

INTERNATIONAL FALCONRY

ISSUE 31 - 2007

The Festival of Falconry
The other 50%
Running with eagles
A return to the source
Nose to the ground
Eagles and hounds

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With the worst summer weather on record in the UK, the build up to the eagerly anticipated Festival of Falconry was an anxious one but miraculously it was blessed with two bright and 'almost' rain-free days..... quite incredible really considering the horrendous conditions that we'd been seeing for weeks on end and I'm sure the organisers must have breathed a huge sigh of relief!..... it could have been a complete disaster. Instead it was a glorious two days of celebration.....a celebration of everything that is falconry and particularly its huge cultural importance to countries around the world. I can't think of any other activity that brings together such a 'brotherhood' as falconry.....it is truly remarkable how one shared passion can peacefully bridge so many completely different cultures and countries so very far apart in other ways. This unique and incredible art simply must continue.....it's just too important to lose and hopefully the Festival of Falconry, enjoyed by thousands this summer, will go some way to protecting its future.

Until next time..... Seth

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IMPORTANT - NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

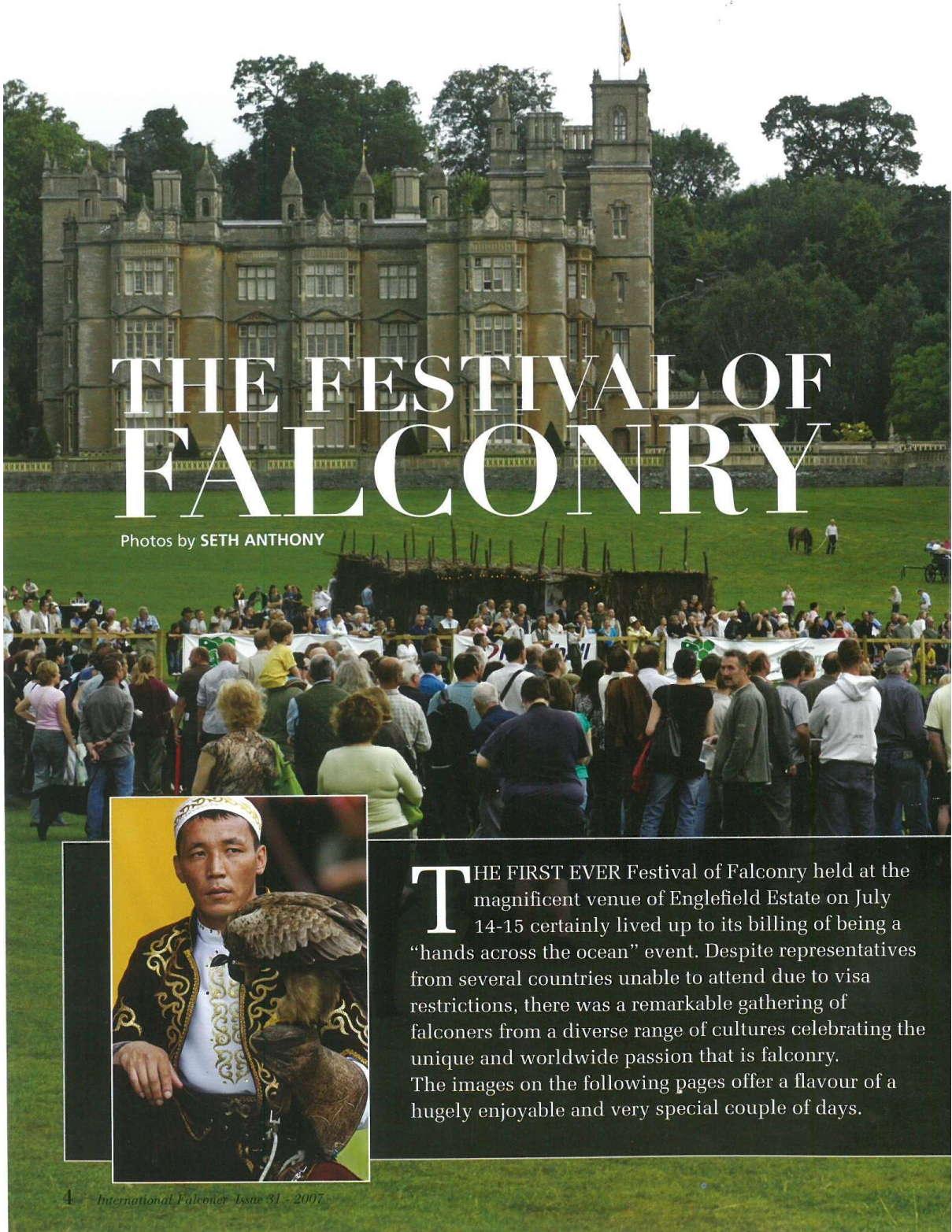
The Editor wishes to point out that *International Falconer* features articles from across the world which inevitably include a variety of management, training and hunting methods. Some practices in one country/state may not be legal in another. It is the responsibility of the falconer to know and strictly 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: An eaglehunter from Kazakhstan with golden eagle at the Festival of Falconry.
by Seth Anthony

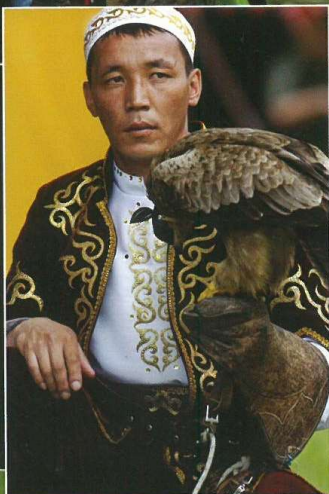
IN FOCUS

WITH INTERNATIONAL FALCONER



THE FESTIVAL OF FALCONRY

Photos by SETH ANTHONY



THE FIRST EVER Festival of Falconry held at the magnificent venue of Englefield Estate on July 14-15 certainly lived up to its billing of being a “hands across the ocean” event. Despite representatives from several countries unable to attend due to visa restrictions, there was a remarkable gathering of falconers from a diverse range of cultures celebrating the unique and worldwide passion that is falconry. The images on the following pages offer a flavour of a hugely enjoyable and very special couple of days.



