

# INTERNATIONAL FALCONER

ISSUE 29 - 2006

**IAF 2006 annual general meeting**

**Desert traditions**

**African goshawk**

**Hunting through the white hot heat of summer**

**In focus – NAFA meet, 2006**

**The first hunt**

**German eagle**

**One world. One passion.**

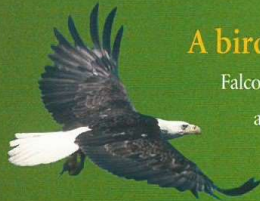




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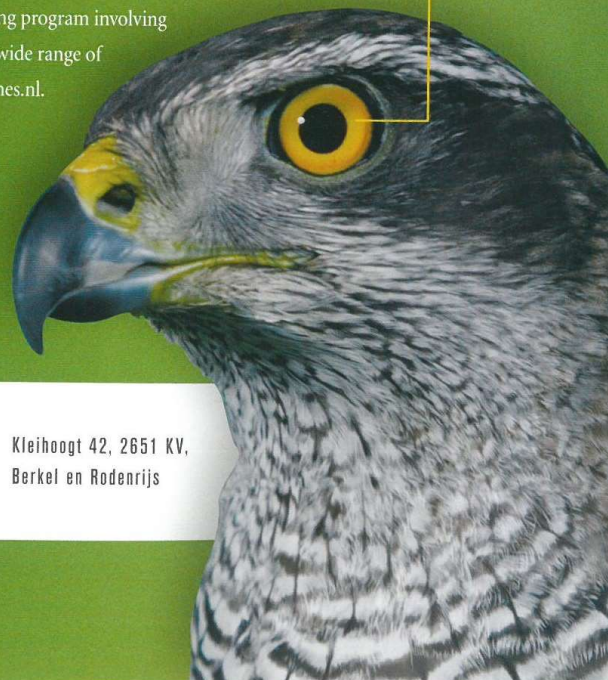
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IT'S BEEN horrendous weather across most of the UK for the last few weeks and it's made hawking extremely difficult – quite a contrast to Kearney, Nebraska which enjoyed bright, mild, windless days for the duration of the North American Falconers' Association annual field meet – it was shirt-sleeve hawking for most of the time and it was a real shock to the system coming back to wet and windy Wales. The meet was as always a great social occasion as well as a week of hard-core hawking and everyone enjoyed the experience enormously – there was a real 'buzz' around the place this year with the large number of IAF delegates – it really was amazing meeting and talking with falconers from so many different countries and cultures. The meet was proof indeed that this ancient sport of ours is truly a worldwide passion – and long may it continue.



Take care and good hawking, Seth

## CONTENTS

- 4 IAF 2006 annual general meeting**  
*Tony Crosswell* reports on this year's meeting in Kearney, Nebraska.
- 6 Obituary**  
William (Bill) A. Burnham
- 8 Desert traditions**  
*Seth Anthony* visits the new Arabian Falconry Heritage wing at The Archives of Falconry in Boise, Idaho to capture some images of the stunning exhibit dedicated to the memory of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan.
- 20 African goshawk**  
In Southern Africa the African goshawk is largely considered a beginner's bird but, as *Jason Bowley* explains, in the right hands it is capable of great things.
- 24 Hunting through the white hot heat of summer**  
*Ben Crane* takes an early hawking trip to Croatia and meets some of the passionate falconers who in the face of adversity are dedicated to ensuring that one of the world's oldest field sports continues to flourish.
- 30 In focus – NAFA meet, 2006**  
*Seth Anthony* travels to Kearney, Nebraska to cover the annual field meet of the North American Falconers' Association.
- 40 The first hunt**  
*Joe Atkinson* recounts the exciting, but nerve-racking first flight at wild game with his now seasoned duck hawk Blackie.
- 44 German eagle**  
A Europe without eagle falconry is a hard thing to imagine and as *Martin Hollinshead* explains, the story of its rise to fame is a fascinating and surprisingly recent one.

## INTERNATIONAL FALCONER

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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/Fax: +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: Female Siberian goshawk  
by Seth Anthony

## Annual General Meeting of IAF in Kearney, Nebraska.

The IAF held its 37th Annual General Meeting in Kearney Nebraska by kind invitation of the North American Falconers' Association (NAFA) from 19th – 24th November 2006.

The meeting started with a sponsored flight for delegates to the Archives of Falconry at the Peregrine Fund's World Centre for Birds of Prey in Boise, Idaho. The trip was to mark the inauguration of the Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan Memorial Falconry Heritage wing of the Archives (see page 8). The privilege was much appreciated by all who saw the amazing achievement that Kent Carnie and his staff have produced over recent years. At last there is a professionally run exhibition of the memorabilia, literature and art of our sport from all over the world that carries to our children and their children the memories of our way of life.

The AGM itself was staged over four days with morning meetings so that delegates and visitors from 32 countries could also share in the field meet put on by NAFA members. Hospitality was outstanding, many friendships renewed and new ones started. Quarry was abundant and the weather smiled on us with clear blue skies, cold nights and windless days. Evening entertainment was seemingly endless with speaker after speaker keeping us entertained until the last night when, through a highly amusing talk aptly entitled "Strengthening the Bond", the inimitable Steve Martin gave us much insight into the American view of falconry and their relationships with hawks.



QUOD TOTUM PROCEdit EX AMORE

Hawks flew high, many so high they were hard to keep in view, and in dry, crisp conditions grouse were easy to find. The weathering lawn was a falconers' delight with so many remarkable birds on display of every species that it would have been hard to choose. I went to the first Kearney meet in 1986 – there has been so much progress in our sport in the past 20 years but most of the same faces were still there – Rick Sharpe, Dave Cherry, Bob Berry, Steve Chindgren, Jim

Willmarth, Ralph Rogers, Frank Bond, Jim Ince, Danny Ertsgaard and many, many others – it's just that they are all so much better at it now!

The IAF AGM finished on the Friday with the election of Frank Bond as the new President following the retirement of Patrick Morel, the re-election of Jose Manuel Rodriguez-Villa as Vice President for Europe, Asia, Africa & Oceania, the appointment of Tony Crosswell as Executive Secretary, Antonio Carapuco as Treasurer, Gary Timbrell as Chair of the Advisory Committee and new members of the Advisory Committee itself.

After the past 6 years' Presidency of Patrick Morel the new President has a hard act to follow. Patrick has been an outstanding leader and diplomat and it was with much sadness that his term came to such a memorable end. He has seen



IAF President with his white female gyrfalcon.



the IAF grow from just a few members to now representing 60 associations from 48 countries. On my return to the UK my 'inbox' was full, the new team up and running with enthusiasm and many ideas to carry our sport into the next generation. Many thanks to the participants and our sponsors – it is quite amazing just what it takes to keep it all running but there is a wealth of talent, qualification and dedication amongst our membership who have proved so willing to support the effort of the IAF.

Our gratitude to NAFA for hosting this event and all the sponsors. Next year's AGM will be in Gen, near Paris, France, probably late October, by kind invitation of Association Nationale des Fauconniers et Autoursiers Français (ANFA) and we all look forward to meeting again. ■



**New President Frank Bond and retiring President Patrick Morel, with the delegates Ata Eyeberdiyev from Turkmentistan and Pavel Yakimov from Bulgaria.**

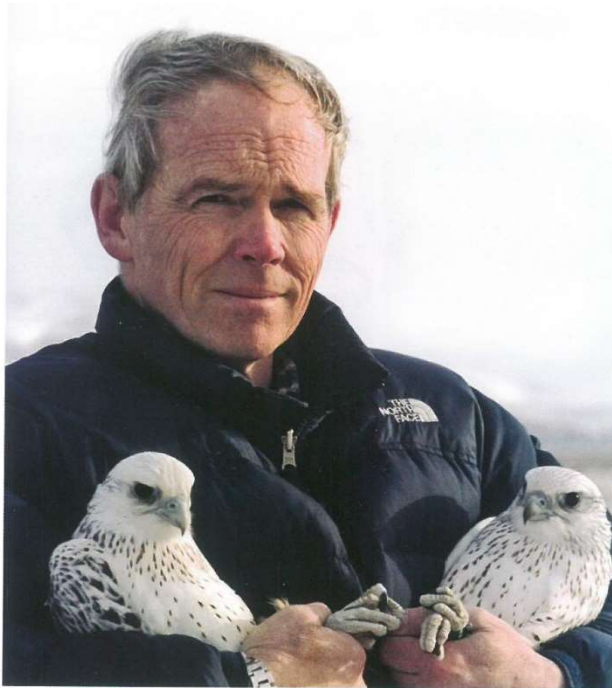
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**William (Bill) A. Burnham**  
**5 October 1947 - 16 October 2006**

**B**ILL BURNHAM, President and CEO of The Peregrine Fund from 1986 through 2006, has died from brain cancer. Bill grew up in Colorado, spending as much time as possible in the outdoors. His initial interest in raptors developed through falconry when, at the young age of 15, he obtained an eyass golden eagle, which he raised and later flew as his first falconry bird. Shortly after this, he found his two true loves: Patricia Wood, his wife of 40 years, and the peregrine falcon, a species which subsequently led him from the sandy shores of Padre Island to the barren tundra of Greenland. After completing an MSc in Zoology at Brigham Young University describing his work with peregrines in Greenland, Bill joined The Peregrine Fund/Cornell University in 1974, and established The Peregrine Fund's western propagation facility in Fort Collins,

Colorado. In 1977 Bill was elected to The Peregrine Fund Board of Directors, and in 1982 he was named a Founding Member. During the spring and summer of 1984, Bill spearheaded the creation of The Peregrine Fund's World Centre for Birds of Prey in Boise, Idaho. At the same time he received his PhD in Wildlife Biology from Colorado State University. In 1986 Bill was named President of The Peregrine Fund, a position he held until May of 2006 when he was named President Emeritus. Under Bill's direction and guidance, The Peregrine Fund's scope and breadth flourished, and its staff, to date, has worked on more than 95 species of raptors in 55 different countries. Despite his ever expanding administrative duties, Bill always remained active in fieldwork, from the Arctic to the tropics. When not working, he maintained his lifelong passion for nature and the outdoors.

Bill's experience with birds of prey extended over 44 years, and led him around the world, from the mountains, plains, and forests of North America (since 1963) to arctic Greenland (since 1972), and then on to the tropical forests of Latin America, Asia and Africa, and to the Pacific Islands (since 1980). He authored more than 90 scientific papers and articles, and one book, *A Fascination with Falcons*. Together, these various publications reflect his diverse interests in raptors, general science, and conservation, from captive breeding and egg physiology to raptor ecology and species restoration. In addition, Bill edited The Peregrine Fund's publications and website, and co-edited the book *Return of the Peregrine* which chronicled the restoration of the peregrine falcon in North America and its de-listing from the Endangered Species List in 1999.

During Bill's tenure as President of The Peregrine Fund, he focused on the continued expansion and evolution of the organisation both nationally and internationally, beginning with construction of the World Centre for Birds of Prey in Boise, Idaho, followed in 1986 by the establishment of The Archives of Falconry and the construction of a building specifically designed to house and breed tropical raptors (Tropical Raptor Building). Two years later, he co-founded the Maya Project in Guatemala and Belize which worked with more than 24 different raptors over a 10-year period of field work. In 1990 a field station was built in Madagascar and work began on endangered birds there; the following year the program expanded to the African mainland.

Bill oversaw expansion of the education program with the construction of the Velma Morrison Interpretive Centre in 1992, greatly



increasing the number of annual visitors. Starting in 1993, a major program was initiated to breed in captivity and then release California condors into the Grand Canyon, Arizona, in order to establish a wild population. This program required the construction of three buildings in Boise, as well as a field station in Arizona over the following 13 years. Additionally, large scale releases of aplomado falcons began in south Texas, with further releases in west Texas and New Mexico in later years. Facilities were constructed on two islands in Hawaii to work with rare and endangered Hawaiian birds; a program which was later passed to the Zoological Society of San Diego. In 1997 the High Arctic Institute was established and a field station opened at Thule Air Base, northwest Greenland, to provide a more secure base for the work Bill had been doing in Greenland since 1972. Work in the Neotropics was formalised with the establishment of Fondo Peregrino-Panama in 2000, and the construction of the Neotropical Raptor Centre followed shortly after in 2001. In 2002 a long-term goal was realised with the construction of the Gerald D. and Kathryn S. Herrick Collections Building at the World Center in Boise, providing a long-term home for an extensive and ever growing library, egg and specimen collection, and The Archives of Falconry.

