


# INTERNATIONAL FALCONER

ISSUE 36 - 2010

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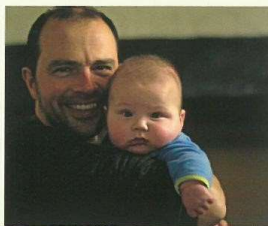
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WITH SPRING well and truly now underway here in Wales, the severe, artic-like conditions experienced across the UK this past winter, seem a long time ago although poor old Scotland and the north of England have still had it bad until very recently. Hope you all enjoyed an exciting and successful season despite the difficult conditions.

Due to lots of production problems this is a rather delayed issue for which the IF team apologise, but what a full one it is and I think it's been a long time since we've put one out with such a diverse selection of articles. Thanks for your patience and we hope it was worth the wait. Until next time...Seth



The editor with his newest imprint Toby James Anthony. Born 22 September, 2009.

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Subscription Rates: (4 issues inclusive of postage)  
UK - £24.60  
Europe - £26.40\*  
North America - £29.40\*  
(when paying by credit card)  
\$51 USD (when paying by US check)  
Rest of World - £29.40 GBP\*

Published by: International Falconer Ltd  
P.O. Box 91, Carmarthen  
SA33 5YF, Wales, UK  
Telephone: +44 (0)1267 232785  
www.intfalconer.net

ISSN : 1477-5859

\*Overseas subscribers please note that we can only charge credit cards in GBP and the conversion rate to your currency will fluctuate.  
All credit card payments can also be made via our secure server at [www.intfalconer.net](http://www.intfalconer.net)

### 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.

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Cover photo: Eagle falconer at Castle Rosenberg, Austria by Seth Anthony



# ABU DHABI 2009

المعرض الدولي للصيد والفروسية  
INTERNATIONAL HUNTING & EQUESTRIAN EXHIBITION





**I**F YOU GO to a game fair (hunting exhibition) in the UK, and, one suspects, in other countries, what is the likely ratio of falconry stands to other hunting, shooting and fishing exhibits? At the UK's July CLA Game Fair falconry was one in a thousand. Move to September; fly East for seven hours and put your clocks forward four, and the balance swings quite dramatically.



The art of hoodmaking was well represented.

Abu Dhabi is a city of breathtaking opulence without the overarching sense of building for building's sake experienced elsewhere in the United Arab Emirates, notably Dubai. Whilst pallid Brits and over-tanned Europeans, with a smattering of the moneyed from the Eastern Block, fry in shade temperatures exceeding 40° Celsius, some are experiencing the UAE's version of the Game Fair.

The humidity is oppressive. Spectacles and camera lenses mist within seconds of leaving the air-conditioned buildings. Shirts cling and footsteps slow. Only the Arabs, stately in their climate-evolved dress, move with any elegance. A culture that prefers the spoken to the written word has embraced the mobile phone with an energy that is unequalled. The earpiece, often hidden by a head cloth, leaves you in some confusion in meetings – are they talking to you or someone on the phone? ►



أبوظبي للثقافة و التراث  
 ABU DHABI CULTURE & HERITAGE

Some Arabs use two, which really confuses, and they use them with a frequency that the West would find verging on the rude.

The UAE is dominated by images of its founding father Sheikh Zayed, but not in the sycophantic subservience of some banana republic. This great man was universally adored. What country could conceivably close all its web traffic, both in and out, during the period of state mourning? Apart from being a statesman, he was a consummate falconer, who set the standards for the modern Arab. He released his wild-trapped sakers back into their native Pakistan, bred their traditional quarry, the *houbara* bustard, for release, and protected vast swathes of his and other countries for that seeming paradox that is conservation and hunting. But his most enduring legacy to falconry was to stop the wild trapping of sakers and to insist that all UAE falcons come from captive breeding programmes: conservation and commerce joining hands.



**Falconry starts at an early age in the Gulf.**

To the Gulf Arabs falconry is a cultural experience. It is learnt at a father's knee and builds to a certain feeding frenzy just before the start of the season, which usually falls just after Ramadan

(the principal religious month). So important is it that Abu Dhabi, linking with twelve like-minded countries, seeks to have falconry protected under UNESCO's programme of Intangible Cultural Heritage. If successful, and those involved are quietly optimistic, global falconry would be a net beneficiary.

At the Hunting Exhibition in 2009, over 30 stands were devoted to falconry and related conservation projects, leaving the rest to guns, equipment, the Arab horse and miscellaneous culture. Falcon breeders descend on the city to meet their customers and to show their falcons. Some are Arab sponsored projects but the majority come from Europe, the UK, and the USA. But there is a risk to the opportunity, and the customers know this.

The breeders come at a fair personal cost for what are in effect 'small businesses'. Shipping falcons is never less than 200 GBP a bird; flights and hotels add further to the bill. So they start their falcon prices at a rate that seeks to cover costs and make a profit – not unreasonable. The trouble starts at the end of the show. Knowing that breeders are unlikely to return home with falcons that would have to face a 30-day quarantine, not to mention the CITES re-import permits, the Arabs play a waiting game to their advantage. The bartering on the last day indicates this.

It was surprising to see how little was purchased. At UK country fairs people leave weighed down with carrier bags. At the Festival of Falconry (held



**The falcons for sale attracted a great deal of**

in the UK in July 2009), there was no shortage of excess baggage and several stallholders sold out. In Abu Dhabi the psychology is very different. Goods are selected then delivered, and if you are in a senior position then others make payment from within the household.

The Hunting Exhibition is a well-presented affair, glossy and exciting to be at, and we were delighted to be invited. Abu Dhabi has done a great deal for falconry and this needs better recognition. Nowhere in the world can you find veterinary excellence entirely funded by the state – a national health service



**All falcons in the UAE must have a valid passport as proof of captive breeding.**



**interest and discussion.**

for falcons. The conservation displays demonstrate a commitment that should be the envy of other falconry nations: in Morocco there are substantial breeding programmes for houbara; in Mongolia there is a continuing study of the native saker falcon with a new initiative for 5,000 man-made nest barrels in areas previously devoid of resident pairs; and in arctic Russia a scientific study of the native *calidus* peregrine is underway. Almost all recent falcon conferences of note have been held in and funded by Abu Dhabi, often at the same time as the Hunting Exhibition, giving conservationist invitees an opportunity to better understand the Arabs' total commitment to the sport that links them to the desert way of life and its cultural heritage. ■



**There was a dazzling array of falconry equipment on display.**



**The world's media were in attendance to cover this unique event.**



**A variety of recreational vehicles, to make a hunting trip into the desert just a little more comfortable, were on show.**



# EXPORT HAWKS,

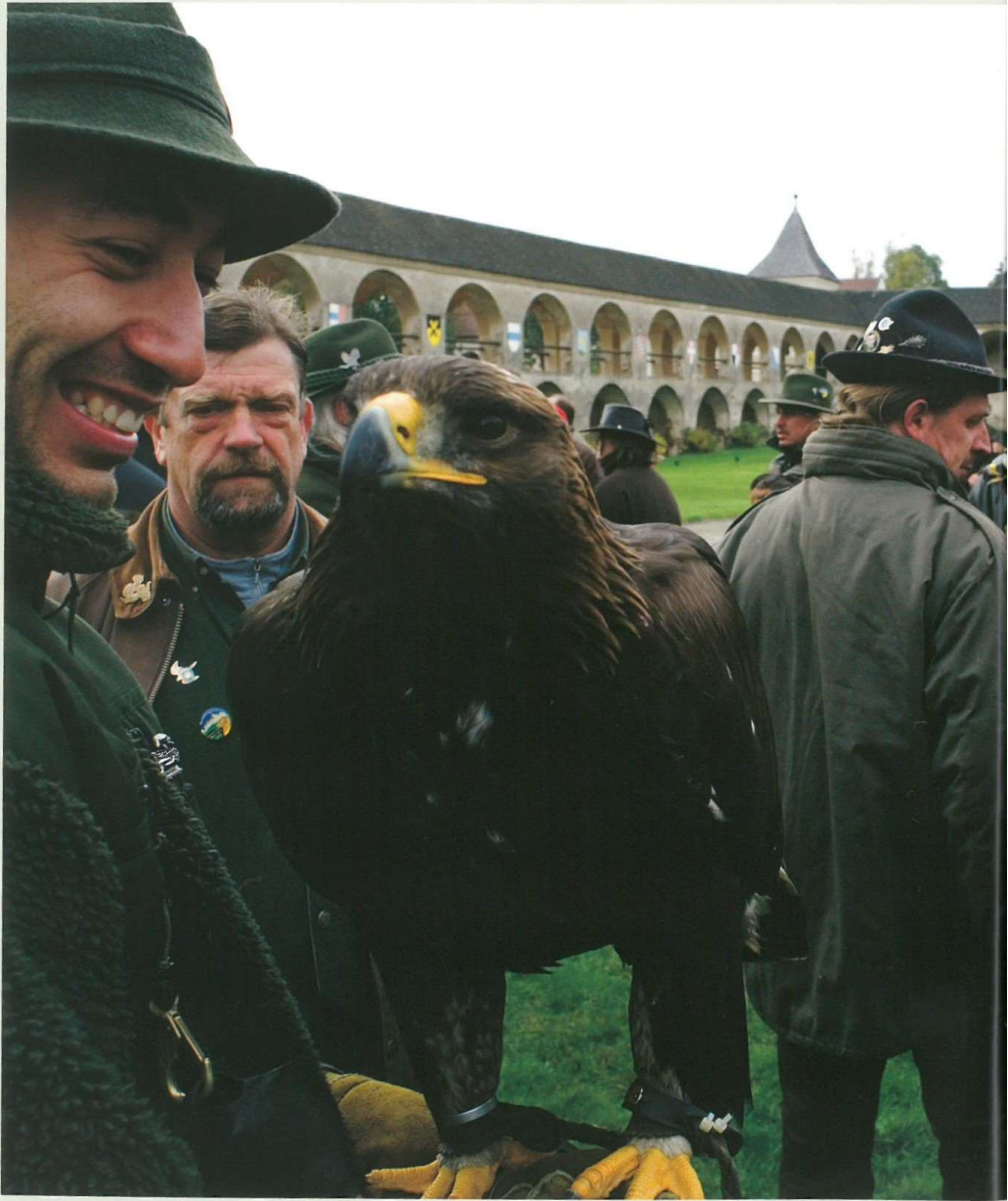


Photo: Seth Anthony



# JOSEF HIEBELER

and The UK Eagle Falconry Association.



Roy Lupton (right) with other eagle falconers from across Europe in the grounds of Castle Rosenberg, Austria.

PART TWO:

## Ravesby and beyond.

Words by BEN CRANE

**O**N MY RETURN to England I made contact with one of Josef's friends and pupils, Roy Lupton. He has been flying eagles for over a decade and has spent many of those under the tutelage of Josef Hiebeler. In 2007, along with a number of fellow falconers, he also launched the United Kingdom Eagle Falconry Association (UKEFA).

The basic premise of the club is simple and straightforward; to disseminate information and educate anyone who wishes to take up an eagle for the purpose of falconry. From those at grass root level, to those who have flown eagles for years, this collective of like-minded individuals is both prescient and a long time coming. ▶

With the growing interest in eagles generally and their use in the UK increasing exponentially, it makes perfect and admirable sense to form an association that first and foremost has the welfare of eagles central to its mandate. The knock-on effect for the general UK falconry population can only be positive.

Clearly all raptors require a huge amount of commitment and any negative incident has detrimental repercussions for the falconry community as a whole. Arguably then, the use of eagles and their ownership in the UK has to be carefully and uniquely safeguarded. To understand them is not simply a case of building knowledge through flying other raptors. Eagle falconry needs to be grounded firmly in the information of a committed collection of minds.

Not everyone of course will make a suitable candidate for the UKEFA, but for those that do, the technical aspects of what constitutes first class eagle falconry is for the taking. The combined wisdom of the current members is impressive; their skill base directly linked to the methods of Josef Hiebeler and consequently back through time to the Kazakhs and Mongols. In this respect the UKEFA is continuing a living cultural heritage of the very earliest falconers on the planet.

For the final meet of their inaugural year, the UKEFA had chosen to hunt on the Revesby Estate in Lincolnshire, England. The estate has a wealth of history spanning back to the Viking invasion and the Roman conquest and is perfectly suited to host raptors of such size and elegance.

Revesby covers 6,200 acres, the soil types range from silty

to medium loams. Both support lush pastures, wide ranging arable and varied root crops. The topography ranges from flat fens to the hilly Lincolnshire Wolds. The diversity of Revesby habitats are huge, resulting in many different types of wildlife.

Over recent years Revesby has restructured itself to enhance parcels of farmland, developing some areas into conservation with various stewardship agreements. This finally tuned balance of farming and conservation allows Revesby to support a population of brown hare (*Lepus Europeaus*) equalling, if not surpassing that of the European continent.