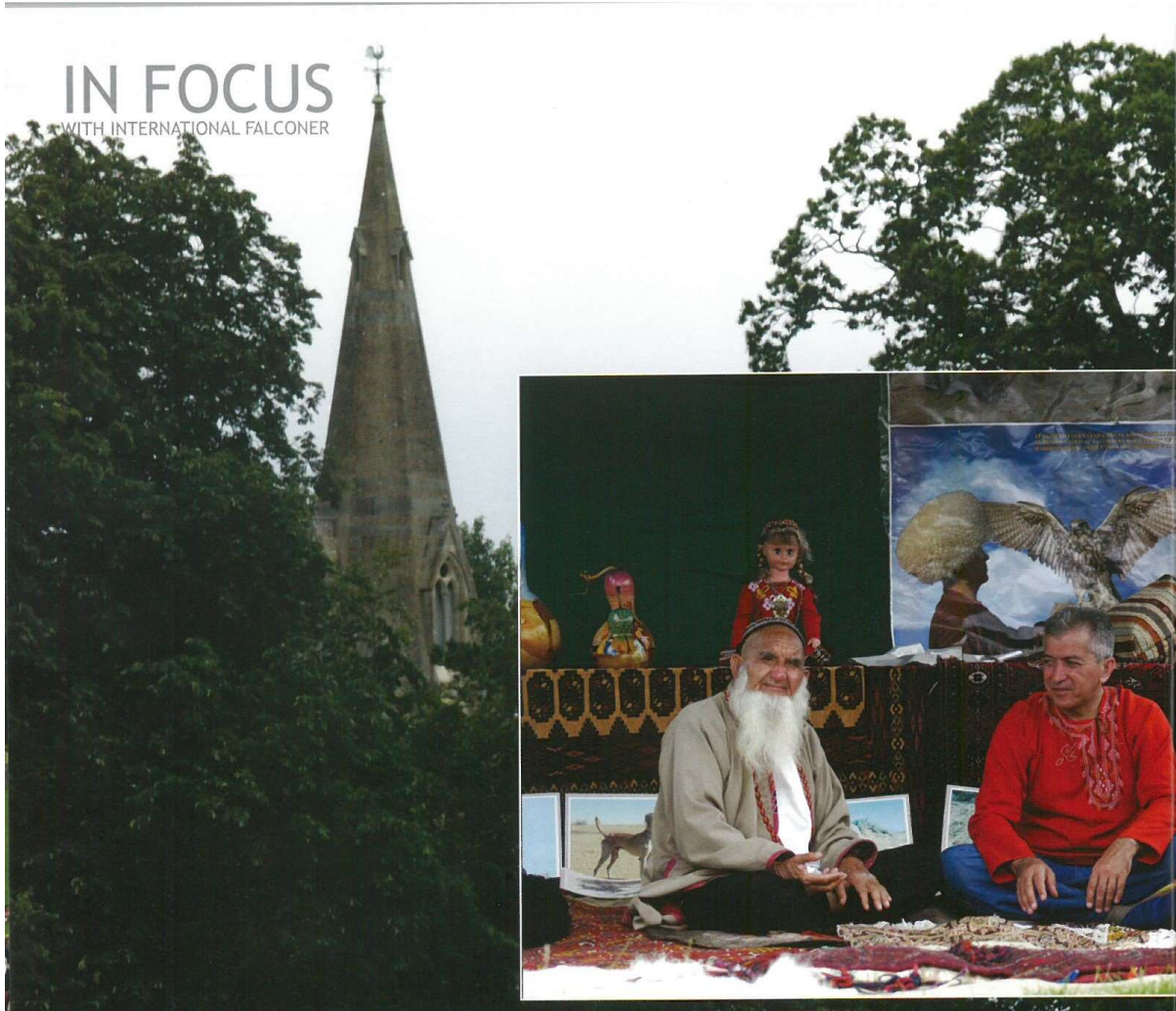
COMING SOON

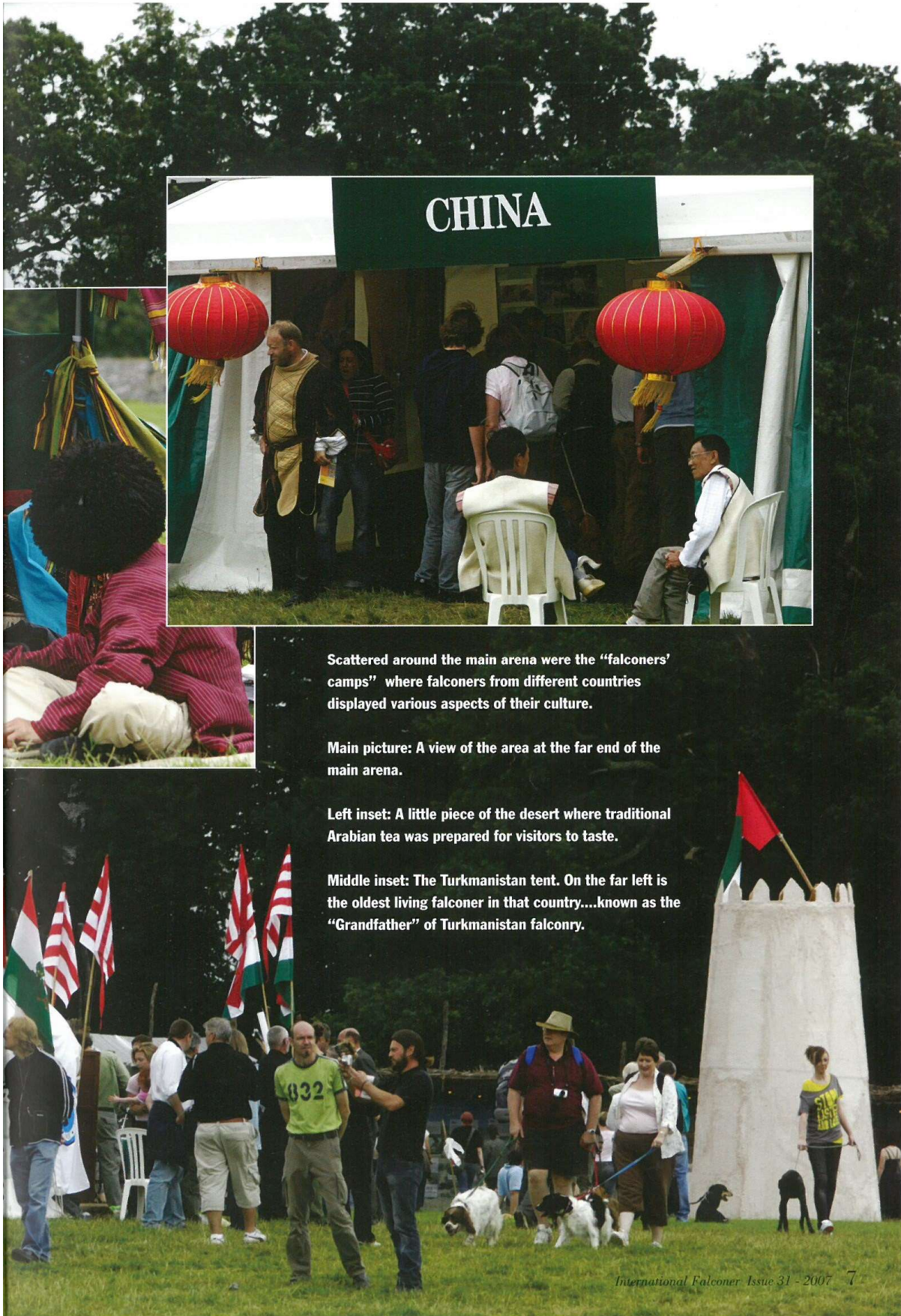
Some snippets of video footage from the two days' festivities will be freely available to view on the IF website very shortly...be sure to keep checking in...

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Scattered around the main arena were the “falconers’ camps” where falconers from different countries displayed various aspects of their culture.

Main picture: A view of the area at the far end of the main arena.

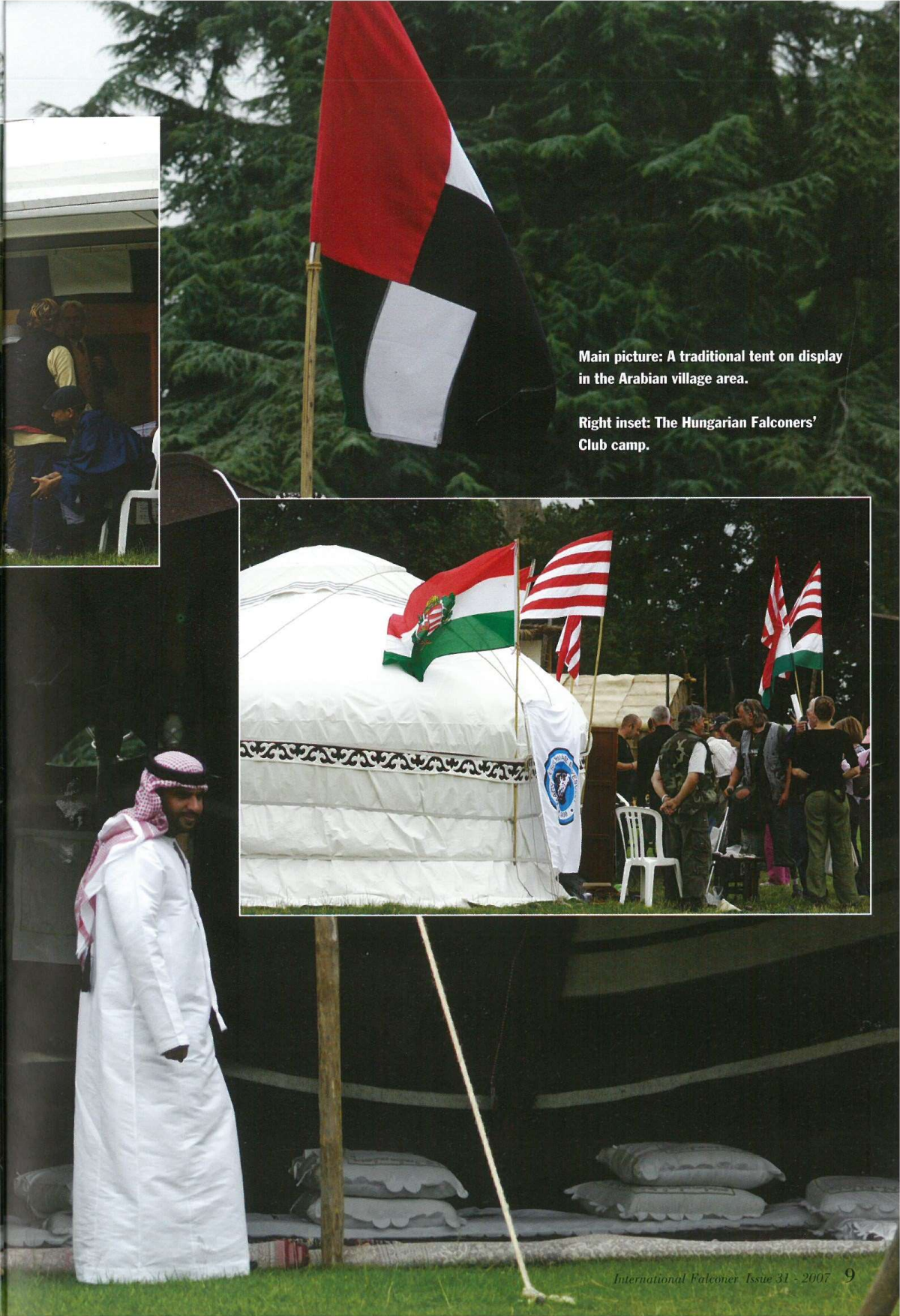
Left inset: A little piece of the desert where traditional Arabian tea was prepared for visitors to taste.

Middle inset: The Turkmanistan tent. On the far left is the oldest living falconer in that country....known as the “Grandfather” of Turkmanistan falconry.

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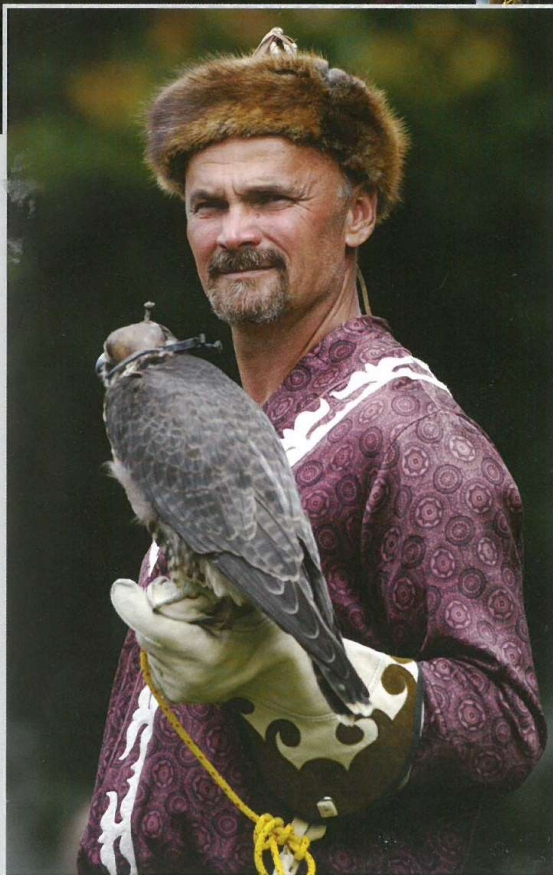


Main picture: A traditional tent on display in the Arabian village area.

Right inset: The Hungarian Falconers' Club camp.

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EAGLES & HOUNDS

Words by JACK HUBLEY

*All else being equal, the hawk that follows
an experienced dog gets more slips.*

*The trick is to convince a fox-catching eagle
that those bigger, spotted canids
are on her team.*



ALPHA WRUNG A strip of meat off the leg, bolted it, then reared back, chest thrust out like a body builder. She looked to the left. The pack was closing fast, eight hounds bawling their heads off. Sure beats telemetry, I thought, hunkered in high grass maybe a dozen feet from my big girl.

The black, white and brown wave poured around the corner, 40 yards out, Daisy and Dottie in the lead, as usual. These two girls were the best of the best in the Beaufort Hunt's team of 30-odd foxhounds, a pair of no-nonsense strike hounds, quick to pick up a track and as tough to shake as a shadow.

And there was a fox at the end of this trail, all right. But atop the fox perched a huge, black

feathered beast. Catching sight of the hounds, she suddenly looked twice her normal size. Her big yellow feet were buried in auburn fur. Clearly, she was going nowhere without this fox!

Daisy and Dottie quickly downshifted, milling about with big question marks over their heads. Others broke to the left and right, running a wide arc around the eagle, heads bobbing, testing the wind – all but one, that is. We'll call him Dunderhead. Alpha's head lowered as the hound trotted in for a closer look. Hmm, I'm thinking, he really has no idea.

When Dunderhead was 30 feet from impact I jumped up, cracked the whip and suggested, in a stern voice, that he change his plans. "Hold up!" Professional fox chaser

that he is, Dunderhead knew what to do at the sound of the braided whip.

I shook my head. What is it in a golden eagle that makes her stand firm against such odds? And what is it that makes her partner think he can convince a fox-catching eagle that she needs a bunch of big, domesticated canines to help her catch a little wild one?

The answer to that second question is easy enough: a man named Friedrich Remmler.

It is rightly so that many ask why the eagle, especially the wolf eagle, does not strike the hounds. The answer is: The eagles rarely strike or almost never strike animals with which they are closely associated. ►

Photo: Jack Hubley

Betsy and the pack reach the end of the trail – Alpha guarding her training cape garnished with meat.

I first read those words by the early-20th-century eagle master in his *Reminiscences from My Life with Eagles*, a story included in the 1970 North American Falconers' Association Journal. And the words bubbled up time and again over those first two winters with Alpha, as I, along with a few loyal pals, beat ourselves to a froth trying to put foxes on the eagle's radar screen. Here in eastern Pennsylvania crossing paths with a red fox is easy enough. But, lacking four legs and a nose, routing a fox from thick cover during daylight hours is a long shot at best. Watching plenty of redtails, goshawks and a Harris' or two chasing feathers and fur over the past two decades, I've come to one conclusion: The hawk that follows an experienced dog gets more slips.

Still, Remmler's words alone may not have been enough to put me over the edge. After all, those hawks weren't entered on wild canids. And the fallout from an eagle-dog confrontation – well, that's not something we like to think about. So, I held back.

