis, falcon and 4x4s were off in hot pursuit. The excitement melted into the pleasures of solitude if not silence. Salman began to explain his heart complaint as the smoke from his cigarette drifted gently into the wilderness. Doctors had been seen, consultants consulted and tests postponed until after the hunting season but still the pain in his chest persisted; tiredness sapped his energy and natural enthusiasm for life. Even a new young wife had not lifted his spirits. What did I advise? Mindful of our remote location (300km and two days from the nearest track) I mentally

reviewed my ER/Casualty acquired resuscitation skills and found them wanting. At the same time I suggested that it might have been wiser to forego a hunting season in favour of tests and treatment. Yes, but what would Abu Khalil (his patron) and Mohammed do without him to find the game for them, he sensibly replied. Putting my heart to the test, my companion jerked convulsively, exploded from the sand, 'Linford Christied' 25 metres and dived into the soft sand of the dune's slipface. We spent the next 20 minutes in a failed attempt at skill transferral as we repeatedly sprinted 20 – 25 metres back and forth along the slip face. Each sprint was followed by a powerful dive into the sand. After 20 minutes I had the

Photo: Jim Ratcliffe



Arabian sand skink

moves butwhereas Salman reappeared from the sand on each occasion holding a *dhamusah* (Arabian sand skink)..... I had nothing but a fistful of sand. These skinks are stunningly beautiful with a soft green hue, mottled flanks and a smoothness of skin that relegates the baby's bottom to rough sandpaper. The Bedouin call them 'sand fish' in tribute to their swimming-like action as they disappear into the sand.



Photo: Jim Ratcliffe

Photo: Jim Ratcliffe



THE HUNTING PARTY

If you are hoping to put your falcon in with a chance of houbara, kurawan or hare in Arabia you need tracking skills. I have had a couple of friends I usually go hawking with. In both cases they have tracking skills but, more often than not, they also have a favourite tracker who comes with them on extended trips. On this occasion we were off into the Rub Al Khali (The Empty Quarter) for six days. The place we had selected was an extremely remote 300km from the nearest road, where sand hares were plentiful. Mohammed Bargash had invited Salman to do the tracking for us. Our party included Mohammed and his sons, Bargash, Humaid and Fahad, their uncle Adil, Jim – my son, who was absconding from his

Arabic course in Sanaa, seven other youngsters who were cousins and nephews, Salman and myself. George and his two assistants from India were to be in charge of cooking and car repairs. Another old friend, Rashed Saleh, whose father grazed his sheep over the sands that we would be travelling through, also joined us. We had with us Mohammed's three intermewed falcons (two sakers and a lanner) and nine trained but un-entered falcons (six lanners, two sakrets and a gyr hybrid). Mohammed and Rashed also brought five saluqis between them to assist in the hunt. All of us would be dependent for our sport on Salman and Rashed's tracking skills.

Mohammed Bargash stands high on the dune allowing his three-time

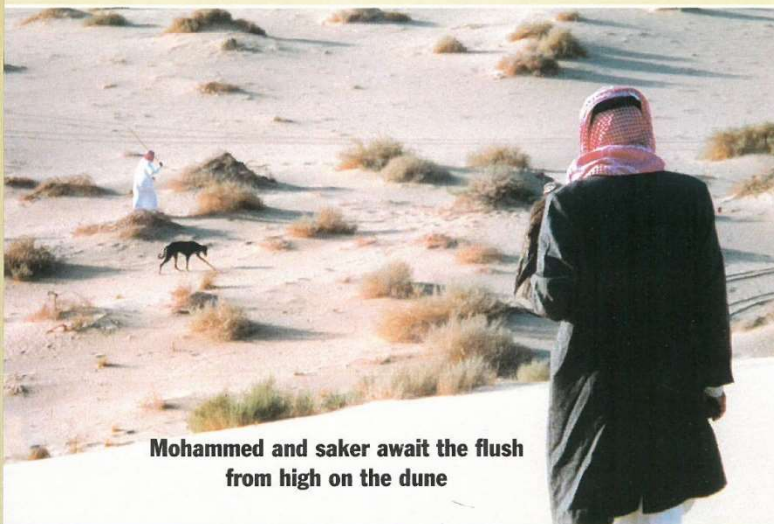
intermewed saker, 'Geraa', a full view of the activity below. Salman, has just indicated that the hare he has been tracking is clapped up in a seat concealed in bushes somewhere in range. The boys spread out lightly tapping each bush with their sticks. Four vehicles, each with a driver, are stood off to one side. Everybody expects the flush at any moment. Geraa commands the view with a keen eye. Four saluqis move from stance to stance lower down the dune trying to be closer to the flush to give themselves a head start. Unnoticed for the moment, Salman continues his tracking. When the flush is made both Mohammed and I are confident of a grandstand view of the hawking and coursing. From my experience over the last few days, this is a rare experience. In the wide hollow in the embrace of the 250 metre long slipface, the excitement could be bottled.

A jubilant shout focuses the attention of everybody.

Salman has done it again!

He's doing a jig with the tiny hare held by its ears in one hand!! This is the seventh hare he has caught with the old poacher's trick. Having spotted the hare in her seat, he passes her by with no hint of recognition. A pace further on, he tumbles side ways and backwards to sweep her up in his hands. This was a much-appreciated party trick on the first day when we had nine tyro falcons to enter. On this, the third day it gives rise to a muffled groan from both Mohammed and myself. In this hunting setting, a tracker of Salman's quality commands respect and it isn't until later that night, as we discuss the following days possibilities, that Mohammed tactfully reminds Salman that all the birds have now been entered.

Salman is triumphant as we all trudge back to the point where the tracking had begun. Here we find the tracks of the balloon tyres of the Cruiser that we had used to do a large meandering circuit in a quadrant to the south east of our camp, before dawn this morning. Our quarry, *Lepus Capensis Dixonii* - the 'sand hare' of the Rub Al Khali - is



Mohammed and saker await the flush from high on the dune

Photo: Jim Ratcliffe

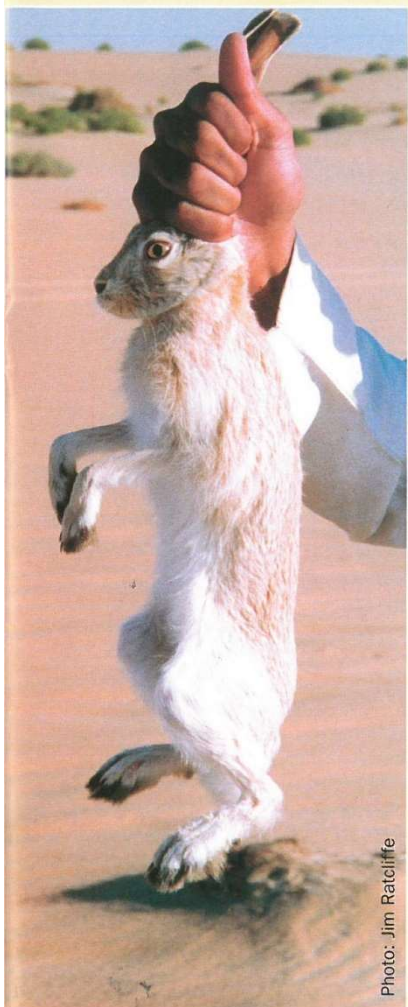


Photo: Jim Ratcliffe

Salman has done it again!

nocturnal and around dawn she makes her way back to her home seat under a bush. As she does, she leaves the imprint of her feet in the sand. We drove our circuit just an hour before her dawn bedtime, so we know that any hare tracks that overlay our smooth tyre tracks indicate a hare that is clapped up in the vicinity. We resume our walk along the balloon tyre tracks and within a 100 metres, Salman stops again and marks the spot with his stick, where another hare crossed our tracks a couple of hours ago. The heavily feathered feet of the sand hare help to conceal her tracks on most surfaces so as we follow the tracks it takes an expert to put

together the patches of tracks visible to us all. Distance between footprints indicates length of stride and speed. As the hare begins her last 100 metre approach to the seat she begins to slow down and to adopt a meandering and circuitous approach. Given that she has approached this seat many times over the last two or three days and that other hares may have settled in the same patch and that many others have passed through in their nocturnal grazing, the area may be a spaghetti junction of tracks. Frequently her own fresh tracks may cross over as she homes in. As Salman proceeds, he uses his stick to circle points on the track where there is room for confusion so that, if need be, he can come back to it. Indiscipline in the ranks of followers may give rise to a muttered oath. If they follow too close to him, he may find himself tracking the hare back through their footprints. Anticipation mounts and suddenly everyone is running around hitting bushes with their sticks. Whoever is slipping the falcon has to anticipate this and try to be on a vantagepoint from which his falcon can have the best command of the whole area. With everyone having started the beating in a clump they are now working out in all directions. There is no real attempt to beat the hare in a chosen direction. The saluqi are in a dilemma straight away. They can either run with a chosen beater and hope that they are lucky or they can adopt a vantage point of their own and be at risk of being a long way from the flush. After over 20 years of hunting in Arabia I am still prone, on occasion, to trying to stamp my own sense of reality on the hunt. I had made a couple of slip leads for Mohammed and was very keen to show him how they worked. Slip leads will not be a hot item in saluqi circles in Saudi I can assure you. Not one of the saluqis with us had ever been on a lead. They were not enthusiastic about the experience now. Sand hares, on the other hand, seem to have an instinctive understanding of the slip lead and use every possible piece of cover and dead ground to avoid the saluqi on

the slip lead ever seeing them in full flight. In this, they are aided by the peculiar bushes which often stand atop a mound of hard-packed sand that has been bound in by the roots. The result was that when hare flushed, falcon flew, the remaining four saluqis set off in hot pursuit and the 4 x 4s took off in headlong pursuit; I was left with the luckless saluqi to review the tracking with Salman.

Salman is off at a tangent to the tyre tracks following the hares well-spaced tracks. She's moving with long strides in a fairly straight line. Salman is tracking with speed and he isn't easy to keep up with. After a couple of hundred metres he slows and makes his first circle with his stick, explores one possibility but returns to the circle and commits himself to another. With shortened stride the hare is now wandering apparently aimlessly around an area at the foot of a large dune. Her tracks are underlain with the tracks of others and sometimes overlain with her own tracks. She hops from bush to bush. Salman is now looking for the telltale marks, which will indicate her seat. Without a word of warning, he explodes forward with a repetitive shout and the hare flushes from the far side of the bush. In full flight she uses every bush and slight indent of the landscape to offer us only flashes of view before she mounts the dune 300 metres away. We see Fahad's tyro lanner put in a first stoop before they disappear from sight. Already too late to catch a ride in one of the vehicles, Salman and I retrace the tracks. He points out the place where the hare had emptied her bladder about 10 metres from the seat and finally the place where she had sat up leaving the imprint of the length of her lower back legs in the sand before finally slipping into her seat.

A car returns and we are carried away to the point where the hare had eluded the falcon and the saluqi. Fanning out, we quickly find the tracks again and Salman is back in business. Fahad has his lanner taken up again with the smallest of rewards. I opt to stay with him in his

car this time. The hare has been flushed once and will be inclined to jump his hiding place, well in advance of the beaters arrival. Fahad keeps the car to the high ground to the right of the beaters. The lanner has a view of the terrain well ahead of the beat. As Salman establishes the direction the hare has taken, Fahad keeps a little ahead of the advancing beat. A saluqi leaps and the falcon pumps forward at the same instant. The car lurches forward along the length of the low dune. We catch a glimpse of the hare, ears laid back, as she crosses the dune well ahead of us. The saluqi is about 10 metres behind. The lanner is catching up fast. I try to keep my mind on the hunt and not on the drive! The lanner was entered yesterday and we are keen to see what she will make of her first real hunt. A determined stoop goes in but the agility of the hare is too good. Once again the hare is using the dead ground to conceal her escape from the saluqi. As the saluqi falls further behind two others join him. It is clear that they are unsighted but are still in touch with the hunt because they have the falcon in the air to point the way. Repeated and ever more determined stoops on the part of the falcon, slow the hare and now the saluqis are back in business. The bonnet of the car has disappeared! I'm grabbing for handholds everywhere as we plunge down a 30 metre slip face. Our advantageous position is lost as the 8 cylinders drag the wheels through the soft sand at the bottom of the dune. Fahad has us heading for the high ground again. His mind is firmly on the hunt. The driving is at a subconscious level. As we mount the rise we see the saluqis spinning the hare as it makes for cover in a clump of bushes. As she lengthens her stride again to make for a more distant clump the lanner puts in her final stoop, binds and the fight is on. As the car draws alongside we find the lanner hanging on with a precarious hold on the haunches. Fahad quickly makes in to assist his champ as I anticipate the need and scabble around amongst the



dislodged items that now litter the floor of the car, for the knife.