In addition to his work with The Peregrine Fund, Bill also attempted to influence conservation and government policy regarding the environment whenever possible. He was appointed by Secretary of the Interior Lujan to the National Public Lands Advisory Council, served as a trustee on the Boise State University Foundation, as a conflict mediator and then member of the Bureau of Land Management's Oversight Committee for the Snake

River Birds of Prey Area, on the council for the multi-agency and university Raptor Research and Technical Assistance Centre, on the Board of the North American Raptor Breeders' Association, on the Advisory Board of the Walt Disney Company's Animal Kingdom, as an advisor to the Philippine Government on science and conservation for the Philippine eagle, and as a Board member of the Philippine Eagle Foundation, Inc. Additionally, Bill advised on birds of prey and conservation in various other functions nationally and internationally. He was a "fellow" member of The Arctic Institute of North America and of The Explorers Club. He received the Explorers Club's Champion of Conservation Award in 2004 and was awarded the Zoological Society of San Diego's prestigious Conservation Medal in 2006. In the several years before his death, Bill dedicated a significant amount of his time to the re-writing of the Endangered Species Act, working with lawmakers and testifying before both House and Senate subcommittees in an attempt to add language to make the Act more user-friendly and effective for conservation organisations.

The long-term effects of Bill's influence on conservation through the activities of The Peregrine Fund have yet to be felt. Bill strongly believed that education of local individuals in the countries in which The Peregrine Fund worked was a critical component of conservation, leading to The Peregrine Fund supporting students from Mongolia to Madagascar, with more than 20 PhDs, 53 MScs, and countless other BS and high school diplomas earned. During his tenure over 2,000 peregrine falcons, 1,250 aplomado falcons, 93 California condors, and 47 harpy eagles were

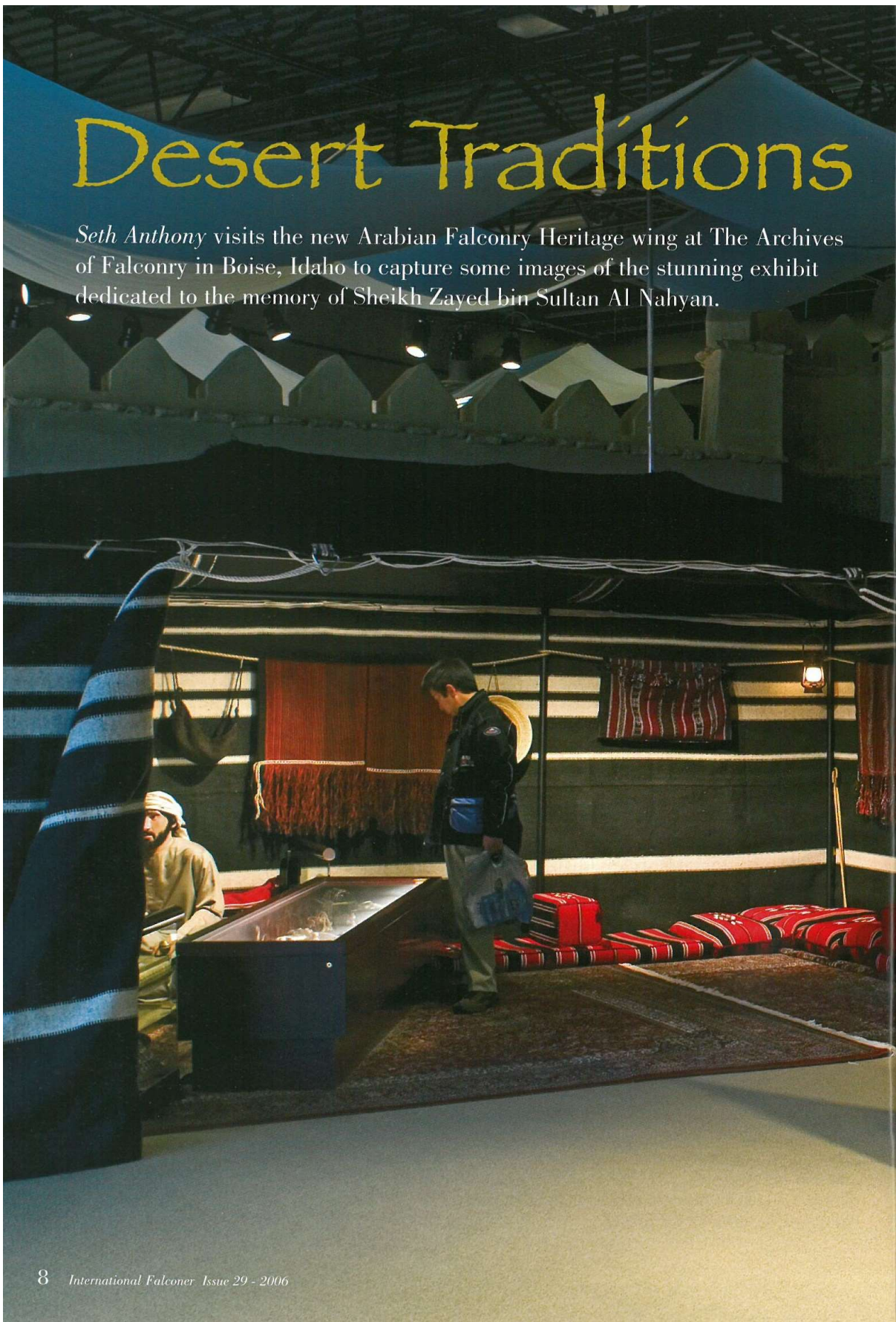
produced in captivity and released into the wild. Highlights included the de-listing of the peregrine falcon from the Endangered Species List in 1999 and the first wild-produced California condor fledging in the Grand Canyon in November 2003. What was perhaps Bill's greatest accomplishment, and the one he was the most proud of, was the bringing together of the world-changing staff, Board of Directors, collaborators, and members that make The Peregrine Fund what it is today and have made all of the before-mentioned results possible. If given one last wish, he would have wanted to thank each and every one of you for your critical help and assistance in making the world a better place.

Bill married Patricia in 1966; they have one son, Kurt, who is completing his D.Phil in Ornithology at the University of Oxford. As time allowed, Bill was a practicing falconer, still flying a peregrine falcon. Each fall Bill looked forward to chukar hunting with Kurt in Idaho and spending several weeks flying his falcons, big game hunting, running dogs, and bird hunting with his friends in Sheridan, Wyoming. Bill held a special love for the Arctic and worked in Greenland from 1972 through this past summer. He was especially proud to have spent the last 16 summers working on peregrine falcons and gyrfalcons in Greenland with his son, Kurt. ■



# Desert Traditions

*Seth Anthony* visits the new Arabian Falconry Heritage wing at The Archives of Falconry in Boise, Idaho to capture some images of the stunning exhibit dedicated to the memory of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan.

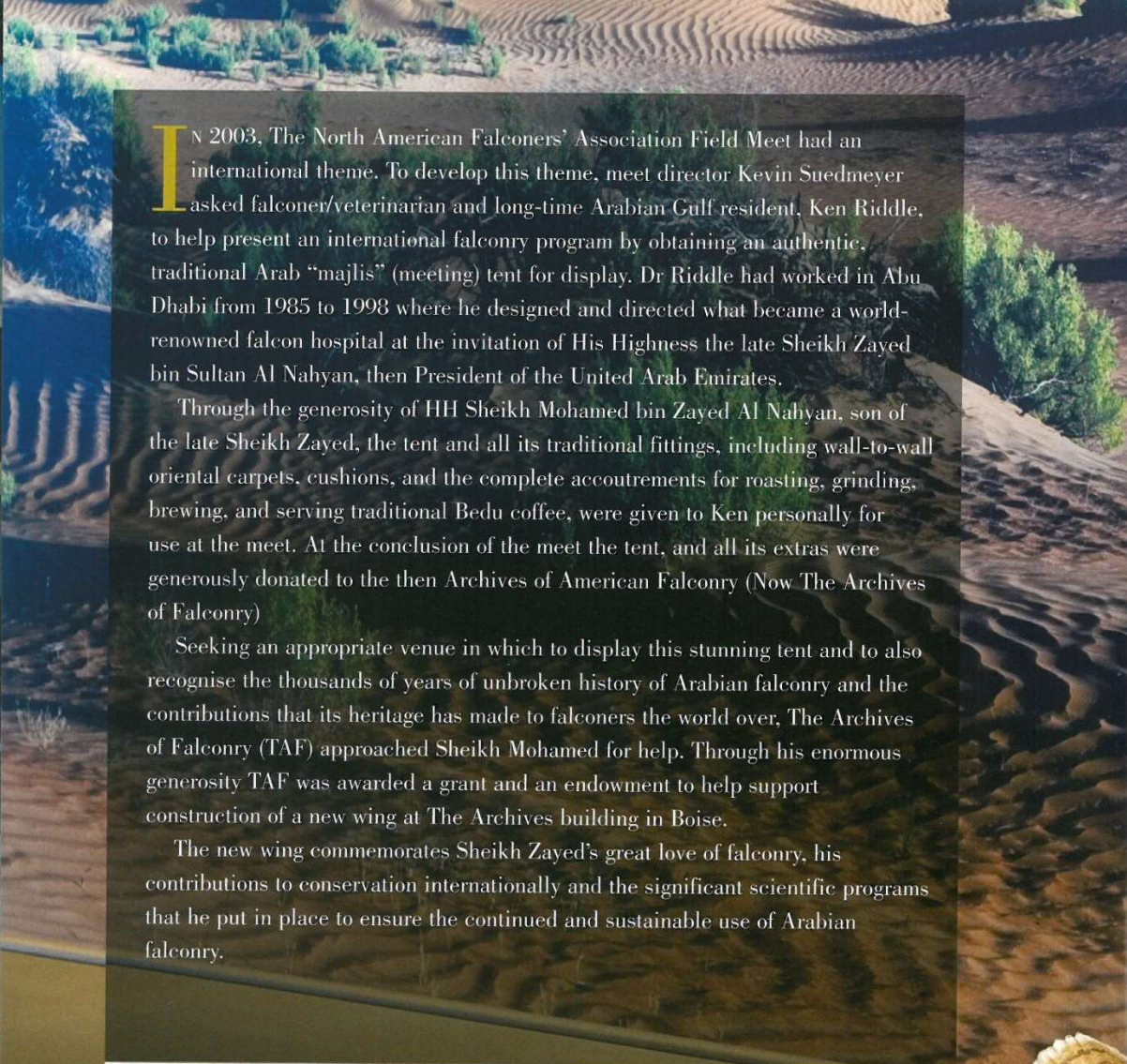




the falconry heritage of the Arabian Peninsula







**I**N 2003, The North American Falconers' Association Field Meet had an international theme. To develop this theme, meet director Kevin Suedmeyer asked falconer/veterinarian and long-time Arabian Gulf resident, Ken Riddle, to help present an international falconry program by obtaining an authentic, traditional Arab "majlis" (meeting) tent for display. Dr Riddle had worked in Abu Dhabi from 1985 to 1998 where he designed and directed what became a world-renowned falcon hospital at the invitation of His Highness the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, then President of the United Arab Emirates.