And I might still be holding back had things not fallen tantalisingly into place.

Opportunity, in the form of my falconry apprentice, came knocking. Betsy Landon-Carricato was not only an aspiring falconer; she was also huntsman for the Beaufort Hunt headquartered in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, less than an hour from my home. As huntsman, she trains and cares for about three

dozen English and American foxhounds, fielding a pack every Sunday and Tuesday for Beaufort's members. So, here was my apprentice with access to horses and hounds. And, here was her sponsor with a fox-catching eagle.

One niggling little wrinkle remained – that “fox-catching” part. Here in America, fox hunting might better be termed “fox chasing,” since the goal is a wild, unscripted ride behind fox and hounds. I'd never heard of the Beaufort Hunt actually catching a fox, and everyone in the hunt liked it that way. Hopefully, the fox would be there next week for another chase.

For Alpha, on the other hand, this hunting game is all about meat in the feet. So, we resolved that the hounds would work two jobs. Betsy picked a team of six to eight starters to begin training sessions on days when they weren't chasing foxes for the hunt. Early lessons involved nothing more than walking a pair of hounds with Alpha on the fist.

Next, the hounds were walked toward the eagle busy with a tiring on a

fox head and hide stretched over a board. Hounds were cautioned, then halted at about 20 feet, with Alpha on a 10-foot creance...just in case.

When all parties seemed OK with this, it was time for a drag. Betsy hitched my pull-behind fox (that reusable cape on the board) to her hunt horse and laid down a quarter-mile drag. Back to the trailer she'd trot for the pack while I put Alpha on the fox (now garnished with a

groundhog leg) at the end of the trail.

I hear that some packs won't play the drag game, but the Beaufort hounds, led by Daisy and Dottie, took immediately to



EAGLES & HOUNDS

chasing dead foxes. Initially, I'd sit with Alpha, cautioning the pack as soon as they came into sight. Eventually, I tried hiding nearby, ready to leap into the breach as

needed. Things were coming along nicely.

But hounds are wolves—spotted wolves with operatic voices, but wolves, nonetheless, with a pack mentality. Watch a fresh pack when it hits a fresh track; everything but heritage goes out the window. Faced with this well-armed canine tsunami, all that stands between a fox and certain death is speed and wit. What happens when there actually is a fox at the end of the trail, and an eagle claiming possession? It was the odds, along with that pack mentality, that nagged at me. Six or eight hounds, blood boiling, pushing each other on. And one eagle. In training sessions with the pack Alpha had

demonstrated many times that she was ready to go down with her quarry. I'd gotten her into this fix and it was my responsibility to prevent that from happening.

And, again, there was Remmler. Why had he settled on two hounds? Having an accomplished houndsman for a father, he could have easily fielded a much larger pack. Still, he settled for two. So, I settled on two, too. Two, after all, was still a "pack" — the smallest possible pack. I liked the odds. If it worked a century ago, it could work again.

This time Betsy chose two Beaufort retirees: Spike, an elderly dog who was no longer up to Sunday-hunt speed, and Annie, a shy girl who seemed to hate the

Sunday crowds and tested her huntsman's good humour by refusing to load in the trailer at the end of the day.

From the beginning, Annie wanted nothing to do with that giant bird. But Spike was a bit different; maybe it was the testosterone. With Alpha on the fist or in the trees he paid her little attention. On the ground, though, she was much more interesting. Time for some eagle-aversion training with the electronic collar. With Spike on the check cord, Betsy would work him toward Alpha and me as I threw tidbits to the ground. At first, seeing an eagle dropping to the ground up ahead was pretty exciting to Spike. But it took only a few taps with the transmitter to convince him that eagles were far too dangerous, even at a distance, to make chasing them worth the risk.

So, after considerable work, we had what looked to be a working team. But it's important to point out that this team operates in a different manner than Friedrich and his eagles.

As the 19th century turned the page to the 20th, Remmler's Finnish hunting grounds encompassed thousands of wild acres with, of course, no suburban subdivisions and no "iron horses" to flatten hounds. Here in eastern Pennsylvania, civilization continues to flow as unstoppable as lava over our precious open space. So, we cherry-pick our hunting ▶

Photo: Elizabeth Schultz



Author with Alpha.

Photo: Elizabeth Schultz



Flying through the trees. A passage eagle from the treeless plains of Wyoming, Alpha adapted well to hunting from trees.

sites carefully. My ideal foxing ground is rolling country made up of a mix of brushy, old-field habitat, woodlots and cropland. The strategy involves working the hounds into the brushy draws. Meanwhile I stake out the higher ground with Alpha on my fist, or, if all's clear, toss her to the trees.

With an eagle perched high overhead, action is almost assured in this country. But a fox on the move is far from a fox in the bag. Thickets of multiflora rose and autumn olive are ideal spots for game to lie low, and a motionless fox in cover is a safe fox, when the team consists only of an eagle and a man. Add four legs and a nose and get ready for action.

One of the most heartening revelations throughout this journey has been watching Alpha adapt to a mix of forest and fields – no small feat for a bird coming from the treeless plains of Wyoming. It should be no surprise, considering the varied terrains that this big *Aquila* has populated across the northern hemisphere. Put a fox on the ground in front of her, and suddenly this hulking female eagle with a 7-foot wingspan is

threading the needle through the woods, showing you moves that you never thought possible.

Still, fur in the feet is a long shot at best. My notes recount 30 hunts last winter, with a fair percentage of those hunts including hound work. The actual number of chases can be known only to Alpha and the hounds, but Betsy and I witnessed only four. I can see my fellow hawkers rolling their eyes. Wouldn't all that time be better spent following a Harris' and a pack of miniature dachshunds?

Obviously, for most, that's true; there's a lot to be said for fast, furious falconry.

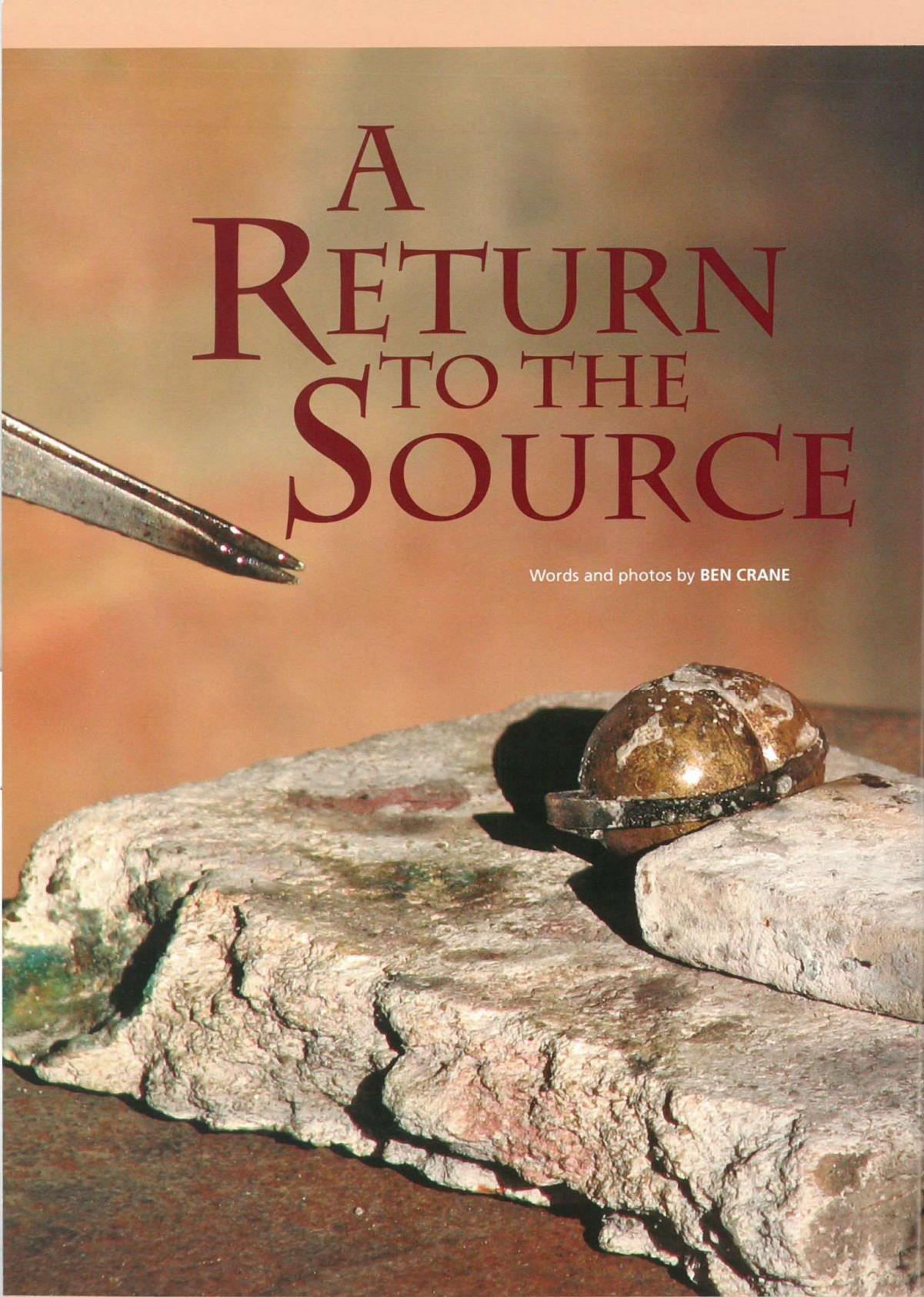
But, for me, short of breathing, I can think of nothing I'd rather do than take the long shot with Alpha and a pair of hounds. Here's a taste of it.

The date is January 17, sunny and cold. Betsy puts the hounds into one of our favourite creek bottoms and Alpha takes a stand high in a tree on the hillside. There's a steep ravine feeding into the creek at right angles and I start up one side with the hounds working parallel to the creek below. Minutes later I hear

tapping in the leaves and turn to see a fox approaching from below and behind me. In an instant I hear the bells. Here she comes, slashing through the trees, tucking and side-slipping like a giant goshawk.

The fox is in high gear now, and the eagle is closing. But just as she folds, the fox evaporates, swallowed by a thick stand of young white pines. As the fox winks out of sight Alpha powers up over the trees then courses back and forth for a while like a spaniel before pulling up into a big sycamore. Very close!

That image – fox and eagle in the same frame on a cold winter morning – is enough to get me through another hazy-hot-humid Pennsylvania summer. It's a shame to wish your life away, but the warm months offer nothing to compare to the sight of these two predators locked in a life-and-death moment. Temperatures will drop, leaves will fall and we'll be ready. ■



A RETURN TO THE SOURCE

Words and photos by BEN CRANE



Continuing his journey in Pakistan
Ben Crane leaves the Sindh province
and travels on through Karachi and
Lahore to meet Moshin Ali, a fifth
generation bell maker.



WE SET OFF as the sun slipped intensely behind a mosque, turning the whole sky from pastel blue to orange. We passed people carrying firewood, riding carts, through small towns and villages into the night. As a sky grew sheet black the mottled texture of the stars was spellbinding. The temperature plummeted and we covered our heads and hands in scarves and gloves. We sealed our mouths from the dust and hunkered down for a long drawn out journey.

A couple of hours in and we hit our first road block. The police waved a lamp and we duly pulled over. We shook hands with a brief 'asalam alkum'. We explained our journey into the hostile beams of torches. Shifting kalashnikoffs from shoulder to shoulder they deliberately took their time before finally waving us on.