We met early, said a few hellos and then pulled out of the pub sweeping left, down country lanes and up onto a small hill and plateau. From this vantage point the landscape was flat and open. As we drove along the farm track, a trio of brown hares were running, twisting and boxing on our left. Another hare was spotted drifting along the right, down in a gully. The eagles were removed from their boxes and we spread out across the first field.

When falconry is right it is unparalleled, simple, and superficially easy. Good flights and clean kills are always the result of unseen work both away from and on the field. I have seen plenty of quarries flown with eagles, but Roy's first slip rates as one of the most clinical. We started sharp and with style, Baby hitting the hare within seconds. Admittedly the hare sat tight and did not move until we were fairly close. But we had been in full view and had made plenty of noise. Even so, at a 30ft head start, Baby was too determined and on top form, closing everything down deftly.



Photo: Seth Anthony

The wing beat was powerful and brief. Baby clasped the back end of the hare and climbed up the spine, before the prize was pinned tight under her burnt amber chest.

The hare was dispatched quickly and the eagle behaved impeccably as I dropped in taking pictures. The pick-up was without possession or aggression. The quarry was still in full view, Baby was crested and clearly agitated but in no way defensive or bothered with the commotion of humans. With delicacy she finished her reward and feaked across Roy's glove as the hare was bagged up.

Once everything was secure and safe, we made our way back



**A golden eagle locks-on to her target and powers out over the maize stubble.**

to the top of the line and worked a second field cut with deep black plough furrows. Roy was out on the far right, followed by Clint with Little Bird, myself, Sophie, Robin with Emma, Travis and the rest of the group into the distance on the left.

With 20 or 30 yards between us, we were covering the entire width of the field. At some of the larger meets in Europe, space allows for multiple eagles to be released. In the UK, safety and field control are paramount. More importantly the quarry needs a fair and sporting chance. On several occasions throughout the day it would have been easy to have slipped a second or third eagle. So at all times it was a

well respected and sporting contest between the eagles and their quarry.

The second flight was again a text book display of first class lowland eagle falconry. It doesn't seem right to describe an eagle in subtle or even delicate terms. They are always considered brutal and powerful. But balanced on frozen rough ground, with a hardened winter hare lifting up and running at 100 yards and counting, they possess the same gift and grace as a sparrowhawk on blackbird, a goshawk on partridge or a peregrine on grouse.

Their size and scale dissolve into something pure and basic, the outcome never definite,

the balanced contest levels everything as the eagle and quarry collide in sepulchral beauty. Phillip Glasier would have changed his mind, fit eagles make first class falconry raptors in the UK.

Robin struck the hood and Emma left his fist as the hare powered off into the horizon. Her wings lifted and spun the air with consummate ease, driving her forward as the hare dropped a gear and turned on the power. The flight moved gently to the left and then just opened up in a straight line. The hare was now at top speed and not missing a foot fall, the eagle about 5ft off the ground, the 'dip' and 'apex' of her wings had reached full ▶

stretch. At a distance of 600 or 700 yards, the hare jinked a little, and Emma yawed, before crashing over on to *Lepus*. After running the distance, Robin dispatched the hare, and as a mark of his absolute trust in his charge, allowed me to hold the hind legs while Emma stepped up, fed, feaked and was hooded.

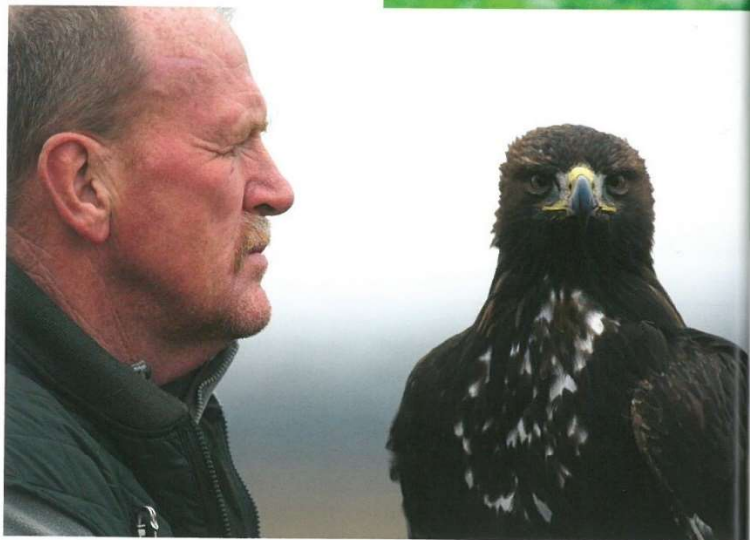
The rest of the morning was a series of stunning flights and near misses as all the eagles were turned on their heads by the huge number of hares flushed. By lunch we had had at least a dozen hares in front of us, and any number more running and boxing in the distance. This wily quarry was fully aware of our presence and the open landscape had given us no real area to hide. The hares were fully-fit, wintered adversaries, and over such a tough landscape any minor weakness in the eagles was exploited to the full.

During the lunch break, Roy exercised and lure trained another of his eagles. This was carried out in much the same way as Josef had done at Castle Rosenberg, except this time the lure was a hare carcass and the horses and castle had been swapped for an Argocat and Lincolnshire countryside. It was repetitive and time consuming. But like any type of fitness training the results would be seen at a later date up in the higher altitudes of Scotland. What became apparent was how influential Josef Hiebeler is on the approach these falconers take and the heights they attempt to scale in order to achieve the best results.

After lunch we moved down to lower grounds and covered several fields of varying type. We flushed hares from inside deep plough troughs, knee-high,

crisp, brown reeds, drilled winter wheat and small hedgerows. The eagles were unlucky to miss at least one hare each. But the best falconry is always knife-edge balance between predator and prey. A miss is as good as a mile, but if the determination is there, and the outcome blurred by back and forth manoeuvres, then the day is a good one.

One hare ran the full length of the field before suddenly stopping. Emma closed in and winged over just as *Lepus* leapt up through her grasp. It was at full stretch 4ft above the eagle before dropping down behind her tail and taking off back along the line



UKEFA member Clint Coventry with golden eagle.

Photo: Seth Anthony

she had just travelled. It was a supreme move, not least because the scene was also witnessed by a family out in their back garden. The initial slip was clearly at a safe distance, but the flight had been a long and extended one. But instead of picking the eagle up and walking away, Robin and one or two others spent a good 20 minutes talking through the

eagles, the processes of falconry, conservation and raising the profile of our pastime. It was an exemplary display of informed public relations.

The third and final hare was a flight of outstanding falconry skill; a perfectly combined example of peak physical fitness, high intelligence and the first class technical ability



Photo: Seth Anthony

**A brown hare springs from its form and makes for the sanctuary of a nearby copse.**

of the falconer. The hunting line was spread far and wide; a curve across a huge vista of dark soil. Roy and the others were dotted on the outer cusp of the low, undulating bowl. Robin and Emma formed the central hub of spindles spanning right, over a quarter of a mile. To our direct left at 200 yards was a drainage ditch and huge coppice running diagonally away into the distance.

Travis bumped the hare at about 600 yards. It wobbled toward us a little, but kept a safe distance from the stationary humans. The hare, suddenly alarmed, turned right, ran hard into the face of the wind, dipping, jinking and made for the sanctuary of the furthest

point of the wood. She crossed us diagonally, a small, speeding dot as Robin struck the hood and let Emma go.

The eagle dropped left at a very odd angle to the hare. It was a peculiar move, and one which left myself and another witness perplexed. Instead of a straight line pursuit, Emma turned hard avoiding the wind. She hit the cover of the coppice and followed its outer edge toward the hare. She seemed to be compensating for the conditions and pre-empting the movement of the hare. She was a lady of experience and chose to behave accordingly. She took her time, watched and waited, before beginning the decent into a kill.

Seeking cover, Emma was able to fly hard without having to fight the wind. She dug deep and worked and pushed herself hard. The hare clipped the top of the ditch as Emma pushed harder then threw into the gulley and out of sight. We had only just begun moving when the cry went up. The noise carried on as I kept running and running, the distance into the wind and through the mud was colossal, far longer and far harder than I had ever managed before. It took us about three minutes of sprinting before we reached the scene.

I slid down into the ditch and waited for Robin to arrive moments later for the dispatch. Lifting everything into a safer

position Emma was a picture perfect mess of mud, bramble and cresting power. She behaved impeccably as Robin took his time on the feed up, after which she stepped gingerly onto his glove.

The afternoon session extended as we carried on into dusk watching as the sun closed crisply down over the frozen ground. Roy had one final slip, but it was too dark and once again Baby was beaten.

On the way back to the trucks, as there had been throughout the day, was a true sense of camaraderie and friendship. It was and will continue to be a pleasure to witness such creatures at the peak of their game. However I doubt I will ever fly an eagle on these shores. I simply do not have the quarry base or inclination. My time is limited and my flight window small.

It is all too easy to slip into cliché and proselytize about eagles being 'majestic', the 'pinnacle' and the 'ultimate'. The normal response to eagles will always be a description of shock and awe. However, I was overwhelmed at their high level of cognition. These are gregarious raptors that respond to stimulation in an often unexpected manner. At the outer edges of technically complex falconry, the relationship between hawks and their owners will always be unique. All the eagles I saw responded with tender, gentle guile within the intimate parameters of their falconer's control. This was an exemplar display of how correctly imprinted eagles should behave. However, the relationship between the eagles and the UKEFA members illustrated more than this. At



Photo: Steve Field

**With eagles on board Roy Lupton crosses a stream in his Argocat.**

this level, eagle falconry reaches out in to our collective history. Worldwide, all falconers are intrinsically beholden to eagles, not because of their size, scale and power, but because of the unconscious knowledge that without these creatures, we would not be part of a living, breathing heritage.

Any falconry raptor, from the diminutive merlin or the ubiquitous Harris' hawk, rever-

berates with the echo of the *berkutchi* who harnessed eagles for the first time. They set in motion a symbiotic relationship between raptors and mankind that has evolved over four millennia. Clearly the members of the UKEFA have this in mind, and in their hands, falconry of this calibre should remain the benchmark by which we measure ourselves. ■

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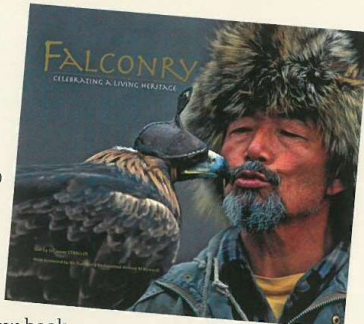
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## FALCONRY

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# PRODUCING SAKER FALCONS BY THE BARREL



Photo: Dimitar Ragyov

**F**OR MILLENNIA falconers have harvested falcons from the wild. In the Middle East, the cradle of falconry, the Bedouin hunted *houbara* and hares with peregrines and sakers in the deserts during the winter months. These falcons were trapped on passage or obtained via the ancient "silk road" trade routes from Central Asia. This deep rooted falconry tradition not only survives, but is thriving in the Arabian peninsula, though the requirements of modern-day recreational falconers has resulted in severe pressure on the continued survival of the falcons and their quarry. Arabic falconry creates a trade demand

for falcons that can be met from wild and captive-bred sources. Despite increased use of captive-bred falcons in recent years, many Arabian falconers still prefer to hunt with wild-taken passage birds and regard their captive-bred equivalents as inferior. The saker has been particularly hit hard by this trade demand as post-Soviet economies collapsed in Central Asia in the early 1990s. Increased and unregulated harvesting and trade contributed to the dramatic decline in breeding populations across large areas of Central Asia and led to the saker being classified as Globally Endangered by the World Conservation Union.







# A CONSERVATION INITIATIVE OF EMIRATES FALCONERS

Words by **ANDREW DIXON**

The saker is listed in Appendix II of CITES, which means that signatory countries can harvest and trade wild birds as long as this has no detrimental impact on the wild population. However, few Central Asian countries have healthy saker populations that could sustain a harvest, and fewer still have the capacity to regulate such a trade. Consequently, the supply of wild-caught sakers to the Arabian falconry markets is met largely by illegal trade undertaken by a network of trappers, smugglers and dealers. This demand and supply is not a new phenomenon, like falconry the falcon trade also has deep traditional roots, especially among Syrians and along the Central Asian silk road. What has apparently changed in the modern world is the extent of this trade, with greater numbers of trappers extending further into hitherto inaccessible parts of the saker's range, to supply a seemingly insatiable demand for falcons in the Middle East.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the opening up of former communist states and China has seen Syrian and Pakistani falcon trappers seeking sakers in new places as remote as central Siberia, northwest China and Mongolia. The Mongolian government was quick to catch on to this developing trade and started charging visiting trappers a fee to export the wild-caught sakers from the country (wildlife is regarded as state property in Mongolia). Mongolia signed the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) in 1995 and since this time their saker falcon trade has needed to meet the requirements of the Convention. However, despite having a large breeding ►

## PRODUCING SAKER FALCONS BY THE BARREL

population of sakers, Mongolia has not been able to demonstrate that its annual trade quota has no detrimental effect on the wild population. Furthermore, poor recording and lax regulation has meant that the saker trade has been heavily criticised both nationally and internationally, damaging the reputation of the Mongolian government. Currently worth around US\$3 million per year, Mongolia is now the only country to operate a legal harvest and trade in saker falcons, with a CITES trade quota of *ca.* 300 birds per year.