As the others drive up the air is filled with 'Ma'sh Allah'..... the traditional form of Bedouin appreciation. Fahad takes the knife and cuts the hare's throat. Muslims are not permitted to eat meat from animals that have not been killed and bled by throat cutting. During the lifetime of the Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), Bedouin huntsmen approached him and asked if they were permitted to eat what

their saluqis and falcons caught even though the prey was often dead before they could kill it in the prescribed way. His answer, recorded in the Hadith, was that they could, provided that the dogs or hawks were trained and that they said 'Allah Akhbar' - (God is Great) as they released the falcon or trained hound. Wherever possible though, the huntsmen will go to great lengths to cut the throats of the quarry on capture. This is often done even after the quarry is dead. Westerners



Mohammed's lanner on hare

watching videos of Arabian hunting should understand that the inclusion of the throat cutting at length and in close-up, is an indication of pride in religious observance.

By ten o'clock we've got eleven hares in the bag and a light January breeze gets up. Within a few minutes the tracks are obliterated and we wind our way back to the camp.

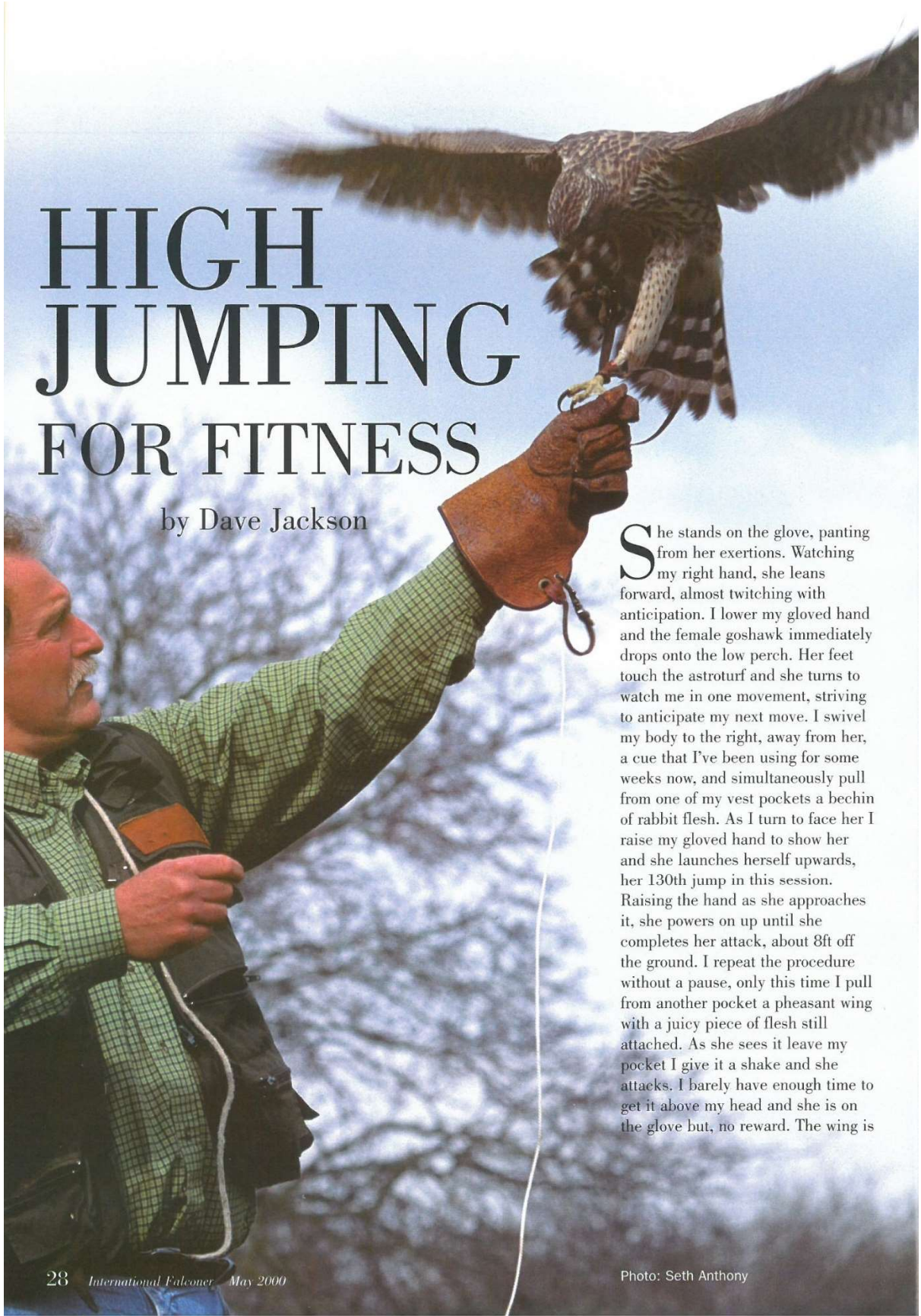
In the early afternoon the boys use Salman's catch to enter Bargash's gyr hybrid tiercel again. If she was less than convincing the day before

yesterday, a few grams lower in weight, she makes short work of the hare today.

The hares remain in their seats until sunset so the hunting in the afternoon does not have the benefit of tracks to follow. An area is selected and everyone simply beats the bushes. Once a hare has been flushed and missed, then fresh tracks will offer an opportunity to track her to her hiding place.

Later that evening Mohammed, Rashed, Salman and I doze around

the camp fire on a full stomach of barbecued skink and hare kebsa. The youngsters are sitting a little further away in two groups of card players and Arabic tuition for Jim. Salman puffs on his cigarette as he tries to lead us into discussion of subjects ranging from hardening of the arteries to genetic heart disease. ■



HIGH JUMPING FOR FITNESS

by Dave Jackson

She stands on the glove, panting from her exertions. Watching my right hand, she leans forward, almost twitching with anticipation. I lower my gloved hand and the female goshawk immediately drops onto the low perch. Her feet touch the astroturf and she turns to watch me in one movement, striving to anticipate my next move. I swivel my body to the right, away from her, a cue that I've been using for some weeks now, and simultaneously pull from one of my vest pockets a bechin of rabbit flesh. As I turn to face her I raise my gloved hand to show her and she launches herself upwards, her 130th jump in this session. Raising the hand as she approaches it, she powers on up until she completes her attack, about 8ft off the ground. I repeat the procedure without a pause, only this time I pull from another pocket a pheasant wing with a juicy piece of flesh still attached. As she sees it leave my pocket I give it a shake and she attacks. I barely have enough time to get it above my head and she is on the glove but, no reward. The wing is

out of her sight by now, behind my right hand side. I drop her to the perch again and immediately flash the pheasant wing. Again her attack is unsuccessful. This may be repeated another 4 or 5 times until, with her chest heaving and her beak gaping for air, I allow her to 'catch' the pheasant wing. After she pulls at the flesh for a few seconds I 'palm' the wing and allow her to regain the perch.

Slowing the pace for about 10 or so jumps, I allow her breathing to normalise until her beak closes. I'm mentally assessing this hawk all the time I'm jumping her, EVERY session. After a brief rest, when she still jumps but less intensively, I consider increasing the work rate for her. I step up the pace and watch her carefully. Her best work rate seems to come in after about 70 to 80 jumps, a sort of warm up period. She will then attack the glove powerfully for quite long periods up to, and beyond 300 jumps. Put into a hunting context, this would amount to over 600 metres of hard pumping flight at quarry, except that I've completed it in less than 35 minutes and I haven't left my garden!

A conundrum of modern falconry is how to balance the rigours of a conventional working week with obtaining the best possible results from our hawks and falcons. Given that the majority of falconers need to maintain regular employment in order to pay the mortgage, feed the family and pay all the other burgeoning bills which besiege us, the business of bringing their hawks to maximum fitness is a difficult one. Additionally, real fitness is not widely understood by many participants of this craft of ours, neither is a real understanding of how to bring about such a condition in our hawks. Certainly, any falconer who has witnessed the hunting of a really fit hawk could not fail to be impressed at the higher level of performance.

Initially we must understand WHAT we mean by fitness. The commonly held view is that fitness is the ability to complete physical acts with a high level of performance, this

level of performance increasing with the raised level of fitness. This perception does not equate with the real meaning of fitness. We can define fitness as the rate of recovery from a given level of exercise). Thus a human running a mile in 7 minutes is fitter than a runner completing the same distance in 5 minutes but requires 50% longer for his heart rate to resume to a more normal rate e.g. to RECOVER.

Although the faster performance indicates performance ability, the RECOVERY RATE indicates fitness.

Looking a little deeper into the advantages of fitness we see that a

The fit hawk has a greater chance of success than its less fit counterpart and, by succeeding more often, its confidence grows, increasing its success yet further!

human/dog/hawk with an advanced level of fitness is not only more efficient due to its ability to recover faster from its exertions but, due to complex physiological processes which occur with true fitness, the individual is MENTALLY more able to hunt/catch its quarry. If we apply the analogy "nothing succeeds like success", we can see that the fit hawk has a greater chance of success than its less fit counterpart and, by succeeding more often, its confidence grows, increasing its success yet further!

How we bring about a raised level of fitness in our hawks has been the subject of much debate and experimentation among falconers. Much of what I have heard and read fails to stand up when subjected to logical and biological thought. When I read in Glasier's *Falconry and Hawking* that getting a shortwing fit simply involves going for a walk and allowing the hawk to fly from tree to tree as it follows the falconer, I thought "OK, sounds pretty easy". And it was. I went for a lovely walk

and my female Harris' (inevitably my first hawk!) followed me dutifully through the tree tops. After a while I could not see where she was getting THE RIGHT SORT OF EXERCISE. What I saw was a hawk just 'flap, flap, gliding' from one tree to another, using the minimum of exertion to keep up with me. I certainly felt better and she seemed to be having a positive experience but as for getting truly fit, no.

The other recommended method for increasing fitness in hawks is to fly them at quarry as often as possible. Well, this is OK for those of us with boundless time and access to masses of game and potential flights ON A DAILY BASIS, but there are few falconers so lucky. Many falconers I've spoken to will say that they hunt their birds every Saturday and Sunday without fail but, when you witness and analyse these hawking days, you see that the hawks in question spend much of the time on the fist, with only very brief moments of exertion, far less than is necessary for obtaining true fitness. Indeed, Mike McDermott has timed the duration of hunting flights with a stop watch (objective thought as opposed to subjective!) and to his amazement found that in a 3 hour hunt in which his male imprint Cooper's hawk made 3 kills, the bird was actually in pursuit for only 52 seconds TOTAL.