Like most places some of the police can be corrupt, complacent and not averse to the odd bribe. Sindh province also has its fair share of kidnapers who will steal and sometimes kill for any amount of money. It is often difficult to ▶

A RETURN TO THE SOURCE

distinguish who is friend and who is foe. As the reality of this overnight trip began to set in, Salman assured me we would be fine: "Mr Crane you must not worry, there are four of us and we have two shot guns". There was a pregnant pause as I glanced sideways; he winked before adding; "However a hand gun would be very useful".

A klaxon sounded from a coach hurtling past and we eased over. From behind, a white car without plates slid into our tunnel of light. The windows were blackened and I asked about the missing registration. Salman replied it was quite common for cars that are not registered to be driving around without plates, he was not smiling. We pulled in at the next village and from the car stepped four policemen and the sergeant from the roadblock an hour ago. They waved us over and began a search.

As a measure of goodwill I had given Salman a set of telemetry from Merlin Systems. We had brought this to show the villagers and I had essentially smuggled it into Pakistan to avoid the heavy import duty on electrical goods. As I turned to see which policeman was behind me, an officer removed the telemetry. He opened the bag and looked directly at Salman. A few cursory words were exchanged and we were allowed on our way.

We were less lucky when we were pulled aside for the third and final time. Sidq did the talking and paid a small bribe of around 30 rupees. Slightly more sinister was the fact that these 'police' had neither uniform, car or powerful torch. However we were not far from Sidq's village, so it was agreed we would stop for the night, eat food and catch up on sleep before heading back to Karachi after first prayer. Before we left

on the final leg of our journey Sidq's wife and mother presented me with small handmade bread baskets and assorted gifts.

We arrived back in Karachi late in the afternoon. During the frost cold morning daylight we travelled through some spectacular scenery. Through the foothills of the Kirthar mountain range, on the western border between Sindh and Balochistan. They erupted high from the base cliff shale and rocks. A sugary, heroin powder brown cascading up through the clouds dwarfing the roads and those who travelled beneath them. Following fast in the distance a billowing train snaked across its lower levels; a fully functioning relic left from British occupation. To my right wide open land stretched out and in the distance I caught glimpses of the flowing river Indus.

On arrival in Karachi we dumped our clothes and took showers to wash away the scum and grit of a long and fruitful journey. By early evening we had rushed through the city and purchased pigeons for the rehabilitation hawks, eaten the best birihani around and bought tickets for an early morning flight out of Karachi. By the time bed arrived we had 4 hours left until sunrise and our journey back across country to Salman's bell maker in Lahore.

We were picked up at Lahore airport by Raffey's uncle, driven through the famous Lahorey canals onto Raffey's red-headed merlin. Raffey had not entered this particular falcon, but Salman told of exploits flying a double cast at pigeon. He explained how the four



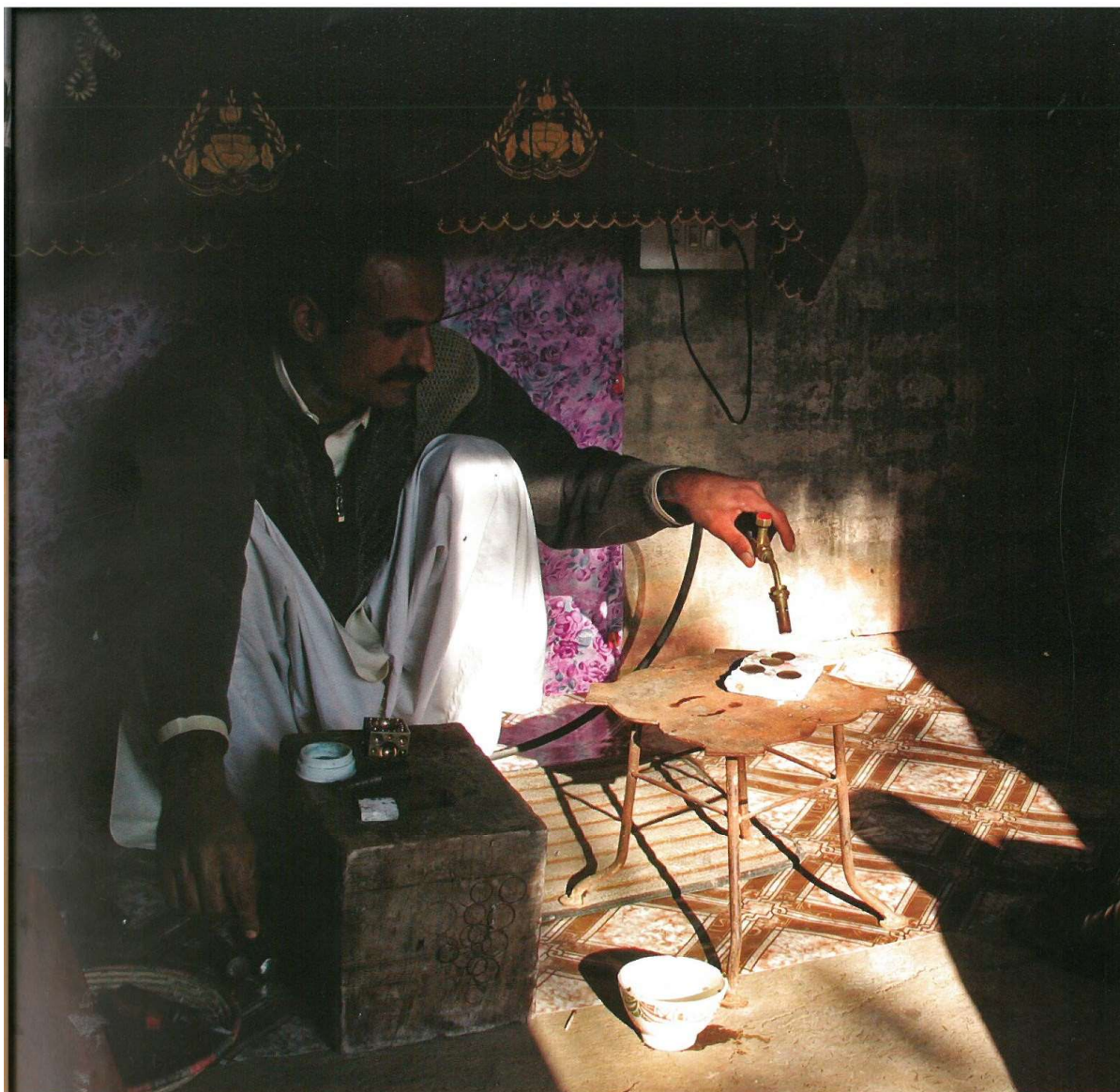
Raffey (left) and Salman with red-headed merlin in Lahore.

merlins would fly alongside the kill out in the flat country. He told how they would goad and hassle the prey into all sorts of angular positions before committing to the kill. Raffey gave us cake and tea and was a most generous host, but it soon became time to leave for the bell maker.

The three-hour journey was as smooth as any car journey can be in Pakistan, the colours and vivid world shot past in iridescent ways. It was wedding season and big parties spilled out on to the streets, the colour and texture of any culture in celebration is always magnificent. The landscape had changed dramatically and there was a lushness to the plants and palms we passed.

We came to the end of our journey and were welcomed into the home of Moshin Ali, nephew of Mohammad Ali, a famous bell maker of older, richer falconry days. Salman informed me that Mr Ali had unfortunately died a few years back, but that he was a very skilled craftsman and his bells were respected right across the Punjab and beyond. He was the last of the very traditional bell-makers existing in an un-divided India pre-1947.

Moshin was the fifth generation bell maker and has supplied Salman with literally thousands



After punching four discs from a sheet of brass, Moshin applies heat to soften them.

of handmade bells over the years. Unfortunately Moshin is now the only member of his family to continue the tradition, and as of yet he has not found a bride. Bells made in this way is very much a dying art and as falconry is illegal in India and Pakistan has only a few hundred falconers left, he may well represent the dying embers of this art form.

Moshin's bells are the first stage in a long process prior to them being carved into the jewelled

bells Salman is rightly famous for. It was a suitably moving sight to see the neat and tidy place they lived and worked in. His family provided refreshments and after a quick cup of tea Moshin began the process.

Taking a small punch he cut four disks from a sheet of brass. They were perhaps the size of a ten pence piece. All four were placed into a doming block, the block sat in a square cut from a huge piece of wood. This allowed

stability when hammering the disks into smaller and smaller curves. When the four pieces were the correct shape he moved to a small anvil where an indented cuff was pummeled into the metal. Not once did he mistrike or catch his fingers, the metal thinned and equally accurate cuffs wove round the four halves.

Moshin then took a huge sanding disk and laid it flat on his work surface. The curved brass was upturned like walnut shells ▶

in the 'guess-the-pea' game. The edges of the halves were moved back and forth slowly grinding down a flat edge. The bottom half of each individual bell had a small hole punched in it, allowing steam to escape when they are soldered. A hexagonal clapper was placed inside and the two halves joined. A small malleable strip of metal was wound round the two halves and twisted to keep it snug and tight.

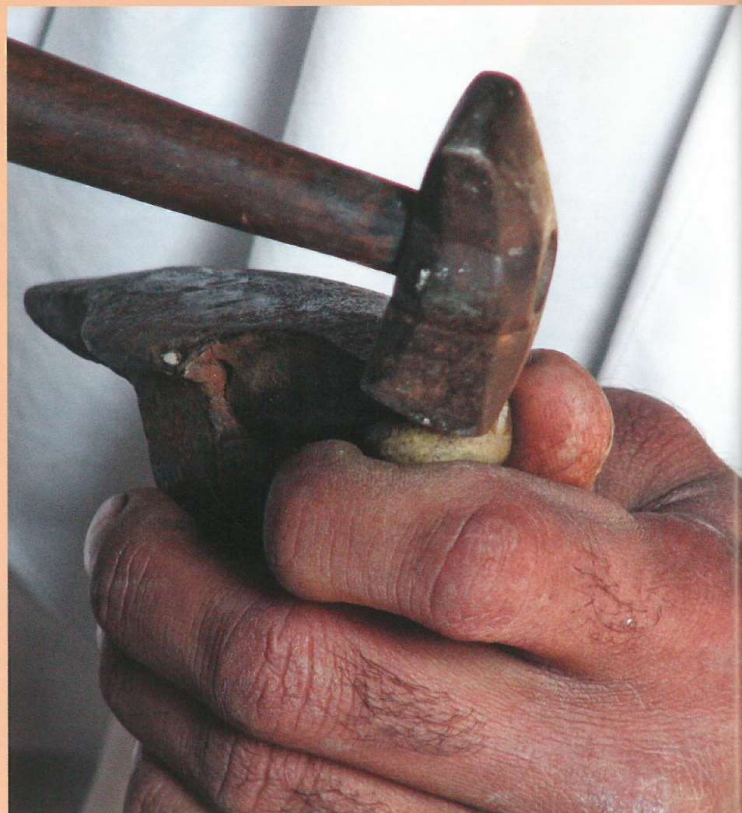
The next step was key to why I had been having problems back in the UK. Moshingently dipped into a pot of borax and wiped it around the seal. He then used silver solder to weld the two halves together. My bells had been joined together using normal lead solder. As a consequence some had broken or changed tone as the join became weakened through general wear and tear. Silver solder melts and welds at a higher temperature and is without question the right material for the job.

