

# INTERNATIONAL FALCONER

FEBRUARY 2001

ISSUE 8

**Mar-hawk!**

**Getting hawking ground**

**Live & learn - Falconry in the Gulf**

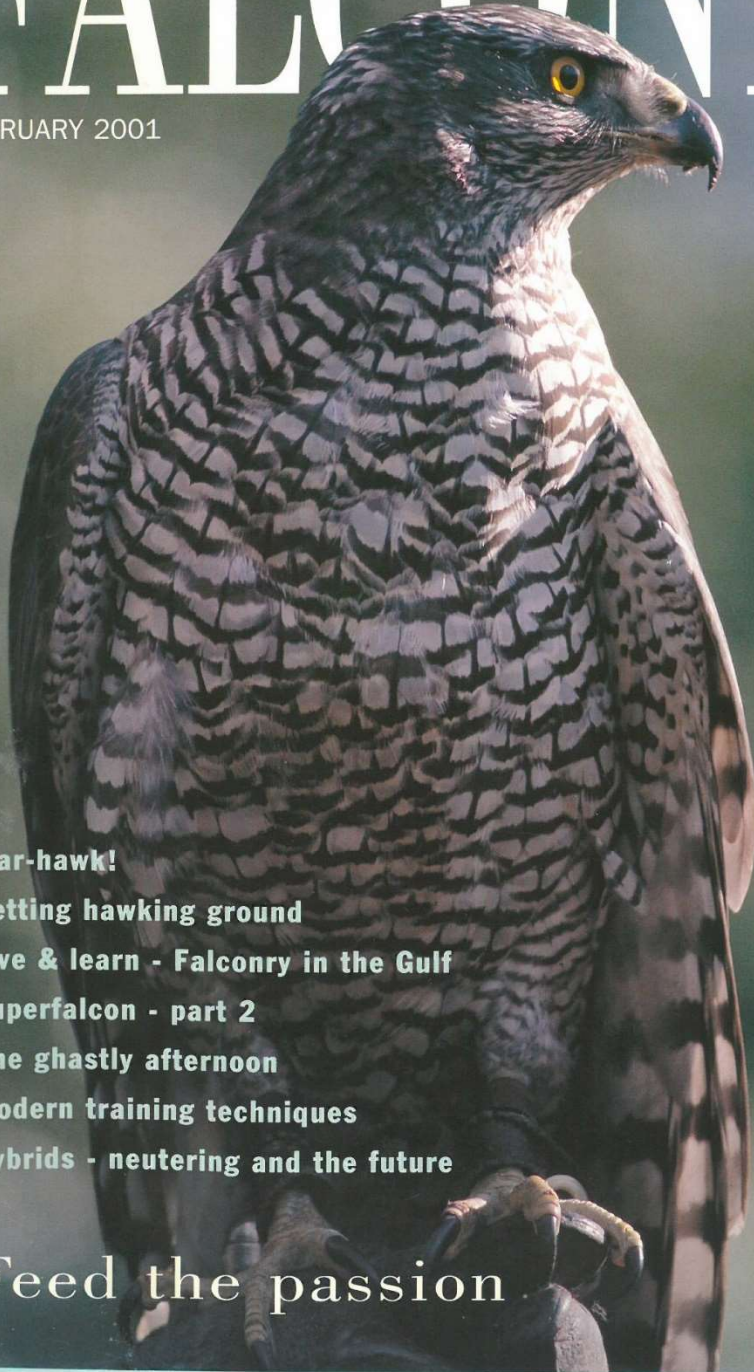
**Superfalcon - part 2**

**One ghastly afternoon**

**Modern training techniques**

**Hybrids - neutering and the future**

**Feed the passion**



# INTERNATIONAL FALCONER

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Cover photo by Seth Anthony.  
Female Finnish goshawk.

# EDITORIAL

With another season drawing to a close, liberty and livelihood are two words on my mind at the moment and every UK falconer by now should know what I mean.

On January 17th, The Hunting with Dogs Bill got the majority vote in its favour and although expected, the reality of it nonetheless came as a blow. The hopes of all who hunt with hounds were dashed on that Wednesday evening in the House of Commons, but they are defiant and the war is still there to be won. You've heard it before but I'll say it again; this Bill affects all who follow a field sport of any description; maybe not directly, but don't think for one moment that the politicians who voted for this Bill have no such agenda for other forms of hunting - ultimately all forms of hunting are the same. They have made it quite clear, along with their allies, the animal rights groups, that no field sport has a place in a 'modern society'; let them get rid of one and they'll just move to the next on the list.

If you truly value the freedom to pursue your way of life, please make the effort to march in London on March 18th. I hate travelling, I hate crowds, and I hate London, but I feel it my utmost responsibility to be there and march for liberty and livelihood - UK falconers; I hope you do too.

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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North American Falconry and Hunting Hawks. 8th Edition  
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## INTERNATIONAL FALCONER

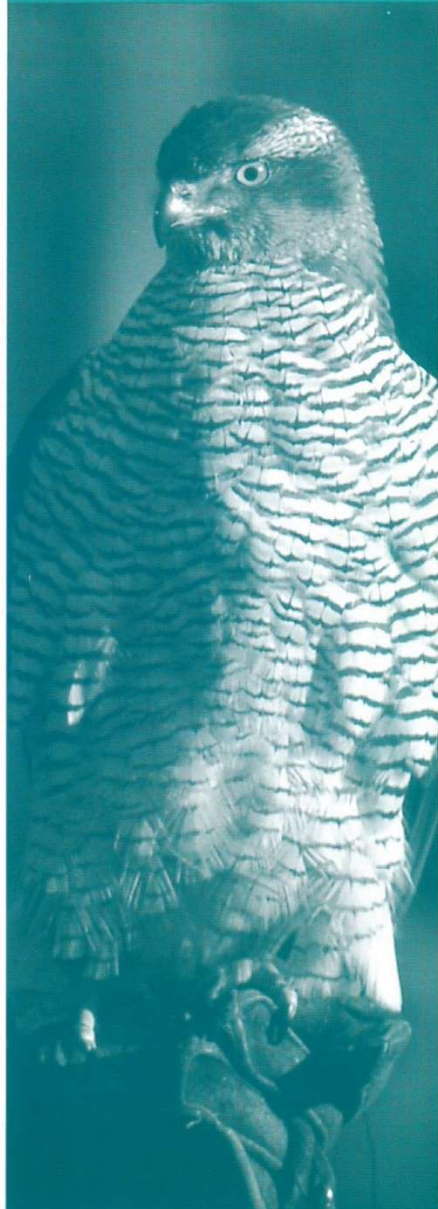


Photo: Seth Anthony

# California Hawking Club awards lifetime memberships



Photo: Stuart Rossell

Honorary members from left to right, Frank Ely, Hal Webster, Jack Hagan, Jeff Sipple and Frank Beebe.

At the recent California Hawking Club field meet held in Bakersfield, two well known falconers, Frank Beebe and Harold Webster were awarded honorary lifetime membership to the club. This award is given to those falconers who have made outstanding contributions to the club or falconry.

Frank Beebe, as well as being an accomplished falconer is well known for his contributions to falconry and particularly his innovations on falconry equipment. He co-authored with Webster, the standard American book on the subject, *North American Falconry and Hunting Hawks* as well as publishing a number of books on his

own including, *The Complete Falconer* and a *Falconry Manual*. He is also a talented artist and still, though in his 80's flies hawks.

Hal Webster is a well known figure throughout the US and other parts of the World. Now also in his 80's Hal is still active in the world of falconry and this last year alone trapped and banded over 100 prairie falcons. He has been very vociferous in his efforts to ease the regulations on falconry in America in particular with regard to private ownership of captive-bred raptors.

The California Hawking Club in giving this award recognises these two individuals and acknowledges and thanks them both for their outstanding contribution to falconry.

## Frank Beebe to attend British Falconry Fair

*International Falconer* is delighted to announce that Frank L. Beebe has accepted its invitation to attend the 2001 British Falconry Fair. To coincide with his series of articles being published in *International Falconer*, Frank will be giving demonstrations in the main arena of his amazing gyrfalcon-trapping technique.

He will also be on the *International Falconer* stand during the two days of the Fair to meet subscribers.

**LIBERTY &  
LIVELIHOOD**

## Countdown to march on London

**W**ith only a few weeks to go until the Countryside Alliance Liberty and Livelihood March in London on March 18th, preparations are gathering pace.

The March Office already has details of over 2,000 buses booked, 11 trains chartered, a ferry from Newcastle and two aeroplanes from Ireland. A large contingent are coming on EuroStar from Paris and the majority of Master of Foxhounds from America will be present. To date 130,000 marchers have registered. All reports are, that this march will far exceed the attendance of The Countryside March 1998.

The March will demonstrate the depth of feeling within rural communities against the threats from Parliament to their livelihoods and way of life. It will be led by children whose parents' livelihoods are at stake and will be followed by a procession of sports people who are all supportive of the objectives of the March.

Marchers will be entertained along route by 3-5 big screens showing images from throughout the day and snippets from key personalities. The running total of marchers passing through the start will be displayed hourly.

To register your support for the March call **0906 788 1680**. Calls are charged at £1/minute and you will receive an information pack, car sticker and an "I have registered badge."

## New President for British Falconers' Club

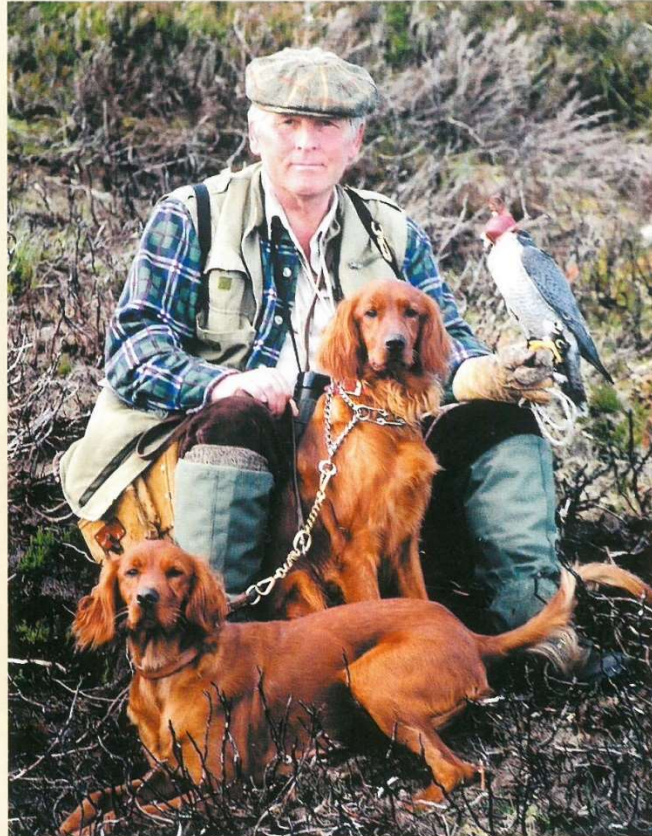


Photo: Ken McDougall

**T**he British Falconers' Club, the largest club in the UK, recently voted for Tony Crosswell as its new President. A falconer for some 40 years, Tony lives in rural Norfolk and is devoted to the country way of life and its values. His falconry has taken him to many different parts of the world to fly hawks but he still has a keen appreciation of the fantastic opportunities that British falconry has to offer and flies mainly lowland game with peregrines and gyrfalcons. During the past six years he has served the club in various capacities including Director, International and Political and as well as the BFC, he has also represented The Hawk Board, the International Association for Falconry and FACE at international meetings. He has worked closely with government representatives worldwide and through appointed working groups, has established positive working relationships with many international conservation organisations.

# MAR-HAWK

by Darryl A. Perkins

**M**arcella sat erect on the fist. A daughter of Finland raised by her parents. Fit, yet untested at 39 ounces in this her second season having been a disappointment to her first handler. She had come into my possession in late February of the previous year. No wild quarry under her belt and a bit too aggressive for her master. Now she sat erect on the fist in bone-chilling weather that must be experienced to be believed. So here we were, smack dab in the middle of some of South Dakota's best pheasant country. God's country. *Dances With Wolves* country and in the midst of some of the worst weather winter had to offer. The previous day I had witnessed New York falconer Ed Hepp's bird, Marcella's sibling; show just what a fit confident goshawk can do under extreme conditions. Below zero temperatures, deep snow and gusting winds didn't deter her from bringing a nice South Dakota cock to bag. Even with the sparse shelter from the wind offered by the trees in the bottom we were hunting, it was still tough going. And like they say in South Dakota, "barbed wire don't stop the wind." So today, it was Marcella's turn. To be honest, I would have opted for better



**Darryl and Marcella with South Dakota pheasant.**

Photo: Ed Hepp

# WV!

conditions but the tongue-lashing and ribbing I had already suffered at the hands of Ed and his cohort, Vic Hardaswick, eliminated that option.

I had taken my time with Marcella and slowly built her confidence and acceptance with bagged pheasants. She, like most goshawks, dearly loved them, but Massachusetts baggies don't quite compare to these denizens of the northern plains. Ed shouted for Spike, his Brittany, to come around as I stood in the knee-deep snow with Marcella erect on the fist. Spike's stubble of a tail was wagging energetically indicating that he had picked up scent. Ed cautioned him as Spike eased into a solid point. It's these intense moments, the seconds before a flush that I so love. I chirped to Marcella as we made our way towards Ed and Spike and reflected on our beginning.

I picked her up at Bradley International Airport in Hartford, Connecticut. She was hooded and jessed when I opened the crate for a peak. The report I had on her was that she was a smallish Finnish chamber-raised bird with big feet and she wasn't afraid to use them, particularly if she was being approached while on the kill. After we made the hour and a half ride from Bradley to Blackstone, I bought the crate in the house to have a closer look. When I put my gloved hand into the crate to get the jesses, she bound to the glove and proceeded to clamp down like you

wouldn't believe. Once outside she was mantling and clamping such that I thought for sure I had a 40oz Cooper's hawk on my hands. Once unhooded, the footing stopped and she sat on the glove with her wings spread, mouth agape and acted like any freshly trapped accipiter. I hooded her, put a tail bell and transmitter tail mount on her before weighing and recording her weigh in my log book. I then turned on *Sports Center*, unhooded her and placed her on a bow perch and ignored her. During the course of the next two hours, she bated 23 times. That would be my benchmark. Anytime I got less than 23 bates in a two-hour period, I figured I was making progress. Before going to bed, I gave her a tidbit, hooded her and placed her back on the bow perch. From February 23rd until May 27th, I gave her a bagged pheasant every fourth day. She would be bagged on Monday morning, allowed to sit Tuesday and Wednesday and bagged again on Friday. She was allowed to take a full crop on each kill and the three times she didn't catch the pheasant, she was brought home and bagged the following day.