So, if these commonly accepted methods for fitness training fail to withstand logical scrutiny, where do we go from here?. Referring to the 'taking the bird for a walk' idea, it is obvious that, without the correct stimulus, the hawk will only expend the amount of energy required to carry out the given task. Hence the 'flap, flap, glide' response. Show that same hawk a hunting opportunity while walking it however, and it becomes a focused powerhouse of murderous intent, pumping after the quarry as if possessed. It has shifted up a gear because it realises that this is the level of energy expenditure required to stand some chance of catching the creature being pursued. Pretty logical so far, isn't it? From

this we should learn that any training regime that we apply to our hawks to improve fitness necessitates the duplication of the same sort of stimulus that causes them to expend high levels of energy, or to put it another way, we need to simulate large numbers of high intensity hunting attacks.

When we start formulating plans for this kind of training, certain factors need to be clearly understood. I've heard many falconers claim that when a hawk returns to the fist it should be well rewarded in order to ensure fast returns in the future. Well, that is not actually how it works. If we understand that a return to the fist is actually a form of attack flight, should the hawk find on its arrival that the fist is empty then the next recall should solicit an even faster response from the bird. You see, the stimulus to glide down to a constantly waved rabbit leg is, paradoxically, less than the stimulus to actually attack something. How many of us have watched the hawk sitting in a tree, ignoring the pleadings of the falconer to return to a well garnished fist (always someone else's hawk!!) when suddenly the reluctant hawk slicks down its plumage and races off after a rabbit or pheasant it has seen sneaking away. Now that hawk has left a guaranteed meal on the falconer's fist in order to take a chance at a quarry item. This should tell us that the stimulus to hunt and attack is greater than we realise. We should use this in our fitness training. We also know that hawk are psychologically geared up to accept quite high levels of failure in their hunting attacks. They know that not every attack results in a kill. If we call the hawk to the fist over a short vertical distance and give her intermittent rewards, we actually find that her response times become faster rather than slower. There is a point at which any hawk will become disenchanted with the constantly proffered bare fist but, with training and understanding, most hawks will jump 5, 10 or even more times to an ungarnished glove. Not only does the

intermittent reward stimulate the hawk to jump faster (If she jumps faster she MAY get there before the food disappears, in the same way that she has to fly faster to prevent the rabbit from reaching cover next time), but it allows us to stretch the rewards over a longer period of

training.

One of the most vital elements of this fitness training is that each session MUST vary according to the conditions. Suppose the hawk had a hard day's hunting the previous day. Pointless to expose her to excessive exercise when a more relaxed



approach would be more suitable. What if she appears a little less enthusiastic (not very common!) then jump her steadier, increasing the intensity as the session progresses. One factor of my jumping training is that I never pre-determine the number of jumps or the intensity of



Photo: Seth Anthony

the session before I start it. We are all individual organisms and whilst my kids can moan to me that they feel off colour or my training partners can tell me they feel lacking in energy and will have an easier session in the gym, my hawk cannot. Therefore I attempt to read the bird's attitude or mood as I commence the session. This strategy has several benefits, among them are learning to interpret the signals that the hawk gives me, (some of them very subtle) and also stressing the importance of maintaining some level of spontaneity or variability in the training regime. Boredom sounds the death knell of any training session, whether it be for man, dog, hawk or whatever. The participants switch off, including trainer and trainee, performance drops rapidly and the inclination to repeat or to maintain the regime is greatly reduced. The likelihood is that the training regime will be reduced, thereby reducing its effectiveness which in turn leads the trainer to claim that it is 'no good', or it is discontinued altogether.

I had heard of other falconers using jumping techniques to improve the fitness of their hawks and had tried it myself. Almost everyone seemed to believe that distance and not speed of repetition was the key. Hence I heard of hawks being called up stairs, to the tops of step ladders, even flying up and down hills. After almost breaking my neck scrambling up and down a set of steps, with a keen male gos waiting impatiently below me, I gave up the procedure believing it to be almost ineffective. The problem, as I saw it, was that the bird could rest adequately between jumps as I lumbered up and down the ladder, or even worse ran up and down the stairs. More seriously, it allowed the hawk enough time and space to decide its own level of exercise, as it coasted down to the perch.

The next time I tried high jumping I had returned to flying my female Harris' for a few months. I'd read something of Steve Layman's work in the USA using high jumping for improved fitness and things began to work out in my mind. I

commenced jumping the Harris' and immediately realised the effectiveness of the technique. You see, this Harris' was widely thought to be very fit. Flown and hunted at least 5 days a week (thank God for early retirement!) she did appear to be in excellent shape. A session of jumping revealed how UNFIT she really was. By the time she got to 20 jumps she was gasping for air with her beak gaping!. I was amazed. When I picked up the above mentioned female goshawk the next season, I immediately commenced jumping training. I built a low perch and shaped her behaviour towards jumping. Starting with low numbers, I was able to increase her repetitions rapidly until she was into the 200's. I had obtained some more of Layman's literature via the NAFA *Hawkchalk* and I maintained the jumping regime throughout the season. My main interest with this hawk was hunting pheasants - pretty demanding on a regular basis. She had proven herself a good rabbit hawk in her first year, but had not been very successful with game birds. As I raised the numbers of jumps per session her fitness grew, so did her confidence and, in turn, so did the numbers of successful flights. She was especially good at the long pursuits and never glided during the flight, maintaining a hard pumping style characteristic of a fit and well conditioned hawk. I finished the season with 40 pheasants and a lot of rabbits.

The beginning of her second season was very interesting. Recovering her from the moult was easy. I reduced her weight steadily while she was still secluded and then, after a two week reduction period I called her to the fist and placed her jesses in the eyelets. She fed on the fist within 5 minutes of recovery, was only 1oz (28g) over her hunting weight and the next day BATED at the jumping perch to resume her training routine. This from a genuine parent hatched and reared goshawk. (An earlier article in this magazine makes reference to the old, accepted method of catching the hawk up and reducing it on the bow perch. Much less stress with this

system I use, for the hawk comes to the fist when she is ready, and is relatively well manned at this stage too). I rapidly raised her repetitions and simply took her hunting. She finished the season with over 50 pheasants to her account, and her attacking flights were superb.

During November of 1997 I met Steve Layman at the NAFA meet in Dodge City, Kansas. A group of us were held spell-bound as Steve's enthusiasm swept us along, and I was really pleased to hear from him that he thought my jump training was right on the money. My results were telling me that it was working, but how good to have confirmation from the man himself! Incidentally, we discussed the inclusion of 'restrained pursuits' in the high jumping regime and I included them on my return. Briefly, these are a kind of controlled bate where the restrained hawk attempts to fly to a thrown piece of food. The duration of the restrained pursuit can be varied but the result is the same. One very tired hawk. By including 5 to 10 of these in a session of jumping, the hawk's fitness improves even further.

As I prepare the food prior to a jumping session, I am thinking about the exercise ahead. I find that I don't set myself any definite programme for the session. I'll commence the session with a general overall strategy based on such things as; her current condition (early season means gentle progress), the level of exercise the day before, the weather, her general mood etc. I may consider raising the number of jumps or the intensity of the session, but I still remain flexible in actually working through the session. There actually comes a point, I believe, when increasing the numbers of jumps is unnecessary. Once the hawk is jumping to 300 or so, in around 40 minutes, then it is receiving an excellent level of fitness training, and the results, in the form of increased performance in the field will be readily apparent.

I need to say something on the subject of food. When jumping a hawk, I routinely prepare and use more than one type of food. We all

know that our hawks find some foods more palatable than others so, by including some of her favourite tid bits in the jacket pockets (I always wear a cheap fishing vest with multiple pockets) I could encourage her with, say, some pigeon breast, rabbit, chick, pheasant or, best of all, a pheasant wing with a juicy piece of meat attached. She would jump to the moon for that! I always started the session by preparing the food, cutting the different meats up into varying sizes and putting them into separate pockets, that way I could stimulate her with a range of foods. The second and surprising, thing about her food was the amount needed to keep her weight steady. As her rate of exercise increased I found it difficult to keep her at flying weight. I increased her intake but still she lost weight fractionally. I considered the possibility of parasites but started feeding her more energy rich food such as pigeon breast and waterfowl. I was greatly surprised at the amount of food she consumed each day, and a session of jumping would end with her resembling a pouter pigeon, her crop bulging. Nevertheless, the next day she would be exactly on weight. The significance of this should be obvious. Not only did I have a hawk which was fit and on weight for hunting, but she had high levels of energy due to her high food consumption the previous day. On more than one occasion Pete Smith, who flies an excellent imprinted male gos, felt her keel, only to remark that she was even fuller chested than his imprint. High jumping works.

The high jumping system I used, as advocated by Steve Layman, has proven itself to me beyond doubt. Being fortunate enough to hawk several days a week, I found that I was able to supplement her hunting by exercising her in the garden at the jumping block, even on those days when I hunted her but found few slips. On my return, a couple of hundred jumps would finish her day off nicely. For those falconers unable to hunt other than at weekends, I would consider high jumping

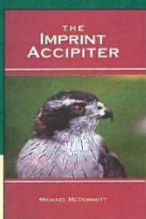
essential for maintaining some semblance of fitness, in order to guarantee success in the field.

One of the problems that I envisage is that so many hawk owners here in the UK seem unwilling to readily accept and implement new or different concepts in this compelling obsession of ours. Many obstructive comments are levelled at different techniques, without the critics even trying them properly. I can imagine comments such as "fiddling about with all those bits of different food", "How can you get over 300 jumps out of a hawk with just her daily ration", "Fancy encouraging a hawk to bate at something and then holding her back on a creance" and so on. Well, there is a very appropriate expression which says "You get out of it (falconry) what you put into it". If you, as a falconer, strive to improve the performance of your hawk to a higher level, if you view falconry as a cerebral pursuit in which you constantly seek to understand and evaluate the dynamics of this amazing involvement with nature, then you will readily accept that there are many areas in which we can raise the level of our craft.

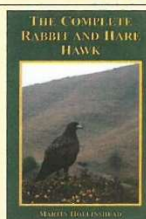
There is an interesting conclusion to this article, one which serves to illustrate how effective supplementary fitness training is. As I entered the third season with this female goshawk, I had decided that it would be my last with her. I wanted to move on to other projects and challenges, and so I would finish flying her at the end of the season and that would be it. Just after Christmas, I eased up on the jumping for a few weeks and then stopped it altogether. The decline in her performance was very marked, and her success rate fell significantly. Birds which would have surely come to bag were not taken and she actually began appearing to try less hard too. I felt that this was conclusive proof to me of her decline in fitness and condition, brought about by her lack of supplementary fitness training. ■

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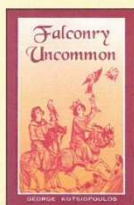
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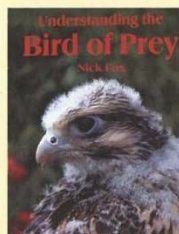
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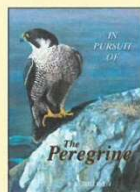
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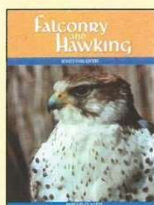
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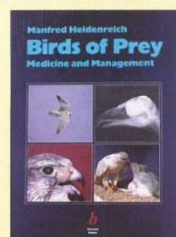
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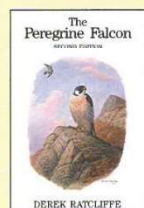
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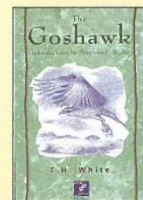
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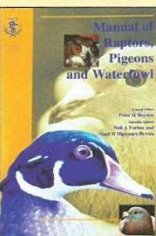
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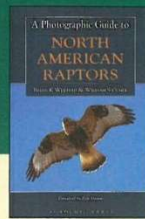
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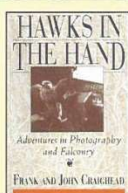
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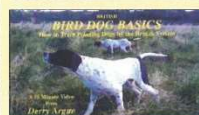
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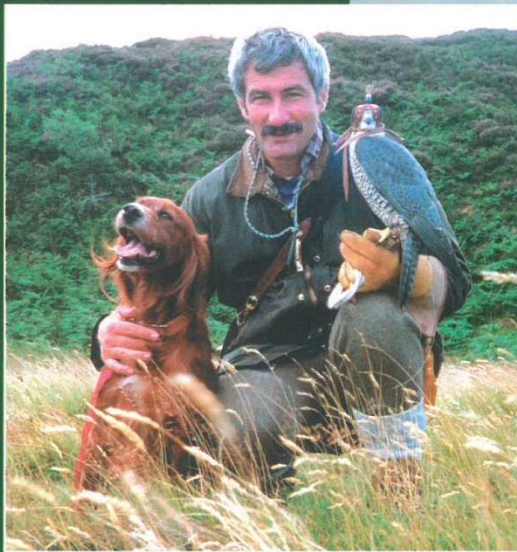
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Grouse hawking with the IRISH

by Maurice Nicholson



Maurice and team.