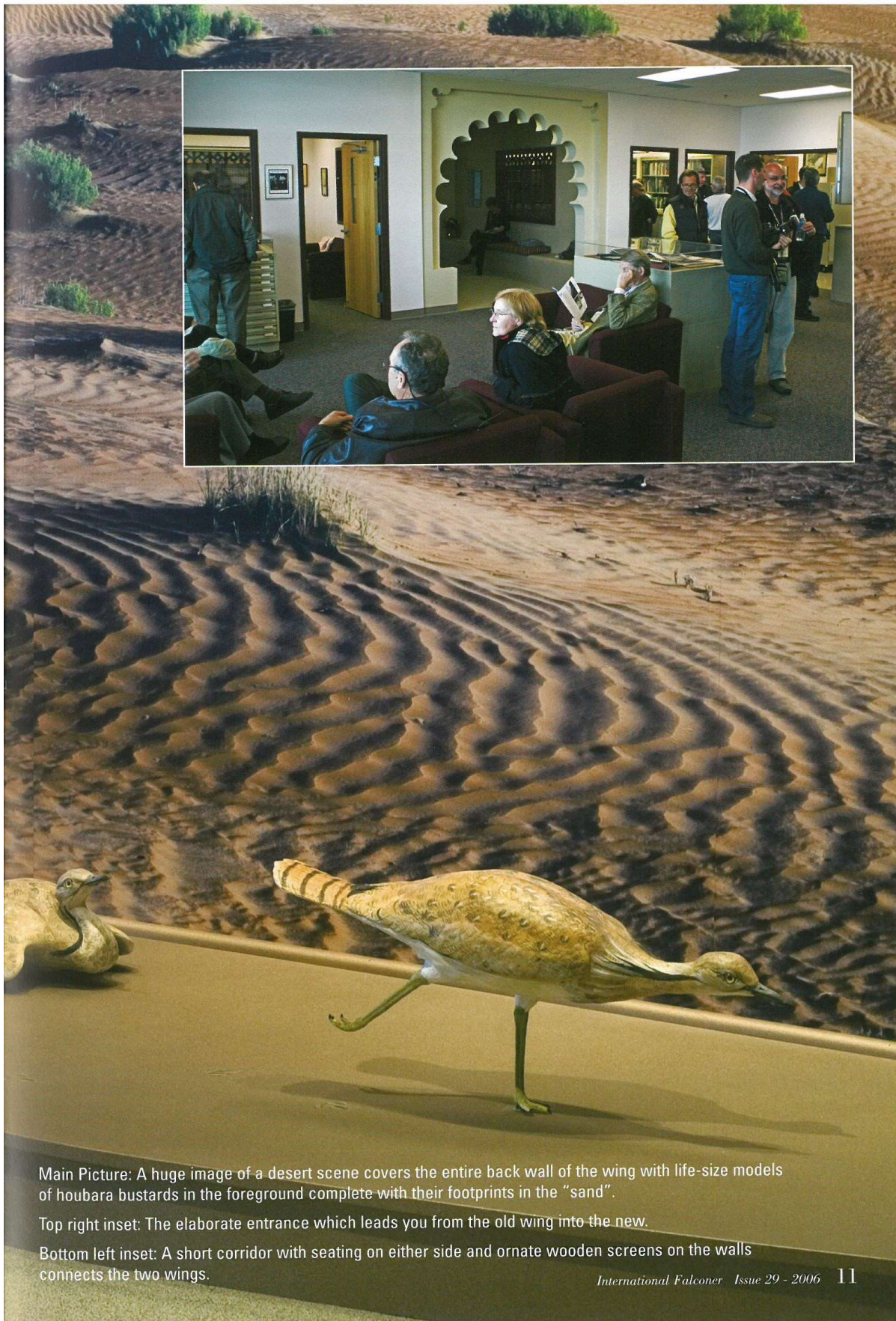
Through the generosity of HH Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, son of the late Sheikh Zayed, the tent and all its traditional fittings, including wall-to-wall oriental carpets, cushions, and the complete accoutrements for roasting, grinding, brewing, and serving traditional Bedu coffee, were given to Ken personally for use at the meet. At the conclusion of the meet the tent, and all its extras were generously donated to the then Archives of American Falconry (Now The Archives of Falconry)

Seeking an appropriate venue in which to display this stunning tent and to also recognise the thousands of years of unbroken history of Arabian falconry and the contributions that its heritage has made to falconers the world over, The Archives of Falconry (TAF) approached Sheikh Mohamed for help. Through his enormous generosity TAF was awarded a grant and an endowment to help support construction of a new wing at The Archives building in Boise.

The new wing commemorates Sheikh Zayed's great love of falconry, his contributions to conservation internationally and the significant scientific programs that he put in place to ensure the continued and sustainable use of Arabian falconry.







Main Picture: A huge image of a desert scene covers the entire back wall of the wing with life-size models of houbara bustards in the foreground complete with their footprints in the "sand".

Top right inset: The elaborate entrance which leads you from the old wing into the new.

Bottom left inset: A short corridor with seating on either side and ornate wooden screens on the walls connects the two wings.









Far left: A portrait of the late Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, founder of the UAE, enlightened conservationist and falconer to whom the new wing is dedicated. To the right is a theatre area showing a slide presentation of Arabian falconry.

Inset picture: Visitors enjoying the theatre room.





A large part of the new wing features an impressive architectural display based on an ancient Arab fort in Al Ain, near the border with Qatar, where the late Sheikh Zayed had once been governor.

Display cases in the walls offer overviews and individual presentations on some of the conservation activities in the United Arab Emirates: falcon hospitals/medical research, houbara captive-propagation and research and the release program for wild-caught falcons.

The exhibit also compares Arabian falconry methods and furniture to those of the West, showing the origin of some western practices to be from the Arabian traditions (such as Frederick II introducing the Arab use of the hood to European falconry) as well as some of the recent techniques to have been adopted by the East from the West such as captive-breeding and kite training.



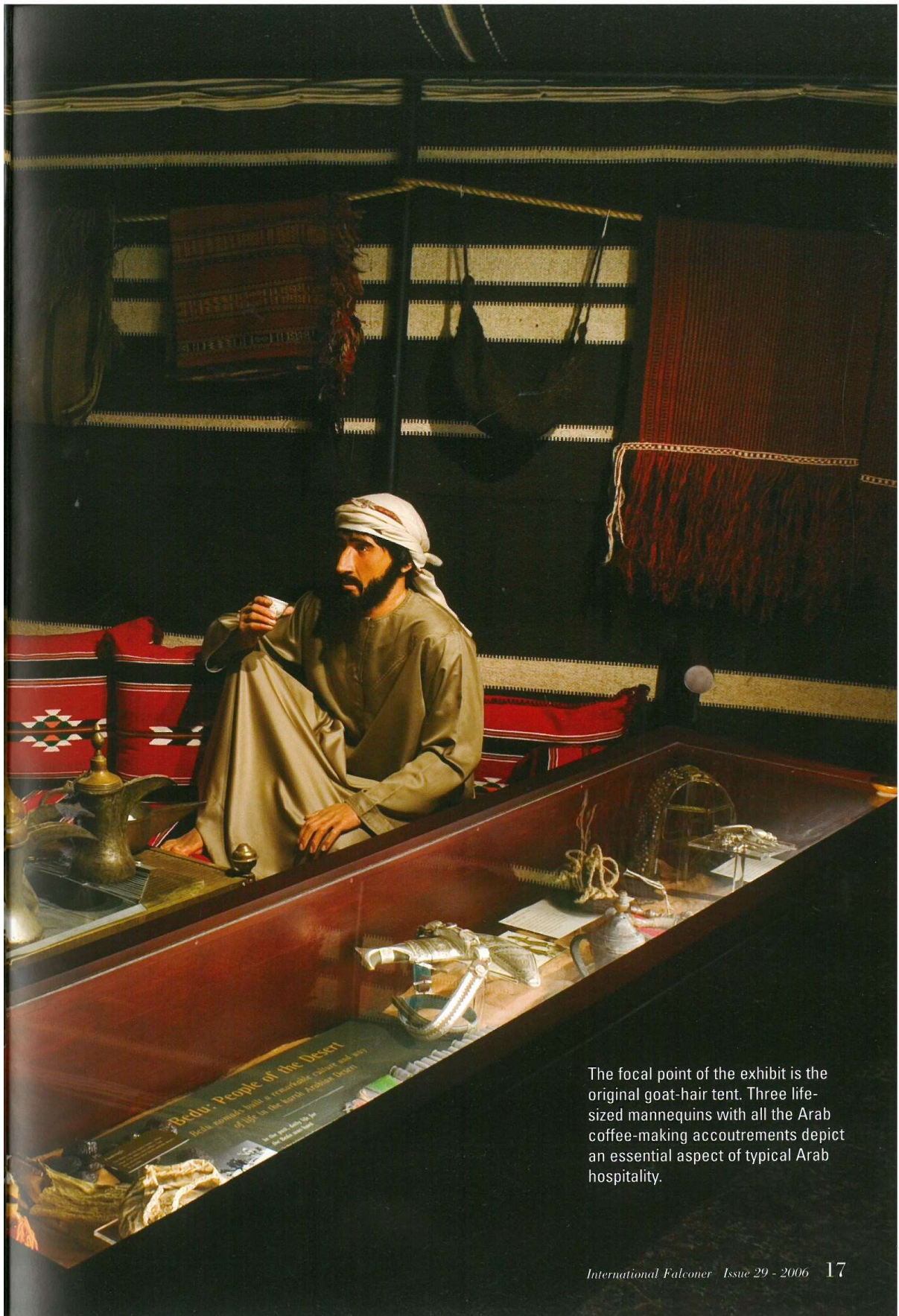












The focal point of the exhibit is the original goat-hair tent. Three life-sized mannequins with all the Arab coffee-making accoutrements depict an essential aspect of typical Arab hospitality.



# A DAY AT THE ARCHIVES OF FALCONRY AND THE WORLD CENTRE FOR BIRD

WITH IAF delegates from all over the world attending the NAFA meet in Kearney, Frank Bond, the now newly-elected President of the IAF recognised a unique opportunity. Always one to think big, a plan was hatched and with the hugely generous financial sponsorship of The Emirates Falconers' Club and the organisational help of The Archives of Falconry curator Kent Carnie, IAF delegates, NAFA Directors and Officers and friends of the Archives of Falconry/Peregrine Fund were flown by chartered plane from Kearney to Boise for a day at the Peregrine Fund's headquarters. A wonderful time was spent exploring the World Centre for Birds of Prey interpretive centre and The Archive of Falconry's incredible collection, including the new wing displaying the heritage of Arabian falconry. A truly memorable day was had by all and for many IAF delegates from faraway lands, this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Main photo: Everyone gathers together for the group photo outside The Archives of Falconry building.

Left inset: Three of the major figures involved in the development of the new wing at The World Centre for Birds of Prey (left to right) Hanan Al Sayed Worrell (Project Manager – Office of the Crown Prince – Abu Dhabi), Frank Bond (newly elected President of the IAF) and Majid Al Mansouri (Secretary General – Environment Agency Abu Dhabi)



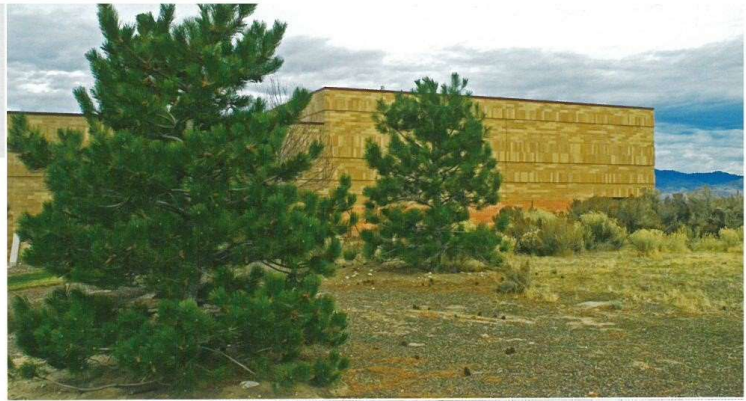


# OF PREY

Photos by Seth Anthony



Above inset: Curator of The Archives of Falconry, Kent Carnie.



Top right inset: A view of the new wing from the front of the Archives building.



Right inset: Visitors enjoying the view from the recently installed Falconers' Wall of Remembrance.





# The African Goshawk

Words by **JASON BOWLEY & NIKOL CHANDLER**

**M**Y PARTNER Nikol and I have just returned to the UK after spending nearly a year in Southern Africa. The first 7 months were spent at the Dullstroom Birds of Prey and Rehabilitation Centre with Mark Holder and Mark Bett. While there we had the opportunity to work with some incredible raptor species; from black eagles to lizard buzzards. Africa really is an extraordinary and beautiful place and the sheer diversity of birds of prey is breathtaking. To witness wild Cape vultures soaring and circling over the hills everyday is fabulous; to watch hundreds of amur falcons (Eastern red-footed kestrel) congregating 30ft above your head catching and eating insects on the wing, is simply unbelievable.

The African falconer really is spoiled for choice, there's an awesome array of birds from which to choose from, whether its hawks or falcons. But for me and many others our real passion lies with the accipiters and in Southern Africa what a choice there is. The six main species to hunt with are: The black sparrowhawk, ovambo sparrowhawk, red-breasted sparrowhawk, gabar goshawk, the aptly named and diminutive little sparrowhawk and the African goshawk.

The African goshawk is considered as a



Photo: Jason Bowley

beginner's bird in Southern Africa, mainly due to its 'calm and even temperament'. Because they are considered a beginner's bird, many of these wonderful little hawks are never hunted hard enough for their true potential to be utilised. Out of all the people I met who hunted



with an African goshawk only about 20 per cent flew them seriously. To me this is a great shame, as the African goshawk has a great deal to offer.