The good news was that during this period she depended on me to give her slips and depended on herself to eat. She was possessive of her first three kills but realised after the third that while I was near, I wasn't a threat to rob her. This caused her earlier tendencies of aggression to disappear and although she still bated if I approached too fast, she was steady on the fist and passage-like on the kill. The bad news was that during this time I kept her in my living room. Fortunately having just raised an imprint male in my living room, I had a ready supply of that \$1.29 paper-over-plastic Christmas table cloths that were made to absorb

moths. With this gorge/fast regiment, I felt I had the foundation for a decent relationship and a confident pupil to begin the season next year.

Marcella was moved to the mews well into the moult in May. She was kept tied to a bow perch on a one-foot bed of fresh pine needles and hooded every third day. She was moulted on a diet of live quail and the occasional freshly trapped grain-fed rat. Once a week she was taken outside and weathered. Even with this regiment carried throughout the summer, she remained somewhat aloft and skittish upon my approach in the mew. I could have of course countered this by offering her tidbits from the glove but quickly abandoned this technique. Even at moulting weight, if offered food on the glove, she became an enraged Coops. Conversely, if picked up with the kill she remained tight feathered and welcomed my bare hands assisting her to pluck. She exhibited the same well-mannered behaviour when picked up or transferred to the 'hot' lure. When transferring from the kill to the lure or glove, I cut a leg or some part from the fresh 'hot' kill to use in the transfer. This I believe is preferable to some cold tidbit from the bag and the goshawks seem to agree. So, with her moulted and used to being handled all summer, we were ready for the new season.

In late August, once she was reduced to 37oz I started bagging her on cock pheasants. I use an Innotek remote bird launcher which is very quiet and can be activated a quarter of a mile away. To get her fit, I often set the launcher so that the pheasant has to fly nearly a quarter mile to cover. By altering the distance I'm away from the launcher, I can control whether she has a chance of taking it before or after it reaches cover. For those that make it

to cover and can't be found without the dog; they become tomorrow's or the day after's baggie. I always have a spare in the bag and reward her for her efforts at an opportune time. This continues to build her confidence and strengthens my importance in the field. When she flies hard and puts game into cover, good things ALWAYS happen when I come on the scene. Of course, this isn't the case in actual hunting situations. Often we come home empty handed. But what we don't do is come home empty handed too many days in a row. I won't allow it. At this stage, I avoid hard duck slips with her that I wouldn't hesitate for a minute to take with my male Y2K or with Atlanta, my huge female imprint. If Marcella is unsuccessful too many times, I give her a baggie. Mentally, I want her to think she's the biggest and baddest beaver in the pond. She's the alpha male, a bull moose in rut or maybe, simply a goshawk that's fit and extremely confident in her ability to catch game. Weight and it's control or lack there of is vital and should always be considered. What I've learned is that with goshawks, particularly the Finnish goshawk, there comes a point with continued success that the game of chasing quarry is nearly as important as the quarry itself.

Fast-forward to mid November. In October, she took her only head of wild game thus far. A drake Mallard that she took in a climbing flight like an old veteran. Now Marcella sits erect on the fist. I chirp to her as we make our way to Ed and Spike. The bottom we're hunting is bordered on the east side by a hedgerow and woodlot to the north. It's a one-section parcel so it's exactly a square mile. We're still 50 yards away when the nervous hen flushes and heads crosswind along

the tree line. Marcella leaves the fist and pursues hard. I see her a quarter of a mile away in the tip top of a tree so I figure she has the hen penned and start trudging towards her through the almost knee-deep snow. The amount of snow that fell isn't all that great. Maybe two to three inches but with the constant wind it's all drifted in to this bottom

ground. When I'm 50 yards from her, Marcella moves up in my direction. I can't see Ed and Spike but hear Ed holler "HO!" I look to see a cock pheasant heading diagonally across the bottom and join in the chorus, "Ho! Ho! Ho!" Apparently the cock was with the hen but held tight when she busted. Anyway, Marcella comes screaming

Photo: Darryl Perkins



**Marcella mid-way through the molt.**



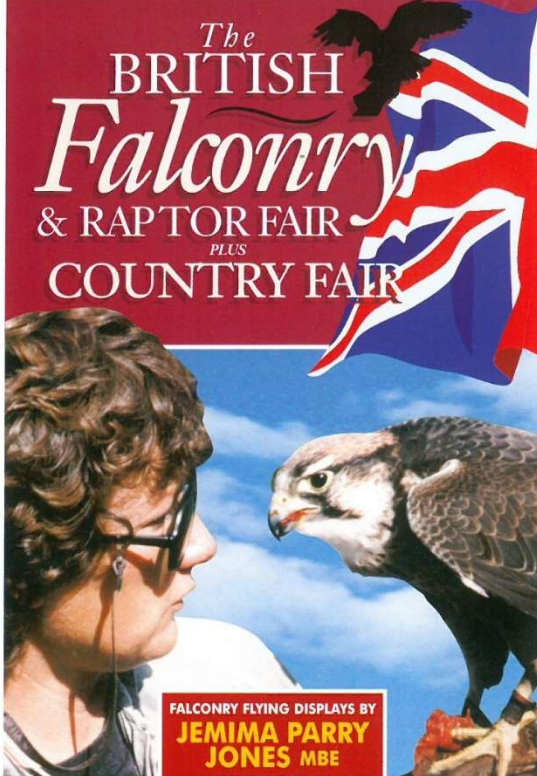
out of the tree and for a moment I think she's gonna cut the angle off and intercept him. She pulls in behind him and they're both burning downwind. They're about 100 feet up, plastered against the backdrop of a pristine blue South Dakota sky. Seeing that cock adorned in his brilliant colours followed by Marcella the former mar-hawk, is one of the most beautiful exhilarating sights I've ever seen. They continued downwind headed towards the woodlot. I thought I saw them come together but the distance was too great and I couldn't be sure. What I could be sure of was that I had just witnessed one heck of a flight. Thirty minutes later, I reach the woodlot and pause to listen and catch my breath. All I can hear is Spike's bell so I shout to Ed to hold the dog. I have a strong signal and as soon as I get the direction down, I find the spot where they came down. There are scuffmarks and wing prints in the snow and a few fluorescent breast feathers floating about. I rely on the signal and finally see her on her side next to a snow covered log. I can't see her feet but sticking out beneath the log are long tail feathers. I get down on one knee and find that she has one foot on his neck and one in his back but can't drag him out he's so far under the log.

I pull him out expecting more struggles but he's all done. I start screaming like a banshee as Ed and Spike arrive on the scene. Marcella takes her well-deserved pleasure for the next thirty minutes as Ed and I look frantically for my receiver. In my exuberance while doing my 'snow dance,' I managed to drop my receiver in the deep snow. Fortunately, I found it underneath the gos's tail. I picked Marcella up to let her finish her meal as we walked back to the truck. I thought about the mutes in the living room, I thought about the dog days of summer and I heard the theme from *Dances With Wolves* playing over and over again in my head. Even now, I'm reliving that flight in my mind and thinking; not bad for a mar-hawk. ■

Darryl's book, *Understanding Goshawks*, should be published sometime in 2001.




For more information visit his website at <http://everythingblack.websitenow.com/daperkins/index.html> or e-mail him at [UndStdGoshawks@cs.com](mailto:UndStdGoshawks@cs.com)

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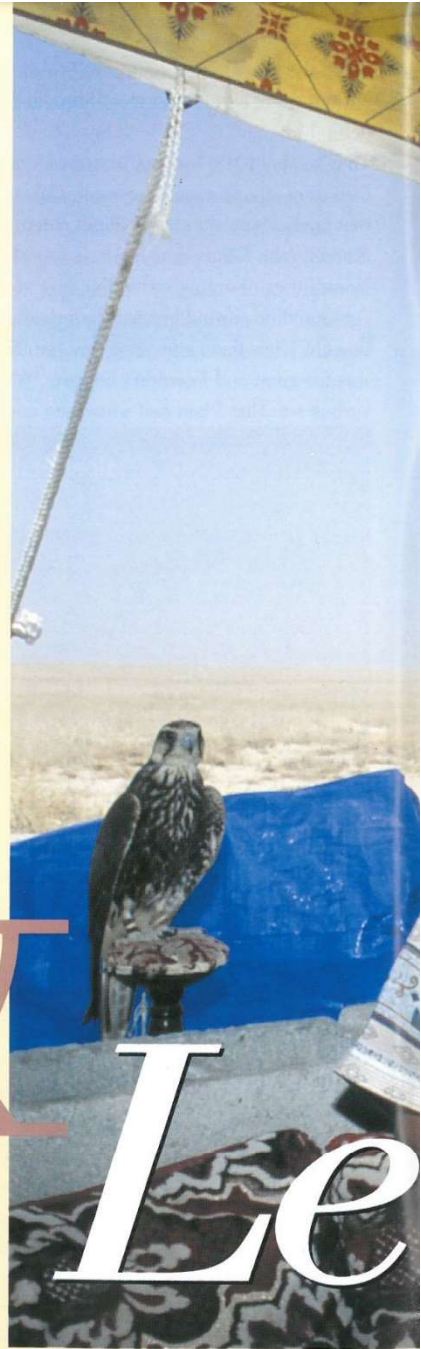
## Sun 27 & Mon 28 May 2001

**OFFCHURCH BURY, OFFCHURCH,  
NR. LEAMINGTON SPA, WARWICKSHIRE**

I thought I'd seen it all. Big, small, black, white, falcons as they should be kept and management disasters. With an annual turnover of 5,000 falcons, working in the Dubai Falcon Hospital for five and a half years followed by eighteen months in Saudi Arabia provided ample opportunity to witness and learn something new every day. From wild-caught Siberian gyrfalcons to tiny Yemeni barbary falcons, there is a global movement of birds to the markets and palaces of the Middle East. The result being that every autumn, as regular as the mualla's call to prayer from the nearest mosque, just about every variation of size and colour of marketable falcon passes through the region for distribution to the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain. Even today, people and countries have their preferences for certain falcon species.

# Live

Go to Saudi Arabia and you will see predominantly sakers, big sakers, the biggest sakers you are ever likely to see. On the Tihama south of Jeddah, barbaries hunt stone curlew (*Burhinus oedicnemus*) and migrating quails to perfection. In Qatar, the shaheen or peregrine is preferred and then there are individuals like Sheba who secretly catch ducks at dusk from the Sheikh's pond with his passage goshawk or *Baz*. Go to the markets of Sharjah and Abu Dhabi and you will see white-fronted *calidus* peregrines, trapped on their annual migration from Siberia to South Africa in the shadow of black shaheens (*Falco peregrinus peregrinator*). Pakistani sakers compete for perch space with Afghan rebels. Falcons from Iran and Iraq are at ease. Some of you out there fly and breed red-naped shaheens (*Falco peregrinus babylonicus*) - or so you think. Take a look at the colour and size variation of barbary falcons (*Falco peregrinus pelegrioides*) in the Sharjah souk and you might think differently!



# & Le

# Falconry i



*arn*

Saudi trapper

# n the Gulf

Article and pictures by Nigel Barton

*International Falconer* February 2001 11

With a resurgence of interest in captive-bred falcons during the past fifteen years, every mathematical formula of falcon hybrid also appears in the markets and falcon veterinary hospitals. With rings removed, who's to say what it is or where it comes from. Many an overpriced wild-caught black *sinjari* saker purchased in Pakistan or Syria has passed through dealers hands with the gullible buyer purchasing little more than a captive-bred black gyr/saker. As a wild-caught falcon it might sell for ten times the price. The Arabs have a special interest in white falcons and on more than one occasion the effects of bleach on feather colouration were quite outstanding. Imagine the buyer's surprise at the onset of moult. Up until about ten years ago there were still people in Arabia who thought juvenile peregrines and adult peregrines were different species. Seems incredible . . . but think



**The effects of bleach on feather colouration were quite outstanding. Imagine the buyer's surprise at the onset of moult.**

about it. The Bedouin are a nomadic people with little to choose from in terms of food. Milk, dates, occasional camel or goat meat and fish for those near the coast. Falconry was a means of providing meat for the family, the houbara bustard (*Chlamydotis undulata*) being the main source, as well as Arabian hare (*Lepus capensis*) and stone curlew. The bustards are only migrating through the desert regions of Arabia during the winter months, after which they return to the breeding grounds of Central Asia. Having trapped a falcon in the autumn it was trained in time for the passage of houbara and at the end of the winter when the houbara left the Arabian desert there was little meat to feed the falcons on and so they were released. Falcons were consequently rarely ever kept through the moult.

Nowadays of course things have changed and most falcons are kept all year round. An exception to this is the Sheikh Zayed Falcon Release Project which releases several hundred pure peregrines and sakers back to the wild each year. The release has taken place each year since 1995 and areas of release have centred around the Himalaya, Karakorum and Hindu Kush. Sites were chosen on natural migration routes with abundant food availability. Over 400 falcons have been released since the programme began and there have been cases

where released falcons have been re-trapped the following year. There is also a case of a lost falcon returning to Siberia to breed and young from this pair were then trapped and recorded in Abu Dhabi! Little is known about the fate of hybrid falcons which are lost during the hunting season but it seems unlikely that they survive and migrate to an area suitable for breeding. Falcon projects in the United Arab Emirates are currently looking at the feasibility of surgically sterilising hybrids to try



### Wild-caught Siberian gyrfalcons



and minimise this risk. About 30% of the falcons in the United Arab Emirates are captive-bred compared to virtually none in Saudi Arabia. Disliked initially in comparison to passage falcons, training techniques have changed amongst Arab falconers so that nowadays they realise how best to achieve good results with captive-bred birds. Hybrids flown in Europe and America are very much chosen for flights in a man-made landscape. Take the UK as an example, put back all the forests and wouldn't

goshawks be popular! Unlike other parts of the world where hybrids are chosen to fly specific prey species in specific habitats, prey is limited largely to houbara for Middle East falconers and emphasis has been on falcon size and beauty. The reality is that a smaller falcon will catch houbara equally well and almost certainly in better style but the size, power and beauty of these large hybrid falcons is desirable.

Nevertheless captive-bred falcon hybrids, especially the larger ones, do have their disadvantages.