A circular cuff was then soldered in place and a slit cut across the hole stamped into the bottom half. A quick file round the join and the job was done. This initial process took about an hour. But there it was, nine thousand miles and a beautiful hand made set of bone fide Lahore bells. It was as simple and straightforward as that. The skill, tradition and reality of his work confounded and astounded me. Even if a falconer pays 15 Pounds a pair, these bells are cheap at double the price. More so if jeweled and carved by the other craftsmen in Salman's employ.

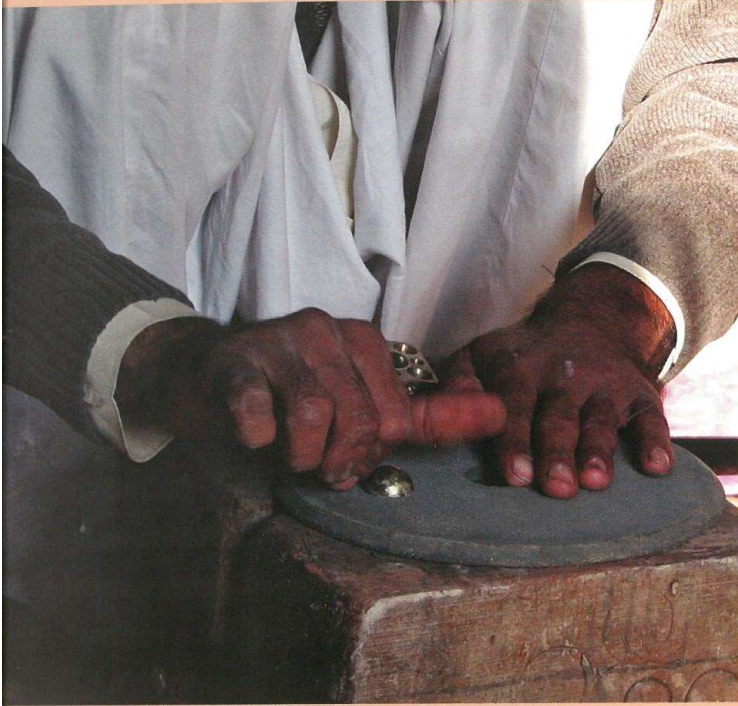
We were kindly invited to eat lunch before heading back across

Above: Placed in the doming block, the discs are hammered into smaller and smaller curves.

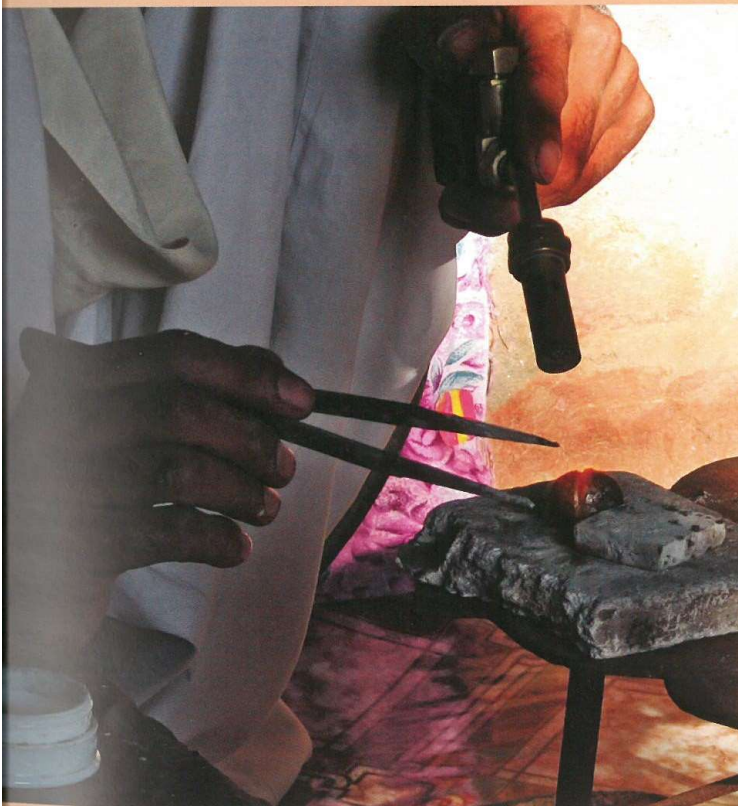
Right: Once the correct shape they are moved to a small anvil where an indented cuff is pummeled into the metal.



A RETURN TO THE SOURCE



Left: The halves are then moved slowly back and forth on a large sanding disc. Below: Using silver solder to join the two halves together.



the Punjab, but time was slipping by quickly; we were running up against the clock of Salman's family wedding in Islamabad. Not once, but twice Salman has missed important family get togethers in favour of falconry. This time he really had to make it and it had been an intense week; so I said goodbye at Lahore airport and headed back to Karachi and on to my connecting flight back to England.

The UK and Pakistan have a long and complex relationship, so in today's heightened climate of fear I found it refreshing to re-evaluate certain prejudices through falconry. What I saw is common to every country in the world; A minority controlling and setting an agenda for the majority who are a peaceful, dignified and a generous whole. What I witnessed was not a dislike of western values and what I represented, but a welcoming warmth and hospitality without payment. I arrived in Pakistan a stranger but left a friend; I was kept safe and well and will return regardless of how the politicians play out other peoples' lives. But above and beyond this, the Pakistani people opened my head and heart to practices long forgotten. Theirs is a falconry which returns to the source of our shared history and passion. Through Salman and his fellow austringers I achieved a deeper understanding for the roots of my falconry, of how it came about and how mankind is fundamentally correct to harness nature in this way. ■

For further info on Salman's bells contact him on Turumti@hotmail.com

Running with

Highlights of deer hunting in the

Words and photos by ELIZABETH SCHOULTZ

Near the Czech Republic's western border with Germany, November 2006, long shadows of woodland habitat reach across agricultural fields as several falconers begin combing these trees and grasses. I walk along the edge with many others most carrying hooded golden eagles. In gathering twilight a sudden cry rings out, "Srnci! (Deer!)" ▶



EAGLES

Czech Republic

**A deer runs between two falconers, causing one to lose his balance;
how unfortunate his eagle has already slipped!**



IPIVOT TOWARD the rain of cloven hooves bursting from tall grass bordering woods, pounding ploughed earth in an all-out effort to attain safe haven. A second call explodes, "Orel! (Eagle!)" Slung off the fist, wings pumping with greater amplitude and faster turnover than I've had occasion to see, an intent golden eagle makes the deer look as though it is walking. Captivated by display of speed, I stand spellbound as the eagle powers through dust swirls, latching onto hindquarters. Strapping forward momentum lifts and flips the galloping deer while the eagle maintains her grip through a tremendous rolling summersault, where several times extended wings seem about to snap from impossible angles of stress. Heels over head, deer on top of eagle, feathers with fur dive, twist, and roll again twice around. The deer manages to regain leg, bucking in

a twirl as the eagle surges talons forward to bind around snout with her left and lower throat with her right, taking the deer to ground once more. Appearing paralysed, the deer makes no further movement beneath the eagle's grand mantle as she arches hackled neck toward approaching falconer.

Unfolding just yards in front of me, this accomplished flight demonstrates the skills and very experienced strategy of a successful, confident, still young female golden eagle. Two years ago I had the honour of witnessing a step in her wedding process when she caught her fourth young deer during free flight through forested hillside. Now three years old, this captive-bred female was just seven months during my second visit to Czech Republic in chilly December 2004.

Happy for morning's sun after a frosty arrival the prior evening,



a local falconer and eagle breeder meets me at the country inn to sip tea by a dining room's blazing hearth before setting off to fly his young female. We speed down narrow blacktop roads, reassuring eagle bells jingling from his trunk, through the gateway to an old army training camp before pavement gives way to tyre tracks.

Running with EAGLES

Soon we are sliding in muddy ruts, thawed by mid-morning sun, amidst beautiful pine and hardwood trees. We park about halfway up this mountainside, opening the Skoda's trunk divider (a Czech-manufactured car) to

Left: Sheer determination keeps this eagle aboard, her left foot dangling on the ground.

Below: She examines her catch as her falconer prepares to remove viscera.



reveal a golden eagle. Her hood is removed as we begin up the trail.

Seeming to orientate, the eagle remains on the fist more than five minutes. At once, she looks around, spreads feathered limbs and leaps into the air, flying a short circle above us, then lands high in a tree, clutching one tiny branch that bends low under her weight.

The falconer indicates she will likely soar, but she follows in short flights, once setting behind us on the ground, then in another tree off to our right. Several times she becomes visible when the falconer presents brief, blasting whistles. Off the two-track path we branch onto a smaller trail, surrounded in thick tree growth before long.

Where we hike across marshy terrain, a steep ridge juts up on our left, gaining height as we pick our course. Over five minutes have

passed without the eagle's familiar bells ringing her flight pattern; the falconer uses sharp blasts, fingers among his teeth. Each previous call the bird had moved toward us in quick response, but we wait during four repeated whistles before we see his eagle flying along the ridge top. Heading toward us, manoeuvring between tree

branches like a longwing flying a lure, she makes an abrupt stoop down the far side of the ridge, folding wings and plummeting from sight.

I count three breaths before we hear shrill, braying screams. Upshot eyebrows accompany an uncertain falconer's voice, "Lishka? (Fox?)" Sounds seem to process through spectrum analysis, then his eyes widen, light spreading throughout a full-bodied grin at me, "Srnci!!" As one catapults off an Olympic twenty-metre starting block, he speeds up the vertical ridge, out of sight in a minute.

Not understanding the word, I attempt to imitate the falconer's power climb toward ridge top. Breathing hard, numerous minutes behind, I hear the sounds of a bound animal that direct my choice of next steps. Lunging upward, pulling myself between tree trunks, I tumble over the crest, settling eyes upon falconer kneeling before his mantling eagle, reaching for control of two flailing hind hooves about fifty yards down the embankment.

Feeling awe, I am surprised when I arrive where the deer lies among high grasses and seedling trees, kicking to dislodge the eagle's upper throat and nose hold. Ready with special dull-edged knife resting in hand upon the deer's heaving ribcage, pointed tip for piercing the heart and dull edges so toes won't be injured if the eagle would grasp it, the falconer pauses.

Size of golden eagle and deer offers a dynamic display of Nature's relationship between predator and prey. Averaging 9-12 pounds, eagles catch animals twice, thrice or more times their weight. The privilege of beholding such a mythic image conjures writings of ancient tree

Running with EAGLES

times, opening a portal through 50 million years as predator and prey have encountered one another during Earth history, even prior to human inhabitation. My surprise transforms to deep respect while I witness the passing of a deer in celebration of life.

An elementary Czech language course, studied for several months before this trip, enabled me to read road signs and ask for mineral water at a grocery store as I drove from Prague's airport in a rental car. Even the word for lavatory, "zachod", was no longer a mystery. However, I wasn't prepared to make a few simple comments in the Czech language about my impression in those moments. A cell phone call to a mutual, bi-lingual acquaintance helps share experience and bring understanding.