'Sustainable use' is a familiar environmental term that is frequently used but often poorly understood. The principle behind the term is that resources should be used in such a way that their continued existence is not threatened, thereby ensuring their availability for future usage. Human utilisation of wildlife is not necessarily bad. In fact, as CITES and the Convention on Biological Diversity recognises "commercial trade may be beneficial to the conservation of species and local people when carried out at levels that are not detrimental to the survival of the species in question". Following a CITES trade review (a process initiated by the UAE because of concerns about the way the saker trade was conducted) the Mongolian government is now faced with the option of either stopping their saker falcon trade or developing a demonstrably sustainable system of trade with conservation benefits. This is the position today, at the beginning of 2010. Which direction Mongolia takes for the future depends primarily on the political willingness to overhaul the current discredited system and the ability to develop a



Photo: Gankhuyag Purev-Ochir

regulated and sustainable system in its place.

International Wildlife Consultants (UK) Ltd, on behalf of Abu Dhabi, UAE, have been conducting survey and research work on saker falcons in Mongolia for over 15 years within the framework of agreements signed with the Mongolian Ministry of Nature, Environment and Tourism. The commitment shown by Abu Dhabi to saker conservation in Mongolia has meant that International Wildlife Consultants have developed an unrivalled knowledge of the ecology and conservation requirements of the saker in the country and are now in a position to advise and assist the Mongolian government in the development of a truly sustainable saker falcon trade. This process is developing at two levels, the first is the practical implementation of the Artificial Nest Project that underpins the sustainable harvest, and the second is the development of policy and a regulatory framework to manage and operate a sustainable falcon trade. The latter may be more difficult to achieve than the former!

Since 2002, International Wildlife Consultants have been investigating the potential of



Photo: Gankhuyag Purev-Ochir



Photo: Dimitar Ragyov

The sakers at our artificial nests had a higher breeding success than their compatriots breeding in nearby mountain blocks because the artificial nests afforded more protection from the harsh spring weather in Mongolia, a major cause of natural nest failures.



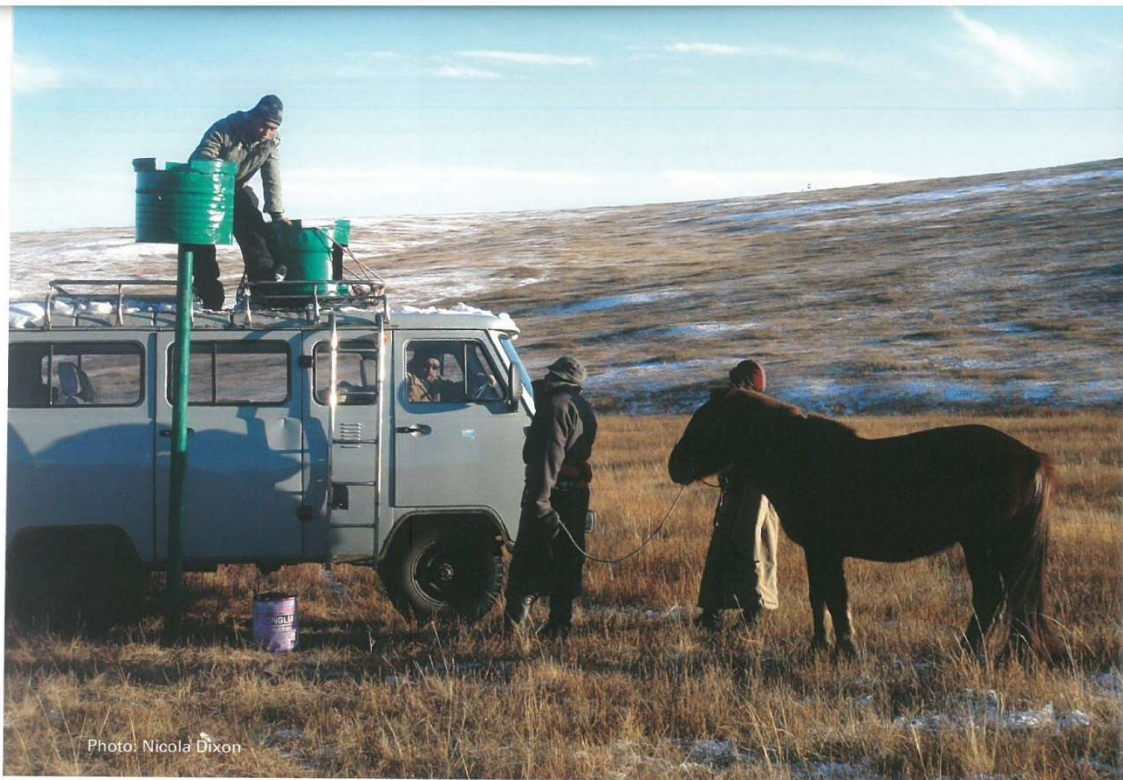


Photo: Nicola Dixon

**The correct location for each nest site is achieved by using GPS navigation.**

increasing the saker breeding population in Mongolia by using artificial nest sites. This form of wildlife management is based on the fact that large areas of steppe grassland in Mongolia are inhabited by sakers that do not breed because there are very few nesting sites available. These sakers can be encouraged to breed by providing them with a suitable nest site. Over the last four years we have been working with the Wildlife Science and Conservation Centre in Mongolia to conduct trials at two experimental areas to identify the most suitable design of nest site and to gather data on occupancy rates, breeding success and survival of sakers using our grids of artificial nest sites. The results have been very encouraging, and the level of occupancy has increased annually at our two study areas, with 20 per cent of artificial nests occupied after 4 years at one site

and 12 per cent after 3 years at a second site.

At current levels of occupancy our research indicates that we can expect a breeding density of at least 5.2 breeding pairs per 100 km<sup>2</sup> in habitats with low availability of rodent prey and densities of up to 16.7 breeding pairs per 100 km<sup>2</sup> in habitats with high rodent availability. Our nest monitoring has shown that these breeding sakers produce an average of three fledglings per nest. The sakers at our artificial nests had a higher breeding success than their compatriots breeding in nearby mountain blocks because the artificial nests afforded more protection from the harsh spring weather in Mongolia, a major cause of natural nest failures.

In 2009 the Emirates Falconers' Club supported a project to establish 5,000 artificial nests in nest site limited habitats of central Mongolia, to be erected



Photo: Andrew Dixon

in 20 grids of 250 nests over 12 months from November 2009. The artificial nests themselves are simple structures, each comprising half a 60cm diameter barrel, with a steel roof and a side entrance hole. The nest barrel is bolted to a steel plate welded

## PRODUCING SAKER FALCONS BY THE BARREL

onto a 3-metre-long metal pole, which is cemented 50cm into the ground. The construction of 5,000 nests represents a serious logistical challenge. The barrels are sourced from a soft drinks manufacturer in Ulaanbaatar (they import concentrated fruit juice in them) and we are buying all the empty barrels the factory produces for a year! To cut the barrels we shall use over 40,000 cutting discs. We need 1.5 km of steel pipe to erect the nests together with 20,000 sets of nuts, bolts and 40,000 steel washers. We have a team working at temperatures of minus 30°C throughout the Mongolian winter to construct the barrels in our rented workshop, so that they will be ready for the erection

the correct locations. However, despite these challenges our biologists and nest construction teams in Mongolia are enthusiastic about a project that has

falcons after 4 years, depending on the local availability of rodents. Our target is to have 500 pairs of sakers producing around 1,500 fledglings at our 5,000



Photo: Sandy Crichton



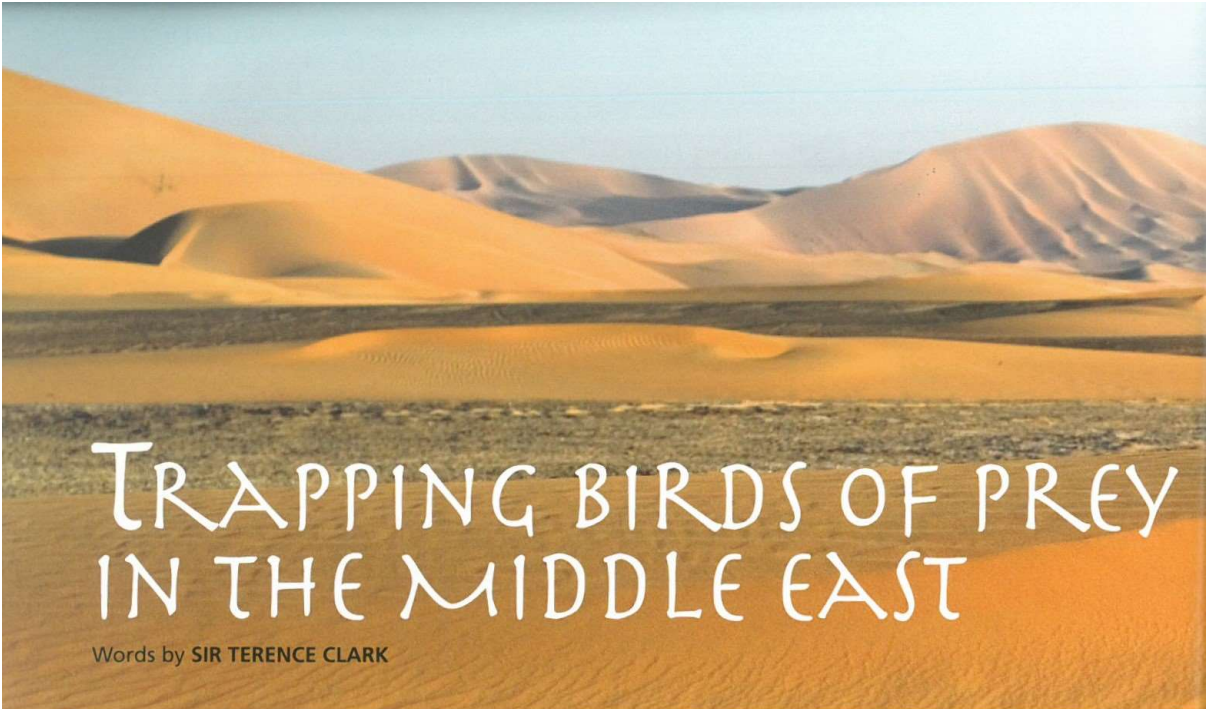
teams to begin putting up the nests when the snow clears in April. Transporting each grid of 250 nests across vast stretches of road-free steppe to their local destinations is no easy task, and our drivers all have to be trained in the use of GPS to find

such clear, tangible benefits for conservation.

In each grid the artificial nests will be placed at 1.5 km intervals and our experimental work indicates that we can expect approximately 10 to 30 per cent to be occupied by breeding saker

**Above: Working throughout the Mongolian winter in temperatures of -30°C the team will construct 5,000 artificial nest barrels.**

artificial nests by 2015. This newly created breeding population would represent a 10-25 per cent increase in the Mongolian population. Harvest quotas could be based on annual productivity of this population and the fee charged to falcon trappers could include a 'conservation levy' to support the maintenance and monitoring of the artificial nests and to provide direct benefits to local communities. A well-regulated CITES trade from Mongolia can play an important role in combating the international illegal trade by reducing the demand for illicit wild-caught sakers. No less significantly, this project to produce sakers by the barrel will heighten awareness of falcon conservation issues in Mongolia and amongst falconers in the Middle East. ■



# TRAPPING BIRDS OF PREY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Words by SIR TERENCE CLARK

I FIRST STARTED hunting with local saluqis in Iraq about 25 years ago and my excursions into the desert often brought me into contact with unusual people and situations. In some places the desert is as flat as a pancake and any feature on it tends therefore to be visible from a long way off. So when, one day, I spotted a sort of pimple on the horizon I felt drawn towards it. As I came nearer I could see what appeared to be a small dome of palm branches. Suddenly from beneath it a man hauled himself out to greet me. He was a falcon trapper and this was his hide.