In the right hands it is a tremendously brave and aggressive hunter, a fast, agile hawk and utterly ruthless in its pursuit of prey. It also possesses a calm and forgiving nature, takes everything within its stride and takes to new situations without batting an eye lid.

To see an African goshawk in action is poetry in motion. When hunting with birds of this calibre, it is easy to see the intellect lurking behind the eyes, the ability to learn is astonishing. The African goshawk's innate talent for the hunt is incredible, it learns from flight to flight, kill to kill and within weeks, you could be flying an awesome little hawk that rarely misses quarry. The African goshawk works superbly as a team hunter, with both people and dogs and unlike many other accipiter species there's no need to imprint. This amenable hawk will man-down very quickly. I've flown one captive bred African goshawk, one passage and one haggard and they have all tamed effortlessly and have been out hunting within a very short space of time.

Don't let the African goshawk's biddable nature fool you into thinking that things will be easy, it has its own set of problems. It's a bright bird and if not catching regularly, many become fist-bound very quickly. Confidence is the key to success; the importance of killing game everyday with this species is overwhelming, for without constant success the African goshawk can lose confidence very quickly and refuse the longer, harder slips. Its 'train' is also quite weak; I don't mean the feathers themselves, but the weight of a bell and transmitter on the tail can be enough to pull out both the deck feathers, so there are a few things to look out for.

While working for the two Marks, I had the fortuitous chance to be given a captive bred untrained female African goshawk and what a fantastic bird she turned out to be. Meisha was given to me at 10 weeks of age, just hard-

penned and weighing in at 350 grams, a small female to be sure, by a good 100-150 grams. But for the type of game that we wanted hunt, she was ideally suited. Meisha was small and fast enough to chase and capture small birds as well as any other larger bird species.

We spent the first manning session tucked away in a quiet corner of the yard and after the initial bating frenzy, Meisha calmed down very quickly and within the first 15 minutes she ate half a sparrow off the gloved hand. Although nervous; more of me than the surroundings, within half an hour she had tucked her foot up and sat quite contentedly on the fist for a further 2 hours. It's not uncommon to have a freshly-caught African goshawk fall asleep on the glove within the first/second day of manning.

Meisha's training went as smooth as silk, she had come off the creance line on day 10 and by the end of the third week she was ready for her first 'proper' hunting trip. Her preliminary training ground was around the centre's grounds, 120 hectares of grass and marshland. The use of bagged game is legal and I have to admit it helped tremendously to switch Meisha onto game. She only took 6 baggies and 5 carcasses before catching her first head of wild quarry.

The hunting was unbelievable around the Dullstroom area, whether you were flying long or short wings. The land was incredible, huge tracts of open grassland, hills and rocky outcrops. Dams and marshland laced through the area, I could look from north to south, east to west, horizon to horizon and everything I saw in between was mine to hunt on. A rich diversity of plants, animals and birds covered the landscape; the quarry was available in numbers you can only dream of. Meisha was hunted exclusively off the fist and entirely at feathered game, with prey ranging from 6-100 grams in weight. The use of a dog really is essential if hunting francolin or quail but for hunting small birds both Nikol and I relied more on our eyes, ears and fieldcraft, a dog was more of an hindrance than a help.



## The African Goshawk

Following are two separate accounts from my hunting journal to help illustrate a little of the African goshawk's hunting styles and abilities.

### **Kill 30, 31, 32 and 33**

#### **Limousin, Wednesday: Weight 306 grams**

Today her obedience and response was great, Rowan's Dad came out with us this evening, we decided to make our way across our old hunting area (as it on the way) and within in 2 minutes Nikki had seen and marked down an Ayers' cisticola, Meisha had already seen it and was off the fist within seconds. She landed on top of this thick spiky grass and then began to burrow through it. I arrived on the scene quickly and I had to dig her out of the clump of grass, as she was 'rat hunting'. Once back on the glove she flew over to Rowan's Dad's hat and landed on it for a better vantage. Again I got her back on the fist and as we were beating the cover Meisha literally fell off the glove, ran along the ground into the base of the vegetation and grabbed her prey.

She exchanged without any problems, so we set off to the hunting ground proper. We were approaching our main patch when Meisha flew off the glove some 30 yards and straight into a clump of thick grass. She jumped straight up to the offered fist and as Nikki and I started to stomp about for a re-flush; it shot out from behind us and sped off low to the ground. The wailing cisticola managed 10 yards before Meisha had neatly plucked it out of the air. She flew up to the fist with her prize and willingly exchanged it for the reward on the gloved hand.

We had taken about 5 paces when a wailing cisticola broke unexpectedly from cover, it veered to our left and streaked away behind us. By the time I had realised what had happened Meisha was already off the glove and in pursuit. I could follow her flight path perfectly and within 10 yards she had her highest catch to date. The cisticola was powering up at a 35-degree angle but Meisha wasn't going to be out done, she followed the bird up and lunged out with her right foot and took it neatly off the

wing some 20ft above our heads. With wings flared she gently parachuted down to ground. No problems at all while I put on her field leash and after she'd eaten the whole of her prey she jumped up to my glove for the rest of her food.

We had a half-dozen slips (all long ones) at various birds within a very short space of time but regrettably they all made it into cover and no amount of crashing about would dislodge them from their hiding spot. Again we had seen the flock of widow birds flying about; and I have to admit that I've got a 'thing' for these, so off we went to chance our luck. And today luck was on our side again, for we had managed to get reasonably close (80 yards) to where we had seen them put in. As we got a little closer the main flock rose out of the grassland in front of us and flew off towards the hills, but luckily for us there were 2 birds in the flock that were much further back (closer to us) and were last to take to the wing.

At first they headed off in the same direction as the others; but by this time Meisha had seen them and was off the fist in hot pursuit. Both birds saw her coming and with amazing agility they turned and changed direction mid-flight, but this tactic was not enough to save them. Meisha had already accelerated to full speed and with stunning agility of her own she had followed their turn flawlessly and snatched out with her right foot and plucked it off the wing as it tried to dive into cover. When I got there she was completely on her side and wedged between a particular large clump of vegetation with her prey securely in her foot. The transfer went smoothly, but by this time the light was fading fast, so we decided to call it a day and make the 30-minute trip back to the truck. As we were leaving a tiny movement sounded in the grass and Meisha was off the fist and in a blink of an eye a quick wingover had her crashing into cover, but just as I was approaching her a cisticola flushed out of the grass not 2 inches from where she was sitting.

What happened next really illustrates the speed and agility of these fantastic little hawks;



with breathtaking speed Meisha followed every single turn, twist and dodging manoeuvre that these tiny little cisticola's employed. The flight only took about 5 seconds; but in that time both birds had flown in-between and all around us; the jinks and turns were lightning fast and all this time the entire flight had happen only 2 inches off the ground! Sadly the bird made it into cover and we couldn't get a re-flush. From this point Meisha messed about a little, she kept flying to the ground as she was convinced that the cisticola was still there. We finished off the session with a carcass that she caught in a mid-air catch.

### **Kill 51, 52 and 53**

#### **Yakamayers, Monday: Weight 306 grams**

What an incredible hunting trip this evening. Nikki and I went to an area that we have only been to once (bar the top part) and it was just action from start to finish. We had just made it over the hill and were heading into the valley when we both spotted a cisticola moving around in the vegetation not 30 yards from where we were standing. So with Meisha once again back on the fist we all headed off in that direction. We couldn't get a re-flush for love or money.

We moved through the dense ground cover for some minutes until we were sure that it or any other birds were not going to flush out before turning back towards the valley. We decided to range out a little and as we were moving through the grass. Nikki unexpectedly flushed a cisticola; which must have been hiding in the grass right by her boot. The cisticola shot almost vertically up in the air about 20ft before turning to head towards the distant valley behind us. Unluckily for the cisticola; Meisha was all keyed up and ready to go and with the first sign of movement she was off the glove and in pursuit. Meisha rose roughly vertically up to follow the fleeing cisticola; closed the gap between them in seconds and coming up from behind she lashed out with both feet and neatly snagged it off the wing.

We were just approaching a fence when Meisha launched herself off the fist and powered some 40 yards to land on a lump of spiky grass. When I got there she was looking intently through the cover; her head snaking from side to side trying to get the exact location of her prey. She jumped up to the offered fist and in the same moment a common waxbill shot out the left hand side of the vegetation. In one smooth movement Meisha spun off the fist and barrel-rolled over the grasses (hitting the fence wire on the other side) to take her prey on the rise as it tried to flee into the nearest cover. I was going to leave it there but Nikki had heard some more birds close at hand, so I robbed her smoothly and we continued the hunt. Our third kill came within seconds; Nikki flushed a cisticola from the thick grasses and Meisha blasted off the fist and took it on the ground within a yard or so of it leaving the safety of the cover. We called it a day; what a perfect hunting session.

#### **Conclusion:**

Earlier I mentioned a little about the African goshawk's weak train – this ultimately lead me to end Meisha's hunting season after only 2 months and 2 weeks. After the occasional bate Meisha had a really irritating habit of 'catching' her own tail (about 80 per cent of the time), it was just after her 70th kill (a black-rumped button quail which she caught after a 100-yard flight) that she pulled out 4 of her train feathers in one go! To say that I was upset was an understatement, her last kill had been breathtaking. I hope this helps to give you a brief insight into these exceptional little hawks; I haven't had so much fun hunting in ages. To witness her hunting prowess and skill increase day by day was fabulous; to be part of a team with this magnificent little hawk is something that I shall always treasure. Here's a quick run down catches: 80 per cent of game was taken on the wing, 10 per cent was taken on the rise and the last 10 per cent was taken in cover. ■



## CROATIAN ACCIPITERS



Photo: courtesy of Ben Crane

A SIGN OF strength and resilience is the continuation of cultural traditions in the face of disaster. That falconry is strong and growing fast after such a ferocious war shows how much the Croatian people respect tradition and implicitly understand the beauty of a hawk in flight. The Scottish falconer Mike Reid and I had been invited to Croatia by the country's IAF representative, Viktor Šegrt. Mike and I were ostensibly going to look at purchasing land for

a hunting bolt hole. But being a pure blooded austringer, Viktor suggested pulling his goshawk early and hawking quail with a variety of accipiters.

Viktor is completing his PhD on the grey partridge (*Perdix perdix*) and works as a lecturer in the biology department at Zagreb University. He is also an author and has a unique take on the growing face of falconry in Croatia. Most importantly he is working hard to move falconry forward in his





# Hunting through the white hot heat of summer

Words by **BEN CRANE**

of these hawks would be totally different to the kind of falconry Mike and I specialise in. But the waft of adrenaline, adventure and the experience of another country's culture was all the motivation we needed.

Flying from London, we arched left over the twisting mass of the Alps, landing in Zagreb less than 2 hours later. Stepping out onto the tarmac, the rolling wall of heat hit us hard. Our lungs filled with unexpected dryness and it was cooler breathing out rather than in. Standing still and panting, it was clear the hawking would be as hard on us falconers as it would be on the accipiters.

Driving through the Croatian landscape was a revelation. I am sure my preconceived perception of the former Yugoslavia is common: Western media rarely follows up on the success of a country post conflict. From the previous decade, the blurred images of the Balkans war remained interred across my mind. I expected a ravaged place of difficulty, struggle and perhaps poverty. The reality was as far removed from my badly constructed prejudices as it is possible to get.

The place Mike and I witnessed was a buzzing summer spectacular of insects and wildlife. Flat, open horizons of waist high wild grass cut rectangular strips into towering

maize crop. On the edge of the horizon the hazy green bloom of mountains ridged up creating a black-tipped jagged line across the blue bell curved sky. Smart orange brick buildings pockmarked the crop yellow, lush green countryside. Everywhere was fresh and clean, both nature and man striking a neat balance, drawing on and accentuating the best from both worlds.

Later in the trip we drove through the distant mountains. They contained rolling valleys of untouched wilderness edged, complete and fractured by indigenous forest; occasionally sharp cavernous stone enveloped and overshadowed the gentle brushing flow of the clearest rivers. We witnessed deer lying protected in the folds of a disused house while buzzards, goshawks, sparrowhawks and wild peregrines occasionally gave away their merest presence. Further north in the deep forest enclaves, lynx, bear and wolves are also to be found.