The falconer tells me his seven month old bird has only taken three other deer, so she will be allowed a full gorge now, along with her next six, to instill desire for catching this type of game. In an amazing series of procedures, he repositions deer and eagle so his bird is secured and he can remove viscera while she feeds. Somehow all movements are accomplished in harmony with the eagle's rhythm, a grand tribute to the falconer's skills; she continues as though undisturbed. Already her crop extends, hackles blazing gold in harsh morning sunlight when she rises up between feedings, arching her elongated neck.

Full crop bulging, head rolling side to side when she takes a break in her gorge, another half-hour passes before the falconer says, "END"; but not before he dumps more than eight baby quail into the mix of flesh where the eagle feeds, all consumed while he lashes deer legs together. Hooding his bird, he takes eagle on fist and deer to shoulder before our trek back to

the Skoda.

Czech Republic's Game Management Act determines hunting seasons, hunting methods and detailed conditions of hunting. Among six kinds of deer listed as their country's allowable game species, eagle falconers target European roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*), the smallest of three subspecies of roe deer, adults standing between 2-3 feet at shoulder height, weighing between 30-70 pounds and Japanese sika deer (*Cervus nippon nippon*), the smallest of several sika deer species, adults standing between 2-3.6 feet at shoulder height, weighing between 55-242 pounds. Sometimes juvenile red deer (*Cervus elaphus*) and Dybowski sika deer (*Cervus nippon dybowski*) are taken. Statistics for 2005, which include captures from all types of hunters, tally 118,800 roe deer, 18,500 red deer and 7,000 Japanese sika deer, with no mention of the Dybowski sika.

Falconry eagles flown in the Czech Republic are captive-bred. Wild take at any developmental stage, i.e., egg, nestling, fledgling or passage, is not legal. Golden eagles tend to nest in neighboring Slovakia, usually not in the Czech Republic. Other birds of prey are governed in a similar manner: wild take is not legal; with one possible exception being the goshawk. Some districts allow for take of a nestling or fledgling goshawk, but only after asking the state body of Nature Conservation for permission; requiring much paperwork with few positive results.

The following day a dozen falconers scurry about making final departure preparations, gathering birds, dogs, friends and equipment from all locations around the inn's dining room. Outside, near the parking lot, a few talons are nail-

filed to point perfection. Vehicle exhaust pipes spew steamy smoke as engines flare and windows are scrapped clean of hard, crusty frost. Tail-mount telemetry is placed, checked with care in frigid wind, and a caravan of cars sets off for today's hunting grounds.

A look deeper at some mysteries of this country's hunting culture reveals a millennium of wisdom constructing their unique concept *myslivost*. Czech Republic's term for forestry management inclusive of hunting, *myslivost* percolates in the hearts' blood of its hunting community, every member of which passes difficult exams to become licensed. This single word, acknowledging complete interdependence of game rearing, game management and consumption through the hunt, provides principles that guide thoughts, feelings and actions toward honouring, gracious, and respectful character. Ritual ceremony, such as spoken hunter's oath and creed, sanctify each hunting experience, maintaining kinship with truer hunting traditions. Observing falconry in this country becomes an inspirational experience of immersion.

Settled from the thirty-minute drive, few words are exchanged during purposeful activities bringing hunters into a shoulder-by-shoulder line overlooking ice glazed fields and distant stands of trees. Each holds close a golden eagle, some resting their left fist upon their right for better weight distribution. Low toned jingles of eagle-sized bells accent moments of silence before we give gratitude to the bounty of nature and thankfulness to those animals that will give themselves today. A gusty "Lovu Zdar!" (Good luck hunting!) punctuates the pledge, spoken in one harmonic voice, marking the opening as well as

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defining the closure of this and every hunt.

Falconers take to sun-glazed fields. I elect to follow a master and apprentice, whom I had met earlier that fall. The master falconer's eagle, a large three-year-old, captive-bred imprint female *berkut* from Kazakhstan, comes alive as he strikes her hood: shaking head, rousing, and repositioning feet. She scans terrain as we hurry forward, glancing at the falconer's *cesky fousek*, a Czech ancestor of the *Deutsch drahthaar* (German wirehaired pointer), who surges across open countryside in advance of hunters. A substantial hare leaps from its grassy resting place, but the eagle displays no notice. Too far ahead to be of serious interest, though beautiful as they disappear into rising mists and foliage, several deer bound off with the *berkut's* gaze following.

We break off far to the left of most hunters, disturbing a couple more hare and a waddling hedgehog-like animal in our jog to thick woods ahead. Just as we step into the forest I sense movement in my peripheral vision. The falconer's reactions have been much faster: his eagle is already tossed toward fleeing shapes between the trees.

For an instant I am almost certain his bird has no chance at such a slip, given the density of foliage as well as what seems an impossible distance to make contact. Yet, face aglow, the apprentice turns to point. The eagle locks on low and true, a heat-seeking missile, as master and apprentice bolt into a headlong run. One moment I see her jetting through trees, and then efficient wing use takes her from view.

I pour speed into my full-out strides, even as I imagine myself almost flying over this rough ground, attempting to catch the action. Falconer and apprentice

pull away, leap a barbed-wire fence, and disappear into heavy trees. Trying to maintain speed while dodging past trunks, several long moments after I jump the fence I see a deer lying on snow-swathed ground just a short distance ahead, eagle mantling over its neck, *chesky* lying close-by. I am surprised I have no further to go!

The apprentice reaches for the bird as master falconer trades her off this medium-sized roe deer's head. Hooded, a loop of rope is brushed against her beak, which she seizes into her mouth. As though with a dog, the apprentice tugs back and forth, explaining to me that this will help release aggression since she was not allowed to gorge in hopes we might catch another deer later in the day. Unable to see, the bird surges with open gape, grabbing the loop held steady by bare fingers a few inches away, continuing to expend her aggressiveness.

Innards removed, legs lashed together, master falconer slings the catch upon his right shoulder and welcomes the *berkut* back to fist within minutes. Hoping to add to the bag, we walk toward several other hunters, located by a quick cell phone call.

Many attempts are made throughout the day, but just three additional deer are taken by the golden eagles. Various eagles, perhaps due to lack of experience, are bucked off from halfhearted or ineffective binding to rumps, backs or necks. Some deer shake their lengthy spines or spin revolutions as though progeny of a hurricane, jarring the eagle's hold and so escaping the hunter's bag.

Chased out of groundcover by a falconer's *Deutsch drahthaar*, a large red-fox snarls, snaps and turns to chase the dog, clamping onto its tail for a dozen or more

minutes as the two jump around, circling down an open field. Until the dog and fox are parted by one falconer's intervention, slipping an eagle is considered unsafe. Apprehension of the dog allows the fox to escape unchallenged.

Closing ceremonies are conducted at our hunting grounds, and upon our return that evening a deer is given to the innkeeper. Served in a stew for dinner, we enjoy our first eagle-caught deer. Other animals are given to families around the community according to pre-arranged needs and requests.

Golden eagles are archetypal in their sheer longevity on the planet, adapting around the globe to a huge range of ecological zones by means of eight subspecies. With extraordinary presence, striking stature and unique qualities of pair bonding, no wonder eagles have come to symbolise loyalty, honour, freedom, power, independence and other regal ideals.

What is the draw to hunt with golden eagles? Several of the most successful eagle falconers in the Czech Republic answer similarly, "They are the best game birds you can have because they will develop hunting partnerships and they are very versatile hunters. With eagles you can hunt larger game, such as deer, as well as fiercer game, such as fox, on a regular basis. Eagles are able to stand up to this kind of workout."

Early afternoon the following day, a choice of separating to explore grassy woodland areas far to the right of fields we are hunting, brings a pause while falconers decide which way they want to go. About half choose to investigate possibilities of the broad, woody habitat. I continue on with falconers choosing fields ahead. When everyone rejoins that evening at the inn, wild with

The falconer takes eagle on fist and deer to shoulder before our trek back to the Skoda.

excitement, several versions of the story going at once, we begin hearing what adventures those woods held as soon as our vehicles roll into the parking lot.

All witnessing falconers agree it was something they had never seen either on video nor in person: an amazing set of circumstances all culminating in condensed and overlapping time. Animated conversation accelerates as another eagle-caught deer-stew-dinner finishes and we settle to relive the experiences on a television screen through video capture.

A loose, wide line forms to comb the habitat when two hunters, moving to the far end of the woods, happen upon a herd of about twenty-five deer. Both falconers slip eagles. Flight of the herd breaks toward the line and soon deer are crashing by many of the hunters. Within the habitat other deer become mobilized, creating several streams of animals that end up running in circles!

The eagles on wing are now in close pursuit of two different deer as the group dashes past hunters. Darting in various directions as they continue to encounter falconers, deer zig-zag, and leap in chaotic frenzy to get away; the herd fans out. Almost making contact with her target, one eagle is reaching out wide-open feet when the deer makes an evasive vault, about thirty degrees to the left of its course. At that precise moment another deer makes a similar change of direction to avoid a bush in its path, springing full speed toward the exact spot the eagle's target is jumping to.

With an audible thud of impact, these two deer collide in mid-air. Necks slam forward, crumpling as chests ram together before they bounce off each other and drop to the ground, legs flailing in attempts to regain uprightness. Multiple efforts are made; moments pass as

they try to heave bodies from the earth. After rolling over, one deer manages to pull onto its legs and rejoin fleeing herd-mates.

Sending chunks of turf skyward, the earthbound deer continues to writhe while its pursuing eagle lands on nearby grass. Probable impact damage to the spine keeps this deer on the ground. As the second deer manages to run, the eagle spreads her wings and with a few hopping steps lands to bind on the deer, claiming her prize after all. In the next moment her falconer arrives, dispatching his eagle's obscure catch.

Behind that falconer a mass of rampaging deer floods past. Then a few deer are seen sprinting to the left at the same time a few deer are bounding to the right. An eagle flies left after that group just as one deer bounds right and finds itself in the eagle's corridor. Seeing this raptor stoop toward her, the deer gathers for an evasive skyward hurdle. When the deer leaps, it is actually toward the eagle. Reaching out as though plucking a falcon from flight, the eagle binds to the deer's throat in a perfect example of intersecting time and motion. Predator and prey tumble to ground. Her falconer arrives to find his eagle has served a swift kill in that fateful moment; the deer is deceased.

"One of the most charismatic organisms on Earth", is how Dr. Charles Preston, zoologist/ecologist refers to golden eagles, "embodying the power, grace and wildness of Nature itself." In his book, *Golden Eagle Sovereign of the Skies*, he notes that adult eagles are capable of killing adult deer and pronghorn antelope. Witnessing eagles hunt deer in the Czech Republic is a grand honour and profound affair.

Warmer temperatures during my return visit in November

2006 present more comfortable conditions for hunting deer, though our first morning finds few flights. A small number of deer plunge from forested stands or grassy ditches between fields, along with several pheasants. Even fewer hare are seen. Most falconers recall birds to fist after unsuccessful slips. Many eagles remain hooded while everyone moves one field to the next, crossing a road, descending or ascending a hill, until we enjoy refreshment on the terrace of a country pub past noontime. Renewed by onion-laden beef soup, our afternoon grows hopeful within our first field as one then another hare meets talons, and several eagles slip on deer flushing from chest high grasses.

Approaching some acres of rocky, uneven ground left for wild habitat in the middle of farming efforts, nine hunters, some with fisted bird, draw close together forming a line, expecting to flush deer from its abundant trees, shrubs and tall grasses. Falconers prepare themselves at strategic positions. Once leaving this island of habitat, deer must run across many open acres, presenting excellent slips for eagles.