The author T.H. White is probably best known among falconers for his book *The Goshawk*. White was a conscientious objector and spent most of the wartime years living in Co. Mayo in the west of Ireland just about forty miles away from my own home there and he based another autobiographical work of his *The Godstone and the Blackymor* on this period of his life.

As a falconer, if this book is anything to go by, he was very self depreciating and he was ever aware of his own inexperience and shortcomings when it came to flying longwings. Yet with two peregrines, a falcon and a tiercel acquired from Gilbert Blaine and using 'Brownie' an Irish red setter, he attempted as best he could to hawk the elusive Irish red grouse of the Mayo mountains. In the very first chapter of the book he tries to explain to a friend of his what it is that underlies his passion for the sport of falconry. "Do you know, training hawks and training setters are the two most fascinating things in the world? A fool in a fog could train retrievers, but setters! but falcons!"

5

RED SETTER

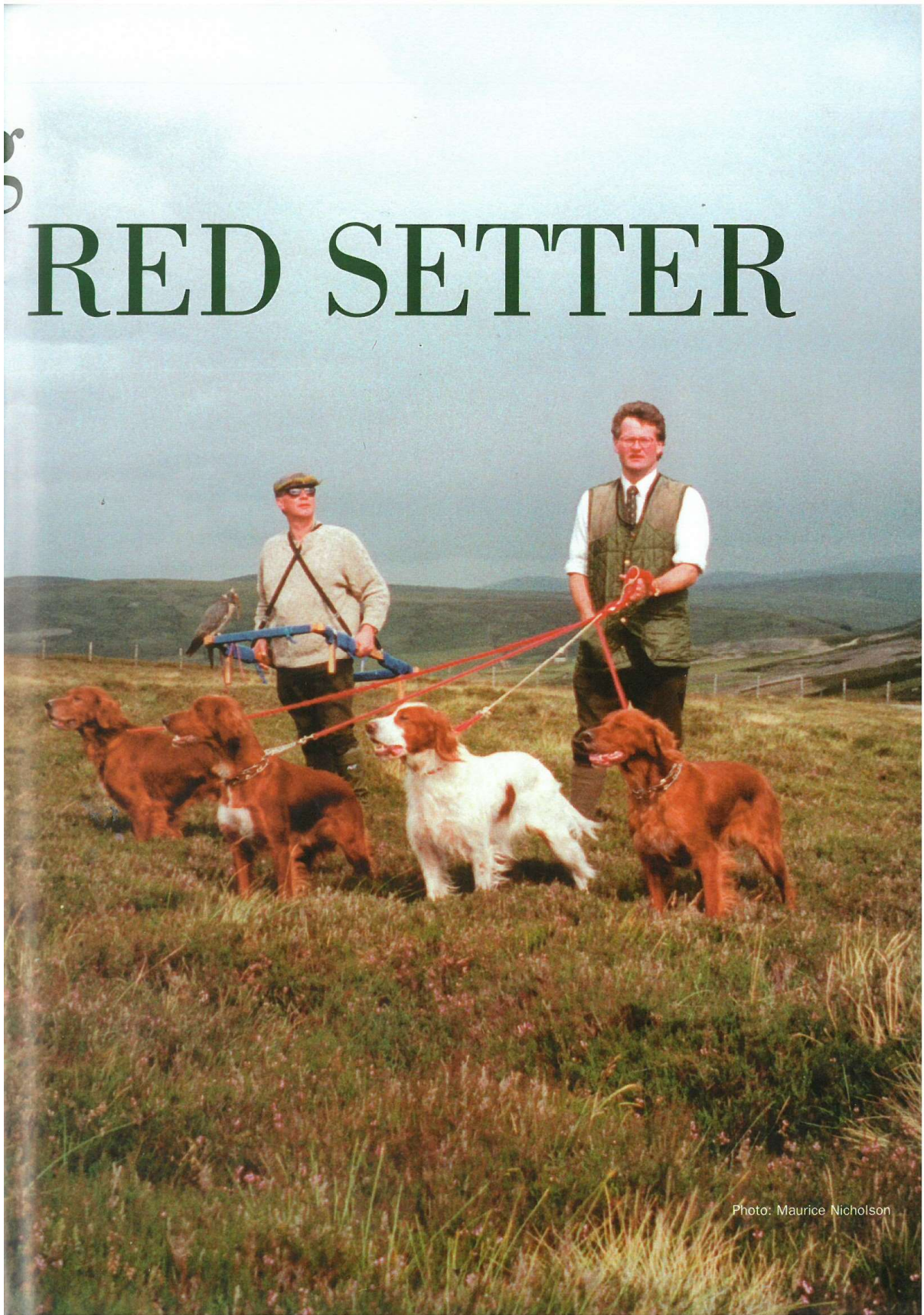


Photo: Maurice Nicholson

Many a Labrador or spaniel trainer might quibble with this statement; yet it does serve to illustrate that there are some similarities in training two very different types of living creature, both of which require to be controlled from a distance. Above all it does make it clear that a considerable mental challenge is involved if one is to successfully train either a bird dog or a falcon. For a start, the trainer needs a thorough understanding of the psychological make up of each species if he is to have any chance at all of unleashing its full potential.

In game hawking style is everything so that the falconer seeks to develop his young charge into a falcon that mounts with real dash to a high pitch before stooping at tremendous speed to strike the quarry down. The ideal complement to such falcons are hard running, wide ranging reliable game finders. There are many fine working dogs among the continental breeds but when it comes to choosing a dog for the heather moors of the British Isles and Ireland, it is hard to escape the conclusion that the home bred breeds of pointer and setter are much more suitable. This upland terrain is, after all, the ground that they have been bred to work over.

Having had a German pointer myself and having had a chance to compare the work of that breed with that of our own pointers and setters, I made a conscious decision some fifteen years ago to begin using my own national breed, the Irish red setter, whose style and pace and ranging were, I felt, much more in keeping with the sport of game hawking as is practiced on our heather moorlands.

The Irish red setter along with the Irish red and white setter are regarded by many as the oldest of the setter breeds and history has it that they were used initially for netting game. Many of the red dog's characteristics indeed would seem to back up this contention. On point they very frequently lie down low, especially when close in to their

birds and it is very easy indeed to imagine a net being drawn forward over them as used to happen in times past. Their reputation though as a working breed has suffered over the years largely due to the proliferation of the show type red setter which has been selectively bred, not for intelligence and the best of working traits but more for its beautiful coat and looks. The result has been a divergence in type between the working dog and the show setter with many of the latter being anything but sound in body or brain for work. Worse still, these characteristics have become associated in the public mind with the working setter as well, whereas nothing could be further from the truth.

Some of the top working red setters can be developed into excellent falconry dogs and they have been used in the sport both abroad and here in Ireland. The late Jack Nash, probably the most well known of red setter breeders, supplied pointers and setters to a number of English and European falconers over the years. I remember when I first wrote to him in the early 1980's, looking to acquire my first trained setter for falconry, I received back a letter saying:

"What you are looking for is not as easy to find as it sounds"

I recognised very quickly indeed that he knew much more about my needs than I myself did. With his vast experience of working dogs and his contacts and friendships with falconers over the years, he knew that not many, even of his excellent field trial dogs, would be suitable for game hawking and its demands. He laid out for me all his ideas of my requirements and promised to think about it and look through some of his dogs and get back to me if he thought he could help.

So, what are the characteristics of a top falconry dog? Jack put it all very succinctly. Intelligence and biddability are the prime intellectual requirements. Hard running, wide ranging and the best of scenting abilities are the basic physical necessities. A good hawking dog should be able to work across and

down the wind once experienced. It should work with the minimum of handling and be able to hold point for long periods if necessary while the falcon mounts to her pitch and the falconer makes a half circle to get upwind of the game. A covey of grouse will do anything to avoid flying when a falcon is waiting on high above and they will often creep away and slip the dog. The best of falconry dogs are marvellous in such situations: they don't creep after the moving grouse pushing them on and on and risking an ill timed flush. Rather, they seem to understand the situation perfectly, and keep their patience and then re-cast across the wind to mark down their birds again.

The timing of the flush determines the success or failure of a flight at grouse and having a dog that will flush on command is the ideal situation. Moreover, the dog must drop to wing as it often possible to get two or more flights from the same covey and a falcon returning after a



miss on her first stoop can sometimes be served again. Also, if a grouse puts in under the stoop, the falcon will be done no favours at all by an out of control dog seeking an intimidated hiding grouse. In this respect, the falconer needs to be constantly aware of the need to positively reinforce all good behaviour patterns in his dog. It is easy in the exultation of a dramatically successful stoop to forget about the setter still patiently waiting on the drop. From such forgetfulness can arise the beginnings of future faults. Instead the dog needs to be rewarded by word and by action, be praised and taken up on the lead and brought in beside the kill and made feel part of it all. Personally, I have never found it any harm to give the dog a few little tid bits from the falcon's kill.

"The falcon is always first in the falconer's thoughts so that there is always the danger of the dog's work deteriorating" was how Jack Nash

put it to me.

In time I heard back from Jack asking me to call and see him on my next trip to Ireland which I duly did. He gave me two bitches to take away and work for a week and the choice of whichever one I preferred at the end of that time. Moanruad Chillí (Moanruad Game x Clashawley Gail) was my choice. Her dam Gail had been one of Jack's great field trial bitches and had been used with great success in the early 1980's as a hawking dog in Ireland. I had seen her working myself and had been impressed by her independence when it came to wide ground coverage while still being extremely biddable. I took Chillí to Scotland and duly killed my first few red grouse over her. I subsequently trained on two of her offspring from a mating with Rustler Boy (Moanruad Wag x Queen of Rockhouse), Billy Darragh's marvellous Champion Stakes Trial winner. Good and all as a suitable ex field trial or ex shooting

Grouse hawking with the IRISH RED SETTER

dog can be, I have no doubt that puppies reared around the falcons and whose training is totally falconry orientated right from the beginning, can become by far the better hawking dogs. The bitch puppy Moanruad Fairaisle became in time an absolutely first class hawking dog and was the star performer on many a day on the hill. She was a very hard running bitch with a great nose and really marvellous around game and in time we developed a really close relationship maintained with just a wave of the hand or a word here and there. This closeness between setter and handler is another characteristic of the red dog as is the wisdom they exhibit with the passing years. Fairaisle's brother, Moanruad Flyon was an excellent worker also and though he never had

Photo: Maurice Nicholson



quite the dash of his sister, he produced many a grouse for the falcons over the years. I had many requests from other falconers for Fairaisle's offspring but unfortunately, she was accidentally killed at her peak and before she had successfully bred. I still feel her loss deeply.

Puppies brought up around the falcons soon develop a healthy respect for their future allies in the field. Suitably trained trial dogs need a more gradual introduction to the falcons but in time the best of them too come to understand the sport and the part that is theirs to play. They are brought out with the falcon in training and learn to lie idly by while she feeds on her lure so that a falcon on the ground with a grouse in her foot is always treated with the utmost respect. The young falcons too, very readily accept the introduction of dogs into their lives and they soon come to recognise them as the providers of their opportunities to stoop at game.