Later in the day we swam in the local river, ate authentic Croatian food cooked by Viktor's mother and drank the local beer. As the afternoon of our first day wore on, the sun slid over the edge of the horizon like butter across a hot plate. The sky shifted in pearlescent tone and we prepared the hunting

**Author with Viktor's gos Meggy.**

country. And apart from an outrageous passion for goshawks, he is also hugely focused on game conservation, breeding and the peripheral interests all falconers become involved with.

With temperatures touching the low forties, hawking would be short and sweet; conducted at last knockings or warm and humid the following morning. With time at a premium, the short explosive flights



party. Life can at times, be that simple.

We were flying a twice-intermewed imprint goshawk named Meggy and running a beautiful German shorthaired pointer called Ella. Feeling the hawk's keel and a quick check of weight gave an indication that she was working her way forward. The high pitch calling from earlier had now ceased and her feathers were tight. A five-minute drive through the town of Karlovac and all three of us were stepping out to the cicada cacophony and the white hot heat of an August evening.

With dry dust pollen filling the air, we made our way to the hunting ground. Ella was stopped, drawn up to sit and then sent into cover. We spent the final thirty minutes of daylight working hard and although Meggy took stand for a few minutes, the opening session was a good one. Not least because of the wraith silhouetted flash of a wild tiercel which buzzed Viktor's lure.

The final flight was on rabbit which had been released a few days previously. The fact that it was rabbit (and a released one at that) may not fill many readers with any level of passion. But these cony were special, with a unique history and quite possibly a shining future.

Except for some of the archipelago islands further north, Croatia has at present no self-sufficient rabbit population. To rectify this and provide a different degree of sport, Viktor and his friends have set about a loose breeding program. With a bit of luck and some patience, Croatia will once again have a growing population very soon; with perhaps a cross-bred line from Scotland and Shropshire in the near future.

The next day we made a visit to a commercial pheasant breeder on the edge of Karlovac. Once a thriving place it has now slowly decayed to a rusting piece of land; its former self



Photo: courtesy of Ben Crane

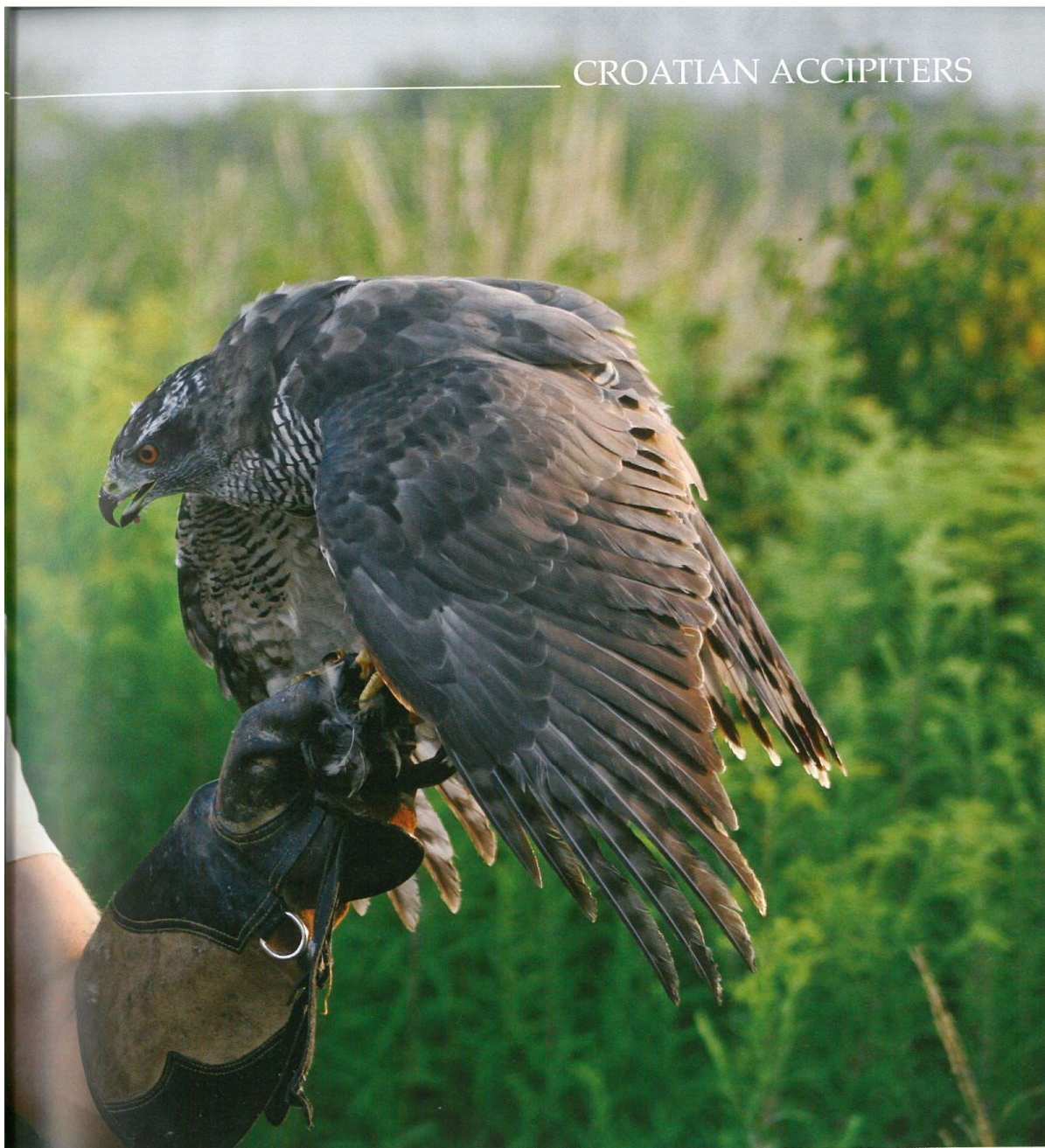
decimated through lack of motivation and human apathy. This place has potential, and if those in power can be convinced of the need for astute game management and a forward thinking policy, it could well be a gold mine.

Game management in Croatia is at best limited and governed by an older generation of communist

thought. On land shot over, they do not use a high concentration of feeders, seemingly content to let nature do her thing. It is normal to have only fifteen on 3,000 hectares of prime hunting land. Coupled with a release program of maybe 200-300 pheasants over a three-year period means the viable hunting of small winged game is virtually non-



## CROATIAN ACCIPITERS



existent.

However, as I write, Viktor is attempting to change government policy by using a loophole in existing legislation. As the law stands it is illegal to hunt using guns within 300 metres of any house or abode. Obviously the use of a hawk or falcon does not pose the same risk as a gun. So the proposal is to create

a bylaw allowing falconers access to this 300m 'no-go' zone. Croatian falconers will then fund and release game, provide the correct environment for it to flourish and reap the inevitable benefits.

The following morning we drove across country to a restaurant owned by the Croatian falconer Dado and his friend Nino. Dado flies a

### **Viktor with gos Meggy.**

beautiful tiercel which unfortunately was not ready. He proudly informed us that this tiny peregrine had taken at least three wild cock pheasants, along with a number of other quarry species over the preceding season. Nino on the other hand was flying the offspring of Meggy and running a



huge, deep chested pointer. We also met a falconer of un-natural talent and it was his accipiter that we had come to fly.

Zlatko is a former soldier in the Croatian army and defended his country with honour. He has three goshawks and was also in possession of an un-entered imprint musket. Viktor translated the astonishing fact that this particular imprint was taken as a three-and-a-half week old brancher (not from Croatia I hasten to add). How he worked through the innate fear of the eyass to produce a tame and silent charge was too complex and detailed to translate. However the steadiness of this tiny accipiter was astounding. We all picked it up, cupped it in our hands and stroked it without any fear or aggression.

The five of us sat and drank beer and juice in Zlatko's cool, shady front room. For fifteen minutes we watched the perfect little musket's composure push from excitement into yarak. Cresting and puffed his wings dropped and the level of focus within his eyes began to change imperceptibly. By the time we had made the short walk to the flying ground his wings were quarter fanned and he was clearly ready.

The first flight came before the cameras were even ready; the slick grey slice of musket tore across the iridescent blue screen sky. Whipping away faster, the single quail shrieked for its life, flipped over at about 30ft and dumped into the waist high grass. Alas the musket was a fraction too slow and missed as the quail scurried away between an impenetrable bush.

In a cool and precise manner Zlatko lifted his charge and made forward once again. Our group began to throw stones to flush more quail. But at over 6ft tall Mike had the benefit of height, and spotting a quail hiding in the brush he called us over. The flight was not the most

spectacular in terms of style, but Zlatko only desired a kill to keep this ferocious little beast appeased. However the significance of entering him and our shared joy spoke volumes about the common ground and passion falconry allows.

The success and motivation this first kill provided was evident via a phone call the next morning. Zlatko's musket had made repeated stoops at a brown hare after an



**The steadiness of Zlatko's tiny musket was incredible.**

attempted flight of 70 metres on another quail. This little warrior and his owner are destined for great things and Viktor, Mike and myself will no doubt visit him again before the season is finished.

The next day dawned hot and fast. An intense eddied heat danced across the ground like the rainbow swirl of petrol on water. A slow warm, oil slick warmth enveloped us before we realised. So the rivers of

Karlovac County seemed sensible and drew us along for a day's swimming.

Nature is the most complex comedienne; she pulls tricks from her sleeve at the most prescient times. In the valley of Duga Resa runs the river of Mreznica. This is no ordinary river; it is a haven of warm waterfalls and spectacular wilderness. A visit to this place puts anyone involved with nature back to their primal self. Diving deep into any number of the old clay holes took me straight back to my childhood and the accordant joys therein.

Swimming through the lily pads and numerous weeds I witnessed hunting water snakes with mouths full of fish. Deep below in the aqua blue depths the hoovering mouths of barbel and chub scooped and carved at the gravel. Needless to say we swam and sun bathed in this place for the day and felt refreshed and ready for the morning.

Meggy had really struggled in the heat, the sun had not broken throughout the days and the evenings were hot, flecked with biting insects. So it was decided a morning hunt would be the way forward. By 4.00am, before the blood-red sun had edged over the cusp of the earth we were boxed up and ready to go.

The venue was the former grounds of an un-built hospital, the cover a mixture of corn, waist high grass, elder and mixed brush. Dew covered the flora and as we turned orange brown in the dawn, the call of quail and pheasant pushed Meggy into yarak.

Viktor had kindly agreed to let me take the first slip, so I took Meggy from his fist as we made our way to the hunting ground. We edged through the grass and felt the cool slide of dew brush our faces. Small birds flitted through the branches raising Meggy's interest further.



## CROATIAN ACCIPITERS

Through the glove she began to tense and flex her feet.

We broke through the cover and moved out onto a flat area and startled a cock pheasant. I let Meggy go and her wing beat remained a steady humming thrust as she travelled out to a range of 70ft. She was gaining on the pheasant just as a quail shot from the undergrowth. Meggy checked and struck it cleanly at a height of about 15ft. She arched over and clattered into the cover as I hollered out a shout of joy.

With a greasy skein of salt sweat blinding me and midges biting deeply into my face, I dispatched my first goshawk-caught quarry. Meggy is a steady imprint and she just looked on, wings folded tightly to her sides as Viktor made in. Only then did she begin to feed.

It is a peculiar feeling catching quarry with any hawk. It fixes you to a place more concretely than any other sporting pursuit. Admittedly I had absolutely nothing to do with the complex balance and checks required to motivate a good goshawk. But I still felt in possession of the moment. And there is a special silence in this place, something so quiet as to be almost deafening; the exact details always forgotten. All I ever really remember are fractured images, but the feeling of triumph is easily recollected. And I suppose it is this sensation that unites falconers across continents and cultures.

By 8.00am Viktor's grandmother had made us a feast of scrambled eggs and smoked pancetta. We toasted the morning with a single shot of slivovitch (plum brandy) and lots of strong coffee. By 11.00am we were sleeping and by 4.00pm we were once again swimming in the water of the Mreznica. It truly was a fine way to wrap up such a memorable trip.