Breeding larger falcons usually implies increasing the percentage of gyr in the hybrid. Gyrs are difficult enough to keep healthy at the best of times but put them under the heat stress of the Middle East at the same time as training begins and you realise why the demand for captive-bred falcons remains from year to year. Just as in our part of the world, falconry has been a learning process over centuries, so it must be in the Middle East. The Bedouin have long flown healthy falcons successfully, but in their

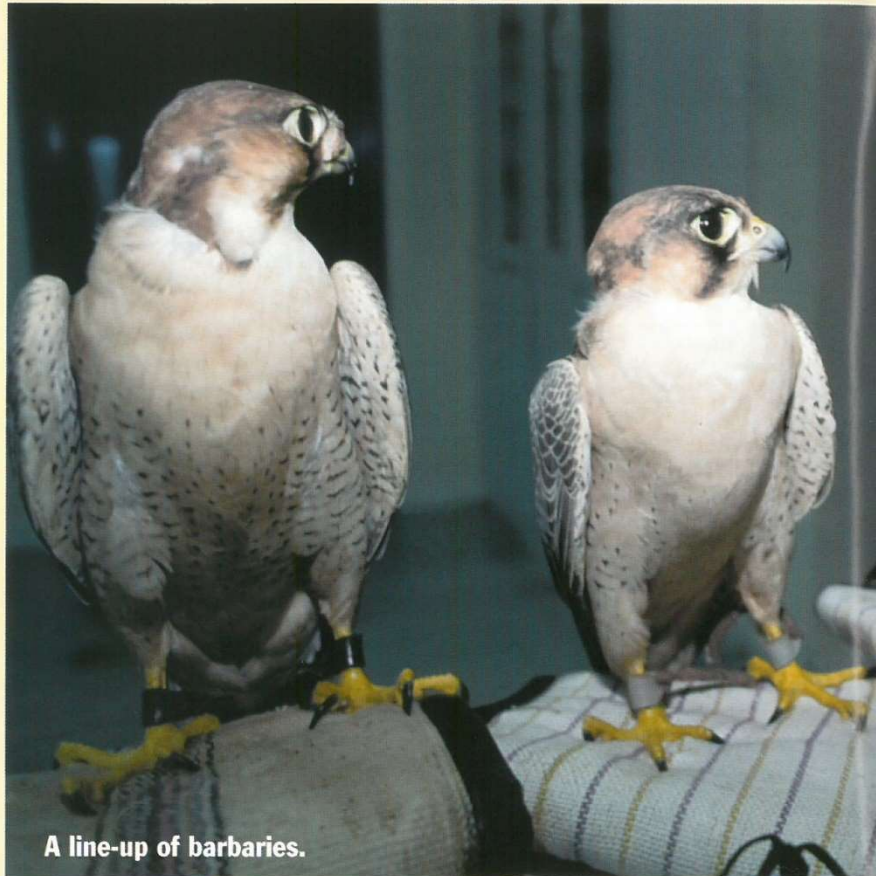
environment and with certain limitations. As a consequence of oil generated wealth, massive changes have hit some Middle Eastern countries resulting in a need to adjust. They are going through a period of learning. Sakers and peregrines have always been bought from local markets and have hunted and survived well. Why should these big white falcons be any different? What are the difficulties of maintaining falcons over the summer? Why is water so important? Why is the larger falcon not male? Why do falcons change colour? Where do they come from? Until quite recently many of the local people did not have or understand the benefits of human medicine. How should they comprehend aspergillosis, viruses and pododermatitis? And if there are medicines, why are there certain cases when the falcon cannot be treated?

Moulting has always been a problem for falcons in the Middle East climate and one way in which this is sometimes overcome is to pull feathers. Unfortunately feather follicle damage, and subsequent poor feather quality due to the high nutritional demand of feather replacement are reason enough not to do this. Toe biting and self mutilation are regular occurrences post-trapping. Hyperkeratinisation causes rapid talon growth, exacerbated by poor perching surfaces. Bumblefoot is still a common problem but management is improving and falconers are becoming more aware that prevention is easier than cure. Tuberculosis and herpes are still

isolated as are cases of malaria. Falcons hacked in mosquito areas are most at risk and cases of malaria are seen each year in imported birds. Avian pox is still prevalent, falcons often contracting the virus during hunting trips. Paramyxovirus is still common amongst the pigeon and quail supplies and early

toe lacerations and hallux injuries; poor fitting hoods cause corneal ulceration, eye trauma and stress when they are scratched off; poor blocks result in bumblefoot; dirty gloves are food for bacterial growth.

Most falconers I know have a thirst for knowledge about raptors in general. Falconers and falconry in



**A line-up of barbaries.**

vaccination is a must. Other as yet unknown avian viruses are no doubt out there and undiscovered. Lead poisoning is becoming less common but still there are people who feed shot items to their falcons and still they come out with the same excuses. There are no excuses. Equipment is readily available from all over the world. Why put poor equipment on valuable falcons? Impractical *subuqs* (jesses) result in

the Middle East are very different. Learning is by hearsay and emphasis is much more on having a bird to do the job and learning is by conversation around the campfire. Species names are hardly apparent. Saker is *hurr*, as is the Arabian horse, thoroughbred camel, saluki and the Arab. It is something precious. There are said to be fourteen distinct races of passage saker or *farqh* and every one is

given a different name. The adult or haggard is called *qurnas*. *Ashgar* and *abiyad* are large, pale sakers, *sinjari* and *shunqar* are dark. *Jarudi* are dorsally barred and *hurr shami* are plain. As in much of Arabia, descriptives are heard in everyday life. Birth dates can be anything from the year of the flood to the year

is an extreme climate in which to keep falcons with temperatures as high as 50° Celsius in the summer with high humidity and cold, dry nights in the winter with frost at higher altitudes. By Royal decree no falcons, captive-bred or otherwise are supposed to enter the country before September 1st each year.



of the *shamal* or sand-storm. How many captive-breeders have been completely bewildered as a mouth-watering 1400g (50oz) gyr/saker is turned down in preference for an 1100g (39oz) bird with fewer spots on its back? Colour is everything, but preferences change.

The past twenty years has seen a remarkable change in veterinary care, management and understanding in the Middle East. It

This is partly to try and reduce trapping pressure but also to reduce mortality of imported falcons during the hot season. Even in October, temperatures are in the high 30's and falcons subjected to the stress of travel and handling are especially susceptible to aspergillosis.

Veterinary recommendations are to begin a prophylactic treatment of an appropriate anti-fungal drug and to continue this for several weeks after

shipping, especially in the case of gyrs and gyr hybrids. As biologists, veterinarians and experienced breeders we take a lot for granted when it comes to understanding. Falconers in our own countries with the benefits of books, videos and a language, most of which they can comprehend, still misunderstand certain concepts and find difficulty in understanding their birds and what makes them function. Twenty years of progress have brought astroturf, vitamin supplements, blocked hoods, rats, quails and day-old chicks, moulting facilities, falcon baths, kites and telemetry to the Middle East. Frustrating as it seems at times, progress is happening relatively quickly. Before falcons are purchased they are often taken to excellent veterinary facilities for X-rays, vaccinations, blood tests and fecal examinations. More importantly, Arabic staff are becoming involved in the daily running of some of these facilities and the UAE will soon see the establishment of the Arab Falconers' Association. I have no doubt that in years to come, an Arabic equivalent of *Hawk Chalk*, *The Austringer*, or other club newsletter will be available.

Nevertheless, despite improvements in management, we should consider where falconry is going. Is there still a need for all these falcons? How are wild populations being affected? Will captive-bred falcons and hybrids become popular in Saudi Arabia? Will the UAE become self-sufficient in breeding in the near future? Will bans on hybrid production be implemented in Europe? Ultimately, why produce and trap all these falcons if there is nothing left to hunt? The fate of the prey species, the houbara bustard, will determine how much longer falconry in Arabia continues. We still do not know harvesting rates for sakers or peregrines but it certainly seems

*calidus peregrine.*



that the houbara is under far more pressure than the falcons themselves. Individual hunting parties are visiting several countries each year. As daily bags decrease so the urge to move to new hunting grounds increases. Despite houbara captive-breeding facilities being established, captive production is negligible compared to what is being hunted. Conservation projects such as the Houbara Bustard Captive Breeding and Restoration Programme of the National Avian Research Centre, Abu Dhabi have been established to try and halt the decline. To make matters worse, hunting seasons are being extended, live houbara are being trapped for training falcons, and the number of countries over which hunting takes place is increasing. It has been suggested that between 4,000-7,000 houbaras are live-trapped on the wintering grounds of Pakistan each year and that this is likely to have a more devastating effect than hunting itself. Shipment mortality for live

houbara is in excess of 50%. But then who are the rest of us to complain. Gone are the great auk (*Pinguinus impennis*) and the North American passenger pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*) and according to the World Conservation Union there are currently 971 bird species suspected to be globally threatened. This represents 10% of all known species. Every year over 6 billion birds of 140 different species migrate from the Pyrenees to North Africa. As many as 900 million of them are killed each year by hunters. However with previous knowledge of species declines and increasing environmental awareness there is no reason why falconry should not be sustainable wherever it is practised and whatever the quarry.

One morning a particular face stood out from the crowd. Bedou, old, wise and weathered. Not for him the city, growth, wealth and change. How to comprehend the advantages of high rise buildings, hotels, fast

cars or even hybrids, all brought to the region by trade and oil. He had no falcon, only a helping hand to support him. Looking at an old black and white photograph from the 1950's in a recently published book, he pointed out his past. The photograph was of Sheikh Saeed, Ruler of Dubai 1912-1958, grandfather of the present ruler, surrounded by his falcons and falconers, seated in the sand, this young man. You can't change history but how he seemed to long for those days of pre-modernisation. He did not speak, nor look around him, but with a smile at the past, he had truly seen it all. ■

*Nigel Barton is co-Editor of the Middle East Falcon Research Group Newsletter FALCO which reports on the many different projects of biology, conservation, veterinary and falconry aspects in the Middle East. The newsletter is online at [www.falcons.co.uk/MEFRG/](http://www.falcons.co.uk/MEFRG/)*



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# Modern training techniques and their benefits for falconry in the field.

by Andrew Reeve

**T**he last ten years have seen dramatic changes in the way falconry is practiced throughout the world. **Conditioned reinforcers, successive approximation and operant conditioning** are just a few of the terms commonly used in the modern falconer's glossary. But what do they mean and what benefits can they really have to further the art of falconry? It is quite apparent by results achieved in the field that some falconers and austringers use many, if not all, of these training techniques at an instinctive level. If one becomes aware of these techniques and, more importantly, their power, then even better falconry can be achieved on a consistent basis. This article aims to demystify the jargon and explain and illustrate how these techniques can hone your current training skills.



Photo: Terry Anthony

By understanding the nuts and bolts of training, a falconer can structure his training programme and consciously plan each small step so that, when added together, the result will be the desired behaviour in its entirety. This process is called **successive approximation** and a trainer following this routine is **shaping** a behaviour. A good trainer will be aware of the importance of rewarding a correct behaviour by using a **positive reinforcer**, in the case of a predator the most powerful positive reinforcer is a food reward. However, never forget that any trained animal can not concentrate fully on the matter in hand if it is

responding to a stimulus as a result of pure hunger, training has moved on from those days of privation. **Discriminative stimulus**, a visual or acoustic signal, when given to the bird consistently will encourage the bird to demonstrate a particular response that is associated with that particular stimulus.

It is immediately apparent that conscious use of these techniques will give any falconer an edge to understanding how his actions influence the hunting outcome. All animals in the wild survive by learning from the outcome of events that they experience. Birds, particularly the predators, have evolved a sophisticated intelligence

designed to enable them to develop the hunting skills and judgement necessary for survival. When a trainer gives a bird consistent commands they become easier to understand allowing the bird to develop its natural intelligence and respond in a reliable manner. Reliability, in any trained animal, can only be achieved through consistency of the trainer.

An example of successful training might read as follows. You are out flying your peregrine tiercel at partridge, he is released down wind of a covey of feeding partridge. The weather is perfect, a crisp, clear day with a blue sky and light breeze. On release the tiercel circles up and makes a good height, whereupon you use a **discriminative stimulus**, waving your glove, to get your tiercel to follow you towards the quarry. As he follows he continues to climb. The partridge have held tight due to the combination of your good field craft and the commanding nature of the tiercel. When your bird is in position you rush towards the covey to effect the flush. Now the bird is given two **discriminative stimuli**, firstly the running in on the covey and secondly the cry of Ho! whilst flushing the covey. When hunted regularly in a consistent manner the bird will recognise the pattern of every move you make together with your verbal commands. If a flight has been well managed and the tiercel has caught its prey then that reward is a positive reinforcement. That reinforcement will encourage the bird to repeat the successful set of behaviours that resulted in the reward.

Conversely, the exact scenario could have a very different result with a newly trained hawk and a falconer that has not considered the effect of each step of the process. The weather conditions are perfect, the falcon has already learnt the

basics and knows that he needs to climb into the wind, all looks well. The falconer slides his hand into his bag to get his glove out in order to encourage his bird to follow him. As before this is a **discriminative stimuli**, but this time the falcon associates the move of the hand with some earlier training when the falconer produces the lure in order to call him back. In anticipation of a lure the falcon begins to lose height, much to the confusion of the falconer. Having lost height the bird no longer commands its prey and the covey make good their escape. To make matters worse the inexperienced peregrine tail chases the partridge and catches a straggler by sheer fluke. The falconer, exhilarated with success, rewards his falcon thus reinforcing undesirable behaviours. In the beginning the discriminative stimulus given was confused with another meaning, the glove should have been ready in the falconer's hand, the covey was flushed prematurely and the bird was rewarded for a tail-chased partridge.

This situation is not as uncommon as one would think. Analysis of the flight from its beginning, tracing every step from the moment you stepped out of your car will help you to identify the pattern of errors. This will not solve the mistakes you have made but it will enable you to alter the behaviour shaping process next time. In the meantime, taking the partridge away from the bird as quickly as possible could have redeemed the situation. Then pick up the bird with no food, hood your falcon and put it down to rest. Before you try to find another flight make your analysis and consciously alter your own behaviours to make the next attempt more successful. If your second attempt is successful then give the ultimate positive reinforcement of a good full crop.

**Positive reinforcement** must be used with great care whilst flying a hunting hawk as it can be very easy to reward for poor performance as well as amazing flights. For instance, if a falcon is released and, after rousing on the fist, takes to the air and then promptly lands on the nearest convenient perch, the falconer may call her back to a baited lure. The falcon has been positively rewarded for the undesired behaviour of landing and the falcon will almost certainly do this again. If the falconer called her to an unbaited lure and picked her up with no food the falcon will realise that there is no benefit in her landing on a perch, after leaving the fist.

**Negative reinforcement** is usually defined as a reprimand, often associated with physical punishment and there is no doubt that there is absolutely no benefit in this kind of training. However, negative reinforcement can also be as simple as ignoring bad behaviour or calling your bird back for no food reward after a feeble flight at quarry. Birds learn from negative reinforcers in the wild and captive situations all the time. For instance, your bird is in hot pursuit of a rabbit, which in an effort to evade the predator, runs under a wire fence. Due to its intense focus, the hunting hawk has not registered that there is a barrier and collides with the fence. This experience is obviously a deeply negative one and the hawk will learn from it and be more careful when approaching fencing another time. In some areas where I hunt there is so much wire sheep fencing that it has been a problem for my birds. My sparrowhawk learnt to close her wings and pass through the fence within her first season after two collisions both of which left her winded. Due to her size the goshawk has to flip over a fence but both birds have learnt to

achieve success in flights that would have otherwise had to have been abandoned by altering their behaviour in response to a negative response.

Conversely, negative reinforcement can also severely limit the career of a promising novice hawk. If a young hawk is flown against a particularly strong prey species, for example the cock pheasant, there may be an occasion when the hawk takes a battering on the catch. This can be negative enough to put them off that prey species for life. Consequently, when deciding to fly a challenging quarry, plan your flights carefully, so you can assist your hawk immediately when it catches large prey. The hawk will be positively rewarded and learn that you are a useful ally.