Over the years, I have been lucky to be able to augment my team of dogs for the hawking season with some excellent dogs from my friends in the Irish Red Setter Club: John Carroll, and Ray O'Dwyer. I borrowed Ray's marvellous F.T.Ch. Sheantullagh Furl for two seasons. This lovely little bitch, who had won seven 1st excellents in Open Stakes in her time, was as 'bright as a button' and after about three days hawking seemed to understand the sport thoroughly and was totally at home with the falcons. She had a great knack of finding a bird just when one was really needed. I was also accompanied for a couple of seasons by my friend Jim Hogan and his dogs, both Irish red and Irish red and white setters. Days with Jim were always full of action.

In the early morning we would take out the young dogs for training on grouse and at midday head out hawking with the older dogs for the afternoon. We consequently slept as well as the dogs every night. Dogs which have been run in trials or shot over are initially confused by the grouse sitting so tightly when a falcon is waiting on high above but



the best of them soon come to understand the cause of this and it is fascinating to see a setter, rigid on point, tilting its head and casting an eye upward to check the position of the mounting falcon. When the falcon is in perfect position high overhead and slightly upwind of the set, the tension from the dog ready to flush is almost palpable but with a good dog, a raised finger is enough to hold them steady until the command is given to 'put em up'.

It has been said that colour mitigates against the red setter on the hill as when rigid in the setting position the red dogs can be hard to spot against the background of autumn heather. I certainly have experienced this effect over the years (I once spent thirty minutes trying to spot my bitch 'on her birds' among some peat hags although she was never more than thirty metres away from me at any time and I must have

nearly walked on her numerous times during my search, but even then the result was a good stoop and a kill from the falcon who had waited on patiently and had not lost confidence in her ally). Taking everything else into consideration I would not regard it as a factor of importance when it comes to choosing a dog. One can always provide the dog with a white collar band if a bit of extra colour contrast is needed.

To have a red setter flowing over the heather and a dashing falcon working in unison and commanding the sky above from a lofty pitch is a sight to stir the soul. Somehow, each seems the master of its environment and it is the pleasure of the communion with such perfection that is the source of the passion, "the rage" as T.H.White calls it, that is the real joy of game hawking. ■

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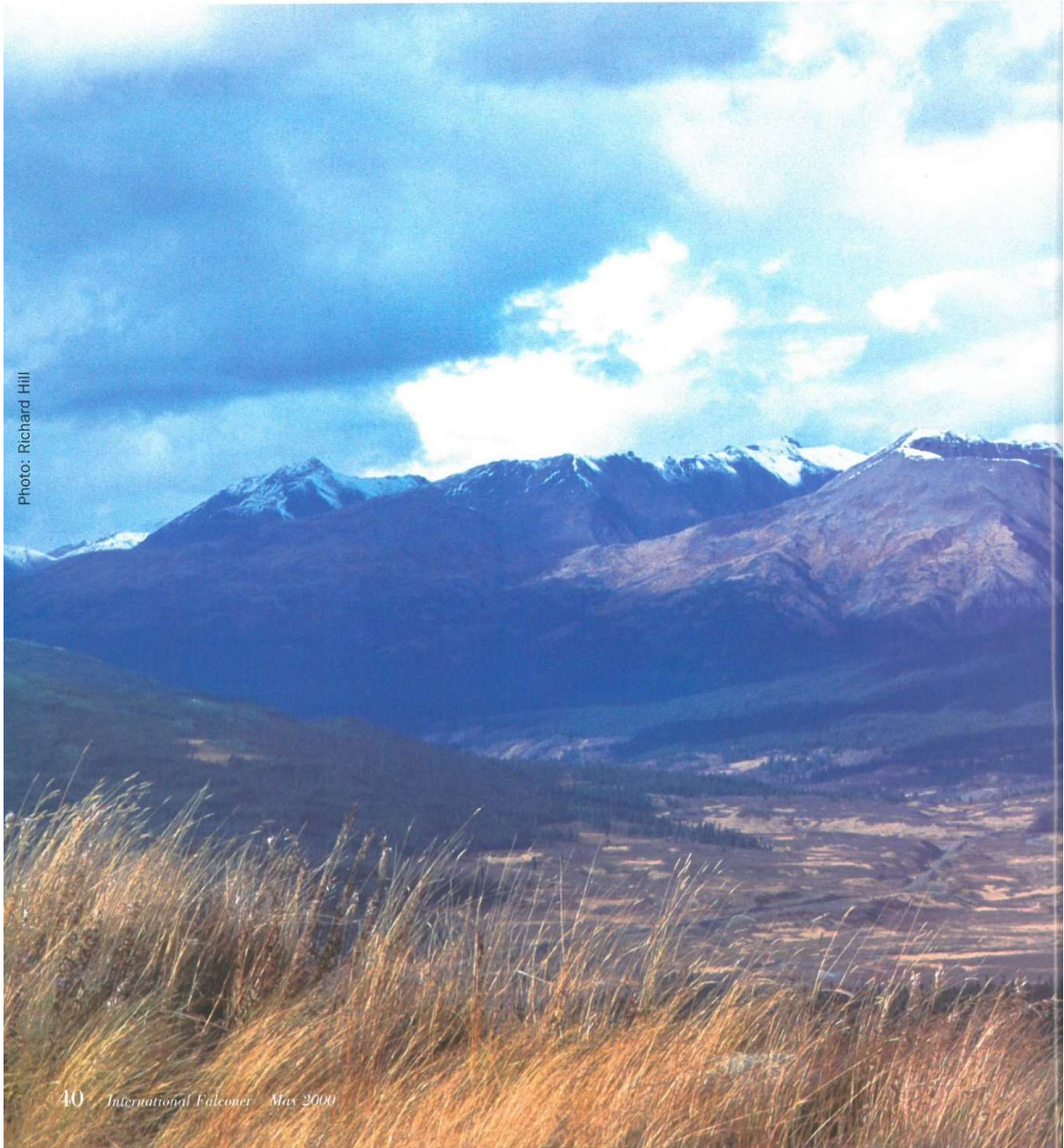
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Gyr Trapping in

Photo: Richard Hill



Northern B.C.

by Richard Hill

So how does a lad from the industrial City of Sheffield, England find himself 6000ft up a mountain side in Canada's Northern B.C.?

It all started with a telephone call from Dr. Jeremy Johnson of Surrey, Vancouver. He called initially asking for a favour. He wanted to acquire a pair of blonde saker falcons for his breeding project and asked if I would be willing to find them for him. His request was, in hindsight, met with a lack of enthusiasm on my part and I suspect this helped spur the Doctor into making his offer to take me gyrfalcons. After several phone calls and some chasing around I managed to acquire a nice pair of sakers that fitted the doctor's remit. While all this was going on the prospect of trapping gyrfalcons was now becoming a reality. Jeremy had been granted a license and the likelihood of the trip proceeding was growing stronger, although we both had similar obstacles to overcome, these being our wives! A large amount of creeping, flowers, and candlelit meals had to be endured, before we were given our leaves of absence.

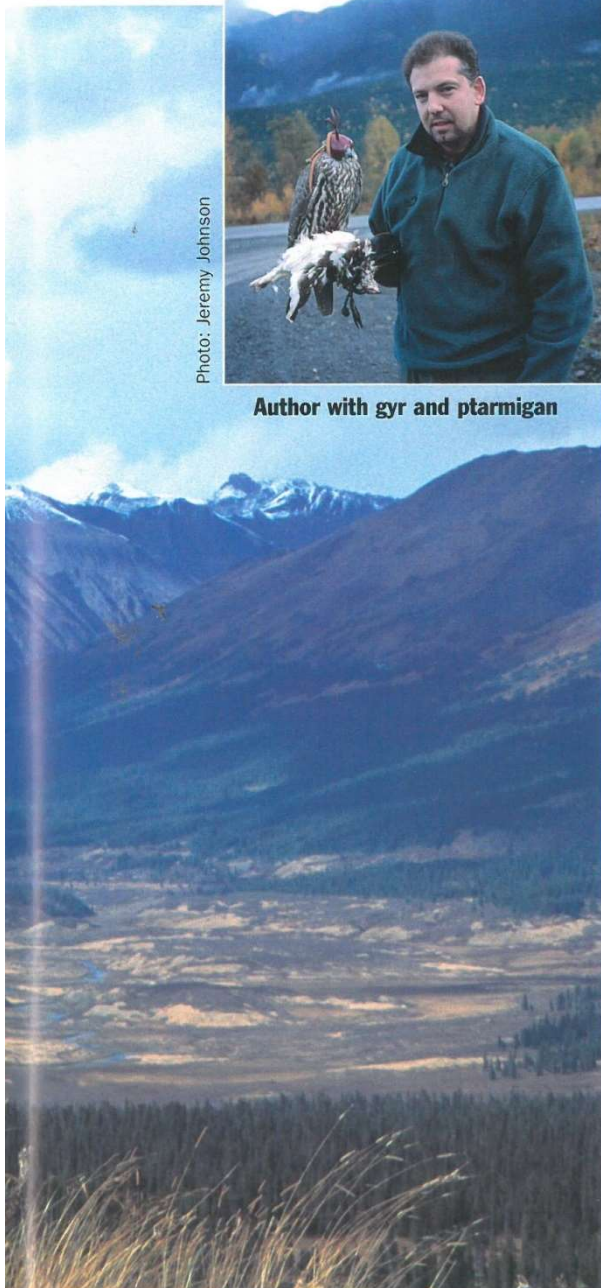
Finally all the preparations had been made and I found myself waving goodbye to my wife in the departure lounge at Manchester Airport. I was bound first of all for a stop in Iceland, which lasted less than 30 minutes and not a gyrfalcon to be seen, then on to Seattle and finally over to Vancouver.

While thinking about the adventure which was about to unfold, it suddenly hit me, I had never met or even seen a picture of the Doctor and visa versa. What was he going to be like? I knew he was a surgeon in Vancouver and that when he used to live in the UK, he was a doctor in the S.A.S, so I felt sure he would be able to cope with everything the trip could throw at him.



Photo: Jeremy Johnson

Author with gyrfalcon and ptarmigan



It was the middle of the night when I landed. I'm sure Jeremy had received a few strange glances, as he stood there in the arrivals lounge with a falcon hood in one hand and whirring a gauntlet around his head. Nevertheless this worked perfectly well and we found each other straight away. We arrived at Jeremy's lovely home in about 10 minutes, said our hellos and good nights and then went straight to bed.

Having slept on the plane for several hours, I found myself wide-awake by 6am and from the sound of it so was someone else. I was later to find out that the Doctor needed very little rest and was perfectly able to endure long periods of sleep deprivation, something I found hard to match. I made my way downstairs to be greeted by Jeremy and his wife making breakfast. I was informed that he had to work that day but we would be leaving for Northern B.C. that evening.

I was shown a large bow net and asked to repair it ready for use - easier said than done. Obviously I had read books on the use of traps but hands on experience is really not available to the British falconer, as trapping wild birds is totally against the law. Needless to say that when I finished putting the new net on, it was as tight as a tennis racket and rather than trap the gyr, would have probably hit it straight up into Alaska. Never mind, a lesson was learned and our preparations were on the way.

While Jeremy was at work I couldn't help but notice he had a lovely old Landrover in his driveway. Now having owned one of these back in Britain, I knew its capabilities and pulling a trailer 2000kms north did not appeal to me. The trip was to be up to three weeks long and as far as I could tell, it would take us that long to drive there and back in this old Landy. I also noticed a small spherical trailer called a 'Boler' stood next to the Landrover. Could it really be true, was this to be our transport and accommodation for the next three weeks? When contemplating the trip, I had a picture in my mind of a swish 30ft

winnebago with central heating and shower etc. Was I to be so wrong? - well almost. We were using the Boler but thankfully Jeremy had had the wisdom to purchase a new Landrover Discovery the year before. To his credit he had made the trip for several years, using the old Landrover and Boler, and had returned to tell the tale. Jeremy arrived home at around 6.30pm in his now familiar whirlwind style, filled both car and trailer with everything but the kitchen sink, and away we went.