It is abundantly clear that



Photo: courtesy of Ben Crane

**Author just slightly pleased with taking his first goshawk-caught quarry!**

Croatian falconers are in an enviable position; they have access to vast tracts of land, their numbers are few and they are highly skilled. They will also be joining the European Union within the next two years or so. As such, hunting and falconry will definitely come under scrutiny, or at the very least have to apply new laws regarding game welfare, breeding and management. This can only be a good thing for Croatia, for the sport and most importantly the falconers who in the face of adversity continue one of the oldest

sporting pursuits in the world. Without question the history and traditions of Eastern European falconry will continue to grow and flourish in the capable hands of Viktor and his contemporaries. ■



# IN FOCUS

WITH INTERNATIONAL FALCONER



Photos by Seth Anthony

## NAFA FIELD MEET NEBRASKA 2006

NEBRASKA, WAS the 2006 venue for the annual North American Falconers' Association Field Meeting.

Falconers from across the globe gathered in the mid-west city of Kearney for an event that is always a celebration of American falconry.

The meet this year had a particularly international flavour with the hosting of the IAF annual general meeting. Game populations on the whole were good and with the state being one of the country's strongholds for prairie

grouse, this meet provided longwingers with great opportunities at prairie chickens – but as is usual with this tough gamebird, not many were taken. Shortwingers had great sport at quail, pheasant, cottontail rabbit, squirrel and the occasional jackrabbit.









## IN FOCUS NAFA FIELD MEET 2006



**Above:** Securing the Siberian gos after a dashing flight at a cottontail rabbit.

**Above right:** An intermewed passage female redbtail about to launch herself from a high, commanding position and do what redbtails do best - moments later a cottontail rabbit was securely in her grasp.

**Right:** A passage redbtail of the year looking very alert.

**Far right:** Grant Anderson from Minnesota with an intermewed passage Cooper's hawk.









## IN FOCUS NAFA FIELD MEET 2006

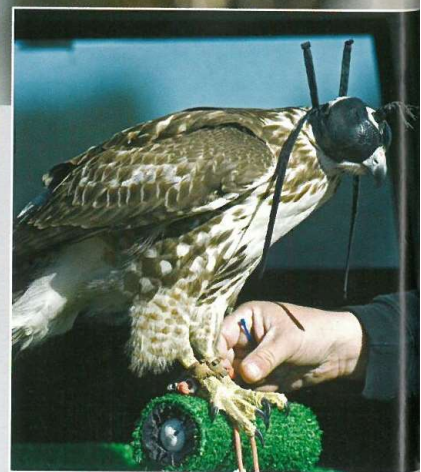
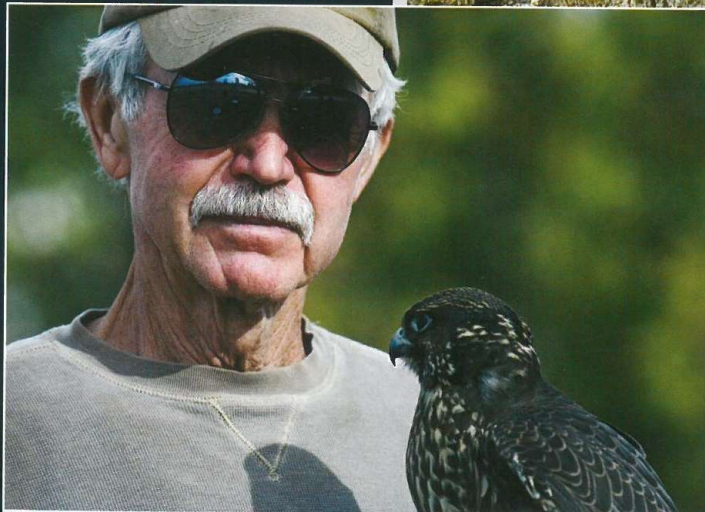
**Below:** There were many fine looking falcons on the weathering lawn – this one a particularly striking dark hybrid.

**Right:** A cast of Harris' hawks.

**Bottom centre:** A passage redtail is wired up ready for some action.

**Bottom left:** Andy Doran from California stops for a photo.

**Bottom right:** The weathering yard this year was a full one.









## IN FOCUS NAFA FIELD MEET 2006



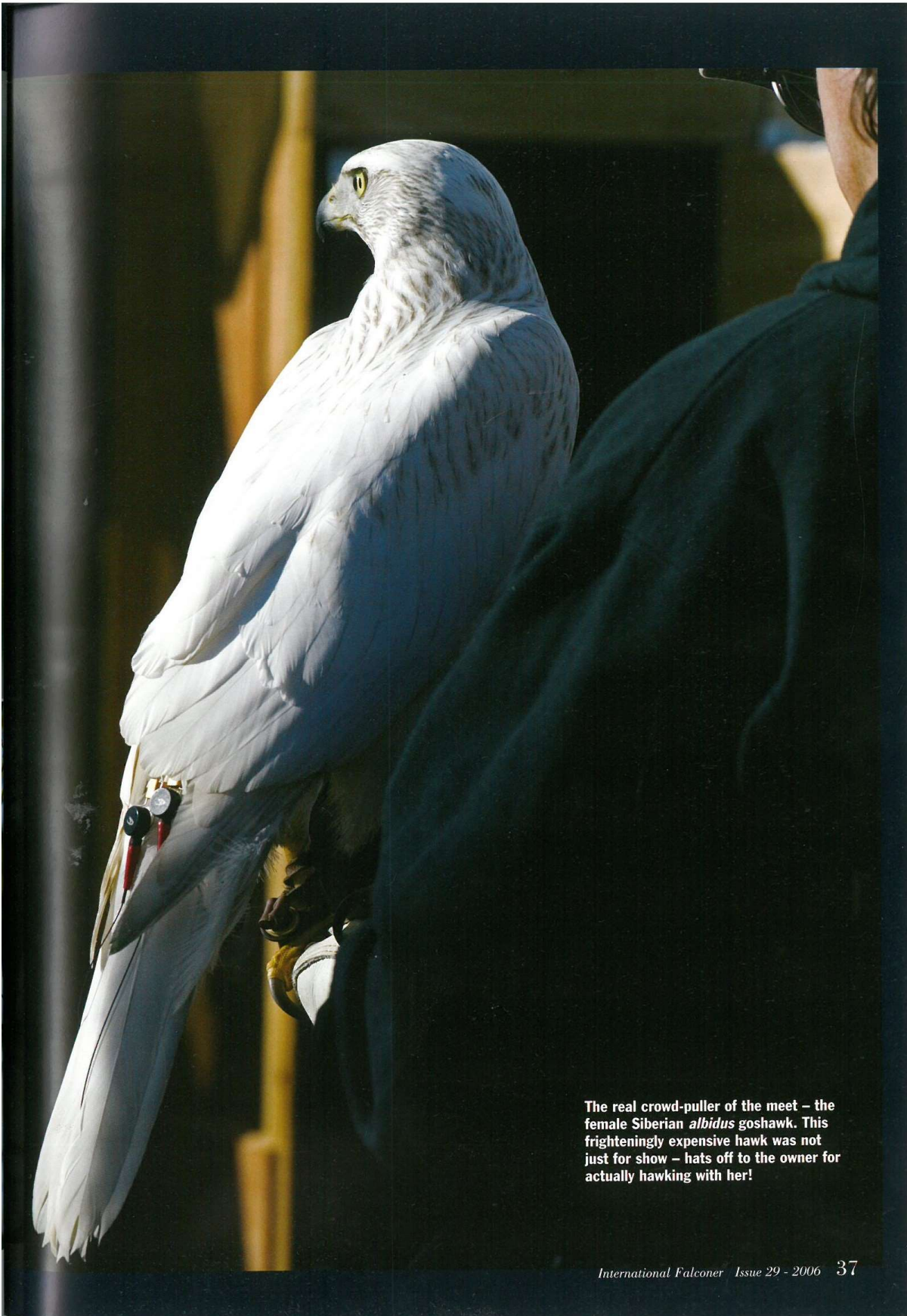
**Above:** A passage female redtail quickly turns to launch her attack.

**Right:** A tiercel goshawk surveys things from above.

**Below:** A very steady tiercel American goshawk on the weathering lawn.







The real crowd-puller of the meet – the female Siberian *albidus* goshawk. This frighteningly expensive hawk was not just for show – hats off to the owner for actually hawking with her!



**IN FOCUS NAFA FIELD MEET 2006**







**Far left: Grant Anderson's Cooper's hawk up close.**

**Left: A tiercel Harris' hawk gets some air time.**

**Below: Richard Brunotte from Colorado after cottontails and quail with one of his goshawks.**

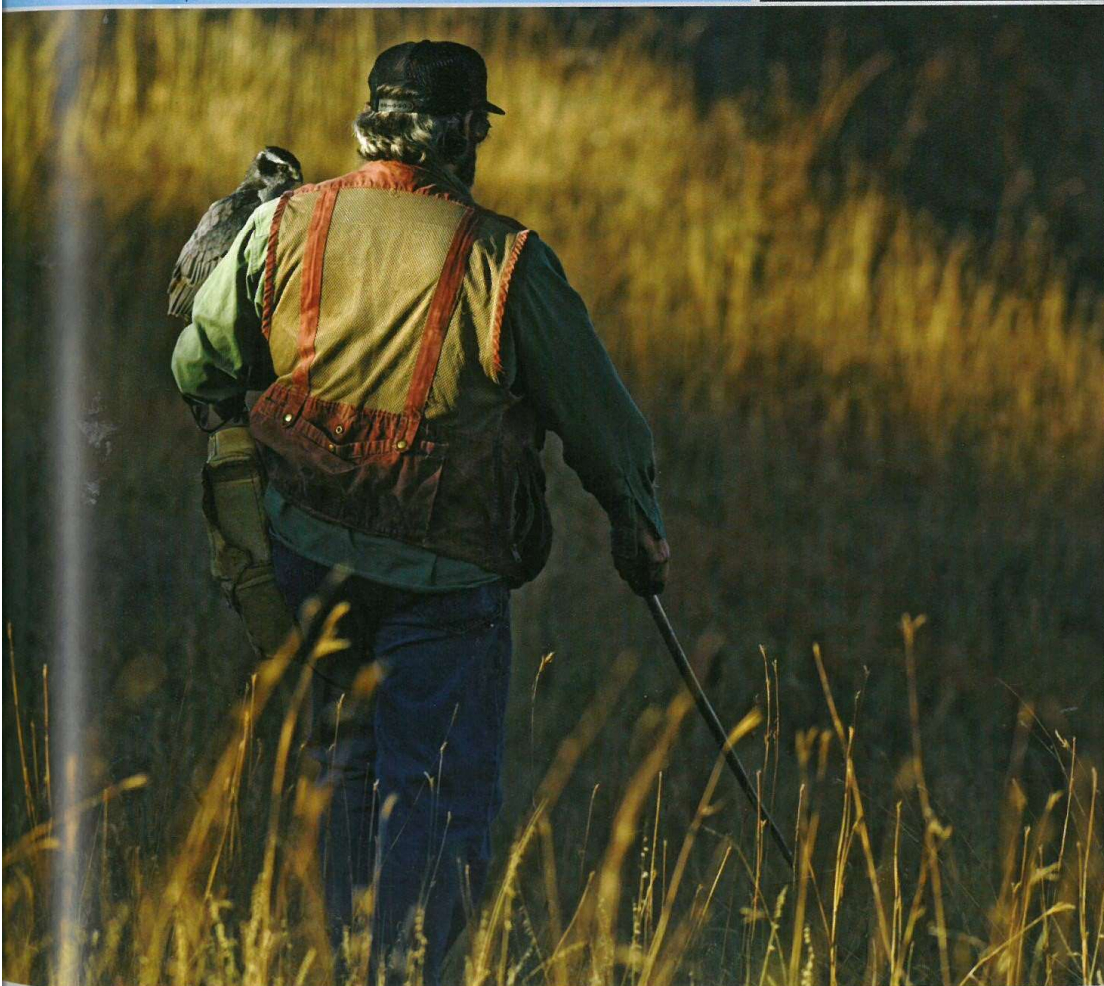




Photo: courtesy of Joe Atkinson



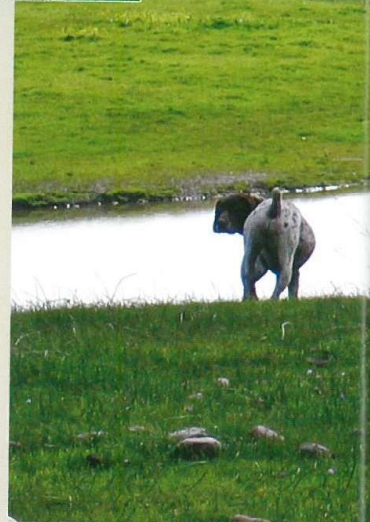
**A**FTER NEARLY an hour of scouting livestock ponds I finally found what I had been searching for – a small pond roughly the size of a backyard swimming pool. I could not see the water from my truck so I needed to scope the pond to see if there were any ducks on it. With my young falcon Blackie on my fist and dog Maggie at my heels I ever so slowly inched my way up the bank. Before I could see anything I heard the unmistakable sound of a hen mallard.....no need to look any further. I crept back down the bank and prepared my falcon for flight. As I struck the braces on the falcon's hood, that familiar knot returned to my stomach. This would be this young falcon's first flight at wild game and I was nervous.