Another situation where negative reinforcement plays a crucial part is in the very early stages of training. In the good early management of a hawk our aims are to prevent the bird from bating by ensuring that you only man when the bird is conditioned to your presence and will feed off the fist quietly. However, this won't prevent every bate. When your bird does bate, it actually learns from the negative reinforcement of being held back by the jesses not to do it again. In a very stressful situation this reinforcement is overriden by the bird's need to express its fear.

If you want to increase a bird's motivation then it is worth considering making use of a **variable reinforcement scheme** where the bird will never quite know what reward it will receive. Take the example of a rabbit hawk with his gos. In the early days of training your aim will be to regularly catch rabbits and this can be achieved by carefully choosing open warrens whilst ensuring that the slips are relatively easy. However, if you over-do this stage of training the

**Obedience is recognised as the sign of good training. In order to achieve obedience, or a fast response to a given stimulus, the trainer and hawk need to understand the concept of a window of opportunity.**

hawk can become hooked on these flights. The hawk will then refuse the harder slips due to the consistent positive reinforcement of the easier flights. If you vary your reinforcement schedule and give big rewards for quality flights and small ones for the easier flights then the hawk will soon realise that the extra effort in taking on a harder flight is very worth its while. This will not only encourage the hawk to take on more challenging flights but it will increase general motivation.

Obedience is recognised as the sign of good training. In order to achieve obedience, or a fast response to a given stimulus, the trainer and hawk need to understand the concept of a window of opportunity. For instance, if a wild sparrowhawk is hunting a hedgerow and sights quarry there is a split second window of opportunity to take on the flight. If the sparrowhawk does not respond the chance for success is lost. When flying a trained/obedient hawk to the fist or lure the reaction to that window of opportunity for reward should be immediate. If it is not, the bird has clearly chosen not to take the opportunity and the trainer is in danger of becoming the trained as he continues to wave the fist or lure for minutes on end until the bird

eventually decides to come. When it does come it is then being rewarded for a slow response. This is not just a question of appetite, if the bird chooses not to respond, for whatever reason, remove the window of opportunity by hiding the fist or lure and walk away. The bird then learns that a quick response gains the opportunity for reward.

Ultimately, the entire training process revolves around the positive and negative experiences that a bird has, these experiences are known collectively as **operant conditioning**. That is, the trainer only ever rewards for the correct behaviour and ignores or gives no reward when the incorrect response is given. This is an area, which is probably the easiest to implement but where most mistakes are made. If the trainer can keep strict self-control then incorrect rewarding should never happen. Eventually the trainer will have a trained hawk rather than a hawk that responds only to the stimulus of appetite.

In conclusion, I believe that an animal keeper needs to be prepared to understand the animal's needs and psychology as thoroughly as possible. Good training is one way of ensuring that a relationship of deep understanding is developed. Falconers are in an enviable position as they can take the relationship to even greater levels by enabling the bird to hone and satisfy its predatory skills to hunt and kill. If you are determined to understand your training and take it to higher levels of achievement then it is worth investing some of your time in reading the following books which all give excellent descriptions of successful training methods:

*Gamehawk* by Turner and Haslen,  
*Don't shoot the Dog* by Pryor,  
*A Hawk for the Bush* by Jack Mavrogordato. ■



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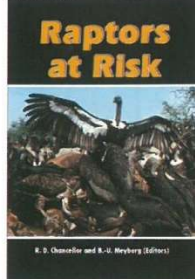


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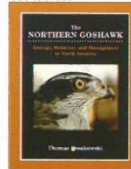
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# ONE GHIAS

by Nicholas Kester

# AFTER

American falconers will say: "told you so" for they have infinitely more experience of this. But for the humble Brit, this was an unusual, unexpected and unpleasant afternoon's game hawking.

Each year British Falconers' Club director, John Fairclough takes a cadge of falcons to his Hebridean croft from which he provides splendid sport for his friends. But 2000 was a marred year.

The Western Isles of Scotland are a wonderful place in September. Bright light sears the late summer hills and John's guests vie with each other to be the first to spot St Kilda; a small group of now uninhabited islands some 30 miles off the west coast of Lewis. Yet in as many minutes the weather can shift dramatically as you watch a driving sea wind bring in a slashing rain that chills to the bone, but before it has started it can be over, and the sun warms as you move on to the next beat.

Morsgail Lodge is not on the



Photo: Nicholas Kester

estate, but marches with it and thus provides an entrance point when the wind is from the southeast. One of the loveliest lodges on an island not renowned for its 'pretty' houses - they are more often stark and imposing or squat and gable-end on to the prevailing winds - Morsgail sits on its own loch within a small

grove of pines and mountain ash at the end of a drive that follows the meandering curves of its spate river.

We do not park at the lodge itself, but on a small grassed pull-in so as not to interrupt the privacy of the occupants. From here we prepare for the hike. It will be a fair hike into our moor so we ready

# TILLY NOON...



ourselves with the two tiercels - Monty and Mars - and two pointers and one setter. Whilst John and I take falcons, hapless guests are burdened with dogs; well they need the extra pulling power to get up the hills! Skirting the back of the lodge, we strike out under the three hills before letting the first dog run. The

weather is so hot that by the second fence line we go to 'shirt-sleeves order' leaving the sheep-wire draped like a washing line.

Soon we have a point. John elects to fly Monty first and the well-established routine is re-enacted. Spare dogs and guests are marshalled to a good vantage point.

One that will not cause the falcon to wander over to them and off the falconer. I will head the point to effect the flush, but before that John strikes the hood and holds Monty up into the wind for a mute and a rouse.

Unusually, the falcon does neither. We wait his pleasure for three or four minutes, but still he doesn't lift off the fist. In fact he is almost crouched down. Something is wrong but what? We scan the near ground and sky for distractions and see it together. Hood on, jesses quickly secured. The golden eagle is drifting towards us in a nonchalant fashion, unconcerned with our presence, checking us out. He cruises past on the upper air - surely he has business elsewhere. Or so it seems. For within minutes he is over the hills and out of sight. But we take no chances, bust the flush that the patient pointer has held for us, and move off.

For fifteen or more minutes we draw blank on the beat. At which point I should perhaps give a more accurate sketch of the area. Imagine standing with your back to three hills each in excess of 300 metres. A southerly breeze is blowing up the face making for perfect lift. In front of you is a slope of uninterrupted heather extending some four kilometres across and two deep ending in a further two kilometres of

**Suddenly, and without warning, Monty is racing down the wind. No grouse have flushed. The dog is steady on point. The falcon is seeking sanctuary, going as fast as he can.**

Photo: Nicholas Kester

broken ground made up of classic Scottish lochs and their smaller cousins, lochans. The afternoon sun sparkles on the surface of this scene over which a final range of blue-grey hills, more serious at 4-600 metres, provides a striking backdrop, and further still but out of sight lies Harris and the southern isles.

It is against this stunning canvas that we eventually achieve a second point. Everyone scans the horizons for several minutes and, leaving the sharpest eyes of them all to make the final decision, Monty rises without question. Using the descending ridge from the furthest of the three hills for better lift, he climbs. Two, three and four hundred feet. It is going well. The guests know the form: keep your eyes on

the falcon if you want to see the flight. I, on the other hand, am already making round the point as John prepares to call the tiercel over for the flush.

Suddenly, and without warning, Monty is racing down the wind. No grouse have flushed. The dog is steady on point. The falcon is seeking sanctuary, going as fast as he can. We shout it at the same time. John is quick with the lure and yesterday's dead grouse. Any temptation that he can conjure for, despite being at 2000 feet, the two eagles mean business. Where did they come from so quickly? On John's command I bust the flush in the hopes of distracting them from their deadly purpose. They are unaffected by our shouts and the

departing grouse. So we start to run. The little falcon is nowhere to be seen but the eagles are mobbing the heather at the bottom of this natural amphitheatre. He must have made it to a peat hag and be crouched safely. More shouting and they give up their attack setting sail for the far hills.

Out with the telemetry. A strong and unmoving signal sounds. Stay still little falcon whilst we find you. We walk past him three times. Why no bells? The answer is tragic. Undamaged apart from two punctures from those mighty talons, he rests on a tussock, dark eye glazing in the sinking sun. We go home.

So why did the eagles attack? John has flown in the Hebrides for



fifteen plus seasons and despite seeing eagles in close proximity has never experienced anything as direct as this, nor from two. Territory challenges usually end in mobbing flights but not kills. Perhaps the rabbits are to blame. The Hebrides was heaving in rabbits. The only ground predators are mink from failed fur farms, so the avian predators have always benefited from a flourishing food source that even the locals ignore. In 1998 rabbits were plentiful, but in 1999 the population crashed leaving limited pockets and concentrating the raptors. By 2000 many of these had also succumbed to the disease - not thought to be myxomatosis but a chronic virus that can kill them in 24 hours. The predators were desperate and any food opportunity

was taken advantage of. Morsgail, as with the rest of Lewis, has a drastically reduced rabbit population and we had placed our little tiercel inside a compressed food source which was already home to several hard-pressed raptors. The residents would have been more than usually aggressive as a result.

I had experienced a similar, if less threatening, display on another part of Lewis. Whenever I flew my goshawk at another reducing pocket of rabbits, two or three buzzards would cruise over mewing like protesting tomcats. They had not the courage to act more aggressively but they were sufficiently disconcerting to the gos to disrupt hawking.

The following day found us on another hill flying Mars above another point. Once again the

conditions were perfect and the larger tiercel found a fine pitch. On John's command, I flushed a grouse that sped down the wind. With exceptional style he killed in front of the same audience, who had witnessed our earlier tragedy. There was a moment as Mars bound to the grouse, which I cannot really describe. A strange feeling of sadness filtered through the elation of the flight. I sense the others felt it to, for there was an infinitesimal sting in the air that touched us all as we remembered Monty. ■



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The second in a series  
of three articles by  
Frank L. Beebe

# SUPER

**Y**oung gyrfalcons (and goshawks too) fledge and fly quite early; by mid-June to early July across the North American mainland sub-arctic, with the white birds but a week to ten days later across the high-arctic eastern mainland and the archipelago. Accordingly, any legal arctic capture-season can be arctic-summer long, beginning in July and extending through to late September, doubtfully much into October, because by mid-October the normal arctic weather becomes entirely too visitor-hazardous.

All of the Canadian eastern (Nunavut) arctic and all of the western arctic east of the Mackenzie River and north of Yellowknife is accessible only by air. So in this entire area raptor-capture attempts must be confined to either the near-vicinity of one of the widely-separated arctic villages, or, alternatively, to one of the larger number of licenced non-resident fly-in hunting or fishing lodges. On the visitor facilities available in either of these, a non-resident licensee, as a paying guest, must be dependent for food and lodging.

While the above limitations might appear to a prospective visitor to be severely limiting of any chance of success, be reassured. The locating of a gyrfalcon capture-set near either of these, actually provides a better chance than a



random set away off by itself on the tundra. This is especially true of a set located about a half-mile, more or less, from one of the villages. These tiny areas of permanent human presence are actually attractive to first-year gyrfalcons in two ways. Nesting gyrfalcons often have scavenging ravens co-nesting on the same cliff, and most young gyrfalcons develop some of their early flying-skills in complex aerial roundabouts with ravens.

The natural untidiness of isolated human settlements provides a continuous food supply for ravens, and these flocks of slope-soaring, tumbling village ravens, endlessly aloft above some favourite hill-crest, are visible to falcons for miles distant in all directions. Drawn briefly to them is almost every curious, roving first-year gyrfalcon that comes within sight.

The second attraction that

# FALCON

PART  
TWO



regularly holds small numbers of first-year gyrfalcons in close proximity to many of the arctic coastline or riverside villages, is the presence of headless, split, red-fleshed arctic char, exposed to wind and summer-sun on willow-wand fish-drying racks. First-year gyrfalcons, drawn from afar to raven-flocks, usually join with them briefly in their aerial play, but soon depart. Young falcons drawn by ravens to where drying arctic char

are on display, tend to linger and fill up on this free food.

Surprised? So was I.

The far western, mountainous sector of high-latitude North America does have widespread, if also wide-spaced, accessibility by motor vehicle. Alaska, Yukon Territory, western Northwest Territories and northern British Columbia, have thousands of miles of linked, wilderness gravel roads. Most of these branch off from the

paved Alaska highway to wander off, usually to dead-end destinations. Some of these ramble on for hundreds of trafficless miles to reach wherever it is they are going. All of these endless miles through the very best northern goshawk landscapes on the continent, as well as across some of the best timberline gray gyrfalcon landscapes too.

Throughout this entire region the most productive sets for both

species occur at the tree-line; this regardless of whether the tree-line is altitude or latitude defined. The gyrfalcons really do prefer these open landscapes. Goshawks don't, necessarily, except that in summer both willow ptarmigan and arctic ground-squirrels are much more abundant just above the elevation tree-line than anywhere else. Also, the wide visibility of tree-line sets does make them more productive for catching goshawks, even in areas where the hawks may be less abundant than on lower, but vision-obstructing forest-land. Throughout this entire western region, at every such tree-line set that I have manned, the number of gyrfalcons drawn to it regularly outnumbers, by five or more to one, the number of goshawks also attracted.

Seamless banded domestic falcons of many kinds, including peregrines and gyrfalcons, have been legally moved from North America across International borders with CITES permits ever since the showdown Yukon trial in 1987. The seamless bands, slipped over the feet of small growing fledglings, becoming unremoveable when these are grown and thus proof-positive of their domestic origin. Similarly, but not always identically banded for international shipment, are many species of parrots, these in far greater numbers and from more diverse and widespread points-of-origin. Most of these CITES registered parrots are just as securely banded as any CITES registered domestic gyrfalcon; yet most of these psittacines are not domestic-produced nor are they seamless banded. On these the enabling, identifying leg-bands are Hess-bands, manufactured in Germany and Switzerland for CITES control

of the international pet-trade in this genera of birds. These Hess-bands are just as suitable for the identification of point-of-origin, when affixed to a legally wild-captured falcon of any kind, as they are for parrots. Once affixed, the Hess-bands can not be removed without breaking, and any band that can resist, undamaged, the bite of a Palm Cockatoo or Hyacinth Macaw can definitely survive the much less powerful bite of any gyrfalcon. So the Euro-socialist Stockholm (CITES) treaty problem of permanent marking, for both legal ownership-transfer and proof of origin, for any kind of wild-captured raptor has been solved and available for some time.

Because of the proximity to a village or other visitor facility that arctic North American falcon-capture attempts must be made, (except in the sparse-roaded western sector) the operators equipment and methods of capture are subject to close scrutiny. Sets made within a half-mile of a village always draw some attention. From within the resident, mostly native, population I have encountered only genuine interest and curiosity, often mixed with scepticism, but never with suspicion or sly resentment. The attitude of summer-resident or short-term resident outsiders, especially from bureaucrats and other 'professionals' working on projects originating from outside the native communities, is less predictable. From these, rather too often, comes suspicion and devious questioning.