The drive north was to take

tow bar were trivial problems to be overcome. Once on our way, we only managed to lose the Boler one other time, not bad if you take into account the terrain we were working against.

We finally arrived at our destination, the exact location of which I have been asked to keep a secret, as only a couple of other Canadian falconers know of its whereabouts. What I can say is that we were approximately 2000kms north of Vancouver, 6000ft up a mountainside! It was dark when we arrived so it was straight into the Boler and to sleep. Again I don't



Photo: Richard Hill

almost 28 hours of solid motoring, stopping only for fuel and caffeine boosting Coca-Cola. I was assured the coke would help keep me awake but I still have very little idea as to how we managed to do the last 200kms. This final stage was on an unmade track, in total darkness with forest and mud slides all around. It was on this final stage that we received our first hurdle to overcome. On glancing behind through the discovery's wing mirror I couldn't see the sidelights of the Boler anymore, it had all gone dark. Could it just be an electrical fault or had we really lost the Boler? The answer was, you've guessed it, we had lost the Boler. After reversing back down a track for about a mile, (bearing in mind, going forward was hard driving) we came across the stranded outline of our trusted home. It was at these moments, that the Doctor was at his S.A.S. trained best, improvisation is his middle name and a sheered metal pin and bent



know if it was excitement or fear of missing anything, but I was awake at the crack of dawn. What a sight it was that greeted me as I stumbled out of the Boler, a vast valley surrounded by mountains on all sides. All I could do was wonder how on earth we had managed to find our way here in the pitch black of night.

The order of the day was to find our way up the side of one of these mountains and find an area to set-up camp. We were looking for an area, which was around the tree line, approximately five or six hundred feet above our present position. The Discovery was banged into a low gear and up we went, bouncing from side to side, it would be a miracle if any of the pigeons in the Boler survived this. Eventually we found an area, which had been used by hunters in the past, as there were signs of tyre tracks and a campfire. The view was just breathtaking, as we were able to see down valleys on all three exposed sides, but better still, the

gyrs in these valleys would also be able to see us. Just to make sure this was indeed the best spot, Jeremy decided it would be a good idea to go a little higher and if no more of a panoramic sight could be found, then we could reverse back down. We went to about 7000ft above sea level, up through the clouds and eventually onto the snow covered summit of our chosen mountain. Things couldn't get any better - or so I thought.

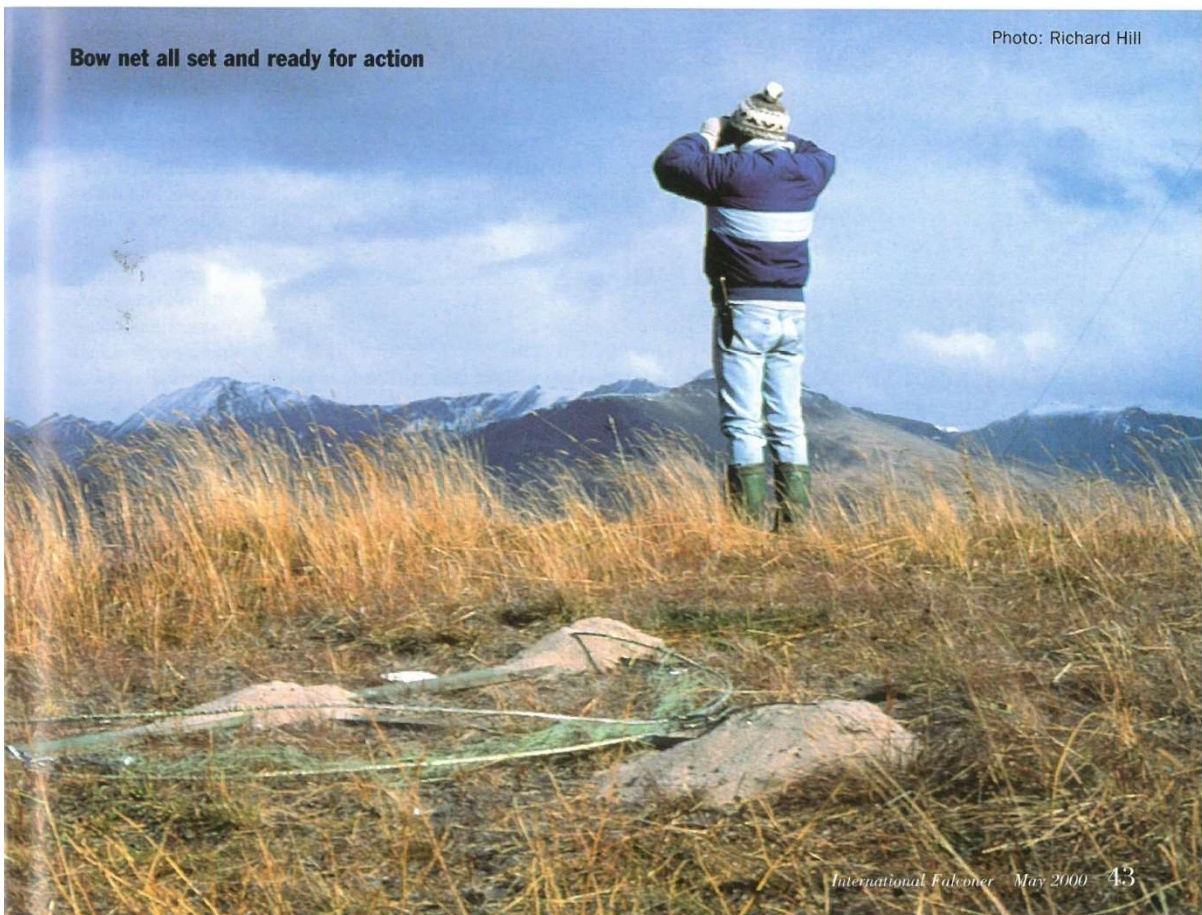
It had been mentioned in my initial conversations with Jeremy, that there was the chance of encounters with some of the more dangerous wildlife in this region. Wolf and black bear had already been seen on our drive north and coyote were to be found in Jeremy's own back garden, but the big one that sent a shiver of anticipation and fear down my back bone was, the Grizzly.

Jeremy had been trapping in Northern B.C. for the last seven seasons and he assured me he had

never once seen a grizzly bear, but Jeremy had never taken me before! We decided to stretch our legs and take in the wonderful views from the top of our mountain, when suddenly it became apparent something was moving in the grass about 300 yards in front of us. It looked to have quite a bulk but didn't seem to be very tall. Well it wasn't very tall because it turned out to be a huge male grizzly, laid on its side with its paw down a ground squirrel's hole. Things seemed to be going fine, the bear hadn't noticed us, and so we stupidly walked a little closer. Yes I know, fools, idiots, all of these words spring to mind as I sit here in the comfort of my home writing this account, but yes we did move a little closer. At this point the bear noticed us, slowly gathered itself up onto four feet and then to our amazement up again onto two. Do we run? Do we stand still? These were all thoughts that travelled through our minds. Thankfully, after giving us a long and

Bow net all set and ready for action

Photo: Richard Hill



The noose carpeted flutter pole

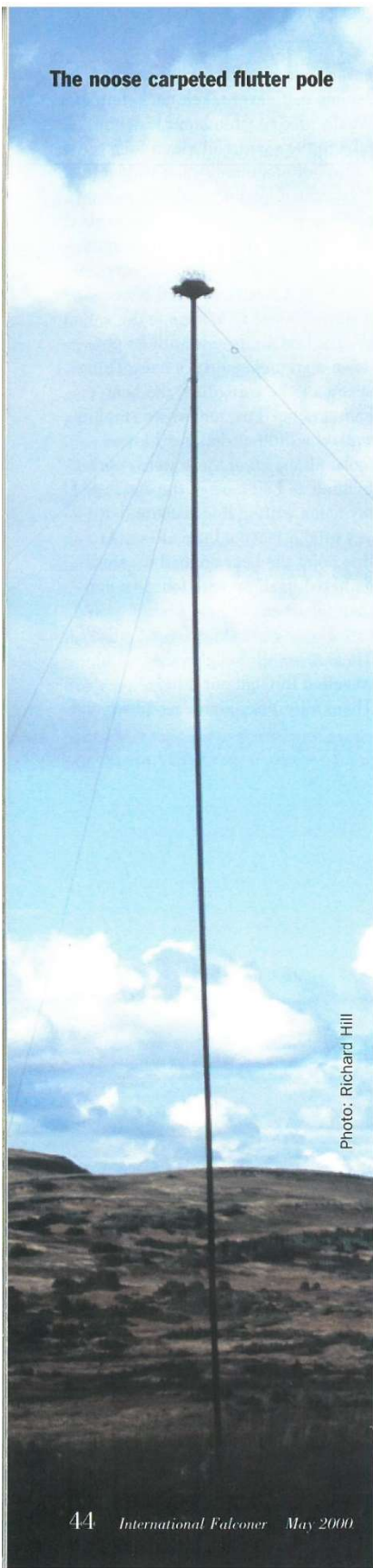


Photo: Richard Hill

lingering glare the bear decided that the best form of defence was to run, and to our delight it was in the opposite direction to us!

We made our way back down the mountain to the place that we now called camp and settled down to the real job in hand, catching a gyrfalcon. The 'camp' was made up of two flutter poles, two bow nets and two noose cages all surrounding the hide which was attached to the front of the Boler. All of these items were new to me and even though I had just helped erect the sight, I hadn't got a clue as to how we were going to catch a gyr with them. The bow nets and noose cages were reasonably easy to work out, but what about those flutter poles. The pole stands around 20ft high, and is held up with three guide ropes. On the very top of the pole is a piece of carpet covered in nooses which should snare the falcon when landed on. The carpet is fastened to the back guide rope with a piece of line and a ring, so any falcon becoming snared should slide safely down to earth. A fourth line is fastened from the top of the pole and led back into the hide. About 10ft down this line a pigeon in a harness is attached on a type of bungee rope. The principle of this set-up is that when the main line is pulled taught, it hoists the pigeon into the air, and when the unsuspecting bird realises what has happened, it starts fluttering back down to earth in the hope of self preservation. The system works extremely well. It is the fluttering motion that attracts the gyrs, so when the pigeon starts to tire it needs to be changed. A bouncing pigeon which does not flutter is a waste of time. The fluttering bird is supposed to imitate the local gyr diet of ptarmigan. The pigeons are selected to look, feather wise, like the local ptarmigan, which vary at this time of year from completely dark brown to pure white. It was only when we arrived, that we were able to look around and find out at what stage of the moult the local birds were. They turned out to be on the whole, about half-and-half, so pigeons with a percentage of white in their plumage were chosen. I now

understood the reason we had brought so many pigeons. Approximately seventy-five in all were taken and thankfully all returned home none the worse for wear.

Once trapping was underway the day basically entailed Jeremy and myself pulling on the flutter bird's line every 2 or 3 minutes in the hope that some passing gyr would be enticed to come and investigate this 'ptarmigan'. Initially I had little faith in the system, and having worked with our gyrfalcons back home, considered them to be too intelligent to fall for this ploy. I was however to be proved wrong and over a period of a week, we saw around ten gyrs, as well as goshawks, merlins, harriers and a superb golden eagle. None of the birds we saw showed any real signs of hunger and most birds that came into our traps, seemed to do so out of pure inquisitiveness - the pigeon was only a game to be played.