I have been a falconer for more than 30 years but each time I release a newly trained falcon it takes me back to when I was a teenager standing on the side of a grass covered hill with my first bird, an American kestrel named Thor, on my fist. After days of building up the courage to fly him free, I had convinced myself that he would indeed return to my glove. I untied the jesses on his legs that in the past kept him from flying away, turned

and faced the wind, and off he went, up and over the trees, never to be seen again. The difference between Thor and my current falcon Blackie, besides years of experience, was that back then I had merely hoped that Thor would come back and in falconry hope doesn't count for much. Blackie could just as easily fly away like my first falcon had, and I still hoped that Blackie would come back, but these days hope has a little more weight to it. Now,

instead of just hoping that he'll return, I hope that he will draw on the hours and hours of training and conditioning I have invested in him and not only come back but hunt as well.

A good hunting falcon will, once released, begin to climb rapidly in the sky gaining height until it has reached a commanding height over the pond. From this moment on it is the fastest living creature on the earth, capable of a diving speed in





# The FIRST HUNT

Words by JOE ATKINSON



Photo: courtesy of Joe Atkinson

**Above: A couple of great duck flushers. Above left: Author with Blackie, eight seasons on.**

excess of 200mph. Nothing can out-fly it. Confidence is everything with falcons; they must have the confidence that you will release them over something they can hunt and, in their mind, eat. By releasing a falcon too many times with nothing under it to hunt, it will lose confidence in you and go off hunting on its own. In order to build confidence and trust in our hunting partnership I need to select the best hunting situations possible and

produce game that Blackie will hopefully catch. Yes, the falcon is the fastest living creature but that does not mean life is easy. Ducks are full of tricks designed to allow them to escape. So, for a young falcon with no hunting experience, ducks can seem almost impossible to catch. Flying in a mass of confusion with swirling wings, as well as using the water as a safe zone, can be very intimidating, if not overwhelming, for a young falcon. My job is to

create a strong flush driving the ducks far out away from the water, thus giving Blackie as good a chance as I can. Along with Maggie, my German shorthaired pointer, who is a great duck flusher, the two of us should be able to give Blackie a good shot at a duck.

I removed Blackie's hood revealing those unmistakable big brown falcon eyes, and I wondered, "Is this the last time I will ever see him?" With trained falcons every



## The FIRST HUNT

time you cast one from your fist it might be the last time you see that falcon. Will he be killed by another hawk or eagle, or will he go diving after a duck or pheasant at ground level and hit a wire fence? These dangers are always lurking with any flight, but especially with young falcons who are still figuring out the ways of the world.

Blackie looked around taking in his surroundings, roused, and launched into the air. With the sudden appearance of a falcon flying over the pond things got real quiet. The duck chatter that I was hearing before was gone. Blackie is a powerful flying young falcon. He has, in his young life, shown that he can gain height quickly and, in the blink of an eye, become the size of a fly speck in the sky. Once Blackie left my fist I could no longer see him due to the pond bank that I was hiding behind. If I stood up to see my falcon I'd flush the ducks too early and that wouldn't help Blackie's confidence at all. So, with my heart in my mouth, I waited for what seemed like an eternity. Would he come over the pond looking for me? He knows from past experience that if he comes and finds me good things will happen, which in his mind means food. So there I was, kneeling down in the wet grass, waiting and hoping that my young falcon would come into sight. As Blackie flew past the pond and began to climb up into the sky the ducks had begun to make noise, but now they were all quiet again. I looked up and there was Blackie flying in a tight circle directly over the pond. Now I could stand up with little fear because the last place any duck wants to be is in the air when there is a falcon overhead.

Now I had to time things just right. With an experienced hunting falcon all I would have to do is send Maggie in and watch the show. But this was Blackie's first flight on wild

game and timing would be critical. My eyes were glued on a dark speck up in the blue sky that was Blackie. For young falcons I like to flush when they are facing the pond. That way they can see everything unfold under them and hopefully go after one. Well, this was the moment of truth. I ran up on the bank of the pond, sent Maggie around on one side, and I went on the other. With Maggie barking and me waving my arms the entire pond erupted into mass confusion. Ducks were flying everywhere, mostly mallards but also widgeon, ring necks, and gadwall, a nice mixture of birds. Using confusion to their advantage the ducks gained speed and looked for any escape path that would take them out from under the falcon. In the meantime Blackie flew in tight fast circles over the unorganized flock of ducks. Some ducks that are slow fliers tried to return to the safety of the water, but with Maggie and me making tons of noise they continued flying. That was precisely what I was hoping for, a single slow-flying duck.

Somewhere in this maze of birds flying around me was my falcon. The ducks had now bunched up and were in a large group swirling in ever growing circles, gaining height and speed. This is one of the defense tactics that ducks will use, flying higher and higher, remaining over the pond and acting like they will dive back to the water at any second. Young falcons will become discouraged by this and drift out of position, losing their advantage. Experienced duck hunting falcons will dive or stoop at the flock and cause one or more of the ducks to make a break for it, thus singling out an individual bird they can catch. Blackie was many hunts away from mastering that technique. For now I was hoping for one of the diver ducks to make a break for it.

As the mass of ducks, in unison,

started a sharp turn, a drake ring neck broke away from the flock, was unable to make the sharp turn and headed for open air and some unknown pond. I looked to the sky for my falcon and could not locate him anywhere. Had he become overwhelmed by all the commotion and drifted off, something not out of the ordinary with young falcons? Had he stooped on a duck? No, there he was, still flying in tight fast circles. My hope was that Blackie would recognise that he could catch the single ring neck and then indeed go after it. For what seemed like forever, I watched as Blackie did nothing. Then he did the classic falcon wingover and folded up his wings, doubling and tripling his speed. Faster and faster he came until my eye could no longer track the stooping falcon. Experience told me to switch my gaze from the falcon I could no longer see, to the drake ring neck flying at full speed across the field. The sound made by a falcon in a high speed stoop is unmistakable. Once you have heard it you will know it forever. I watched as the ring neck, realising that it had made a horrible mistake, tried to make a turn and come back to the pond. Blackie, acting on total instinct, made a slight adjustment and struck the ring neck duck at full speed, sending the hapless diver cart-wheeling to the ground. I was already running out to where Blackie was busy plucking feathers off his prize when Maggie shot past me to do her job by getting to the falcon and, with her presence, keep away other predators.

Falconers have a saying that Murphy's Law loves falconry and that what can go wrong usually does. But on this day, at this pond, everything came together. ■



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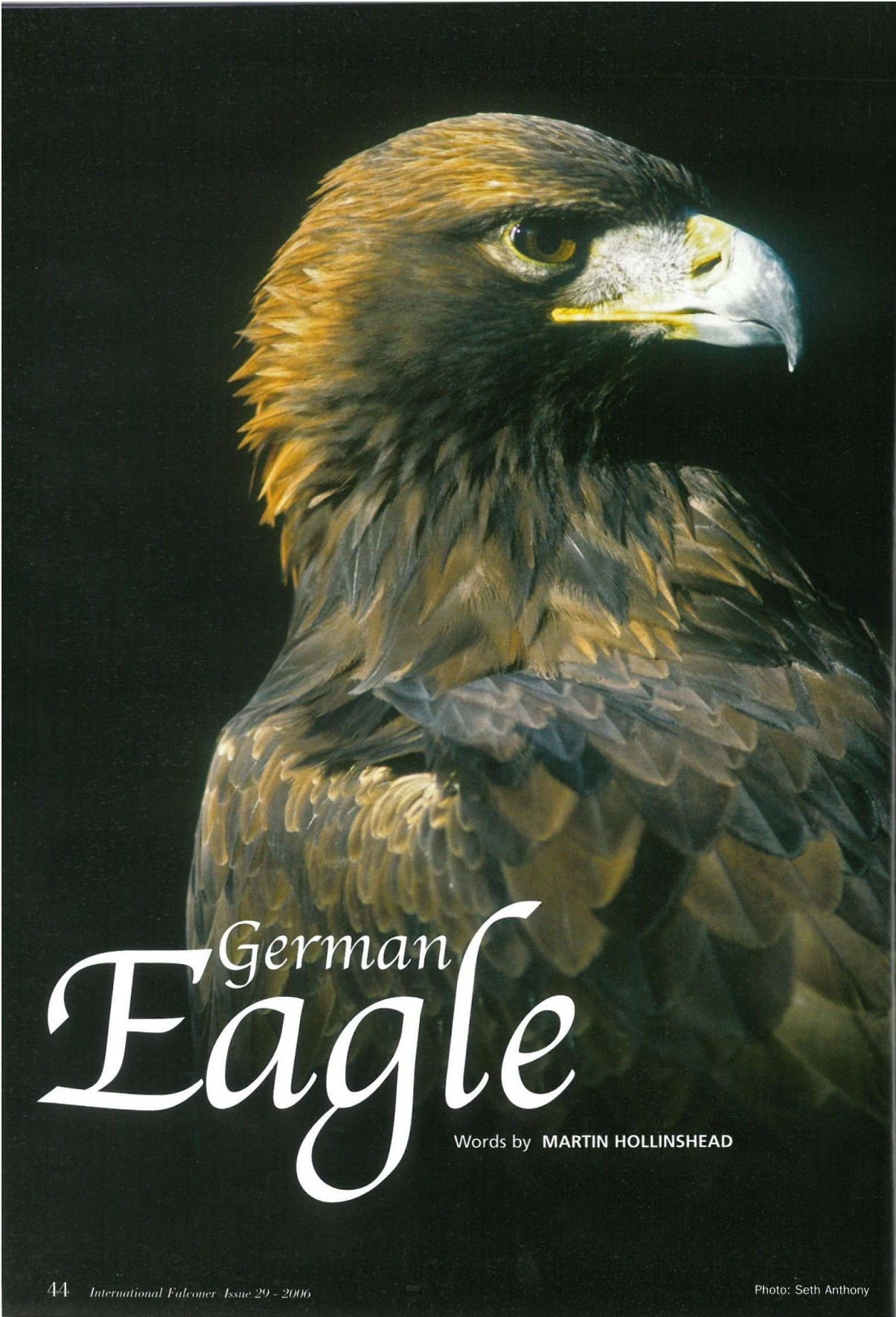
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German  
*Eagle*

Words by MARTIN HOLLINSHEAD



**Imagine a Europe with no eagle falconry.**

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**Hard to imagine isn't it? Yet this was European falconry not so very long ago. The rise to power of the golden eagle is one of falconry's most fascinating stories because just a few individuals totally changed the West's perception of this bird, took centuries of negative programming and did the greatest sales job in history.**

**It's a story that begs a closer look.**

**I**T'S 1903 and deep in the forests of Finland a fifteen-year-old boy is handed a nestling golden eagle. That boy is Friedrich Remmler. The eagle's story has just begun.

Remmler's attempts to train this bird should have been a total disaster: he lived in a land with no indigenous falconry, had never met a living falconer; he didn't even have any books on the subject. But miraculously, he was successful and there and then decided to devote himself totally to hunting with eagles.

Nothing about Remmler's eagle hawking can be compared to that seen today and in his homeland of vast forests, countless lakes and long, bitter winters, he developed some unique falconry techniques. His two main quarries were the mountain hare and fox, and he accounted for prodigious numbers of both. But he didn't stop there. Fully aware of the golden eagle's awesome capabilities, he decided to take things right to the edge and pit his birds against what has always been the eagle's

most formidable quarry – the wolf. And he was successful. Flying carefully selected and prepared female eagles, he began to record kills against top-weight timber wolves. It was an astonishing feat.

And yet alone, none of this would have changed anything. Isolated from the rest of European falconry in

his northern homeland, Remmler's accomplishments would have gone totally unnoticed – as they did for many years – but world events would change that.