It is in the continued use of late nineteenth-century methods of peregrine falcon capture, using live, expendable pigeons, that visiting falconers are most vulnerable. Vulnerable, because this practice,

can so readily be publicity-manipulated to create a controversy sufficient to terminate any experimental U-catch, project. In Britain the use of live-lures for any falconry-related purpose, is already illegal, even to just the serving of full-winged, free-flying pigeons. The only way for North American falconry to avoid the risk of something similar is to revise our capture and training methods by improvements in the design and use of artificial quarries for both purposes.

However, insofar as their sustained all-weather usefulness is concerned, live pigeons, for gyrfalcons, just aren't very effective anyway. Additionally there are other excellent practical reasons for either eliminating the use of pigeons altogether or reducing their use to very small numbers, and in ways that ensure their complete protection when in use. Why? Well, the situation anywhere in say Nunavut, is this:

Every bit of capture-equipment must be air transported (scheduled or charter) to the chosen village or guest-lodge, then from the landing strip either carried by hand, on foot, or (with luck) ATV transported, another half-mile or more out to some far-visibility hilltop capture-site. Under these conditions even one crate of expendable bait-pigeons, together with their attendant bags of food and daily requirement of liquid water, combine to make them the most aggravating, time-consuming and expensive appendage to have to drag along on any kind of remote-country expedition.





**Left: Setting up in a meadow at the tree-line in Chilkat Pass**

**Below: Two gyrfalcons (females) captured on pigeons by the Spring brothers (Mike Beebe in between)**



With such a problem multiplied tenfold, how, then, did the overland falcon-catchers of antiquity manage? They certainly did catch falcons. Equally certain; they did not take with them on a thousand-mile journey in continuous sub-zero temperatures, any ton or more of mixed-grain pigeon food plus any hundred crates of live pigeons. No way!

So the sensible thing, now as then, is to abandon the whole idea of utilising expendable pigeons. If you feel you absolutely must take

pigeons, as few as two can easily be made adequate for several falcon-captures - well, maybe just near-captures. Complete protection does require the use of some kind of equally effective substitute for the exposed, live-pigeon aerial lure. Solve this, and immediately the fake attractor, if effective, delivers big rewards. In addition to major cutting of time, bulk and expenses, the non-resident falcon-catcher can from then on, invite close ethical scrutiny with unworried confidence.

So why not take the last step and

try to come up with a capture technique which doesn't depend on live-lures at all. The first-year gyrfalcons which are so regularly attracted to the red-fleshed arctic char on the drying-racks is the clue. Attracted to this are the young birds only; which are, of course, even by September, no more than sixty days out of the nest. Are these not still teetering on the leaving-edge of food-dependence? So perhaps at a catchers-set they might be more interested in a dead (or fake-dying) food-item than in any head-up,

alert-looking live one? Given a try, it turns out that indeed they are.

So why and from where comes this contemporary fixation on the use of live pigeons? Two words: first: Tradition. Second: Valkenswaard. At Valkenswaard: An erect pole, some seven yards (metres) or more in height and two live pigeons, one a lure-pigeon, the other a catch-pigeon; both expendable, the latter always so. The lure-pigeon is short-line attached, about one-third of the distance from the pole, to a much longer line fixed to the top of the pole; this pigeon to be lifted, then let fall, fluttering back down to the ground, by an operator hidden in a blind at the two-thirds further line-end, outward from the pole. The catcher-pigeon is tied to a separate ground-line and is moveable, by that line, to a fixed stop exactly centered within the diameter of a bow-net. Finally, a shrike held captive on a short line and provided with a hiding-place; is to reveal by excited chattering, the far-off sighting of a falcon.

Sophisticated, yet primitive, the Valkenswaard set-up was a lone twentieth-century survivor of the hundreds of others that earlier, must have operated all across ancient and medieval Eurasia for the commercial capture of autumn-migrant peregrine and saker falcons. Here at Valkenswaard on the North Sea coast of Holland this particular enterprise had been privately owned by the Mollen family for generations. Because it was Dutch-Royalty sponsored and not wilderness-isolated, it remained functional into the early twentieth century. Eventually the entire layout was photograph-recorded, and (US) *National Geographic Magazine*, publicised. It thus

bridged the falconry hiatus of the renaissance to become, twentieth-century, widely known. Some modified variant of this layout is still the arrangement most utilised by raptor trappers all across North America. Currently, in conjunction with mistnets, it is utilized by raptor banders far more than by falconers, at fixed, annually autumn-activated capture-sites, on known mid-latitude raptor migration routes in Canada and the USA.

Essentially the same layout of vertical fixed pole, hut-concealed operator and pull-string controls may well have been basic for the gyrfalcon-catchers too, but the details had to be quite different. The gyrfalcon trappers must have crafted their aerial lures and ground-capture decoys from natural materials readily available and at hand. But if so, how? The records are evasive, "by means of various nets and snares" covers everything and reveals nothing. Of course in their time it was also to their best interest to keep successful methods as secret as possible. Yet, because the capture-problems they encountered have not changed, and were exactly the same then, as now, there is a high probability that anything currently devised and successful, was known to them. Observant and highly motivated, pre-twentieth century falcon trappers, discerning the meaning of certain behaviour, would lose no time devising a like capture-tactic, even when utilising entirely different materials.

So now to an analytical examination of what has been recorded. Here, my own early experience allows me to know with certainty the unyielding parameters that controlled the timing of the overland expeditions.

From 1926 to 1935 my adolescent and early adult life was in a family-built log house on a quarter-section pioneer homestead in the boreal forest of the Rocky Mountain foothills of midwestern Alberta. This is essentially the same latitude, kind of landscape, climate and forest-cover as is the Eurasian taiga. My location: One hundred miles west of Edmonton, thirty miles east of Edson, twelve miles, north of the Edmonton-Jasper highway, six miles north of the mainline Yellowhead Pass, trans-Canadian National railway.

At the time, except in the cities, there were no asphalt roads in Western Canada, and only the main highways were doubtfully 'all weather' gravelled. Secondary roads were of ditched natural subsoil, never snowploughed in winter and only occasionally summer-graded. Travel on these was impossible for anything but horse-drawn sleighs during the entire snowcovered mid-October to mid-March winter. Come spring, swiftly following the March equinox, and they deteriorated to absolutely impassable, other than on foot or on horseback; this from mid-March through to mid, or even late June. The sequence begins with rapid snowmelt, coupled with extremely treacherous under-snow softening of river-ice preceding high water and unpredictable ice-jam flooding caused by the mid-April ice-breakup. Following this comes the slow thawing and even slower draining of the snowmelt-soaked, frozen ground. In boreal (taiga) forest landscapes, devoid of airstrips, asphalt-surfaced, or graded gravel roads, all common-sense human travel stops during this entire period.

The same parameters governed pre-industrial human movement



**Kim Hodgson and his jerkin "Superfalcon". Chilkat Pass, September 1999.**

across the entire Eurasian taiga. So the overland, usually horse-drawn expeditions had to begin their northward journey by mid February at the latest, so as to move straight-line across hard-frozen snow-covered land, swamp, lake or river three weeks or more ahead of the thaw, and depend on keeping the northward progress rapid enough to maintain frozen terrain beneath them. Ahead of their caravan of animal-drawn sleighs and sleds lay some three months of slow, cold, snow-drifted, brutally difficult and weather-beset travel. The objective: To reach, permafrost tundra north of the latitudinal tree-line, by mid June. Once there to break into smaller groups and spread out, miles wided spaced, to set up multiple semi-permanent summer trapping camps, these perhaps a

half-mile or so removed from previously-proven productive capture-sites. The capture sites: Certain ridges, hilltops, river-bordering hill-scarps, or shoreline headlands. Special places all, proven points of concentration for singles, or small groups of random-roving first-year gyrfalcons. The capture season: A maximum of between sixty and seventy days, often less; from mid June to early September. The operator-hut, at such sites, was surely kept continuously relay-manned for the entire time; this about a thousand hours total, for each set, because here, at this time of year, there is no night.

There may well have been some continuation of opportunistic late-August early September captures on the more northerly part of the

return, perhaps for goshawks all the way back, but only when such captures could be effected without slowing the caravan. Because this return journey was burdened with the summer catch of falcons, these consuming prodigious amounts of fresh meat (or fish), the providing of which must have been a continuous second-priority to haste. Return-time delay was profit risked. Yet on this journey, if haste was essential it was also possible. From late August through September, sometimes on to mid or late October, the land and weather of the taiga is at its very best. Excepting only across the muskegs, the land is dry and firm, the air mosquito and tabanid free, stream-levels are low and most rivers fordable. The return had to be on wheels, which wheels must have been an integral part of the



**The fabric and rubber fake jerkin.**

cargo earlier taken across the snow and ice of the road north.

The return expedition(s) reached the inhabited mid-latitude cities (Moscow Kiev) between late September and mid-October. While the approximate six-week return was surely made in less than half the time required for the frightful northward journey, the ground-distance covered was surely longer because it was less direct. So there had to be two trails, not at all following the same course. The frozen sleigh-trail north very direct, crossing pine ridge, muskeg, lake or river, straight-line, just as the mine-supply ore-haul ice-roads of northern Canada do now. The return trail south, except for haste, hardship-free, but winding and

indirect, holding to dry ridges, stream-divides, the top of sand eskers, through well-drained deciduous woodlands and sand-soil pine forests, evading lakes and muskegs and seeking major streams only where these were fordable.

The mostly Denmark-based marine expeditions to Iceland and Greenland followed a similar schedule, although to avoid pack and shore-ice departed much later, but also travelled much faster. These took with them, usually in the form of live goats and sheep, most of the estimated falcon-food required. Both brought back first-year gyrfalcons in recorded numbers that, if duplicated today, would be cause for apoplectic protectionist screams of horror and

imminent extinction.

The historic gyrfalcon trade was driven by privileged-class demand; this demand quite as much prestige as recreation oriented. The demand sector is far the better recorded, because on this side only were there educated people to record. From these we know the timing of the expeditions and that the ancient and medieval trade in captured gyrfalcons was of millenia-long duration and encompassed the entire northern sector of the known world, extending right across the entire Eurasian arctic-subarctic from eastern Greenland to Kamchatka.

From the magnitude and the time-duration of this historic trade two conclusions do become



impressively evident. One: Almost anywhere north of the sixtieth parallel, near to or, in altitude, above the boreal (taiga) forest, gyrfalcons are universally present, whether noticeably so to humans or not. Extensive, flat boggy tundra does have low appeal for them, but in subarctic and arctic mountainous and hill country, glaciated rock-tundra and deltas they are by far the most abundant all-season avian predator. In many areas they are the only one and at some natural concentrating points regularly become so over-abundant as to annually overwhelm the local food-supply. Two: The first-year birds must have been easily captured by skilful use of simple equipment. This has not changed. The aspect of gyrfalcon trapping most surprising

to a novice is how regularly a falcon becomes visible immediately following the setting up of a trapping site and the repeated lifting up of some kind of distance-visible lure into the air. Gyrfalcons really do escape human vision most of the time, until something happens within their sight-range that interests them.

To so attract their attention and lure young gyrfalcons to the capture-set is easy. To achieve their capture too, but not by the Mollen method. Even the luring-in when using a live pigeon as the initial aerial lure, is but marginally effective. A live pigeon is arctic-functional only when combined with exceptionally warm arctic-summer temperature combined with still air. In cold wind, or in wet blowing

snow, either of which or both together is quite normal at any time in an arctic summer, a live pigeon is so quickly an expended dead pigeon as to be almost useless.

Willow and rock ptarmigan, the most important of winged prey for gyrfalcons, are white-winged year round. They are accordingly highly visible in flight during the blue-sky, dark-ground arctic summer. Almost any white fluttery thing going up, down, and roundabout in the air will draw any passing first-year gyrfalcon toward it to investigate, but unless it also looks somewhat like a ptarmigan close-up, will not hold attention. Even crude imitation ptarmigan, if made light-weight and reliable on the spin or flutter-down, do work well. I feel sure that a light, quickly crafted arrangement

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of furred leather and ptarmigan wings was for sure one of the flashing 'come-hither' lures regularly utilised by the professional trappers. But not the best one.

Now any falconer who has regularly flown any of the large falcons for any length of time, quickly becomes aware that there is absolutely nothing more compellingly attractive to a passing first-year wild falcon, than another first-year falcon, especially when the 'other' (falconer's) falcon appears about to be successful in catching something; as when down-looking and close-ringing over one spot, or repeatedly stooping to a lure. Think those outdoor-living professional falcon-trappers didn't know that? Of course they did; and knowing made lightweight artificial falcons of a roll of fur, or a severed fox-tail, to effect a lightweight body, and to that attached falcon, gull or jaeger wings. Then, from this effigy, effected quite convincing aerial falcon-behaviour once it was attached to the pull-line. Given these same materials, (with no late twentieth-century illegalities attached) I know I could craft such an effigy in less than an hour. And following, get the desired results from it, too.

Because I have. Not with fox-tail and falcon-wings cobbled together on site, but with a lightweight tiercel-gyr size fake-falcon, made of modern flexible synthetics, that looks and flies so alike to a repeat-stooping falcon, that, at one set in Chilkat Pass attracted to it five first-year gyrfalcons. Not in sequence. All five together. Could a falcon-winged foxtail do the same? Of course, and probably did; many places, countless times.

To achieve the next step, a no-

miss, nonliving, capture-lure was more elusive. Attracted to traditional sets, these wandering first-summer gyrfalcons are not at all alike in behaviour, to the late-season migrant raptors, the peregrines, merlins, goshawks, red-tails and sharpshins, which, highly motivated, come full-tilt, into the bird-banders' mist-nets. Yet these are gyrfalcons, supposedly the swiftest, bravest and most reckless of all. As indeed they are, but not here, not yet. From within the limited visibility of the blind, they appear as suddenly as if conjured by magic from the air itself, but not at all intensely focused and motivated, just casually floating about in slow, wing-waving, tail-depressed harrier-flight; interested, but as tentatively indecisive as butterflies.

Some arrive as singles, but all too often, for traditional pigeon-lure sets, they appear in groups of two, three, or four. Given enough time free of interference from another one coming in, the loners are catchable; but not any of the multiples. Here the fake bird again proves to be a better initial attractant than a real one. With the deactivated artificial lure inert on the ground, the falcons shift attention at once to the real thing, the difference being either discerned, or the inert lure simply ignored. But with a live catch-pigeon, be it screen-protected or not, they are distressingly reluctant to close. They appear determined to scare it into flight, making pass after pass above it with slow-waving wings, sometimes dropping their feet in a false strike, but as often not even that. Mist-nets can make occasional catches, but even these are more often seen and either avoided or touched so lightly as to

cause a near-catch. Then, with the net down, and the falconer out of his blind to re-set, away go(es) the falcon(s). Usually, but not always.