Under the leafy dome was a hole deep enough for a man to stand up in. The entrance was on the south side and opposite was a tiny 'window' to give a view of the north, from where in the period September to November he might expect birds of prey to follow the migration route of all kinds of birds from the Caucuses down into the 'land of the two rivers' (*Bilad al-Rafidain* in Arabic or Mesopotamia) on their way into the Gulf. From inside

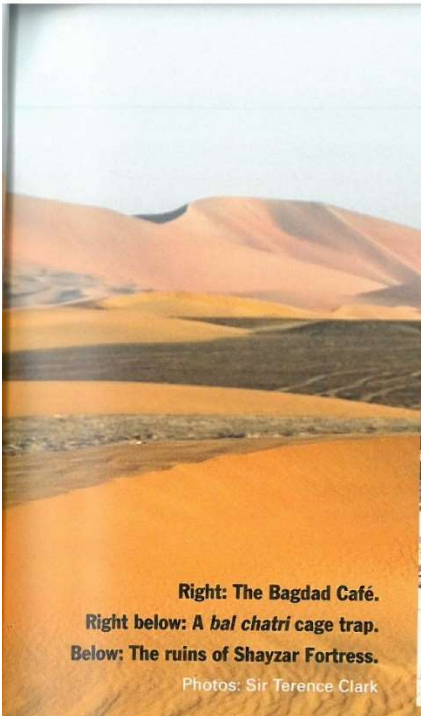
the hole through the 'window' extended two lengths of string, one led through a ring in the ground to the legs of a crow. By pulling on the string the trapper could make the bird hop and flutter about to attract the attention of an over-flying bird of prey. The second string led to a spring-loaded fine mesh net which when released by a pull on the string would fly over to cover the decoy and the raptor. The trapper said he would spend about a month at the hide, supplied from his village. If he was lucky he might catch a female saker (*Falco cherrug*) and sell her to a falconer in Kuwait for enough to keep his family for a year. At that stage he had been there a couple of weeks without a catch.

The Friday market in Baghdad in the 1980s often had for sale an extraordinary range of birds of prey which had been either trapped in passage or taken as eyasses. Eagles, such as the Eastern Imperial (*Aquila heliaca*) were commonly seen but sparrowhawks, buzzards,



kestrels and owls also made frequent appearances. For the most part, these birds were not meant to be flown but were sold as pets for the menageries maintained on some of the farms and plantations.

As I was recently passing by the great fortress of Shayzar about 15 miles northwest of Hama in Syria I was reminded of the almost identical description of



**Right: The Bagdad Café.**  
**Right below: A bal chatri cage trap.**  
**Below: The ruins of Shayzar Fortress.**

Photos: Sir Terence Clark



trapping raptors in Usamah Ibn Munqidh's memoirs translated by Philip Hitti as *An Arab-Syrian Gentlemen and Warrior in the Period of the Crusades* (I B Tauris, 1987). Usamah Ibn Munqidh was born in the fortress in 1095 and subsequently ruled the surrounding land, defending it stoutly against the Crusaders. He was a great warrior and man of letters and in his memoirs

describes among other things his passionate engagement with all forms of hunting. In particular he describes how the local villagers kept his father supplied with fresh hawks every season by trapping them near the castle. However in their case the hide was a little stone house built to the height of a man and concealed with hay and grass. The lure was a pigeon tied by the legs to

a stick which the trapper inside could agitate through an opening to attract the hawk's attention. While the hawk was busy with the pigeon, the trapper would slowly pull the sticks nearer to the opening until he could reach through and grab the hawk by the legs. So it would seem that these traditional methods have not changed much in hundreds of years. ▶



Photo: Sir Terence Clark

**Trapper demonstrating the harness.**

Although modern Syrians prefer to use shotguns and retrievers for the birds on migration, the trappers still ply their trade with a number of simpler devices. Stopping one day at the Bagdad Café at a fork in the road from Damascus to Baghdad, I was intrigued to see the outside walls were decorated with a number of falcon traps. On closer inspection with the young trapper, the main device was what we call a *bal chatri*, which may have come originally from India. It consisted of a wire mesh dome, festooned with running nooses of nylon, fixed to a flat metal floor, which could be anchored to the ground by a stout metal hook. A small rodent or bird is put inside the dome, which is left in an open place, where it would be clearly visible to passing raptors as well as to the trapper. A raptor would stoop on the dome, its talons would become entangled in the nooses, it would attempt to fly off

but the weight of the trap would sooner or later bring it down, when it could be smothered with a cloth and brought under control. Versions of this device are of course commonly used elsewhere.

The young trapper also demonstrated another device which is widely used. It consisted of a light wire harness covered with plaited string, which is carried on the back of a pigeon. On the underside are two adjustable string shoulder straps, which go over the wings. They continue into two long strings with slip knots at the



Photo: Sir Terence Clark



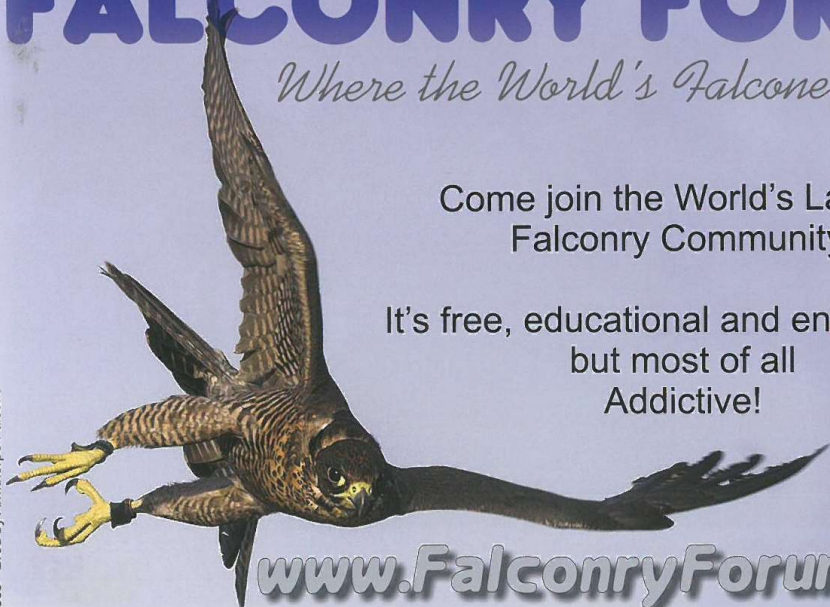
end, which go over the legs. Secured to the harness are nine nooses, three on each of the long members, made of spun nylon monofilament with running loops of fine thread at the end. When a falcon is spotted the pigeon is released, the falcon stoops on it, and becomes entangled with its talons. While the falcon can easily fly off if it has the pigeon in its talons, if they are merely snared in the nooses and the pigeon is swinging below, it is soon forced by the weight of its prey to land, when it can be taken by the trapper. The young trapper told me that passage falcons had become increasingly scarce and it was rare that he

succeeded in catching one.

Recently I was out with some hunter friends with their saluqis in the Syrian Desert, when I spotted a kestrel (*bashiq* in Arabic) behaving in an unusual fashion. It appeared to have some kind of prey dangling from its talons but was continuing to hover until it eventually drifted down to the ground. Out of nowhere appeared two young men on light motorcycles who gathered up the kestrel. I went over to see what they were about and found the kestrel on a cloth perch on the fuel tank. Tied to its jesses was a bunch of weighted pigeon feathers from which stretched a number of nylon

running nooses. This was what I had mistaken for the kestrel's prey. Its eyes had been almost sealed so that when cast into the air it merely hovered rather than flying off until it grew tired and came down. According to Mark Allen's book *Falconry in Arabia* (Stephen Greene Press, 1982) the decoy hawk is known as *niqil*, a term of affectionate derision in Arabic often used of a diminutive hawk.

These hunters were not having any luck either, confirming the impression across the region of a decline in numbers of the favoured saker falcon. ■



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# TOO EARLY TO



**Author preparing Meisha for a midwinter lowland flight.**



# FLY?

Words by **BRIAN MORRIS**

**T**HE PRESSURES in pursuing quality hawking are significant in the modern-day world. The overall situation is further complicated when trying to balance with work/family/life elements. As a result, falconry, and especially game hawking, is not for the faint hearted. That said, falconry continues to be practiced to a high standard in the UK and by increasing numbers. And this just goes to show how successful falconers are in finding innovative ways to feed their passion for this ancient field sport.

While I believe that hawking early in the morning is nothing new, it constantly surprises me when questioned about why I have adopted this practice. It was four decades ago, as a school boy, that I began to apply an early morning routine during the winter months, exercising my hawk before running off to school in time for class. These were relatively simple times, as I only ever had one bird at any given point in time and my routine was non-complex in either hunting sparrows round the grain barns of the local farms with a musket or trying to perfect my lure swinging skills with a kestrel in the outlying arable fields. Even so, I always seemed to get lucky (and by that I mean I never lost a hawk in those non-telemetry days) and so I always returned home in time to undertake that dash to school.

On my return from university it was not long before I started

to fly large longwings at game. While achieving success and realising a good standard (in my humble opinion) with tiercel peregrines (notably Troy, 1987 eyas), it was not until I tried a female peregrine (Morticia, 1990 eyas) that I realised game hawking with a falcon was a completely different ball-game and that to attain comparable pitches would require different field practices. While Morticia never made the grade (eventually became a crow hawk), the game hawking and falcon 'thing' consumed me, with only the occasional tiercel appearing on the cage since then.

The timing of that realisation coincided with the publication of two modern day falconry classics: *Gamehawk* by Ray Turner, 1987 and *Gamehawking At It's Very Best* compiled by Hal Webster and James Enderson. While Turner's book drove home the need for a (and already acknowledged) highly disciplined, analytical and continuous improvement approach, it was specifically a chapter by Mike Connolly in the latter book that reminded me of the early morning hawking I practiced as a school boy.

Connolly's duck hawking article revealed that he was rising early at weekends to travel considerable distances to reach quality hawking locations before first light. And it was the travel aspect that I found intriguing as it appeared Connolly was purposely rising early in order to feed his passion and yet not allow

Photo: courtesy of Brian Morris

## TOO EARLY TO FLY?

his sport to significantly interfere or disrupt his daily domestic and business commitments. Furthermore Connolly's article clearly portrayed that he was succeeding in achieving an extremely high standard of hawking.

At that time (in the late 80s) the partridge numbers in my region were healthy and so finding sufficient quality slips (with respective high pitches) was not the issue. What was a constraint was finding the same quality set-ups during the winter months of late October to January. Furthermore my goal was to fly red grouse on a regular basis and I knew that this would forever be a two-week, autumn affair unless I had more time. So the big question was: would the Connolly early morning routine benefit my hawking on the time constraint aspect and yet still allow me to improve upon present-day standards? While I adopted with some reservations, I quickly concluded that this was the only way to go during the winter months of the game season in order to maintain work/family/life balance, provide greater opportunity to

succeed with a falcon and also make grouse hawking a more regular feature.

Given decreasing game numbers over the past decades the Connolly method has paid dividends, as my experiences now match those that he experienced in a late 80s, overcrowded California and that is the falconer needs to continually seek out and travel to quality locations to achieve and maintain high quality hawking.

Having used the Connolly method for two decades, I will outline the approach, benefits and practices that I have adopted to make this a win-win situation in terms of modern game hawking.

## APPROACH

The approach undertaken can be split into a small number of categories:

- **Eyas and intermewed falcon training**
- **October feeding routine transition**
- **October first morning flights**
- **Midwinter maintenance**



Photo: courtesy of Brian Morris

- **Midwinter practices**
- **Midwinter routines**
- **Use of dogs**

## EYAS AND INTERMEWED FALCON TRAINING

Eyasses are generally collected in early July, with training following normal practices. Given that I field trial my setters on the summer circuit during July and August, all eyasses are subjected to a lot of manning which I believe to be a cornerstone of excellent falconry.

Eyasses are manned during July with absolutely no true regard to weight reduction control. I simply allow eyasses to find their own weight and so allow them to eat as much as they desire at a single feeding session. I allow the manning/carriage and daily field trial 'life on the road' routines to do the rest. As a result I am able to train and then fly at higher weights than otherwise might have been possible if dieting and exaggerated use of the hood were the only control methods applied.

Thereafter the eyasses are kited to great heights during August/early September before being introduced to game scenarios.

Intermewed falcons on the other hand are removed from breeding/moulting chambers in mid August and weight controlled to allow them to be kited during the first half of September and then moved onto game hawking refresher scenarios.

This is the routine that allows me to balance my family/work/life elements. It also allows me to iron out the creases before I go hunting. Furthermore I dislike hunting early season game from an ethical perspective.

Meira and Meisha on cage.



Photo: courtesy of Brian Morris

Author with Colin Forde (Bownard Kennels) at spring 2009 pointer and setter trials.

### OCTOBER FEEDING ROUTINE TRANSITION

October signals the onset of winter and the month can bring about un-settled weather. To accommodate this I purposely reduce the number of field outings, electing to fly on only the most ideal of days (wherever possible).