The story now comes forward to 1937, and we're in Germany as Europe creeps ever closer to the Second World War. Remmler had ▶

Photo: T. Dollman



**Josef Hiebeler (second from left) and fellow hare hawkers prepare for the off – 1988.**



## German Eagle

always had strong ties to Germany (his father was German and the family retained German citizenship), and now, with Germany putting so much time and energy into all forms of hunting – this mainly due to Hermann Goering's obsession with fieldsports – Remmler's activities had been attracting a lot of interest. For one falconer, Fritz Loges, working at a state falconry establishment, the lure of eagle flying became irresistible, and with advice and guidance from Remmler he took the plunge.

While Remmler's activities were obviously a massive influence, it's hard not to read a little more into Loges' decision – and why he got the support and encouragement of his superiors. For a regime eager to promote its might, wouldn't being the first European nation to employ falconry's most impressive bird, a bird that had come through history as a symbol of power and aggression, make the perfect statement?

Whatever the real motive, Loges was successful, and during the course of the war flew three eagles not only to hares but also foxes, taking over a dozen. Naturally, his position as falconer to the Reich guaranteed that all this success received plenty of exposure.

During the early years of Loges' flying, a small number of other falconers had been experimenting with eagles too (in Eastern Prussia flights from the saddle were explored – something also prompted by Remmler who was a fanatical horseman), but with Loges' death in 1955, eagle falconry was pretty much over.

Five years passed and with hardly anything happening on the German eagle scene at all, it seemed as though all that pioneering work had been for nothing. Then someone stepped forward to take the baton – Claus Fentzloff.

Fentzloff was a serious and dedicated falconer, but with his first

eagle, a passage female named Leif, he struggled to find his feet. Slight consolation came from Austria where a falconry group were also struggling with a tiercel they were desperate to have success with. In fact, so disappointing were the efforts of both Fentzloff and the Austrian group that they found themselves the target of no small amount of ridicule.

Their problem was the brown hare. This quarry had always been a big challenge for the goshawk; it wasn't beyond the bird's capabilities but meetings were never the most comfortable of affairs. The eagle, however, looked made for the job. It had weight and power and as Loges had shown, could catch hares.

But things just wouldn't come together. The type of direct-pursuit flatland flying required (the quarry being a creature of even, arable landscapes) was totally unnatural for the bird; if the hare didn't beat it with its magical manoeuvrability,



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**Claus Fentzloff (centre) leads the discussion during a pause in hawking – 1989.**

Photo: T. Dollman

then it did so with its blistering speed. Of course, that this hurdle had to be tackled had been clear from the start, but the difficulties involved were only fully drummed home by the so very bare diary pages.

With more consideration put into field preparation – the vital role of fast lure pursuits now recognised – success started to be achieved, and as a small number of other falconers looked to the eagle (a notable name here would be Hans Brehm), European falconry began to see a bird never known before, a long range multi-kill hare hawk capable of taking the very biggest hares. Not only had Europe gained a new bird, it had gained a new type of hawking.

By the late 60s Fentzloff himself was riding on a tidal wave of success. At an Austrian meeting in 1969, Leif took eleven hares, and at a gathering in 1972, her bag was fifteen. Emphasising how very well the eagle was performing in its new role, at one of these early meetings,

six eagles took twelve hares in just one hour.

And with all of this, something fascinating had been discovered: golden eagles could be flown as a cast. Today, this is an accepted part of eagle falconry, but this was far from the case for those early falconers. With a background of flying goshawks, birds that they had seen do each other murder, how could they even begin to imagine safe cast flights with eagles! But this is what happened. In 1966 a young eagle belonging to Fentzloff was flown successfully with one belonging to Hans Brehm, and in 1967, Leif and a Finnish eagle being flown by Walter Gockel, astonished the field with their joint, repeat-stoop attacks on a dazzling hare.

Although during this period the emphasis was on hare hawking, the eagle's ability to take larger game hadn't been forgotten. The foxes that Loges had so keenly flown were being taken, and in 1974, Fentzloff even travelled to Morocco with

Jacques Renaud to successfully fly jackals! These new eagle falconers were only too ready to apply the bird's power and soon a totally new quarry was being examined – the roe deer.

Roe deer hawking was an obvious move. In the eagle's falconry homeland of Central Asia, hoofed animals had been an eagle quarry since the bird's earliest days in the sport; the abundant roe would connect past and present.

The first kill at an official meeting was recorded in 1963 when Fentzloff's Leif took a weak buck. Fentzloff achieved another meeting kill in 1967 with the eagle Tabu, and again in 1976 with Leif. But Fentzloff far from held the monopoly; other falconers were exploring this quarry too, and as time passed, one in particular would become intimately associated with this branch of eagle falconry. His name was Josef Hiebeler. With roe hawking in its infancy, this Bavarian was probably the first falconer to ▶



# German Eagle

really focus on specific training, delving deep to produce very special birds. Flying at home and abroad, he enjoyed some remarkable hawking.

Through the 1970s and into the 80s, the eagle's popularity continued to grow and the bird that had once been something of a novelty at field meets was now an almost overwhelming presence. Big, eagle-dominated meets were now being seen. Top location for these was Eastern Europe. Shut away behind the Iron Curtain, and with falconers clutching invitations as valuable as gold, the Eastern Bloc became a Mecca for German and Austrian eagle owners. Teaming up with falconers from all over Eastern Europe, the lure was vast open terrain and staggeringly high hare numbers. And it was adventure too: late night border crossings, watchtowers and armed guards, and vehicle-searches straight from a spy

movie. It was another world and one I was lucky enough to experience.

As the eagle 'movement' marched into and through the 90s, the former Eastern Bloc now united with the rest of Europe and with the big meets attracting visitors from all manner of faraway lands, we arrive at the present day.

And now a weird twist. Germany, the country that gave golden eagle falconry to Europe, currently finds itself in a bit of a dilemma. The eagle has become too popular! The massive exposure the eagle scene has had in recent years plus the increased availability of captive bred birds, has made the eagle something of a 'must have'. The worry is that newcomers to the sport will rush out of the exam room to tear up their "Learner" plates and immediately acquire an eagle, without even considering getting a feel for the sport with a more

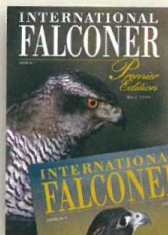
appropriate bird. Such is the concern, the possibility of a mandatory small-bird apprenticeship period – a suggested five years – seems likely to be examined.

As golden eagle falconry continues to expand, this is an issue that will creep into the falconry of other lands (the UK coming immediately to mind due to it currently having no required falconry exam at all). And it's a worry. The golden eagle is a massively valuable asset to modern falconry. It's a bird for special jobs and deeds and one that connects us straight to ancient Asia and the very dawn of our sport. I do hope its success doesn't prove its undoing. ■

**A full account of Friedrich Remmler's eagle falconry can be found in Martin Hollinshead's new book, *The Last Wolf Hawker*.**

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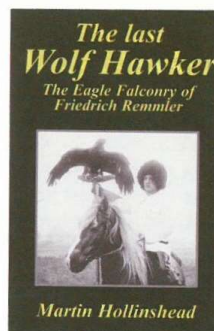
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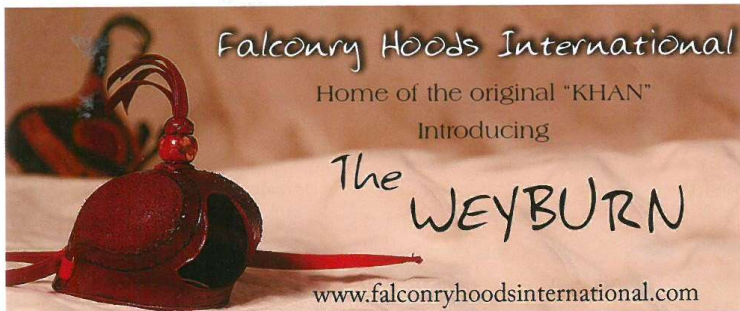
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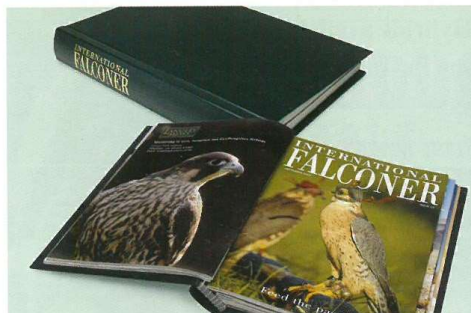
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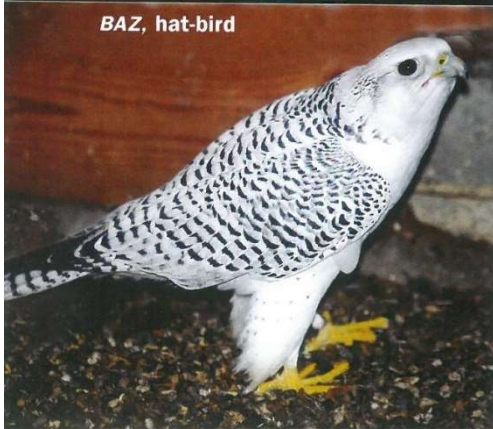
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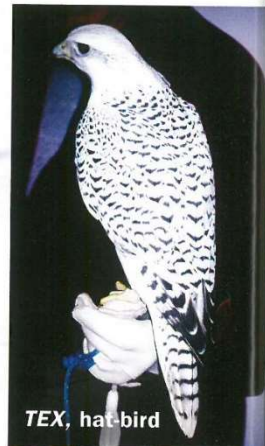
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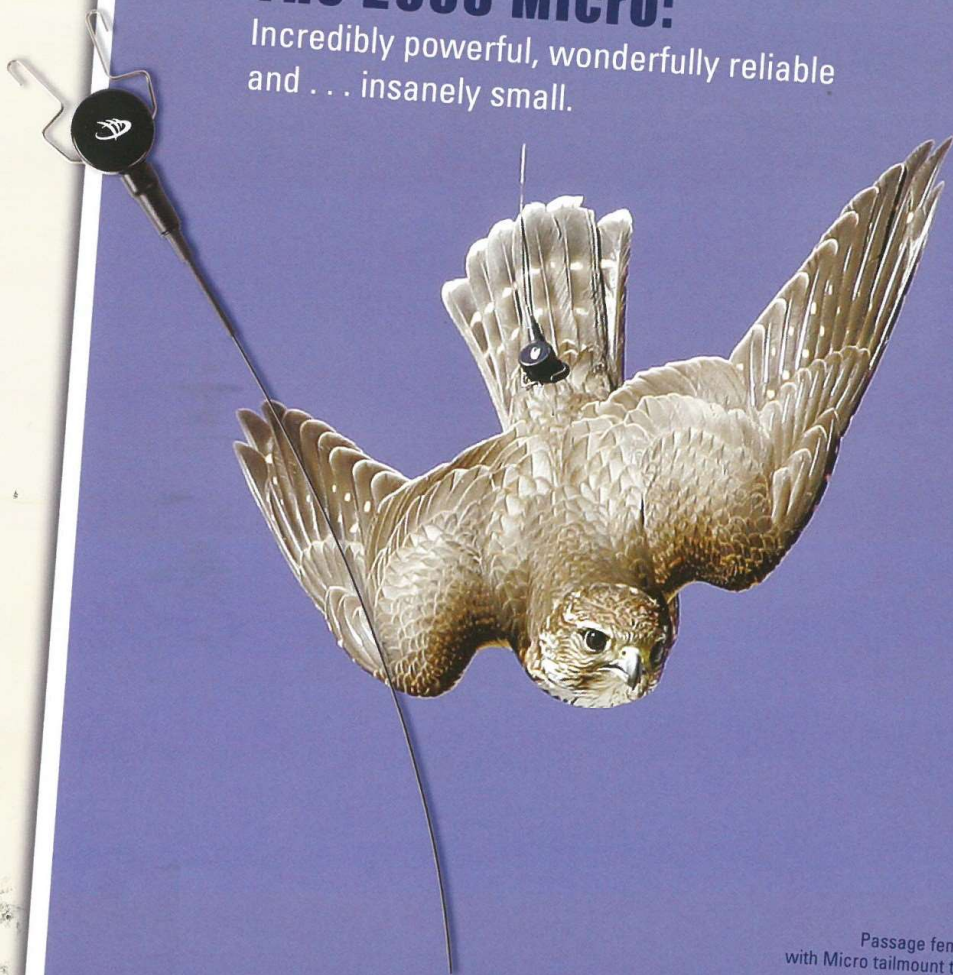
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