Calls at odd intervals, twig snapping, grass swishing, and an assortment of crashing sounds foretell emerging deer. Unhooded as they are propelled off the fist, eagles take wing toward bobbing white rumps. Two birds manage to close the gap and latch on, though one for just a moment before its deer lurches from underneath the bird's grip. Dropping to tilled soil she folds her wings, watching the deer thunder away. The second eagle manages to ride out several revolving body bends before she, too, is left in dust of fleeing deer.

As the hunters' line moves forward, more dark shapes can be glimpsed disturbing tall grasses

Running with EAGLES

in multiple locations, similar to ripples on a still lake when fish surface for insects. From his observation point atop an elevated rock, one falconer shouts, "Srnci!" Immediate calls of "Orel!" echo along the line, extending to three hunters positioned around the edges of the habitat. Four deer plunge onto ploughed ground, bucking, pivoting and running with eagles attached to rump, shoulders or neck.

Another deer pushes past me where I stand in chest-high grass, so close I take a few steps backward, feeling hot breath and dusty hide touch my arm. Clinging to its neck with uncertain talons, an eagle is dislodged following a few rugged, bucking spins. Heading back toward its former sanctuary, a loud cry "Orel!" blasts behind me a moment before the deer shies sideways. Long, feathered legs pitch forward, bolts

of lightning with hefty talons that secure another eagle mid-back, atop this deer.

Having bucked off their attackers, every other deer sprints out of sight, dusty clouds marking departure trails. The one deer whirls in a series of bucking loops, moving toward flat, ploughed ground while the eagle pumps splayed wings to keep balanced in the dervish. Sheer determination along with active limbs seems to keep this eagle aboard, her left foot dangling on the ground in the course of renewed bucks and pivots.

Running footsteps bring falconer into sudden view as he makes in to assist his eagle. I realise that perhaps just ten seconds have elapsed since his eagle slipped. Having gone to knees, the deer tries to run again as falconer seizes head and hind leg, applying body weight over

shoulders in joined effort with his bird, and brings this animal to ground. Long neck hackled, beak agape, the eagle moves to clamp her left foot around nose and mouth while the right binds into upper throat as she watches falconer dispatch the deer using his dull-edged knife placed through the heart.

Myslivot creates specific atmosphere surrounding the hunt that is supportive of both predator and prey. In these privileged moments of witnessing the monumental hunting capabilities of adult eagles opened through falconry's window, I found bountiful understandings of other people, the world and myself. I am grateful for these opportunities to experience the Czech Republic's conscientious falconry community. ■

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Mark Williams continues his experiences of attempting to find out just what the unique and long-revered pure gyrfalcon is capable of.

THE OTHER 50%

Words and photos by **MARK WILLIAMS**

ESSENTIALLY I KITED him only once a day at first and later switching to early morning and late evening. Any wild hawk that would enter his airspace would soon be escorted out and unlike my peregrines or gyr hybrids before, he could put the burners to anything including haggard wild peregrines that entered his area while out hunting for food for their young. Eventually by early September he seemed to get really focused on the kite and bait and was taking the bait at over 1,200 ft consistently and with a passion. I never used the chute release even though I owned one as in early season there were standing crops surrounding most of my kiting fields and I feared he'd drift off into them. Over the training period and changing weather patterns I used 3 different types and weights of kites to account for any wind conditions from very little or very

high winds, so we lost very few training days. Essentially he flew almost every day for four months. The highest we flew in was 35km per hr and it was not fun for me or the bird. Getting up to the bait was easy as he was so fit but coming down at such wind speeds and dragging a bait was the problem. There are some days you just have to say no!

Around the time of me switching from bait to live game served beneath him, there was the odd occasion when he would be climbing up to the kite at 1,200ft or so that he would check at passing quarry that he saw off in the distance. I picked him up off three ducks that way in early season but fortunately the duck flocks migrated south and the temptation was naturally removed before it became a bad habit. Thankfully he became more reliable and consistent to the kite over time. I have never had a

bird climb to the bait so fast as a gyr can. In particular in the last hundred feet or so they seem to stand on their tail and snatch the bait out of the air. I lost count of how many times I put him up at the truck and walked out to get under the kite and bait to serve him a baggy and he'd beat me to it and take the bait instead. On a side note I also learned that it was a mistake to release the bird from the truck/kite reel and instead I should have pegged the kite reel in the ground and walked or driven downwind of the baited kite to release the bird. It teaches the bird better position, to mount into wind and also avoids the bird cueing on the falconer later on when he starts to walk out and serve the hawk under the kite. There is nothing more annoying than to have a bird cue in on you and stop climbing, hanging in the air like an iron cross knowing you are about to serve him. My bird

tested me frequently and I had to wait him out and let him start climbing again before I'd serve him. On rare occasions I'd even call him down.

By October we were into full-time hunting and to be honest I

never showed the kite again since, not even as a re-enforcement. He did lower his pitch to around 700-800ft or so thereafter, a lot higher on some days but I was happy with that pitch for the most part. If he ever dropped lower I'd called him down and give him little reward and fly him again later. This being said, I had a heck of a problem getting him to come over into position which I attribute to my previous point about not putting him up downwind of the kite but instead at the truck and walking out. Anyhow, as it would turn out the out of position would pay off in some instances as the game felt they had a real chance to get to cover as he was wide and out of position and therefore they would get up and go hard when flushed, getting into full gear by the time he was coming down and were

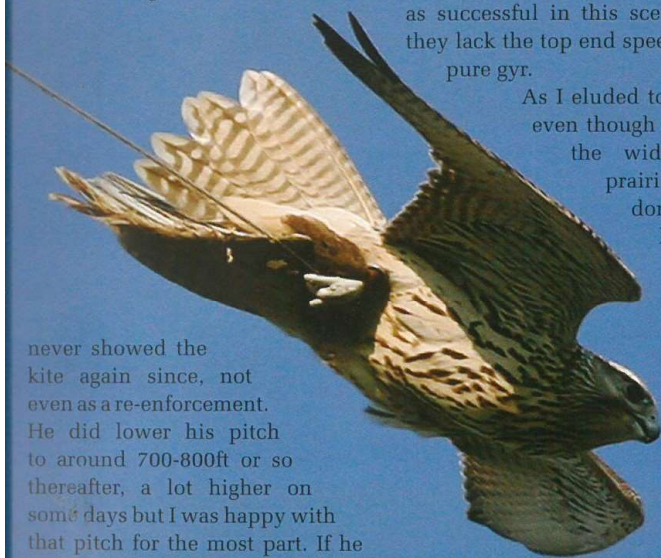
less inclined to bail. However as he proved countless times over the course of the season, he would soon catch up as his 40oz body falls very fast and loud when cutting through the air at speed. I don't think most gyr hybrids would be as successful in this scenario as they lack the top end speed of the pure gyr.

As I eluded to earlier, even though I live in the wide open prairies, I still don't really have the

optimum situation conducive to flying a big bird like a gyrkin. It didn't help that my gyrkin was at the higher weight range of a gyrkin flying at 40.5oz. My main quarry are ducks in the Fall which migrate south by early November and then I switch to flying Hungarian partridge throughout the winter. However, throughout the late extended falconry season from December through March I did make numerous trips 2-3 hours to the southeast for pheasants and grouse but my day-to-day game hawking were huns and a gyrkin is overkill with a capital "K". This

being said he flew high and I was very selective with my slips for him more so than for my hybrids and the huns that we flew were pointed by my dogs far out in wide open stubble fields and they had to really "motor" to get to the safety of cover. This, combined with the fact he took to waiting on wide by general standards, the game was usually at top speed by the time he was coming down, so I rarely saw a hun dump under my gyrkin. Furthermore through careful management I managed to pick him up off his huns without him feeling the desire to pack it off to the next province. This being said, there were a few instances in deep cold winter when he did show signs of possessiveness, accentuated by the bitter cold and I did have to let him cool down a bit before picking him up off it. I bought my new truck at the beginning of the hawking season and by the time of hanging up my glove I had put over 36,000 kms on it.

Comparing the gyrkin to my gyr hybrids, no question the gyr is a turbo-charged gyr hybrid and many of us know how agile and fast stooping those hybrids are compared to say pure peregrines. There is definitely something to the other 50 per cent but that extra percentage may be more than most need or want. Gyrs are intelligent opportunists and it is this intelligence, persistence and speed of flight that are the characteristics that separate gyrs from other large falcons. It is only perhaps the merlin and ▶



goshawk that come close but rarely demonstrated in captivity. However, I found that it is these very same attributes that make the training and maintenance of a gyr such a challenge. Furthermore, if it were not for the fact I use the most powerful transmitters and receiver available, I'd have lost him at least once or twice in his first year. They cover ground so quickly when they are motivated to do so, that keeping up with them is hard even with good telemetry. My good friend Dale Guthormsen in Saskatchewan who is very experienced in both flying gyrs and in using radio telemetry, lost his intermewed white gyrkin this past Fall while it was wearing two transmitters, so it can happen to anyone. On numerous occasions both myself and regular hawking buddies of whom are all more familiar with seeing tiercel gyr hybrids and pure peregrines or prairies fly, bared witness to the

incredible speed a gyr is capable of. The first sharptail my gyrkin ever caught was flushed from a small patch of cover in the open. It dumped under the gyrkin when he still had 400ft of his stoop to come down and when the young gyrkin pitched up and parachuted to where it put in, the grouse got up, (surprise, surprise) and headed for a distant lone bush with the gyr in hot pursuit. The gyr then proceeded to go in after it from a standing start, catch up with it, re-flush it from within the bush and once again from a standing start catch up to it and turn it back to the bush where it eventually nailed it. Essentially after the first flush the falconers played no role in the flight and it demonstrated to us the speed and tenacity of a gyr in top condition and how they do it in the wild.