However, of greater significance is the clock change (from BST to GMT time) in late October, as this brings about a reduction in daylight hours at the back end of the day. To avoid this interfering with my falconry, I transition the falcons over to morning feeds as we approach the clock change.

The feeding routine transition is easy to do and outlined below is the process I've adopted for many years. You'll note that I morning feed the falcons for a few days before venturing out. It may be unnecessary, but this practice allows me to observe behaviours (especially with eyasses) before undertaking a morning flight later that first week. In effect this is a peace of mind process.

### SUNDAY AFTERNOON

Normal ration with no casting

### MONDAY MORNING

Half ration with no casting (to act as a top-up)

### TUESDAY MORNING

Return to weight control practices

### WEDNESDAY MORNING

Weight control practice

### THURSDAY MORNING

First early morning flights etc..

### OCTOBER FIRST MORNING FLIGHTS

The first morning flights for me are always nervy affairs, especially with eyasses. Those feelings are no different to when the creance is removed with an eyes in late summer. However, providing weight control practices have been followed, these flights go without mishap. That said I initially do not fly eyasses until the sun has crested the horizon. This sunrise aspect remains for a few weeks to allow the eyasses to settle into the morning routine. Thereafter I fly so long as I can distinguish game or a pointing dog in the gloomy light of early morning.

Falconers often ask me why I elect to fly so early? Quite simply this is because of my timetable and trying to fit everything in. Dog handlers also ask the same question as that time of day is not conducive to good scenting conditions. My response here is that while a dog shall fluff a point or two, I don't get disappointed

as I know they shall learn from these experiences and be better off for it in the long term.

Another question asked is, will flying early and in poor light conditions affect a falcon's pitch? Here people believe the falcon's vision shall be impaired due to the light conditions. Believe me, the falcon's eyesight is the last thing the falconer needs to concern him/herself with.

### MIDWINTER MAINTENANCE

Midwinter is a time when only the strongest quarry is present. It is also a time of challenging weather conditions, as well as diminishing availability of lowland arable ground due to ploughing activity. This can result in lowland quarry being harder to find and even harder to find in the right locations. Obtaining suitable ground is challenging, as a result I try to optimise what I already have and so try to assist by strategically locating feeders, thereby providing food for wild as well as released game birds.

Even going to such lengths will not provide you with the ideal slip every time, but it helps in keeping gamebirds on your ground and does increase opportunity when afield. Some people struggle to believe the result of doing something so simple can yield so much payback. In effect this is no different to having a small bird feeder in your back garden, and anyone who does can testify to how often that feeder needs replenishing during the winter months.

### MIDWINTER PRACTICES

Given that quarry numbers are thinned by midwinter, it is good practice to reduce the number of visits made to any particular

## TOO EARLY TO FLY?

location and ground rotation is important to avoid over disturbance.

During midwinter I do not hawk every day. There are various reasons for this associated with business/family demands, proximity of mid-week quality lowland ground and weather conditions. In the past I flew my falcons in every weather condition, however after witnessing the gradual decline in standards (late 90s) I abandoned this for a more selective approach. This has resulted in a return to higher standards as well as increased enjoyment.

### MIDWINTER ROUTINES

After flying I return home to offer the falcons a bath. I believe bathing is important from a general falconry management as well as from a falcon health perspective. It comforts me that the falcon is clean, her equipment has been cleansed and that she will while away the afternoon drying off and preening herself... preparing her feathers for the next assault on the sky.

Baths are offered regardless of temperature and even in sub-zero temperatures. This past season the UK was gripped by extreme wintry conditions for a prolonged period. During this time temperatures in my locale would drop to below minus double-digit numbers during the evening, while daylight temperatures were not much better. That said my falcons always bathed after flying. There is obviously some management required in these situations to avoid feather freezing, but that effort is minimal.

### USE OF DOGS

Falconry is enjoyed by many people, though it still surprises

me how many of these falconers do not use dogs. I grew up reading falconry literature by Upton, Pollard, Frank, Blaine, Woodford, *et al.* They were my inspiration and each was very successful in the field and I believe it was no coincidence that they all used top-pedigree setters and pointers. It was a 'no brainer' for me to follow suit, though I elected to do it the difficult way by initially using HPRs.

These days many falconers rely on high-powered optics for spotting game as well as using a friend to walk them into a set-up. While I do use optics when on lowland ground, I simply replace the friend element with man's best friend; the dog. It is my belief that a dog is more reliable as they don't chat, slow down walking into a set-up or take their eye off the game to glance upwards to watch the falcon. A dog simply works a pattern, hits scent and has only one thing in mind and that is the game in front.

As a result I use dogs no matter what the situation, wetland, lowland, upland or high upland.



Photo: courtesy of Brian Morris

And whenever I doubt a dog's sense and I take control, the flight fails to meet expectations. Given this dependency I spend a lot of time in the falconry calendar running my dogs and competing at pointer and setter field trials. In all, my desire is to improve my dog handling skills and fine tune the dog's abilities so that my falcons may benefit from our collective experiences.

I am not alone in the UK falconry community to believe the dog aspect is another cornerstone of excellent falconry. I am joined by fellow falconers Daryl Edwards

**Meira having bathed, enjoys winter weathering in minus 8 temperatures.**

Photo: courtesy of Brian Morris



Meisha on midwinter lowland pheasant.

and Lee Cooper as well as Sue Walker (wife of long-time game hawker, Tony Walker) at the pointer and setter field trials. And it should be noted that all of us feature regularly in the awards.

## PRACTICES

Following are outlined three practices, so that each may be placed in context of an average week during the winter months of the game season. Please note that I live in the north of the UK, where the daylight hours time window differs (i.e. shorter) from those in the more southerly parts of the UK.

### WORKING WEEK NON-HUNTING SCENARIO

**5.00am** Lights and radio (via a timer) switch on in the kennel and mews (see note below)

**5.15am** Enter mews to hood and weigh falcons, placing them on an indoor cage thereafter

**5.30am** Head out for a run or cycle with the dogs

**6.00am** Return home; falcons unhooded, fed and placed in weathering for the day

**Note:** The light and sound aspect is probably not necessary, but I feel better in doing so believing that it awakens the falcons/dogs and prepares them psychologically for the morning ahead.

### MIDWEEK, MIDWINTER HUNTING SCENARIO

Providing the weather is suitable I fly a few times during the working week. These mid-week scenarios are however dependent on two other key aspects i.e. work commitments and falcon weight.

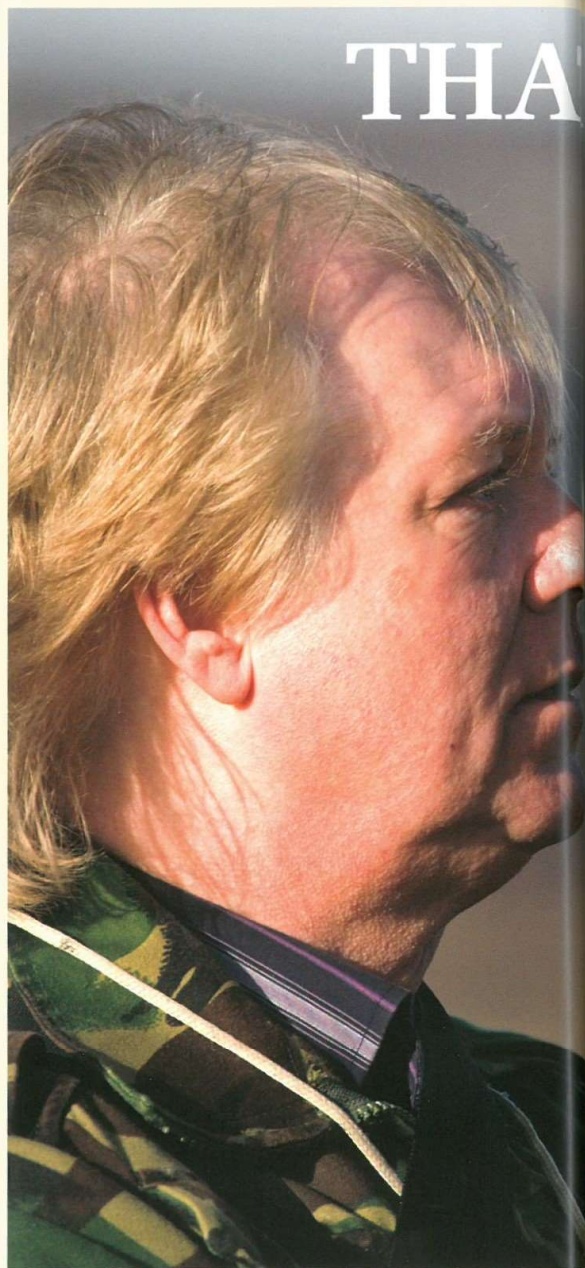
While work commitment determines if I hunt either in my immediate locale or a location not too distant, the most critical governing aspect for me is the falcon's weight. Given that feeding the day before occurred at 6.00am, I need to be careful that I do not fly too late when a falcon (at weigh in) registers slightly below her best field ►

# BERKUT OR NO?

Words by DAVID GLYNNE FOX

Photos by ALEX HYDE

THIS ARTICLE was born through reading a short paper entitled *Golden Eagles and the Swindle with the Subspecies *Aquila chrysaetos daphanea**, otherwise known as the *berkut* golden eagle. There was something in this paper that I had not observed before and it made me sit up and take immediate notice. The author of this paper is the celebrated eagle austringer Josef Hiebeler who raises concern with the captive interbreeding of golden eagle subspecies and the sale of alleged golden eagles pertaining to be of the legendary subspecies. Josef maintained in this paper that, and I quote, "A typical feature of *daphanea* eagles is the featherless supraorbital bone above the eyes," and he goes on to illustrate the point with a photograph depicting this feature. I have to admit that, having flown two *berkuts*, I had never noticed this particular phenomenon and so, intrigued, I immediately ventured out into the garden to check the supraorbital ridges of my own *berkut*, a male named Star. ▶





BERKUT

S THE QUESTION



I have it on good authority that Star's parents heralded from Kazakhstan and this of course places them well inside the range of the golden eagle known as the *berkut*. Accordingly, I had always deemed him to be a full-blooded *berkut* and therefore, one can imagine my surprise, not to say shock, when I discovered that Star's supraorbital ridges were entirely feathered, in complete contradiction to Josef's writings. I was still musing over this when I inadvertently glanced at my female golden eagle Skye. To my utter amazement, her supraorbital ridges were entirely naked! What was going on here? I knew for a fact that Skye had none of the *berkut* strain in her, despite her being dark and having a top body weight of fourteen pounds. So, according to Josef's paper, one way or another, one of my eagles was a *berkut*, but I know it wasn't Skye, because I know her pedigree and that she was bred by Alan Griffin from a female which originated from Steve and Emma Ford and the male heralded from western Europe, both parents being well out of the range of the *daphanea* subspecies. I also noticed from a splendid in-flight photograph of one of Joe Atkinson's female golden eagles named Widow, that her supraorbital ridges were also bare and she is most definitely of the *canadensis* subspecies! (*International Falconer*, issue 34, pages 20-21, 2009.) I contacted Joe directly about this and he confirmed that all of his eagles are of the *canadensis* subspecies and both his males have feathered ridges, including the well-known Jackhammer and that his female, Widow also has naked ridges. Joe was kind enough to e-mail me close-up head study

photographs of his eagles to illustrate the point. Therefore, one can perhaps understand why I am much troubled by the supraorbital ridge being used as a distinguishing feature of the *berkut* in Josef's paper. In my view and from my limited experience, it seems to be more of a female eagle thing, but I stand to be corrected, as Josef Hiebeler has no doubt forgotten more about golden eagles than

many subspecies comprise the total make-up of a particular species and there have been, and still are, many opinions as to how many subspecies of golden eagle actually exist. Most authors are content with five: *Aquila chrysaetos chrysaetos*, which includes our Scottish bird, *Aquila chrysaetos canadensis* from Canada and the USA, *Aquila chrysaetos homeryi* from southern Europe, *Aquila*



Head studies of two golden eagles showing the feathered (left) and bare (right) supraorbital ridges.

I could ever hope to learn. But I have to state that I am a little confused and hope that other eagle austringers can shed more light on this issue. I certainly have my doubts that this aspect is exclusive to the *daphanea* subspecies.