The first bird trapped was a superb passage male northern goshawk. This was my first encounter with this particular subspecies and I was surprised at how large this individual was. Jeremy informed me that we were at the northern limits of the goshawks' range, and that back down near Vancouver, they would indeed be much smaller. As we did not have a permit for a goshawk, the bird was released almost immediately, after the obligatory pictures. It took almost 40 minutes from when the goshawk arrived in camp, to the time we actually had him in the bow net. His final attack on the pigeon in the bow net, was a walk of almost 15ft, he had showed no urgency in wanting the pigeon and when he was eventually caught we discovered him to be very fat and with a full crop. Over the period of a week we had many close encounters, but there seemed to be a lack of urgency on behalf of the falcons, which started to hit moral. Time on the mountain was slipping away, and our rations had begun to be very limited indeed. One evening meal consisted of a tin of sweet corn, a tin of beetroot and a tin of apple sauce, all cooked in the one pan - very

appetising! The dog's tinned meat was beginning to look extremely attractive and his biscuits already tasted very good. Food had become short and personal hygiene was leaving a lot to be desired - it was now the time to catch our gyr and make our way back home.

We were blessed with a couple of days of snow and fully expected this to worsen as the week went by, but to our surprise we awoke to torrential rain. Surely today would be another blank, as no self-respecting falcon would want to be out and about in these conditions.

After a wait of about 30 minutes our gyr paid its first visit. It stayed in and around the camp for about an hour and frustratingly sat on top of one of the flutter poles, without getting caught in the nooses that adorned the carpet perch. She set off down the mountainside several times only to return minutes later to land back on top of the flutter pole. Then the falcon suddenly started to show a sudden burst of excitement as she glared down the mountainside and away from our camp - what had she seen? The adrenaline was starting to pump around my body. Was she about to disappear on us, never to be seen again, or was this going to be our lucky day?

Suddenly within the blink of an eye the falcon pushed off from its perch atop the flutter pole with an extra burst of enthusiasm, but she was caught! She dropped below the top of the flutter pole and began sliding down the back guide rope - what a perfect design. We set off at full speed to grab the falcon before she managed to pull free or worse still, damage herself on any of the many nooses on the carpet. It soon became apparent as to what had changed the gyr's attitude. While we were grappling with her, trying not to

receive too many injuries, our attention was drawn to lots of flapping and screaming on the other side of the camp. A male northern goshawk was caught on one of the noose cages! Our gyr had obviously seen the goshawk powering up the valley. Simultaneously and with a major stroke of luck, we had managed to trap another nice northern goshawk and best of all, a beautiful female gyrfalcon.

With pictures, videos and congratulations over with, we could at last dismantle camp and set off home. Everything was taken down and packed away in a fraction of the time it took us to set up, the wind and rain forgotten in the euphoria of achieving our goal. The falcon was jessed, hooded and then left on a block, while we ran around like mad men. Her temperament seemed to be excellent, no bouncing around, hissing or spitting, instead she just



Harnessed 'flutter pole' pigeon

sat there accepting everything in her stride. This was a welcome trait indeed, as it was agreed that she would travel back to Vancouver on my fist, while Jeremy would do the driving.

She would be fed on some ptarmigan, which we had shot earlier the day before, although she, as with both goshawks, felt extremely well fed. It was decided that we deserved a slower drive home, and that we would splash out on a night in a motel. A hot bath and shave seemed in order, particularly as I was starting to look like a 'Sasquatch',



Photo: Richard Hill

Our gyrfalcon, hooded and ready for the journey home.

but would a motel allow us to stay?

We pulled into the car park, of what looked a very nice but very busy establishment. Jeremy went to book and arrange for the keys, while I waited outside with a large coat on and a rucksack over my shoulder, concealing the gyrfalcon on my fist. Once the room was arranged I entered the foyer making sure my back and shoulder were turned towards the receptionist and made my way towards the elevators. All worked well and the gyr was soon in our room undetected.

She fed from the ptarmigan that evening bare-headed and sat on my fist looking around the room for 10 minutes or so. We checked out of the motel the next morning, leaving the room in perfect condition and set off back down the road to Vancouver. We were home by midnight, mission accomplished, no injuries, no illness just one beautiful female, northern B.C., gyrfalcon.

I would like to thank Dr. Jeremy Johnson for allowing me to share in one of his adventures, I shall never forget even the smallest of details, it surely was an experience of a lifetime! ■

Dealing with parasites should we really

Neil A Forbes Dip ECAMS FRCVS

A parasite, is an organism which survives due to dependence on another organism for part or all of its life cycle. As parasites generally rely on survival of their host for their own survival, they have generally developed a fine balance with their host. We know that very many wild raptors (up to 65% in many surveys) carry parasitic burdens and live quite happily with them - so should we be concerned about the odd worm.

Firstly it should be pointed out that captive raptors generally live longer than their wild counterparts. Whilst a wild bird may carry a parasite burden in normal healthy life, as soon as that bird is stressed, injured or diseased then the fine host-parasite burden may well swing in the parasite's favour, leading to the host's demise. Furthermore life in captivity is not normal, either in life style, diet, general activity, but also because birds are confined in a small area, in which a parasitic load may become concentrated over a period of months or years. As such we are concerned by parasites in captive birds not only for their own sake, but also for the health of future generations of birds who may share the same accommodation.

In broad terms parasite may be divided into 'ecto-parasites' and 'endo-parasites' i.e. those inside and outside of the body. The parasites described are not complete, in particular in an international sense, although the parasites of major

clinical significance are covered.

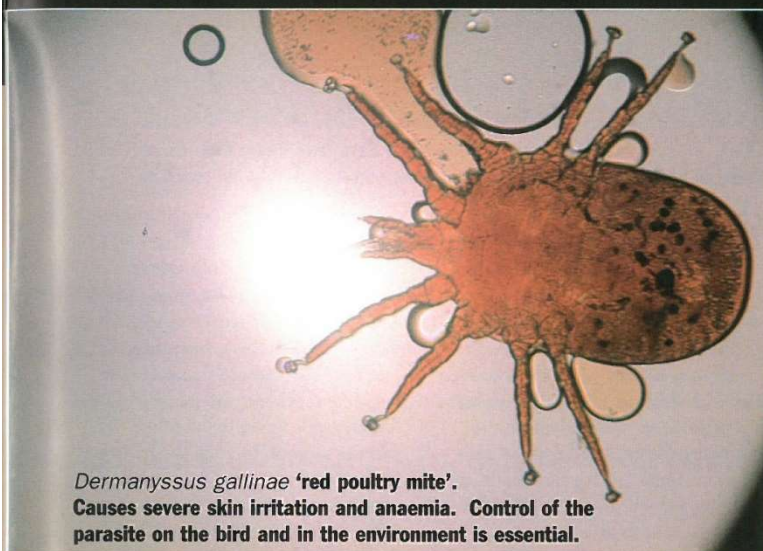
Ecto-parasites - (ticks, mites, lice, fleas, hippoboscids)

Ticks - have traditionally been found on raptors in the tropics, however in recent years they have been recognised as a significant cause of death in birds of prey even in temperate areas. Ticks vary in size from pin head size, to several inches, they tend to increase in size whilst they are on the host, as they fill with blood. Ticks have an interesting life cycle (varying with species), living most of their life off the host on vegetation, only feeding once a year, prior to their own breeding season. As such, raptors do not contract ticks from other warm blooded animals, but from vegetation or their immediate environment. Ticks attach to birds in their least feathered areas, in particular about the head and neck. Ticks are well reported as the carriers of blood parasites such as *Babesia* and *Aegyptionella*, although these tend to be harmless in most cases. Ticks are second only to mosquitoes as the transmitters of infectious disease. There are also a significant number of cases reported each summer of acute deaths in birds, with localised swelling around the site of tick attachment. Death is thought to arise due to per-acute bacterial infections or toxic reactions, and will typically occur within 24-36 hours. By the time of death, the localised swelling around the tick may have subsided, and the tick may even have become detached. Tick

presence tends to be a seasonal and regional problem, in prevalent areas, birds should be kept well away from ground and over-hanging vegetation. If birds are kept, or flown in tick risk areas, preventive seasonal spraying with insecticides e.g. Fipronil (Frontline, Merial) may be advisory. If ticks are found in an aviary or a mews, the surroundings may be sprayed with an insect growth inhibitory substance e.g. Indorex spray, to control any ticks and prevent new adult forms developing.

Mites - are small blood sucking parasites, which resemble grains of sand (of varying colour), which may be seen running around on the skin within the bird's plumage. Often the first sign of parasitism, is a loss of, or broken feathers on the tarso-metatarsus (just above the jesses), which may just look like damage to the feathers from the furniture, but which is actually the bird nibbling its legs. The two most significant mites are 'the northern fowl mite' *Ornithonyssus sylvarium*, which spends its entire short life on the host, sucking blood and reproducing. The parasite is commonly found on wild birds and poultry. To control this mite, all in contact birds should be treated with a safe and efficacious insecticide (e.g. Fipronil, Frontline : Merial). In contrast the 'red poultry mite' *Dermanyssus gallinae*, tends to feed on the host at night, but live off the bird in the day, sheltering in crevices in the aviary, mews or perch. In such cases the bird should be examined after dark with a torch

asites be concerned?



Dermanyssus gallinae 'red poultry mite'.
Causes severe skin irritation and anaemia. Control of the parasite on the bird and in the environment is essential.

for cream-red-dark brown 'grains of sand' running around in the plumage. Nestlings in particular can become quiet anaemic and weak if burdens are significant. Treatment involves not only treating the bird but also the aviary (with permethrin preparations).

Quill Mites (*Harpyrhychus* spp)

Are a less common but significant parasite. These mites live within the shaft of a 'flight blood feather', causing a reaction which tends to cause a pinching off and loss of the feather before its growth has completed. One can attempt control of these parasites with avermectin parasiticides, but it is not always effective.

Cnemidocoptes mites - these are occasionally found on either the legs or ceres of raptors causing 'scaly leg' or 'scaly beak'. In the case of ceres it may appear that the bird is

continually traumatising its cere flying into aviary wire, although when such a bird is removed from its aviary, the lesion does not heal. When legs are affected, they appear crusty, with a dry scaly or flaky appearance. Birds affected are often immune suppressed at the time, so they may have some other form of concurrent systemic disease. All in contact birds should be treated, two doses of avermectin 10 days apart is curative.

Feather lice - these are often seen in the plumage (especially the undersides of the feathers), as long (2-10mm) sideways scurrying insects. Feather lice will irritate the bird, but cause it no real harm, living off feather material. A heavy louse burden is generally an indication that the bird is unable to preen or has some other significant systemic disease. In particular if an

individual bird is affected amongst a group, tests should be performed to find the cause of the underlying disease.

Louse flies / flat flies

(*Hippoboscidae*) - the bane of all falconers and rehabilitators lives. These 'flat flies' are frequently found on wild birds (especially corvids and owls), and on handling, jump from the bird onto the handler. They cause considerable irritation, and are very difficult to squash (or physically kill). These flies cause irritation but also may transmit blood born infections.

Why are ecto-parasites important - apart from the clinical signs listed above, all biting flies, mites, lice or gnats, have the potential to transfer infection to the host, i.e. to act as an 'insect vector'. This is of particular significance with blood parasites (see later). Whilst a host may be adapted to its own parasites, if these are transferred to an abnormal host, they may either cause no disease (as the abnormal host is not sensitive to it), or a massively increased disease (as the host is sensitive and has no resistance to it). The author has experienced this with clients' birds who have been flying at corvids. On killing the corvid, hippoboscidae transfer to the raptor, leading to sudden death due to blood parasite infestation within 7 days. If your bird is catching prey infested with flat flies or other biting parasites, your bird should be protected by spraying it monthly with Fipronil.

Endo-parasites - these may be divided into protozoa (which include blood parasites, trichomoniasis and coccidiosis), round worms (including gut and respiratory worms), tapeworms and fluke.