Lone birds can keep this play going for a long time. Usually they make repeated flushing-passes for between five and twenty minutes before wandering off. Re-activating the flying lure may then bring them right back for a repeat, and this several times over. The individuals that do manage to get themselves caught usually achieve this by landing on the ground twelve to twenty feet from the bait pigeon, then approaching on foot, still undecided and tentative, but to eventually close with the pigeon, or, with one wire-mesh protected, try to, and thus terminate things by being toe-noosed or netted.

Now, because of the complexity of what follows, I must consistently refer to the different sexes, from here on, as 'jerkin' for the male and will use the term, 'falcon' in the classic way, strictly for the female.

Seldom indeed, can any of the various multiples be captured with traditional equipment. These multiples are occasionally pairs, jerkin and falcon, but more often, two falcons.

Triples are sometimes one jerkin and two falcons, but just as often, three falcons. The largest group I have encountered were the five in Chilkat Pass in early October of 1996. Here, the association was one jerkin accompanied by four falcons.

There are several interpretations possible to explain the meaning of these loose, but continuous June to October social groups of first-year gyrs. One: they are sibling groups, that retain interdependency for an unknown post-fledging period.

Two: When in pairs or triples, if jerkin and falcon(s) the jerkin is the

providor, the falcon(s) free-loading dependents or semi-dependents.

Three: The groups are equally interdependent and are learning the advantages of co-operative hunting. (Paired adults often do hunt co-operatively, using quite advanced methods). Jerkin/falcon twosomes: Any of the foregoing; the same for the triples of one jerkin and two (or more) falcons.

I have my own interpretation of what is really happening here; plus some convincing, falconer-only end-experience to back my conclusions. Any group of two or three falcons together are probably sibling groups, but whenever a jerkin is present he is not necessarily a sibling. The falcons, siblings or not, have attached themselves to him and he is, perforce, killing for all. An imposed arrangement which has rather dark implications.

Regardless, for the moment, of what these may be, none of these arctic-summer gyrs appear hard-pressed at all. Their behaviour rather suggests just carefree wandering and hunting-for-fun. This may be more impression than fact, but is indicated by their apparently careless abandonment of attempts to kill the medium-size live-quarry (pigeon) that fails to flee from them. So if the falcons are imposed dependents, then the summer jerkins, do give an appearance of providing for them, with ease.

At the capture-sites the only jerkin that can be captured with live-bait is one of the extremely few that arrive unescorted. When accompanied by a falcon(s) they are always 'bumped' and forced to keep flying, every time they attempt to alight, or even slow, when anywhere near to the bait-pigeon. Two or three falcons do exactly the same to one another when they appear as a

group. Of the twosomes it is only the falcon of a jerkin-falcon couple which can be occasionally captured. The 'bump' is interesting and happens often enough at slow speed to be observable. The bumper just overpasses the bumpee and thumps him (her) on the back with closed feet. Sometimes a fake-falcon lure is thumped by incoming birds in exactly the same way. Anyway, this constant, determined back-and-forth interference nearly always results in the lot drifting off together with none caught, even when the visit lasts for an hour or more.

I suspect the professionals of antiquity were away ahead of us here, and knew exactly how to capture nearly every one of such a group, jerkin or falcon, that came to their sets. But how? When these young birds are attracted to what appears to be a jerkin making repeated passes at something on the ground, what are they expecting to find? The answer is so obvious. They are expecting to see something either fresh-killed and just lying there inert, or something badly injured and (by a falcon) easily pre-empted. So why not try presenting them with as exactly as possible, what they expect, and then see what happens.

You can catch them all. So simple. Just a chunk of fresh red meat or red arctic char, ringed by feathers, and secured to a noose-carpet or, if preferred, centered in the ring of a bow-net. Or a dead pigeon, ground-squirrel or ptarmigan, also feather strewn, and with red-meat exposed. An invisible nylon monofilament pull-line to flick a wing or sound a dog-toy squeaker helps to draw attention. The nonsense stops. They are down and at it at once. The sun-cured

char has the merit of being locally available at most arctic seacoast villages is decay-resistant and retains indefinitely the appetising fresh-flesh colour and texture. Alternatively: When abundant, lemmings are an important food item brought to gyrfalcon nestlings. So in a low, flat noose-cage, secured to a noose-carpet, two or three brown hamsters - very alike to lemmings in size and colour - should work equally well.

I do not really know which to recommend. I am convinced that as live bait, small mammals will work much better than pigeon-size birds, but I have not tried this. Hamsters are easy to look after and transport, requiring less space and are less difficult to screen-protect when in use. Also because all gyrs know full well that furry things can not fly, their use should also eliminate the obsessive overpassing of an avian bait-quarry in vain attempts to make it fly.

To adequately cope with the problem posed by group arrivals, requires a minimum of two well-separated capture-sets. This separates the individuals and so brings them down. Once on the ground, one or the other, sometimes both, are usually caught. Now if either of these is a jerkin, you then have in your hands, the ten-to-one lottery prize of falconry, the one and only superfalcon. Treasure it above all others. Train it. Fly it. Only then can you know. ■

To be continued.

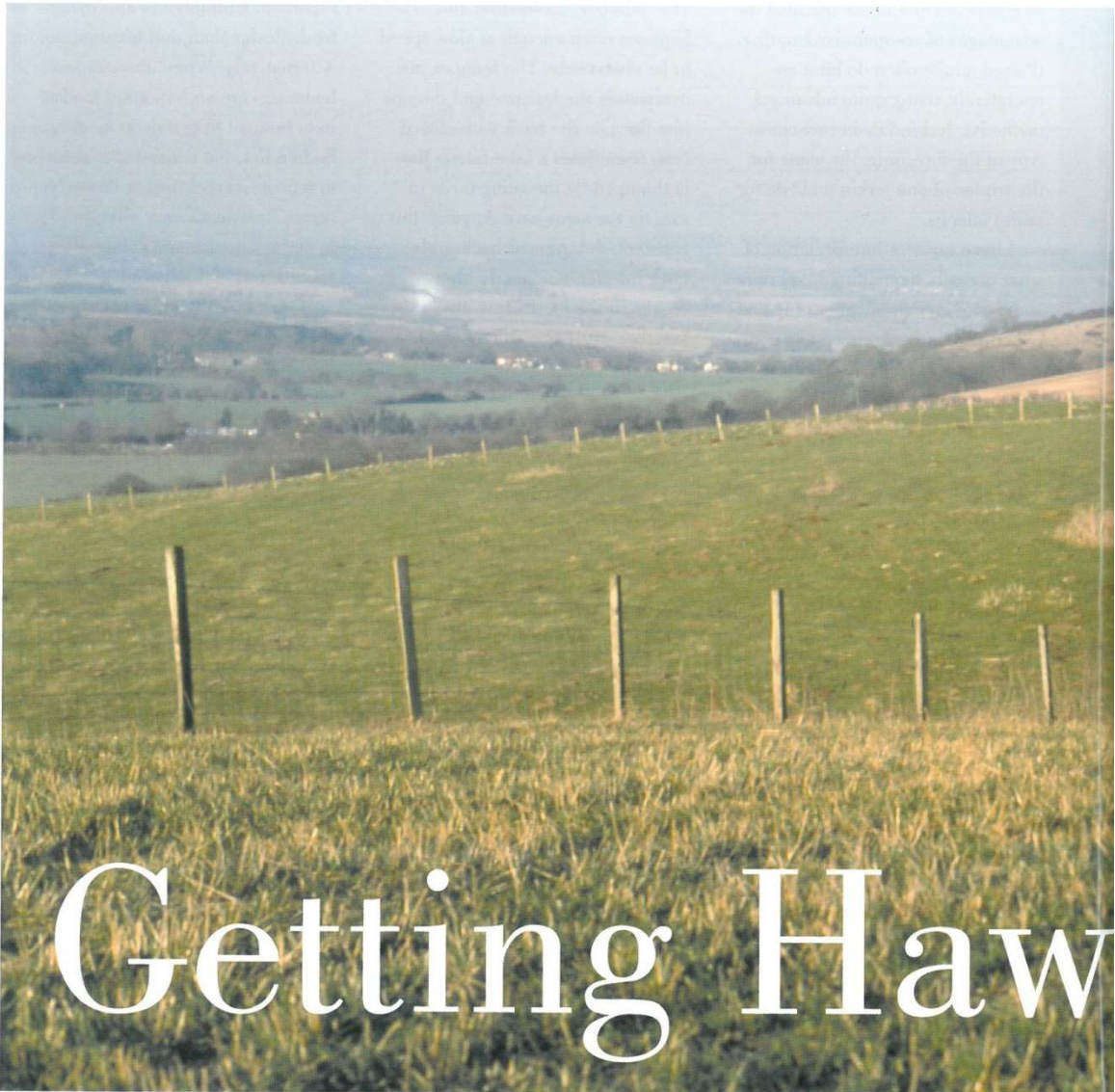
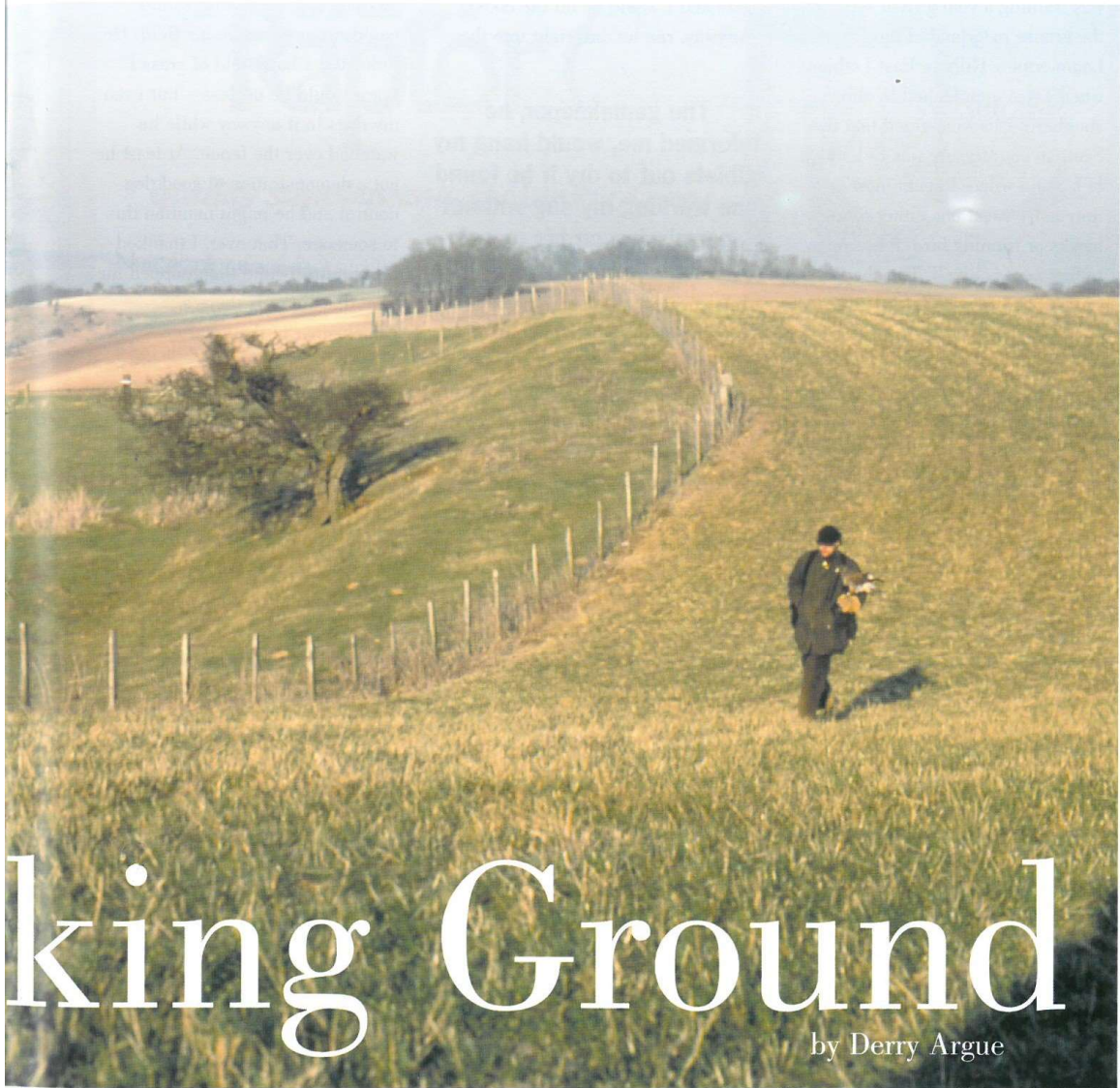


Photo: Terry Anthony

# Getting Haw

**T**he ease or difficulty of getting access to land suitable for falconry will obviously depend primarily on where you are. Some falconers are lucky enough to have free access to vast areas of public land but most will depend on the generosity of the landowners, whether they pay a rent for their sport or get it for free. This article is aimed at readers in this latter category and my experiences are limited to the UK.


I have been farming on my own account or managing other people's property as a



# Finding Ground

by Derry Argue

chartered surveyor and sporting agent in Scotland for most of my life. On the other hand I am a falconer and dog trainer who needs access to a lot of land for my sport. The Editor suggested that this might give me some insight into the problems of finding ground from both sides of the fence. How would I go about finding ground and, as someone managing land for a client, what would encourage a landowner to allow falconry on his property?



My introduction to getting permission came about this way: Soon after arriving in Scotland I was training a young Irish setter on the grouse moorland of the Lammermuir Hills in East Lothian when I was approached by the shepherd. I had imagined that the Scottish countryside was like much of Ireland where I spent most university vacations either flying hawks or running bird dogs - open to free access by all. The shepherd quickly and gently disillusioned me. The gamekeeper, he informed me, would hang my giblets out to dry if he found me working my dog without permission on his moor! So I set off to make myself known to Willie Veitch who was to become a firm friend up to the time of his death some years later.

Every countryman in the north east of Scotland at that time would have known Willie. He was a pretty tough little character and just as likely to tell a senior diplomat or a lord of the realm that he was a lousy shot and couldn't hit a barn door as to tell an aspiring dog trainer exactly where to go! Anyway, I introduced myself and told Willie what I wanted. "Look", said Willie pointing to a grass field opposite his bungalow, "See that cock pheasant. Try your dog on that". It was a pretty emphatic punctuation mark to what I had thought a convincing bit of salesmanship. Lesson number one, no one in the countryside is going to be converted by your rhetoric.