Taxonomists seldom agree with each other when it comes to defining actual subspecies, or sometimes even species status, and the same is true for the golden eagle. I suppose it all depends upon whether one is a lumpner or a splitter as to how

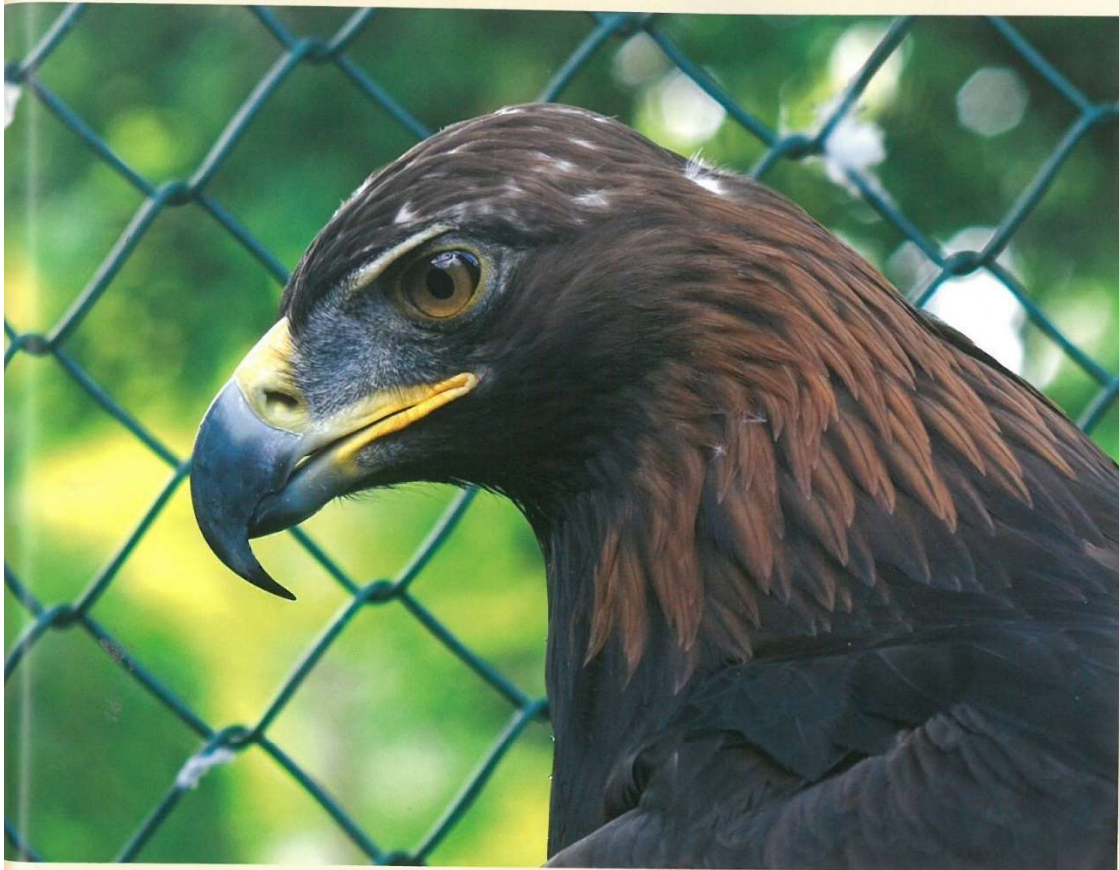
*chrysaetos japonica* which is generally recognised as the smallest of all the subspecies and *Aquila chrysaetos daphanea*, the *berkut*, which is considered by many to be the largest of all golden eagles. Some authors recognise a sixth subspecies, *Aquila chrysaetos kamschatkensis*. However, something all these birds have in common is that they are all recognisably golden eagles.

The *berkut*, as many would have us believe, is a huge and dark version of the golden eagle,

and indeed, some specimens are, but it also has to be said that not all *berkuts* are of this colour and dimension. I have seen quite small and light coloured birds. It is mainly because historically, the Mongolian and Kazakh eagle austringers specially chose the largest birds for the flight at such

My personal view regarding the golden eagle is that these so-called subspecies are basically geographical races which I am certain will interbreed wherever the ranges overlap. Only island races, such as those in Japan are likely to remain genetically constant because they cannot

in the *berkut*? It can only be through historical reasons, for as aforementioned, it is this subspecies that has become so famous because it has been flown for centuries by Asian falconers whilst other golden eagles elsewhere in the world have been largely neglected until very



formidable quarry as the fox and wolf, and of course, *Aquila chrysaetos daphanea* is the local golden eagle race and thus the subspecies has become so well known in literature. I daresay that if the Mongolians and Kazakhs had lived within the range of other golden eagle races, they would have used these with just as much success.

interbreed with other races unless they decide to cross the seas to pastures new.

I personally feel that if two or three true *berkuts* were placed on a weathering ground with thirty or so other golden eagles comprising various so-called races, I would defy anyone to pick them out accurately. So why is everyone so interested



recently. I would also state with some conviction that I do not believe for one second that other races of golden eagle are inferior to the *berkut* when it comes to training, flying and hunting, as many eagle austringers are now becoming fully aware. Also, until fairly recently, golden eagles were not readily available in any numbers, especially in the ▶

United Kingdom, where our bird is quite rightly rigidly protected. Eagles required for falconry had to be sought out wherever possible, and it is this factor that has led to the mixed pairing of various subspecies. It is hardly surprising then that many golden eagles in the hands of falconers today are of mixed origin. But is this really a major problem? I can see where Josef is coming from and I for one am no hybrid lover, but these birds are not hybrids in the true sense of the word, they are a single species and as I have already mentioned, variation across the whole range is rife. A true hybrid is the crossing of one species with another, such as the common pairing of steppe eagles

with golden eagles, the results of which hold no interest for me personally, but many do seem to like them. What is wrong in my view, is the passing off to an unsuspecting buyer, something that is not what it pertains to be. This is particularly true when it comes to *berkuts*, the subspecies, or geographical race that many eagle austringers seem to revere, and where an unscrupulous seller may well take advantage of by passing off any golden eagle as a true *berkut*.

In conclusion then, what constitutes a true *berkut*? What are its physical and physiological characteristics? As stated, many *berkuts* closely resemble the other subspecies and only the

largest are generally retained by the Mongolian and Kazakh falconers. So size alone is not necessarily a good guide, for there are also very large specimens of the American race to name just one. Overall colouration is no criteria either, for the species is highly variable. Hunting prowess, as many are now aware, is no different from one subspecies to another, and as for the naked supraorbital ridge, I think I have successfully laid that one to rest. So, *berkut* or not *berkut*? I wish someone would inform us all as I'll be blown if I can tell the difference! ■



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# BOOK REVIEW

## Falconry: Celebrating a Living Heritage

By Dr. Javier Ceballos

Published by Motivate Publishing, Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

www.booksarabia.com

ISBN-978-1-86063-276-1

Format: Hardcover, 306 pages with over 400 photographs in full colour.

Reviewed by BEN CRANE

**F**ROM THE OUTSET I will declare that I have a vested interest in this publication simply because it contains some of my images. However this does not stop me from objectively assessing this as perhaps the most valuable visual history of falconry of the last few decades.

Published to coincide with the second Festival of Falconry, *Falconry: Celebrating a Living Heritage* has a pedigree that is second to none and screams quality from the first page.

As far as I am concerned, the image will always usurp words when depicting mankind working with nature. To try and encapsulate the entirety of a cultural pastime which transcends ethnic, historical and geographical boundaries is a monumental task. This book handles the problem with confidence, style and with a sense of thrill all falconers will recognise. The only other comparable books of this calibre are those produced by the BBC in conjunction with their natural history programmes.

Recently, the printed page has come under pressure from various electronic media. As far as I am concerned, books will always have a tangible quality which needs to be explored in real time. This book shows us why the printed page will always rise above a flickering screen. Its weight, construction, feel and even smell make this an object to be coveted.

However it is the content of books which makes them so much more valuable. So many times I get asked by non-falconers, "what is your obsession with flying hawks". Letting them peruse this book for 20 minutes gives them all the answers they require.

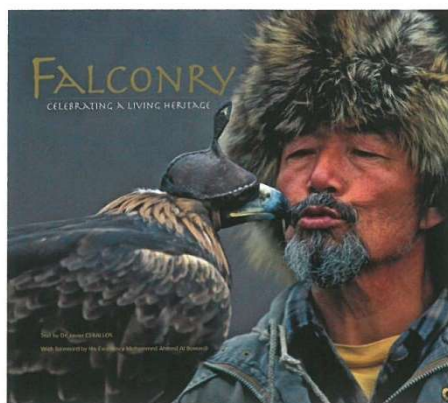
It is both an intimate and educational book that covers the whole spectrum of falconry motivations and emotions. Within these pages the full scope and diversity of how humans live and breathe falconry is explored. It covers the historical, the artistic, the sociological and the biological strands of humanity touched on by falconry the world over.

Starting with the *berkutchi* on the steppes of Kazakhstan and Russia, *Falconry: Celebrating a Living Heritage* follows a linear visual history across the globe. From Asia, Pakistan and Japan, we travel through the Arabian countries, to Europe

and onto the Americas and the New World. The final chapter is perhaps the most important, as it contextualises the previous 300 pages within a modern falconry framework.

Every section has high resolution, large scale images which cover the global range of processes, equipment, hunting and human interaction with birds of prey. From the relaxed faces of children in remote villages, nomadic hunting parties in Arabia, formal gatherings in Europe to the vast flights of gyrfalcons in America. This book covers it all in a style rarely seen in other publications. Thankfully the editing team were wise enough to keep the text to a minimum. Any words are neatly tucked away allowing the images to breathe and carry their own individual stories.

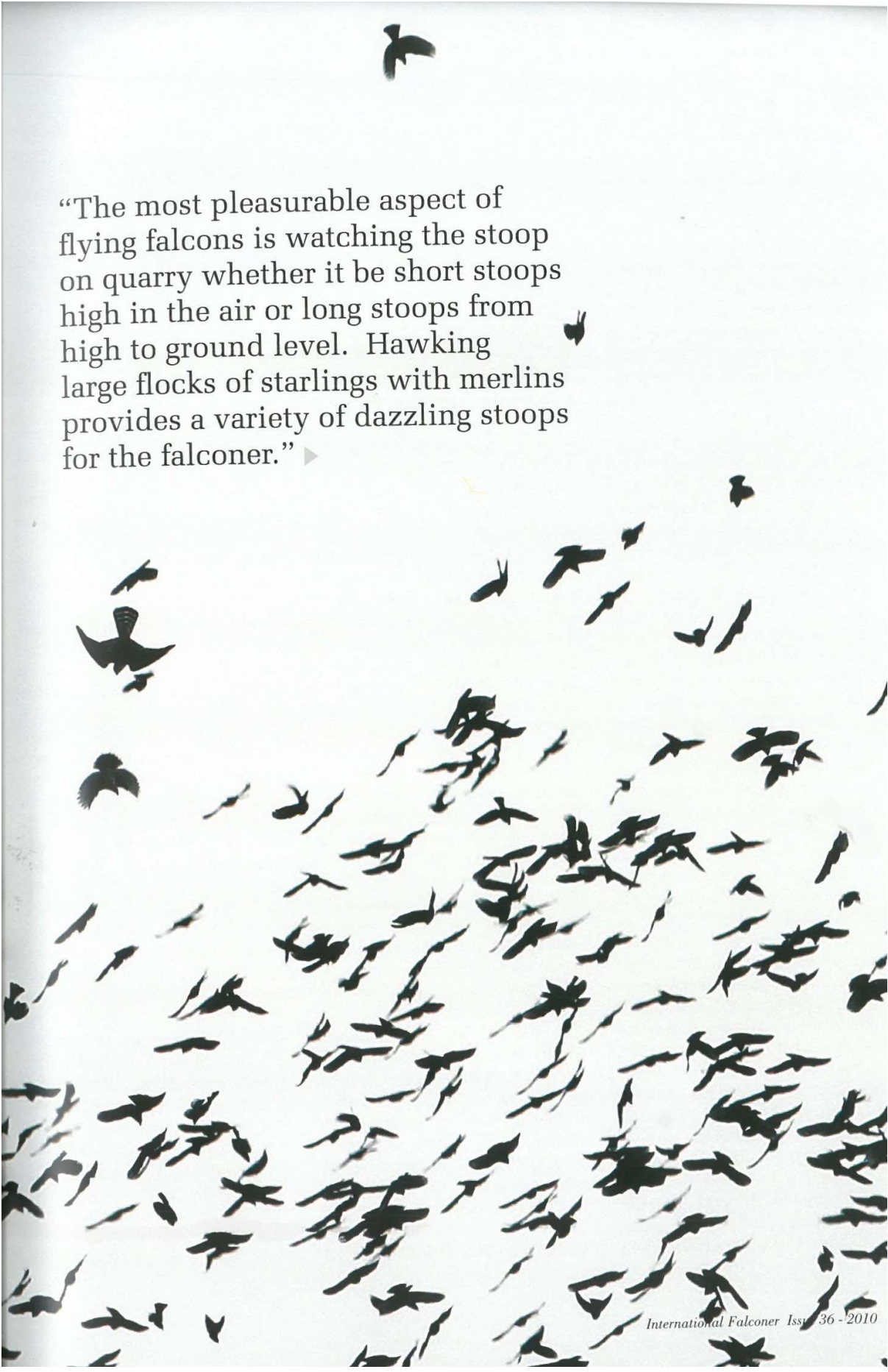
I have every faith that in years to come, when the UNESCO bid has been ratified and falconry is given its rightful status, this book will be seen as a classic. It gives a complete picture of falconry to date but also does that other rare thing; it reaches out beyond the niche world of falconers and explains the reasons and motivations to those that may not understand, in a profoundly moving and human way. ■