Blood-parasites - this group includes trypanosomes (parasites free floating in the circulation) and *Haemoproteus* spp, *Plasmodium* spp and *Leucocytozoan* spp (which all infest blood cells). All these parasites are transmitted to their hosts by biting insects, they are therefore commonest in tropical zones, or in temperate areas during the summer months. Infestation does not cause disease in most raptors. However gyrfalcons, snowy owls and great grey owls (all coming from colder parts of the world), appear to have minimal resistance to these parasites, hence severe (frequently fatal), infestations do occur. The signs seen are typically of weakness, lethargy or collapse. The author has seen acute disease in other species (e.g. Harris' hawk), when they have been exposed to species of blood parasite against which they appear to have no resistance. Treatment of diseased individuals involves blood transfusions, fluid therapy, nursing care and anti-malarial medication (e.g. Chloroquin, Primaquin, Mefloquin). Prevention in breeding stock involves screening of adult birds for the presence of the parasite. Treatment of infested adult birds is unlikely to achieve eradication, however it will permit full ecto-parasite control of parents and young, foster rearing by uninfested stock and monitoring of neonates for signs of parasitism.

Trichomoniasis - a flagellate protozoal parasite commonly found in pigeons. Many keepers will be familiar with the white plaques which are typically evident in the mouths and throats of infected raptors. However one should be careful not to confuse these signs with similar lesions which may be caused by certain other bacteria, viruses, yeasts or *Capillaria* spp roundworms. Occasionally the disease will cause swellings in the sinuses around the eyes, in trachea



A tick (*Ixodes frontalis*) on the head of a European Eagle Owl (*Bubo bubo*). Note the significant area of subcutaneous sero-haemorrhagic reaction.

or in other internal organs. A diagnosis of trichomoniasis is readily confirmed by a veterinary surgeon on microscopic examination of a fresh sample from the lesion, when motile organisms will be seen. The organism is highly sensitive to the effects of chilling. Almost all cases in raptors occur subsequent to the bird being fed fresh pigeon (or on occasions other fresh avian food). If fresh pigeons are to be fed, these should be first treated as a group with effective medication. Wherever possible, pigeons should all be frozen at least over night before being fed to birds. Treatment has traditionally been with Metronidazole, daily for 5 days, which although effective, had a narrow safety margin. The currently recommended therapy is Carnidazole (Spartrix : Harkers), which involves a single dose (1 tab per 500g bird).

Coccidiosis - *Caryospora* spp. - although there are various different groups of coccidia, it is only *Caryospora* spp which is currently a major threat to captive raptors. *Caryospora* spp is a parasite of captive falcons and owls (not as yet shown to affect hawks). Each subsequent generation of falcon, contaminates its own aviary, leading to infestation of the subsequent generation. This parasite is very difficult to eradicate from an infested bird, not only because it undergoes a

dormant resistant phase within the host, but also because birds tend to re-infect themselves from their environment, as the infective coccidial oocysts are very resistant, surviving up to 2 years on the ground. The disease is most severe in merlins, where young birds of 28 - 45 days will typically be found dead with no premonitory signs. In larger falcons it is again the younger birds who tend to suffer most severe clinical signs, typically whilst they are being first manned and trained. Signs include lethargy, failure to respond, abdominal cramps, brown coloured diarrhoea, but rarely death. Clinical cases are confirmed by microscopic faecal examination, although samples collected on the first 2 days of clinical signs will often be negative for the parasite oocysts. Currently recommended protocols for medical treatment of affected birds involve weekly medication by mouth with Toltazuril (Baycox : Bayer). The parents of infected youngsters should be regularly screened for the presence of parasites. Prevention of infection may be achieved by scrupulous hygiene, screening of parents and youngsters and treatment where appropriate. The long-term control of this disease is currently the subject of considerable continued research by the author.

Flukes - are a less frequent but significant parasite of raptors. The

parasite is commonly found in the small intestine and occasionally in the bile duct of affected birds. Heavily infested birds may show signs of diarrhoea and weakness. Fluke eggs are intermittently shed into the faeces. Diagnosis is by repeated microscopic examination of the faeces. Treatment is with Praziquantel (Droncit : Bayer).

Tapeworm - are most commonly found in raptors originating from warmer climates. Tapeworm infestation rarely causes clinical signs, and is easily controlled with a single treatment of Praziquantel (Droncit : Bayer).

Roundworm - there are many different nematodes (roundworms) which affect raptors. These vary from standard enteric ascarids which may cause gut obstructions if present in high numbers, *Capillaria* sp which live in the back of the throat and oesophagus, causing dysphagia to respiratory worms such as *Syngamus* sp, *Cyathostoma* sp and *Serratospiculum* sp causing coughing, gaping or secondary respiratory

infections. The scope of this text does not permit a full discussion of all these roundworms. Capillariasis does however deserve special mention. This parasite frequently demonstrates multiple drug resistance (i.e. some wormers may not be effective) so birds should always be re-checked after treatment. Furthermore the parasite has both an indirect life cycle (using earthworms as an intermediate host) and a direct life cycle (i.e. they can re-infect themselves from their own faeces). All of them can cause significant clinical disease, even causing fatalities on occasion. Ascarid worm eggs are generally very resistant, surviving for long periods on aviary floors. Diagnosis of roundworm infestations is by microscopic faecal examination. Treatment is by use of Fenbendazole (Panacur : Hoescht) or other benzimidazole preparations or avermectins (Ivomec : Merial).

Parasite Control - the important take-home messages in relation to parasites are that they do

cause significant disease and on occasions death in raptors. They have the potential to cause more common and severe disease in captive birds due to the build up of infestation within a confined space (the aviary). Aviary design which excludes intermediate hosts (worms, slugs, snails, arthropods) and prevents build up of parasite eggs are of great advantage. It is important that faecal samples are checked on a regular basis. The author recommends a twice annual faecal examination (i.e. before the moult after a season flying and eating infected quarry species as well as after the moult, after access to intermediate hosts on an aviary floor. Checking a mite sample is far more useful than simply treating the bird because knowledge of the parasite, and its life cycle allows the correct medication to be used, the correct husbandry changes to prevent re-infestation and it prevents a bird having to be treated if the therapy is not required. ■

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Neil Forbes

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QUESTION TIME

with Stuart Rossell



I fly a female goshawk and have done so for the past four seasons. She is good in the field and has only taken fur in the first three seasons. It was only at the start of this season that I entered her at pheasant. This was not a problem she took to it straight away. However when she is slipped at one and does not make contact with her intended victim and ends up in a tree she is really disobedient to the fist. As if she is so intent on taking quarry that the fist is of no use. I have to either wait until she is satisfied that there is no potential victims in sight or lure her down to either pheasant wings or a whole carcass.

How do I make her more obedient to the fist and return promptly out of trees.

There are two ways that I know of to make an accipiter more responsive to the fist. The first is vertical jumping as described by Layman, Fox, and others. The second would require you to go back a long way in training and would probably best be introduced when starting the hawk after the moult. That is to do as Radcliffe recommends and only call the hawk to the fist once per session. After each flight she is given her entire days rations. Radcliffe further suggests that this should be a freshly killed bird of some kind. Both these methods will increase the attractiveness of the fist for your hawk.

However, I am of the opinion that you are barking up the wrong tree as it were. Your hawk knows, having flown the pheasant in, that her best chance for killing it will be to remain where she is. Given the choice of killing a pheasant or coming down to a small reward on the fist she is making the decision to stay in the tree until all hope is lost that the pheasant will re-appear. If I were you I would encourage her to stay there by re-flushing the pheasant for her.

A good dog is almost essential for this, as pheasant (as you probably know) are not easy to find having been put in by a hawk.

I realise a number of falconers believe that by reflushing pheasant you encourage the hawk to follow them rather than take them on the rise. My argument is you get better flights by reflushing and you will catch more pheasant that way especially in areas where they are scarce and the slips normally long. On pheasant rich estates where you can almost guarantee putting one up right at your feet if you look long enough their argument makes sense. Where I fly however close slips are the exception rather than the rule and hawks that do not fly pheasant in and wait for the reflush are of little use.

Generally a hawk will realise when you have made a concerted effort to find a pheasant and failed that it is time to move on and come down to the fist accordingly.

What type of hood is best for a redtail hawk?

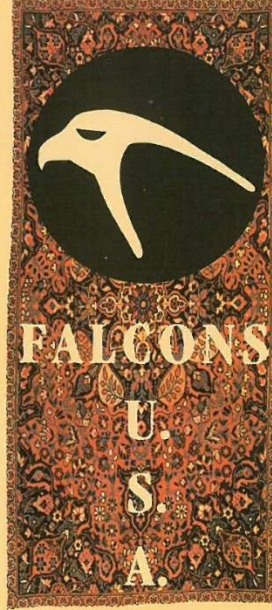
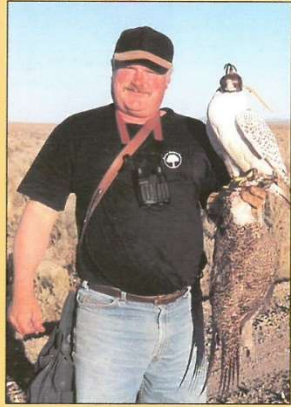
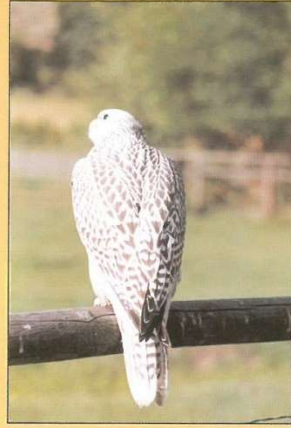
I normally use blocked Anglo-Indian hoods on broadwings and shortwings and Dutch hoods on longwings. I am not a great fan of Arabic hoods though they do seem to fit sakers well and some of the shortwings. My dislike of Arabic hoods comes from the need to push them onto the hawk's head whereas the other styles roll on and roll off. When buying a hood for a new hawk it is as well to buy two or three and then return (or keep for later use) those that don't fit. Some equipment suppliers want to know the flying weight of the hawk and that is obviously impossible when it hasn't even arrived yet. Hood training takes place in the first week so make sure you are prepared well in advance and have your hoods ready. When storing the different styles both Anglo-Indian and Dutch are best kept open while Arabic hoods are best left in the closed position. If left closed Anglo-Indian and Dutch Hoods will not open properly when it comes to hooding and unhooding the hawk as the leather will 'remember' its closed position and pinch back up. This is not a problem with the Arabic hoods and keeping

these soft hoods closed when not in use helps maintain their shape. Finally, 'gore-tex' braces, while new on the market are the way forward. They do not stretch or shrink when exposed to the rain and they stand out away from the hood allowing easy access to the braces. I have used them now for several years and they definitely outlast and outperform leather.

What book would you recommend for a complete beginner? There seems to be so many choices available now and the book dealers give all of them a good review so I am a bit confused.

For someone starting out I feel *Falconry, Art and Practice*, by Emma Ford and *Falconry and Hawking* by Phillip Glasier are hard to beat. The authors of both books have experience with teaching a large number of beginners and therefore have a good idea of what it is you need to know. In addition both books start at the beginning and assume you know very little if anything. Some of the other books on the market tend to assume the reader has a basic knowledge. Once you've become familiar with these two the next book to digest should be *Understanding the Bird of Prey* by Nick Fox. After that the choice becomes a bit more difficult. For flying broadwings at ground game the books by Martin Hollinshead, especially his latest one *The Complete Rabbit and Hare Hawk* are good. If you move onto accipiters Harry McElroy's *Desert Hawking*, Jack Mavrogordato's *A Hawk for the Bush* and Liam O'Broin's, *A Manual of Hawking*. For game hawking *Gamehawk* by Ray Turner, *Observations on Modern Falconry* by Ronald Stevens are both essentials.

Other than that I would buy every book you can afford as they all have something to offer, but definitely start with the first two mentioned as they will give you a thorough introduction and cover almost all the aspects needed to get you started and much more besides.



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