Now that field had been grazed by sheep all summer and it was as bare as a billiard table. I believe Willie knew it was an impossible task. He was undoubtedly more interested to see how I handled the problem. There was no way any dog ever created was going to point that

pheasant as it had nowhere to hide. My only hope was that the bird would run before we opened the gate and I would be off the hook! Anyway, run he did, right into the

**The gamekeeper, he informed me, would hang my giblets out to dry if he found me working my dog without permission on his moor!**

only cover in the field, a patch of stinging nettles about the size of a table cloth! Now there was hope. I let my pointer off and signaled her to run across the field. She was a good one and she ran like the wind, took two cuts and slammed into a very classical point as she winded the pheasant in the nettles. As the pheasant flushed, which he did as soon as he realised he'd been discovered, she slapped herself down on the grass as if shot. I looked at Willie's face. I was in! No, not on Willie's ground, but he did direct me to a couple of big farmers who had suitable moorland where I ran my dogs and flew my peregrines for the next few years, rent free.

Sometimes it happens like that. The best way to get ground is to make contact with a fellow sportsman who understands what you might want. In hunting country I have found that easier - hunting people understand these things and there is an unwritten code. If there is shooting, you have at least a hope. In such country, there is a social network of sportsmanship engrained into the community.

On another occasion I travelled down to Wiltshire to run my dogs in trials. My dogs were going well on grouse but had never even seen a pheasant, a grey partridge, let alone a brown hare. But, being an

optimist, I thought it would be easy enough to get a run. I asked at the first farm I came to near the trial ground. Yes, the farmer said, I could run my dogs in his field. He indicated a bare field of grass I knew would be useless - but I ran my dogs in it anyway while he watched over the fence. At least he got a demonstration of good dog control and he might mention this to someone. That over, I thanked him profusely and then popped the vital question, Is there a gamekeeper in the area?

Sure enough, the directions were good and I found the keeper feeding pheasants in his pens. No, there was no chance I would get onto his ground. Well, I told him, that was fair enough. He had his responsibilities and I understood that. We chatted away and I made a point of dropping a few names. I soon mentioned someone we both knew. "Look, follow me up the road", he said. I did so. We stopped opposite a field of rye grass ready for cutting. "Try your dogs in there", he said. I handed him a couple of my dogs to lead and took two of my best pointers out of the trailer. Keyed up after the journey, they set off as if their tails were on fire, then one hit game scent, stalked forward and froze; the second came up and backed. Both dogs were now rigid with the intensity of the game scent and certain in their own minds that a big pack of grouse just ahead was ready to spring at any moment. It was exciting stuff, even for someone who has seen it many times before! The cock pheasant exploded with that glorious cackling which made my heart jump. The dogs slammed themselves down as if this action alone would bring the bird tumbling out of the sky, the total effect was

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electric. "My God", said the keeper after a few moments of shocked silence, "I've never seen this before but I heard about it! This is infectious, isn't it!" His face was lit up with excitement and I knew I had a convert! No, he could not allow me free run of his estate but he directed me to another gamekeeper with an absentee landowner who could. So, armed with this man's recommendations, I got my running ground.

I mention these incidents because they illustrate the tremendous common bond there is in our country sports. The Labour Government does not know what it is up against! If you can show you are a good sportsman and can show sport, it will open many doors. I remained good friends with Willie for several decades though I'm afraid I never met the second keeper again.

Making that initial contact to get ground is the key. Initially, be happy with what little you are offered and you will find all sorts of doors will be opened to you. That first offer may very well be a test to see if you are 'alright'. But how do you make that initial contact?

Offering to beat for your local pheasant or grouse shoot might be a good start, especially if you have a dog. Don't push too hard as there is nothing more fatal than trying to impress. Country people are naturally curious and if you are new, they will very soon find out about you (both the good and the bad!) either by direct contact or through the country grape vine. Then there may be a local hunt. Is there a hunt supporters' club? What about the pub? Livestock mart or market? Agricultural salesman? Even the council roadmen, all are now your allies.

There are all sorts of ways to get into a friendly chat. "Oh, so you fly hawks, do you? Seen that at The Game Fair. Gawd, I'd like to see 'em beggars catch somat!" Well now, that might be arranged.... But better be ready to put on a good show, your testing time has come!

But don't, as I once did, accept such an invitation in good faith only to later discover you have been invited for a spot of poaching! Ignorance of the law (and of the crime) is no defence - especially if you get caught - and it will do your reputation with the local landowners no good at all.

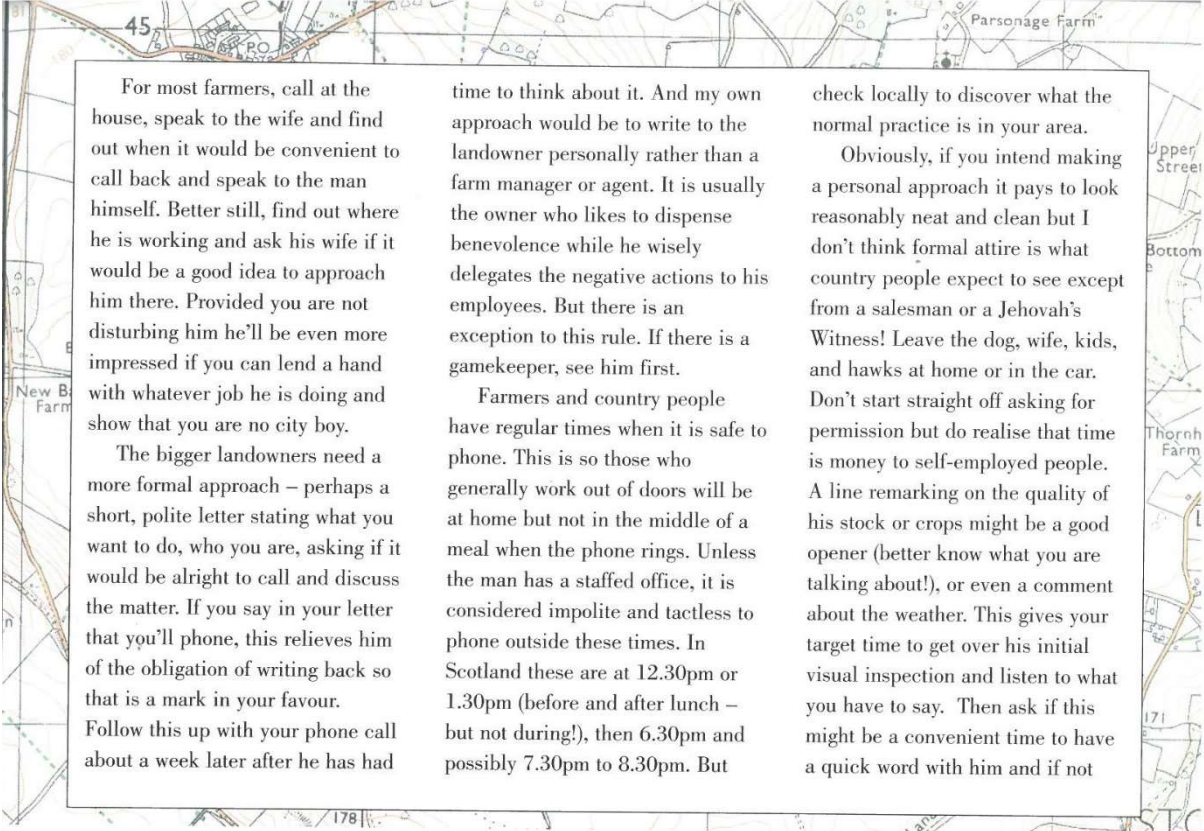
Another way to get ground might be to approach your local vermin controller. He probably gets inquiries like yours every day so an introduction or a common interest would help. If he cannot help you personally (and don't forget he is hired to do a job, not act as your personal sporting agent) he might be able to tell you who is approachable and that introduction may lead to greater things. What about the local branch of The National Farmers' Union? They are likely to receive complaints from their members about pests and also know who to go and see. It is the job of local livestock auctioneer to know his clients intimately and he can be an invaluable source of local knowledge. The local office of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries will have someone concerned with vermin control. Phone and ask to speak to who ever handles this area and he will likely know where there are problem numbers of rabbits or other pests. Try the local forestry companies. A forest may not seem a very attractive place to fly a hawk, except perhaps at grey squirrels, but these firms sometimes have

huge areas waiting to be planted and even planted ground will be useful until the trees become established. If possible, call in and speak to these people personally - it is far easier to say "no" to an anonymous voice at the other end of the telephone than face to face but a follow-up letter will almost certainly get put on file and could be help you in the future.

Approaching people and asking for favours (which is what you will be doing) requires tact and diplomacy. Ask any student who has done a lot of hitch hiking and he will tell you there is a psychological element even to something as simple as getting a lift. Give the car driver long enough to see you, somewhere to pull in safely, but not long enough to think up an excuse! Farmers are busy people and if you turn up at the wrong moment the answer will inevitably be "NO". The reason is quite simple, even though on another occasion this same man may invite you into his house and give you free range over tens of thousands of acres!

It's like this, he's busy. The weather has delayed harvest/ ploughing/sowing/spraying/whatever and he doesn't have time to explain that you could go and fly your bird in those fields down by the river, but to make sure you leave the gates OPEN so the stock can run between the fields to get to the only working water trough, and don't park in the lane because the tractor has to go down there this morning, and don't go over the hedge with the three elms in it because his neighbour is a bugger, and he'd come down and show you but the accountant is coming, and don't... Well, now you know why NO is so much easier!





For most farmers, call at the house, speak to the wife and find out when it would be convenient to call back and speak to the man himself. Better still, find out where he is working and ask his wife if it would be a good idea to approach him there. Provided you are not disturbing him he'll be even more impressed if you can lend a hand with whatever job he is doing and show that you are no city boy.

The bigger landowners need a more formal approach – perhaps a short, polite letter stating what you want to do, who you are, asking if it would be alright to call and discuss the matter. If you say in your letter that you'll phone, this relieves him of the obligation of writing back so that is a mark in your favour. Follow this up with your phone call about a week later after he has had

time to think about it. And my own approach would be to write to the landowner personally rather than a farm manager or agent. It is usually the owner who likes to dispense benevolence while he wisely delegates the negative actions to his employees. But there is an exception to this rule. If there is a gamekeeper, see him first.

Farmers and country people have regular times when it is safe to phone. This is so those who generally work out of doors will be at home but not in the middle of a meal when the phone rings. Unless the man has a staffed office, it is considered impolite and tactless to phone outside these times. In Scotland these are at 12.30pm or 1.30pm (before and after lunch – but not during!), then 6.30pm and possibly 7.30pm to 8.30pm. But

check locally to discover what the normal practice is in your area.

Obviously, if you intend making a personal approach it pays to look reasonably neat and clean but I don't think formal attire is what country people expect to see except from a salesman or a Jehovah's Witness! Leave the dog, wife, kids, and hawks at home or in the car. Don't start straight off asking for permission but do realise that time is money to self-employed people. A line remarking on the quality of his stock or crops might be a good opener (better know what you are talking about!), or even a comment about the weather. This gives your target time to get over his initial visual inspection and listen to what you have to say. Then ask if this might be a convenient time to have a quick word with him and if not

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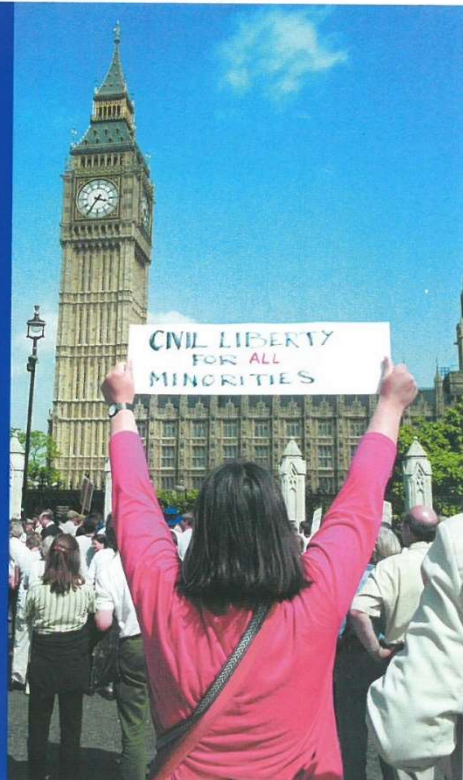
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volunteer to come back at some mutually suitable time. If the latter, it is imperative to be punctual. State briefly what you want and drop the names of any people your farmer might know who can give a good report of you. State what you do for a living, where you live, and anything else you feel is relevant. It might be a good idea to have this concisely and neatly set out in writing with details of your qualifications in falconry, what you want to do, and any references, etc. so you can offer this to him if he wants to go away and think about it.

You see some land that would be ideal for your sport, but who do you approach? The local pub or post office may be able to help there. But it is usually easy enough to find out who the landowner is in the country by simply asking at the nearest house or farm. If the farmer is a tenant, he may have to consult a landlord or shooting tenant. If there is a gamekeeper, as mentioned above you should anyway make your first approach to him. In Scotland, the gamekeeper is without doubt the most powerful man on an estate! No landowner is going to give you permission to run dogs or fly a hawk without first clearing it with his keeper so it is wise to get there first. If there is a refusal, turn it to good effect by asking if there is anywhere else he can recommend you try. At worst, he will direct you to his dearest enemy!

When you do get permission, it should be obvious that you should make sure you are clear about the boundaries and any restrictions. I like to get these drawn in on a map so there is no doubt. You may be used to flying your hawk on a Sunday but that might cause offence in certain parts of Scotland

although nothing will be said to your face. Many do not understand that a dog not strictly at heel may still be under control, so put your

**Getting ground is only half the battle. Keeping it is another matter. From the moment you get your foot in the door you are on trial.**

dog on a lead when around stock. Be aware that a flock of sheep scattered over the face of a mountain will start to run in unison as soon as they see a strange dog, whether it is chasing them or not, and from the glen below, such a sight may be wrongly interpreted. Most of these seemingly trivial details can be dealt with by effective and regular communications with the men who work the land and with the livestock. A few moments conversation is always a good investment.

Getting ground is only half the battle. Keeping it is another matter. From the moment you get your foot in the door you are on trial. Remember how easy it is for the man to say "no" and how easy it is to blame a stranger for that gate that was left open, the sweet papers or empty beer can thrown casually aside. Be aware how valuable that permission is to you. Just think how much you would be prepared to pay for a good night out and how little you pay for what you enjoy at your benefactor's generosity. The occasional bottle of whisky or brace of pheasants can go a long way but a half-hour chat over a cup of tea may do you far more good. And don't be afraid to put your sport aside and give a hand unloading a lorry or stacking some

bales. You may be surprised how much kudos you win for such seemingly trivial acts of goodwill. I gave one man permission to put half a dozen sheep on my land to train his sheepdog; he turned up with twenty and never even gave me a wave or a good morning. He seemed surprised when the permission was withdrawn.