# Hawking starlings with passage merlins

Words by KEN TUTTLE

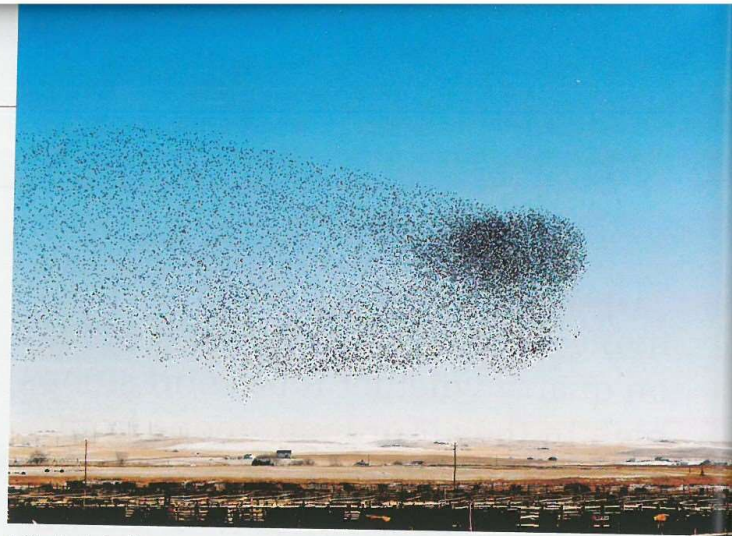


“The most pleasurable aspect of flying falcons is watching the stoop on quarry whether it be short stoops high in the air or long stoops from high to ground level. Hawking large flocks of starlings with merlins provides a variety of dazzling stoops for the falconer.” ▶

**T**HIS FLIGHT requires an abundance of starlings congregated in the area where the falcon is to be slipped. Starling flocks are most often found perched on the power lines of high power poles or feeding in fields, dairies and cattle feed lots. The merlin is slipped by setting her on a fence post or other low perch where she will sit briefly before flying up to the highest perch in the area such as a tree, telephone pole or power pole.

This arrangement is just as critical as is the waiting-on pitch of the game hawk, for the merlin needs to be able to survey and spot the intended victims without drawing attention to herself. This flight is most successful when the merlin launches her attack from two-tenths of a mile to four-tenths of a mile away; under these conditions the merlin is most likely to launch a high climbing attack. When the starling flock first becomes aware of the merlin's presence with her coming high and fast in the air above, they are most likely to fly up to meet the falcon in the defensive move of flying together in tight formation as opposed to just dispersing and heading for ground cover in the bushes or trees.

Starling flocks are more likely to cooperate with a high flight when there are thousands of birds present, but even under ideal conditions the flight can be difficult to orchestrate. The author has seen flights where thousands of birds climb up into the sky flying in all directions in an effort to out climb and out fly the falcon. However, a well-conditioned, fast-flying merlin will overtake the starlings and as she gains ascendancy above them they will



**A flock of starlings grouping into a tight, defensive formation.** Photo: Nancee Testa

tighten up their formation and begin their gyrations in an effort to confuse her and foil her efforts at singling out an individual bird. Repeated stoops with the starling flock high in the air are common and usually result in a kill. However, on small and medium sized flocks the merlin will sometimes make repeated stoops across the top of the flock, each time driving the flock closer to earth before making one hard sincere effort to strike or bind to quarry. This style of flight reduces the probability of a kill but is safer for the falcon, as she is less likely to draw the attention of other raptors in the area when she kills closer to the ground. This style of flight is also more likely if the falcon is flown overweight. The author believes that proper weight management is crucial for classy flights on starlings with a passage merlin.

#### **ESTABLISHING THE TRUE WEIGHT OF THE MERLIN**

The true trapped weight can be crucial in establishing the best flying or hunting weight for a passage merlin. The true weight of a trapped bird is calculated in the same manner as the true weight of a trained bird, it is the weight 24 hours after the last feeding. For a trapped merlin it will be 24

hours after the most recent meal. If the bird is trapped early in the morning prior to eating anything then the trapped weight is the true weight; if the bird is trapped in the afternoon prior to eating anything, then the true weight will most likely be the weight the next morning, assuming that she probably ate the morning preceding her being trapped. If she was trapped with food in her crop in either the morning or the evening, then the true weight will be 24 hours from that time.

Many years ago the author discovered that in spite of differences in weight of freshly trapped prairie falcons, their flying weights were all pretty much the same. At the time of being trapped some birds appeared to be very large but they were usually just very fat, and their eventual flying weight was not significantly different from other prairie falcons. In discussing this with Dr Clayton White he explained that research had shown that tundra peregrines as juveniles in the nest showed quite a range in size, with large and small birds but that upon returning in the Spring from their winter habitats, the size range for falcons surviving through the year was very small. The bottom line is that nature



tends to select average sizes for survival; this seems to be true with most prairie merlins all being quite similar in size and somewhat larger than taiga merlins. Most taiga merlins are pretty much the same size and somewhat larger than black merlins, which are also quite similar to each other in size or flying weight. Many birds that have a high trapped weight turn out to be quite average, they were simply in a fat condition when trapped. That being said, trying to get an accurate estimate of trapped weight is helpful in later establishing the correct hunting weight, and using behavioural response in training as the most important guide to establishing hunting weight.

### CRUCIAL WEIGHT MANAGEMENT

Perhaps the biggest mistake made by many falconers is to ignore critical weight management and conditioning factors. Ray Turner (*Gamehawk*, Gallery Press, 1991) believes that compulsive weight management is a must. He says that a falcon must be low enough in weight to be motivated and high enough to be strong, going too far in either direction will result in poor performance.

McDermott's definitions of overweight, flying weight, hunting weight and underweight are well-described and easy to understand (p.56 *The Imprint Accipiter*, Western Sporting Publications, 2009) "By definition, flight weight is the motivational point where a trained hawk has good field control. Hunting weight is a more compelling motivational point (a lower weight) at which the hawk consistently takes game." Moreover, McDermott (*Accipitrine Behavioural Prob-*

*lems, Diagnosis and Treatment*, privately published, 2004) determined with surveys and research into behavioral problems with trained raptors, "Undoubtedly the single most common problem faced by most falconers worldwide is flying their hawks too heavy."

In his book, *Classical Falconry: A Treatise on Rook and Crow Hawking*, pp. 111-113 (Hancock House Publishers, 2004), Nick Fox had this to say about weight management, "There is a general idea going round that hawks should be flown at the highest weight possible, consistent with obedience...Obedience to the falconer is not synonymous with optimum hunting performance... The immediate crisis to loom with a hawk that has been fed too high is that she may be lost or rake away. More insidious than this is that, if flown at quarry when she is not spot-on for weight, she will be lacklustre in performance...By flying her slightly overweight you will get her into bad habits, break her cycle of success and confidence, and ruin her. The same applies to merlins." He went on to say, "Levels of obedience and the urge to kill are not directly connected. The urge to kill grows weak well before obedience falters. You would not train a gymnast or a horse to be at as high a weight as possible. The aim with a falcon should be optimal hunting performance."

The newly captured female merlin will weigh from 210 to 250 grams, depending on her age and how much food is in the crop, stomach and panel. The 'true weight' of the merlin will be her weight 24 hours after capture if there is any food in her system. This weight is usually between 200 and 215 grams,

not including the weight of the hood. Training weights in a cold climate (daytime highs under 40 degrees Fahrenheit) may require a reduction in weight of 10 per cent. The training weight during first free flights will usually be between 180 and 190 grams, not including hood. The hunting weight for the passage merlin will usually be 10 per cent or less from the true trapped weight, often falling between 189 and 205 grams, not including the weight of the hood.

### THE 22-HOUR WEIGHT CONTROL MODEL OF HARRY McELROY

Harry C. McElroy was the first to write about what he called the 22-hour weight control model (pp.52-53 *The Journal*, NAFA Vol. 15, 1976). He simply described it as "feeding to a predetermined weight after the hunt. This fed weight is selected to have the hawk within its response weight by flight time the following day. Generally there is a 22-hour period between being fed and being flown the next day." Harry hunts his hawks for about 2 hours and maintains their weight by feeding tidbits during the 2-hour hunt.

The author has used variations of the "McElroy weight control model" for more than thirty years. He has usually had to work around his work schedule, exercising his birds daily but only hawking with them two to three times per week during the winter months. Raptors flown with regular exercise and relatively stable temperature control maintain rather precise flying weight and responsiveness when food intake is regulated in relation to the 24 hours in the day with one daily feeding.

Tasha, a black merlin flown ▶



**Black merlin Tasha after one of her many successful flights at starlings.**

Photo: Ken Tuttle

by the author from 2008 through 2010 flew between 185 and 190 grams on a 22-hour hawking schedule with lower hunting weights in autumn and spring and higher hunting weights in winter. Tasha's average hunting weight was about 187-189 grams. The merlin was left at home and fed daily at about 6:00pm in the autumn and spring and 5:00pm during the winter. Then on hawking days, she was taken to work in a transport box and taken to the field at about 2:00pm. hunting from about 2:30-4:30pm. By 4:00pm starlings had gone to roost and by 5:00pm it was dark during late November through early January. During the hunt, the merlin's weight was maintained for the duration of the hunt by feeding 1-2 grams of starling leg. At the end of the hunt, Tasha was fed a reasonable crop but at 5:00pm at home in the news she was given the final portion of the pre-determined

food ration for the day; her weight was brought up to about 213 grams resulting in a weight of 187 grams 22 hours later the next day and 185 grams on the 24 hour feeding schedule.

For the author's weight management model, starling meat is weighed out in daily portions, including a starling leg for tidbits with the typical autumn and spring rations being about 24 grams and the typical ration needed for winter being about 29 grams but ranging as high as 34 grams. Weighing daily food rations provides additional control of the falcon's weight. If the falcon's hunting weight is accurate for the day she is given the daily ration of meat and then weighed again the next morning at 8:00am. In the example of Tasha, her morning weight was about 195 grams; she would lose one gram per hour for the last 9 hours of the 24 hour day putting her at 187 grams on the 22-hour

schedule and 185 grams on the 24-hour schedule. If her weight was too low in the morning, she was fed a gram or two; if she was too high in the evening, she was given a gram or two less than usual but it was amazing how consistent she was when all of the variables were consistent.

#### **SOME FLIGHTS FROM THE 2009-2010 SEASON**

**October 2009:** The wind was blowing with flags almost straight out, so I was sceptical about having a good flight but with thousands of starlings on the power-line and feeding in the field below, I was still hopeful. Tasha quickly assessed the situation and took off flying crosswind at a small flock in the distance. An upwind flight is the best, as it allows the merlin to climb at a faster rate than the starlings but it is very difficult for the merlin to achieve supremacy over the starling flock in a strong

## Hawking starlings with passage merlins

wind. After a stoop near the ground and a miss, she went up to a nearby tall telephone pole, then she quietly flew to another pole to position herself better. She flew more like a buoyant kestrel than like a merlin. Soon she launched at the large flock flying crosswind about two tenths of a mile in front of me. After ringing them up to a high position in the air she gave up and landed again. I could not understand why she did not stoop on them with the starlings being right underneath her but then I saw a soaring red-tailed hawk right above her. Eventually the hawk left the area and she once again climbed up to a towering position, hundreds of feet high with the flock flying right below her. It was difficult to judge how high she was as I was watching through 10x binoculars but I am sure it was well over 400 feet high. She put

in a beautiful stoop, and pitched up with another power dive into the centre of the flock, binding to a starling and then coming down quickly to earth to avoid catching the attention of other hawks. This was an incredible flight, the kind that takes the sting out of not being able to find quarry for large falcons anymore.

**January 2010:** Today I located a large flock of starlings north of Palmyra near the double pole lines. I perched Tasha on the highway to the north and then drove south towards the slip, which was three-tenths of a mile away. When I pulled my car over and parked I was about halfway between Tasha and the flock of starlings. The flock was feeding in the fields where the farmers had cattle feeding. Tasha flew down the road going high and fast and I watched with

10x binoculars as she streaked across the sky like a black dart against the white backdrop of clouds. Gaining supremacy over the flock that was flying below her in tight formation, she stooped vertically into the centre of the flock and bound to a bird. When I arrived in my car, feathers were still falling from the sky. After getting permission from the home owner to look for my falcon, I found Tasha in the backyard of a residence, sitting on a piece of board, pluming her quarry. There was an old dog sitting on a couch not more than 10 feet away, and Tasha was somewhat concerned about the dog. I quickly bent over and transferred her onto a starling on my fist. I would like to have given her more time to break into her quarry but the nearby dog had both of us concerned. This was a flight to remember. ■

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# Falconry & UNESCO

the story so far...