Landowners, on the whole, are generous people. They are well aware that they are privileged to own or lease the land on which they live and work. These days they are also aware that they are under pressure to open up access to the general public. But it is, after all, their living and they have every right to keep you off - even under proposed UK legislation. When you gain such a privilege, even though you pay a rent for it, guard it jealously and be aware of those others who struggle daily to keep themselves and their families fed from this land which you now enjoy. Make sure you know The Country Code (get a copy when you visit the offices of The National Farmers Union or Ministry of Agriculture) - a simple set of rules for enjoying the countryside without infringing the rights of others. Falconry is a sport often enjoyed in solitude. Make sure it does not become a sport indulged in selfishness as there is nothing more certain to lose you ground and ensure that you get no more. It harms the sport and gives power to our enemies. Let your motto be "If I abuse it, I'll lose it", and never take small kindnesses for granted. Good sport!



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# HYBRIDS

## NEUTERING AND THE FUTURE.

by Neil A Forbes  
BVetMed Dip ECAMS FRCVS



**Gyr/peregrine hybrid**

Photo: Seth Anthony

**F**or many decades, hybridisation of falcons has been practised by falconers, achieved by the use of artificial insemination. Falconers are well-versed in the sporting benefits of hybridisation and to date it has not posed any harm to any other parties or interests - so what of the future? Whilst avoiding the debate as to whether hybrids should be neutered, the author addresses the current scientific status with respect to potential methods of preventing hybrid or non-endemic raptors from breeding in the wild should they be lost.

**IMPRINTING** has been recommended by some authorities as a method of preventing the successful breeding of a lost falconer's bird (imprint) with a free-living specimen of the same species. Certainly, an imprinted bird is likely to possess a behavioural barrier when attempting to breed with a natural pure-bred individual. Despite this we are all aware that imprinting is a 'plastic term' with degrees not only of severity but also permanency. In view of this the act of 'imprinting' to prevent undesirable breeding in the wild is an inexact science.

**CROSS FOSTERING** of captive-bred birds has been recommended such that if they were lost in the wild they would not attempt to breed with their own species. Likewise, if they attempted to breed with an individual of the species they were cross-fostered by, that individual would repel the advances recognising them to be abnormal. This technique is generally effective, although a male reared in this way, in particular if a hybrid, may still compete with a natural pure-bred male and then attempt to force himself on the female. In particular when the hybrid male is larger, stronger or faster in flight than the pure-bred, this will on very rare occasions be a possibility.

**MEDICAL AND SURGICAL OPTIONS.** Aim - to safely induce permanent sterility (and preferably lack of sexual behaviour) without inducing any deleterious side effects in male and female raptors, prior to them being first released for free flight. More over any method used should not adversely affect their hunting or flight ability.

Can breeding behaviour be prevented? Previously, breeding behaviour has been prevented by the use of powerful sex steroids (e.g. medroxyprogesterone acetate, mestranol (Wentworth 1970). The latter drugs, although often effective

Photo: Seth Anthony



have been recorded to cause serious side effects, such as obesity, lethargy, hepatic lipodosis (fatty liver) diabetes mellitus, hepatic cirrhosis and death (Joyner 1994, Orosz et al 1997, Lightfoot 1996, Tell et al 1999). Levonorgestrel another synthetic progestin has only been evaluated in quail (*Coturnix coturnix japonica*) and may well carry the same side effects (Tell et al 1999). Chorionic gonadotropin has been shown to be a much safer option with significantly less side

effects, however it is not so consistently efficacious and the effect is typically not permanent (Tell et al 1999). Leuprolide acetate is the latest medical agent which has been recommended for the control of egg laying in birds (Bowles and Zantop 2000) although the treatment is far safer than sex steroids and more efficacious than gonadotropin, the effects are not permanent. The drug Busulfan (Bayer) has been trialed recently for inducing infertility in birds in

### Gyr/saker/saker hybrid



Photo: Seth Anthony

Germany. The drug attacks fast dividing cells (including the gonads) and does induce sterility, but the effects to date have not been long lasting.

**IMMUNOLOGICAL CONTROL OF BREEDING.** A vaccine derived from pig 'zona pellucida' (an acellular protein coat surrounding the unfertilised ovum) has been used as an effective and safe immunocontraceptive in multiple mammals including horses and elephants (Barber & Fayrer-Hosken 2000). Experimental data to date suggests that the same vaccine may be helpful in preventing ovulation in hens (Ritchie et al 2000). The zona pellucida is comprised of glycoproteins which are the receptor

molecules which are necessary for efficient binding of spermatozoa. The vaccine has been shown to work by generating antibodies that interfere with the binding of sperm to the ovum (Barber & Fayrer-Hosken 2000). Although vaccination is generally temporary, in several species repeated vaccination has been shown to erode the follicular pool, thereby increasing the likelihood of vaccine-associated sterilisation rather than simply immunocontraception (Sehgal et al 1989, Upadhyay et al 1989, Paterson et al 1996).

It is clear however that immunological techniques are still very much in a research stage and as yet are not considered to generate a consistently solid infertility. This

vaccine does not prevent sexual behaviour, but research conducted so far in poultry has indicated that it is efficacious in preventing fertilisation. In the long-term this method perhaps offers the most potentially likely solution to the hybrid problem, it is non-invasive, and appears to have no primary or secondary deleterious effects.

The latest proposed chemical technique (Tapp 2001) is the proposed use of a hormone-toxin conjugate. In this case a cytotoxin (a poison which damages cells) is attached to gonadotrophin releasing hormone which normally triggers the pituitary gland in the brain to send further hormone messages (lutensising LH and follicle stimulating FSH hormone) to the gonads asking them to produce sex hormones. In turn the agent attaches to the pituitary gland, where the cytotoxin agent attacks the pituitary cells killing them and preventing the release of LH and FSH, the hormones which in turn trigger the gonads. Again this research is in a very primitive state. The technique is aimed at controlling abhorrent behaviour related to excessive sexual behaviour in post pubertal psittacine birds.

If this technique were to be used although effective, it would induce permanent sterility and would at the same time have the potential disadvantage of preventing normal sex hormone production which might cause negative effects on muscle, fat, vocalisation and moulting. Only by continued research will this be clarified.

**SURGICAL TECHNIQUES.** In birds both the testicles and the ovaries are closely adhered to the back bone and the aorta (the main artery running down the body which is supplied directly by the heart). For this reason, the safe surgical total removal of the gonads (testicles or ovary) is not possible. Readers

may well be aware of 'caponization', which was practised on poultry for the table market for many years. The latter procedure was performed to achieve a heavier, more sedentary and placid, male bird for fast economic growth for human consumption. Caponization was achieved by the implantation of a sex steroid implant usually into the birds neck (now banned in birds for human consumption), or surgical removal of the testicles. Surgical removal involved a surgical procedure and aspiration (sucking out) of the testicle. However, in more recent times when these procedures have been conducted, and the birds not slaughtered soon afterwards, a significant incidence of testicular re-growth has been recorded. It is considered that if any testicular material is left (even a few cells) that these are sufficient to facilitate redevelopment of the testicle.

More recently radio-surgical ablation (an endoscopic burning technique) of juvenile gonads has been achieved with a high level of success in a small number of pigeons (Altman 1997).

Both of the above techniques aim to remove the whole gonad. However in line with the neutering of all other species, it is considered that the loss of sexual organs and hence sex hormones would inevitably have an effect on vocalisation, plumage, moult, fat and muscle development as well as potentially on aggression and 'drive' (in essence, game hawking ability) in flight. In view of this it is believed that gonadal ablation would be contra-indicated in falconry birds.

**CURRENT SURGICAL TECHNIQUES** concentrate on achieving total and permanent infertility without removing the gonads. Although sterilisation of

falcons has been achieved for a number of years, no authenticated research data has been generated as yet on safety and long-term efficacy. Techniques currently used concentrate on removing the vas deferens (the tube which carries sperm from the testicle to the cloaca) from both testicles in the male and as greater length as possible of the oviduct in the female. Removal of the vas deferens is a kin to a vasectomy, whilst in most (but not all) avian species the removal of the oviduct prevents the release of follicles (yolks) from the hens ovary. Although most female birds (unlike mammals) only have one ovary (left) and one oviduct, it has been noted that certain hawks have a vestigial right ovary and oviduct. As such the removal of an oviduct (especially in early age) in such species might stimulate the full development of the right oviduct and ovary leading to a return to fertility

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at a later stage. It is for this reason (as well as the potential for recanalation of the vas deferens in the male), that long-term studies are required. The author is pleased to report that such studies are currently on-going.

**IS SURGICAL STERILISATION AT AN EARLY AGE AN OPTION?**

Almost certainly yes, although it is only ever likely to be conducted by specialist avian/falcon vets, with high quality (expensive) video endoscopic surgical units. Although high quality expensive endoscopes are required for visualisation of fine structures in immature birds, the great advantage of conducting surgery at this age is that the organs are small, have a miniscule blood supply, hence endoscopic surgery is far safer. The techniques involved require a general anaesthetic, a small incision (or two) 3-4mm in diameter, minimal

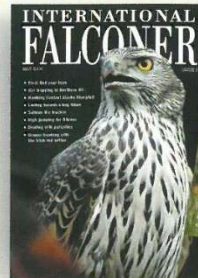
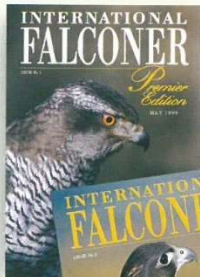
feather removal and removal of the respective organs. Once the endoscope is introduced into the abdominal cavity, the organs are located. The tissue is crushed (to stimulate clotting) and then cut and the section of tissue removed. It should be noted that this is very delicate work with both the oviduct and the vas deferens running over or directly beside vital organs such as the ureters, the kidney and the aorta. Breeders will inevitably be concerned about the safety of such techniques. Even in the hands of experienced specialist avian vets there will be some risks involved, it will certainly not be a procedure for your local vet to under-take.

It should not be forgotten that the responsibility of falconers to prevent loss of their birds and the retrieval of lost birds by the effective use of transmitters is of paramount importance. ■

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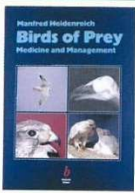
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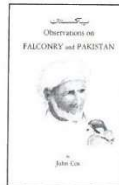
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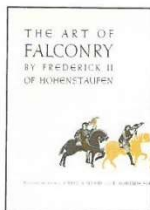
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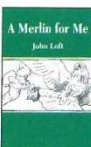
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## **NORTH AMERICAN FALCONRY AND HUNTING HAWKS.**

8th Edition

by Harold Melvin Webster and  
Frank Lyman Beebe with additional  
chapters by other authors.

Published by North American  
Falconry and Hunting Hawks,  
Denver, Colorado.

I first read this book in its fourth edition. Much has changed since then and not all the changes are for the better. The artwork of the latest edition is of the highest quality. My own favourite is the immature falcon by Ron Digby.

Contributions by other authors have increased throughout the editions and in this latest come from Mike McDermott on accipiters, Matthew Mullenix on the American kestrel, Gene Johnson on making Anglo-Indian hoods and Dale Guthormsen on using the kite. Gone from the last edition are the chapters on ferreting and balloon-training. McDermott is a very knowledgeable falconer and his writings are clear and concise yet thorough. The only drawback of his chapters are that much of what he says, which he readily admits, is taken from his excellent book *The Imprint Accipiter*. My only other comment is that the difference between the trapped weight and flying weight for the Finnish goshawks seem far greater than for the other goshawks listed.

The chapter by Matthew Mullenix is interesting, well written and informative. Again however, the author has his own book out on the

# BOOK REVIEW

by Stuart Rossell

subject. I enjoyed very much the chapter on making an Anglo-Indian hood by Gene Johnson. It is possibly the best written chapter I've ever seen on the subject.

The book has a lot of mistakes that should have been spotted at the proof-reading stage. Some of the errors are the result of updating parts of the text without checking what was left over from the older editions. For instance on page 34, the goshawk is listed as having two separate sub-species, the Eastern and the Western. One paragraph later, a DNA study is quoted that found all goshawks were the same species. Other errors are just plain inaccuracies. Canadian falconers are not allowed to take peregrines from the wild (pg. 21), Aylmeri jesses were not first used 135 years ago (pg. 53) and falconry was not introduced to Europe by returning crusaders (pg. 425).

Some of the comments are puzzling. Spruce, blue and ruffed grouse are mentioned as being suitable quarry for a peregrine even though all three are forest species. A quote on page 30 has "feeding falcons show(ing) great apprehension of ...red-tails" but "eagles do not worry them a bit". Red-tails are a poor choice for beginners, which goes against the current and past experience of most American falconers. On page 456 after having stated that the kestrel is not a good hawk for a beginner especially the "young adult" he suggests the authorities lower the minimum age for such hawks to 12 years. In light of such comments and contradictions it is sometimes difficult to understand what the author is trying to say. On page 200 Webster makes the stunning

statement that "global warming" may well "ease the existence of gyrfalcons and perhaps allow a substantial increase". One would assume if all they wanted was warmer weather they would move farther south.

The book does tend to jump about a lot. A study on ferruginous hawks gets mentioned in the chapter on prairie falcons. After dealing with the lure in the equipment chapter and having moved onto the creance, we go back to discussing the lure. This happens repeatedly throughout the book. The various governmental departments come in for very strong criticism at every opportunity which grows old rather quickly.

When I first read this book in its fourth edition it was obvious that Frank Beebe had contributed much of the real meat of the book. His chapters on goshawks and peregrines both in the wild and trained state as well as others on the nature of predation, obtaining a hawk and equipment were well written, concise and informative. His was also the only artwork in the book. I was surprised therefore that he appears to have made no further contributions to the book even though his name still appears on the cover and that his art no longer appears.

The highlight of the book for me was the chapter on flying passage prairie falcons at sage grouse by Hubert Quade. It starts off with a nice story and offers proof of the ability of the species and the author that leaves no doubt that he is a man who knows his subject and has done what he claims. ■

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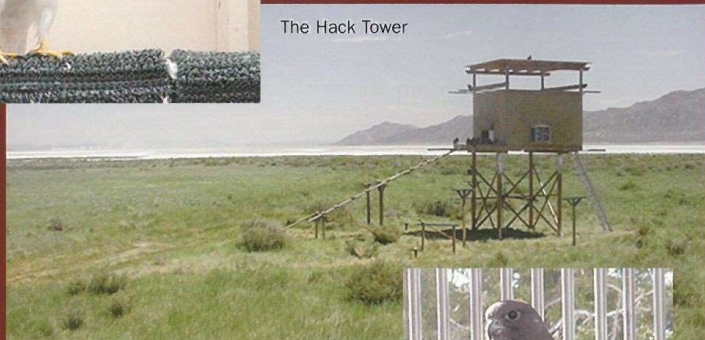
White adult gyr



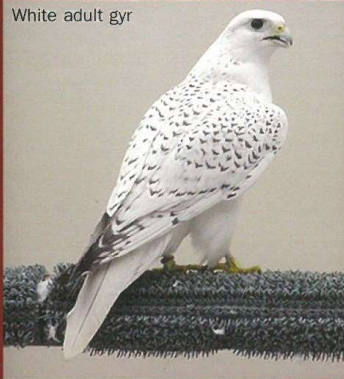
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The Hack Tower



White adult gyr



Aleutian Peale's peregrine



Black juvenile gyr

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