Words by JAVIER CEBALLOS ARANDA

Photo: courtesy of Dr. Javier Ceballos



**HE Mohammed Ahmed Al Bowardi and Dr. Javier Ceballos with English and Arabic versions of the book *Falconry: Celebrating a Living Heritage*.**

**I**N RECENT YEARS, I have dedicated a large part of my work to recognising and publishing the cultural values of falconry. I started by releasing the book, *Soltando pihuelas. Conocimiento y práctica de la cetrería*. Afterwards I made the documentary *Aliados del Aire, (Allies of the Air)*. With what I had researched up until that point and another few years' of effort, I submitted my doctoral thesis on falconry in Spain.

This brief preamble illustrates why I have been involved with international working groups since 2005 to get UNESCO to recognise falconry as World Cultural Heritage. In the beginning I worked as coordinator for Latin America, and subsequently to date, as Falconry Delegate for the Ministry of Culture in Spain.

Encouraged by the editor of *International Falconer*, I shall set out the steps taken until the end of November 2009, interpreting the results obtained and the possible consequences for falconry in the near future.

#### FALCONRY AND UNESCO

The United Nations Organisation for Education, Science and Culture (UNESCO), created in 1945, promotes international cooperation with regard to education, science, culture and communication between its almost 200 Member States.

Among other roles, UNESCO identifies cultural assets which deserve to be considered as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), to guarantee their knowledge, protection and maintenance in the long term. The Convention for their safeguard was held in Paris in 2003.

*"Intangible Cultural Heritage means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity. For the purposes of this Convention, consideration will be given solely to such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development."*

Those nations that have ratified the Convention can put forward candidatures before UNESCO. These candidatures can be national or multinational.

The United Arab Emirates Government, UAE, has confirmed the important cultural heritage that falconry constitutes both in its own country and throughout the rest of the world. In recent years, it has embarked on a series of actions until it managed to put forward an important multinational candidature

before UNESCO. They have been able to bring together 12 countries. The objective is to achieve recognition for falconry by UNESCO as Living Human Heritage.

#### STEPS TAKEN

The Arab people have always lived closely with falcons. In modern falconry, among its main figures HH Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahayan, first President of the United Arab Emirates (rest in peace) stands out. The United Arab Emirates Government has been the driving force of this important initiative for falconry from its beginnings. Its passion for falconry, financial support and hospitality have been crucial for the success of this ambitious project.

In September 2005, the symposium *Falconry, a World Heritage* organised by Pro-Falcon and the Emirates Falconers' Club, took place in Abu Dhabi. I had the honour of attending as Latin American regional coordinator, sharing sessions with important falconers, researchers and IAF and UNESCO members. Mr. Gadi G.Y. Mgomzulu, Director of UNESCO Cultural Heritage and Dr. Nick Fox, Director Falcon Research UAE and founder of the Falconry Heritage Trust, laid down the guidelines for the falconry community to follow. In subsequent years, the International Association for Falconry (IAF), with Gary Timbrell's patient coordination, formed an active working group. We changed the initial approach on seeing that UNESCO required

particular involvement from each government. The first step was recognising falconry as an asset of cultural interest in each country. Until that time, it would not have been possible to put a multinational candidature into effect.

Months later, the IAF, as per procedure requirement, broke away from the established working groups. It worked hard until achieving accreditation as advisory NGO of UNESCO at the Third Session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, held in Istanbul 4-8<sup>th</sup> November 2008. The year 2008 was crucial for the project. The second meeting of the General Assembly of States Parties to the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage took place from 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> June 2008 at UNESCO's headquarters.

It was getting closer to the date established to present the multinational candidature to UNESCO and all that was needed was to identify the countries that could be included. With this objective, International Wildlife Consultants Ltd. (IWC), with the support of the UAE government organised the corresponding International Workshop on the same dates. The following countries were represented:

**Austria** - Christian Habich

**Belgium** Patrick Morel & Kris Ulens

**Czech Republic** Dr. Martin Ptacek & Dr. Bohumil Straka

**France** Pierre Courjaret

**Germany** Karl-Heinz Gersmann ▶

**Hungary** Janos Toth  
**Japan** Yukio Asaoka & Yukihiro Fujita,  
**Kazakhstan** Bakyt Karnakbayev  
**Kyrgyzstan** Almazbek Akunov  
**Morocco** Abdelhak Chaouni  
**Netherlands** Tula Stapert  
**Poland** Janusz Sielicki  
**Russia** Konstantin Sokoloff  
**Slovakia** Dr. Ladislav Molnar & Mr. Lubomir Engler  
**Spain** Dr. Javier Ceballos  
**Turkey** Dogan Simit & Salih Dogursadik  
**Turkmenistan** Atadurdy Eyberdiyev

In attendance, as representatives from the UAE government, were HE Mohammed Al Bowadi, HE Majid Al-Mansouri, Dr. Awadh Al Saleh and Dr. Dr. Ismail Ali El-Fihail. From the IAF, President, Frank Bond, Vice President José Manuel Rodríguez-Villa and Advisor Christian de Coune attended. Dr. Nick Fox, Barbro Fox, Diana Durman-Walters, Nick Kester, Jo Oliver, Jevgeni Shergalin, Alan Gates, David Horobin and Delphine Delire took part in the organisation developed by IWC.

Those of us participating in the workshop were invited to the reception held for UNESCO delegates at the United Arab Emirates Embassy. It was there that the video, which the UAE had commissioned from me some time ago to show falconry as cultural heritage, was screened.

In the months following, each delegate was working with his/her respective government in order to get falconry included on their nation's assets of cultural interest list. Meanwhile Dr. Nick Fox, Dr. Sulayman Khalaf and Dr. Bohumil Straka were

jointly writing the draft of the multinational proposal.

In July 2009 the second Falconry Festival, the most important gathering of falconers in modern international falconry, took place. It was held in the United Kingdom, hosted by the Hawk Board and financially supported by the Emirates Falconers' Club. Falconers from five continents participated, with national representations from almost 50 countries. It was shown once again that when a falcon is in the air, falconers from around the world come together irrespective of culture, religion, age or whether you are rich or poor. Borders swiftly disappear on discovering that what unites us is much more powerful than what divides us.

During the Falconry Festival, the workshops of countries included in the proposal led by UAE took place. A smaller number of national delegates attended than at the workshop in Paris. The following 11 countries participated in the meeting: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Korea, Mongolia, Morocco, Slovakia, Spain, Qatar and UAE. We knew then that Saudi Arabia and Syria could join.

The Falconry Heritage Trust (FHT) meeting coincided with the Falconry Festival. This organisation, founded in May 2005, works to maintain and publish information on falconry. It has a growing archive of material and documents on falconry on the Internet. The book launch for *Falconry: Celebrating a Living Heritage* also took place.

Shortly afterwards, in the middle of August, the last Workshop prior to sending the documentation to UNESCO took place in Abu Dhabi. Once again its government was generous in inviting us to the meeting. After many hours of deliberation, in sessions moderated by different delegations, we reached consensus on the final document. It was signed by the following 12 nations: United Arab Emirates, France, Belgium, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Mongolia, Korea and Spain.

Once the proposal was received, following the usual procedure, the Secretary from the Convention for Safeguarding the PCI made his first comments in November. Dr. Nasser Ali Al Himiri, as Director of the Department of Intangible Heritage in Abu Dhabi, encouraged each participating country to provide the required documentation. He formed a committee of three representatives (European States, South East Asia, and Arab States) to meet in Abu Dhabi and approve the final version of the candidature in December 2009.

This final version will be subsequently studied by the subsidiary body in May 2010. In July, the Secretary will send the documentation assessment to the participating States Parties and to the rest of the committee members in August. The archives of the proceeding may be consulted online by the States Parties. The committee will assess the nominations in September 2010 and make its decision then.

## CONSEQUENCES FOR FALCONRY

It is very likely that we will have UNESCO's recognition in the autumn of 2010. Falconry will then have the guarantee of long-term maintenance. Applying the Agreement of 2003, grants Intangible Cultural Heritage legal protection at international level. The guidelines for its maintenance and publication are set out in articles 11, 13, 14 and 15 thereof.

However, as we falconers know, not all the event's success lies in the final outcome: the results already obtained are significant. Motivated by inclusion on the Multinational Submission, each one of the countries listed in the proposal has already recognised falconry as an Asset of Cultural Interest in their respective nations. Governments must be vigilant of its protection, study, consultation and dissemination. Without a doubt, UAE has prompted this important official recognition.

Another success achieved, is the feeling of belonging to the falconry community. The creation of the Falconry Heritage Trust, the excellent reception at the Falconry Festival, the holding of workshops at different times and places, the publication of videos and books...have all given rise to bringing falconers of the most diverse profiles and origins together. Falconry is revealing itself as the art of hunting through which the bird of prey brings out the best in the human being.

I would like to show my recognition and gratitude to all those who have contributed

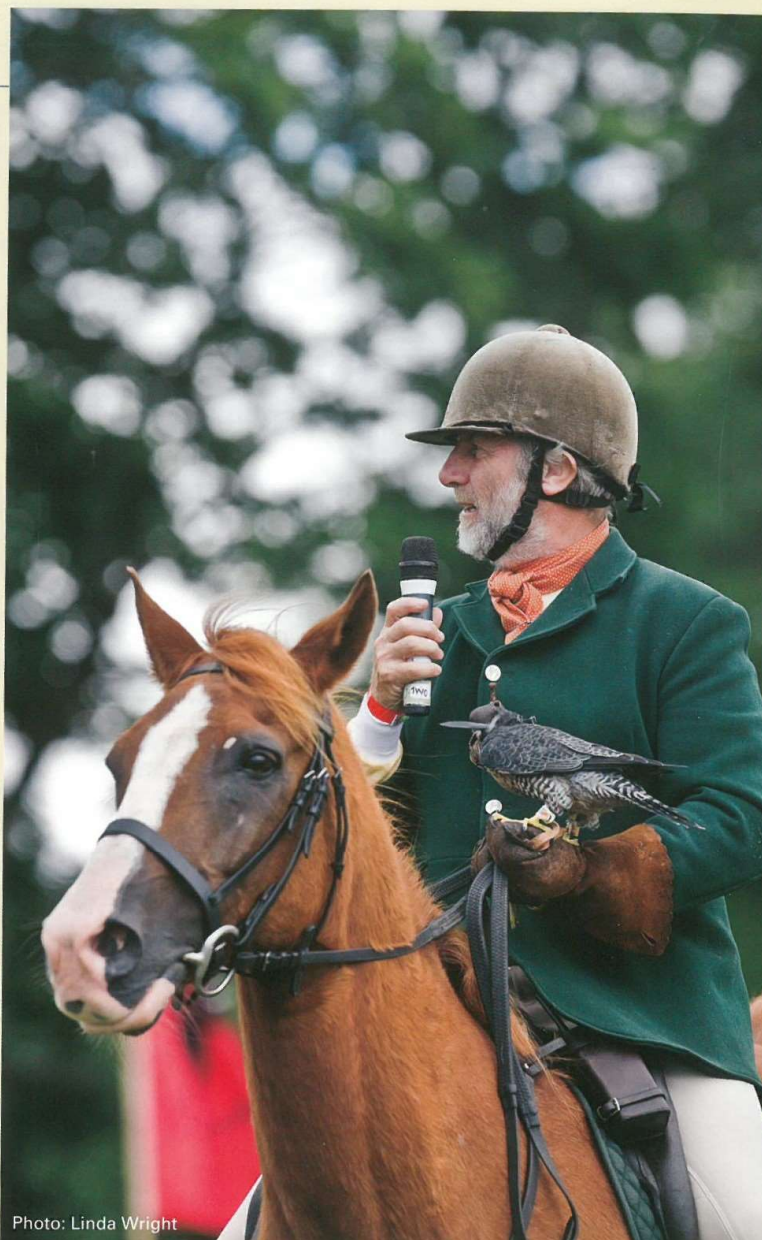


Photo: Linda Wright

**Dr. Nick Fox at the Falconry Festival. Modern falconry flies high largely thanks to his influence, work capacity and dedication.**

to the design, drive and development of this project. In particular, I appreciate Dr. Nick Fox's dedication to the cause. Nick has worked in the service of falconry, cultivating and sharing his knowledge, for a very long time. His leadership, analytical capacity, global vision, gift for training and coordinating

teams, and work, have been quintessential in this challenge. Thank you Nick! Modern falconry flies high largely thanks to you. ■

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