Other comparisons I would make is the gyr has equal to if not greater agility on the ground as the

gyr hybrids I have and they whip around pretty quick on downed birds. I would like to see my gyrkin "lay the lumber" to its quarry in the stoop but this rarely happened in his first year. I am told that should come in his second season. I can also attest to the intimidation factor of gyrs on quarry. Even when flown on well-matched fast, whiley quarry like grouse, when a gyr is on its tail and matching every twist and turn from only a few feet behind, even the most crafty grouse loses its head and shows sign of intimidation which leads to mistakes and ultimately its demise. I'd hate to think what a huge female does to them. I can also see how easy it is to lose a gyr to predators as my gyrkin could catch stuff in direct pursuit far away that my very fit gyr hybrids or peregrines would have pulled off chasing much sooner if they did not get a foot to after the initial stoop. Flying gyrs in good grouse





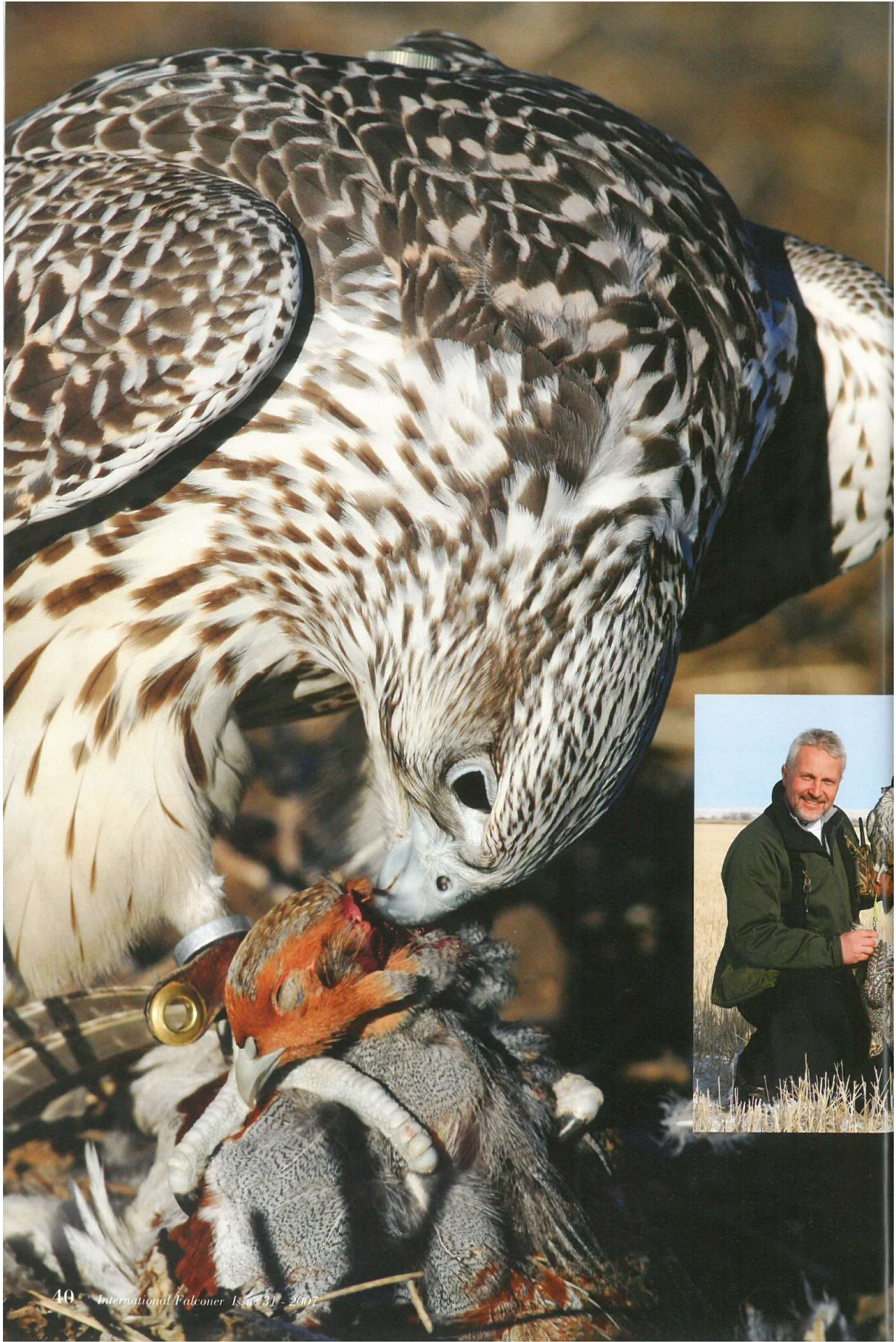
Left: Sharptail grouse in the grass. Above: Gyrfalcon putting the pressure on a sharptail grouse.

country relates to remoteness and therefore usually means that eagles are present. When they see a hawk tail chase a grouse and kill it, the reality of a free meal is recognised as this is often how they interact with wild hawks. However, falconry birds do not often have the same awareness and they are killed as a result of this kind of long tail chase flight far from the safety of the falconer or his dog. There is even a chance that ground born predators such as coyotes who happen to be near the outcome of such a chase, can kill your hawk in much the same manner. Of course the trained

falcon is used to seeing/working with a dog and does not therefore see it as a threat until it is too late. I had this happen with a peregrine once that took a duck down into the reeds beside a large pond and I got there by chance just in time to avert a disaster.

Based upon my limited experience, if I were to offer any advice to anyone considering the challenge of flying such a bird for the first time, it would be that they should consider the following: Gyrs are indeed high octane birds that require big sky to gain their full potential and under ideal conditions with well-matched

quarry. They are indeed amazing falconry birds capable of high flying and deserved of their reputation. Fortunately they will fly just as well if moderately hungry as when they are ravenous, however they do react moodily when presented with any form of rationing. Some experienced gyr owners therefore recommend to fly every other day to address this but being the energetic thoroughbreds they are, they do require frequent flying to expend this energy and failure to do so can result in boredom-related negative traits. If your gyr were to have a dreaded tantrum, you ►



THE OTHER 50%

would do well to hood it and leave it alone for a while to fight its own demons as you don't win fights with gyrs and it could cause some ingrained grudge if you persisted. If they have any fault it is their fragile constitution particularly in more temperate climates and extra care is needed particularly in the summer periods during inactivity. This all being said, if you have the conditions and time to devote to a gyr they are truly special birds to fly. No question they are hard work and they do keep you on your toes with their native intelligence, but aside from their awe-inspiring potential and great looks, I have never had such an affable, endearing bird with such great demeanour. I am looking forward to my next season with this gyrkin. When socially well adjusted, an imprint gyr in particular, is just plain fun to be around. ■



Above: A successful day's hawking with visiting UK falconer Alex Stokes.
Left: Gyrkin whispering in partridge's ear. **Right:** Gyrkin and sharptail pose.



INTRODUCTION

This is a story of three dogs: a beagle, a Jack Russell terrier, and a miniature dachshund. Note well: This is not about the beagle, the Jack Russell terrier, and the miniature dachshund. I am not qualified to write about the three breeds, having known only a few representatives of each. But these three individual dogs I do know well, having enjoyed a great deal of time hawking with each of them. Here, then, is their story...

MIKE COX AND Karl Linderholm have been hawking together in and around Lincoln, Nebraska for over a quarter-century. Between them, they have flown a few bird hawks, including prairie falcons, merlins, and a sharp-shinned hawk, but their true passion is rabbit hawking. They have hunted rabbits with eyas and passage red-tailed hawks, eyas and passage Cooper's hawks, eyas North American goshawks, captive-bred Harris' hawks, and even, years ago ("Before we knew what we were doing"), a passage ferruginous hawk. To say they know their quarry is to commit an understatement of massive proportions.

I began hawking about twelve years ago on the piedmont of Georgia, where rabbits are few; I cut my teeth hawking grey squirrels with passage redtails. Eight or nine years ago, I moved to Lincoln, had the good fortune to meet Mike and Karl right away, and became the "third musketeer". Almost everything I know about rabbit hawking I learned from Mike and Karl.

Nebraska has two species of rabbit, the eastern cottontail (*Sylvilagus floridanus*) and the

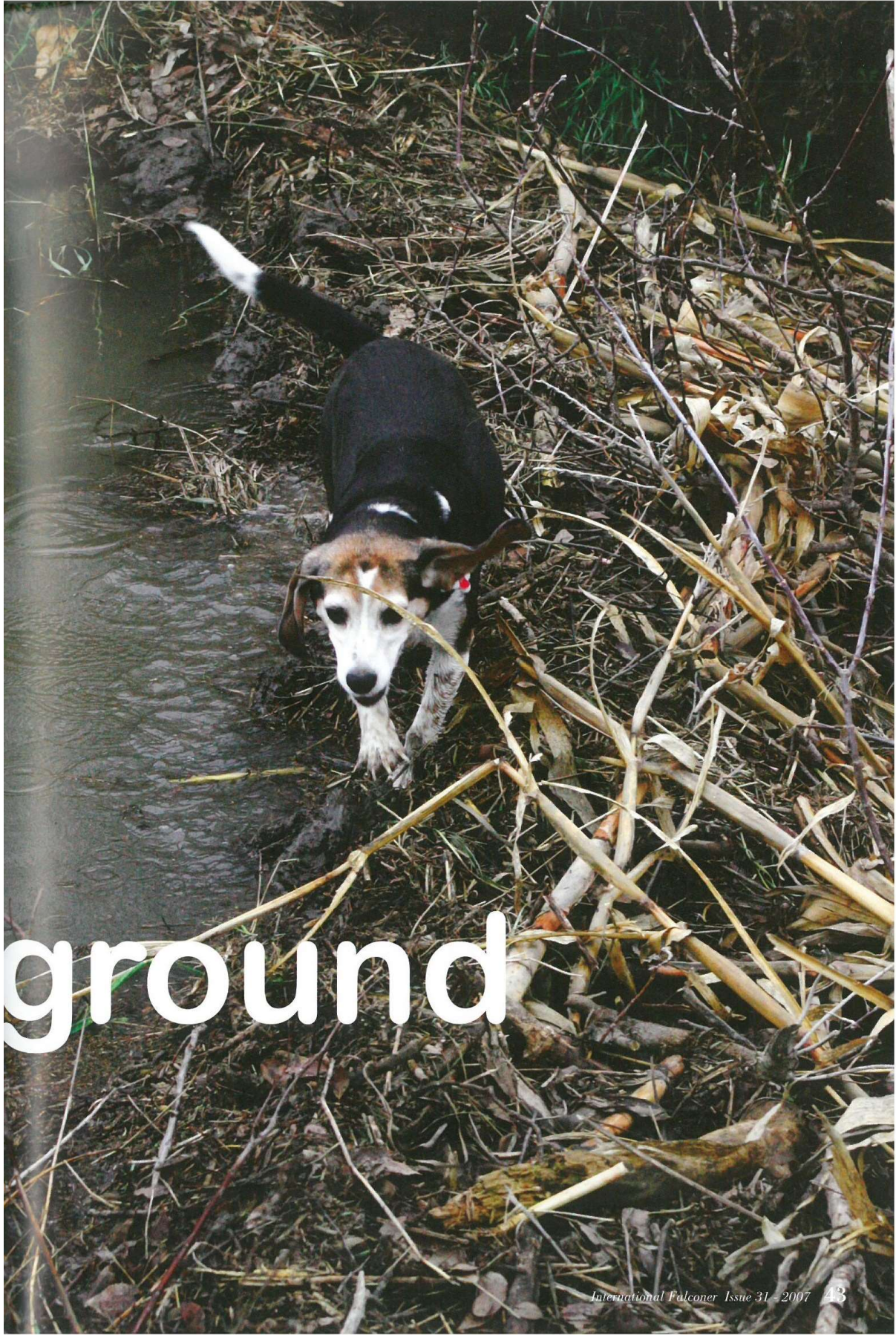
desert cottontail (*S. auduboni*), and two species of hare, the black-tailed jackrabbit (*Lepus californicus*) and the white-tailed jackrabbit (*L. townsendi*). The latter three species have limited ranges, mostly in the dry western parts of the state. Eastern cottontails, on the other hand, are found throughout Nebraska, and constitute our main local quarry.

Eastern cottontails are very adaptable animals, and occur in a wide variety of habitats. They are commonly seen in urban and suburban areas; indeed, their highest population densities may be in industrial areas where cover is abundant and predators are few. In rural areas, they occupy woodlots, open grasslands, and agricultural fields if cover is available. They will use holes created by woodchucks and other animals, especially as escape cover, but do not burrow as European rabbits do. Since the majority of their time is spent above ground, dogs are more of a luxury than a necessity in our area. And all three of us, treasuring our one-on-one relationships with our hawks, for years were loath to complicate matters unnecessarily by taking on dogs as well. ▶

Nose to the Three Rabbit Dogs

Words by MARK CHURCHILL photos by MITCHELL RENTERIA

Houlie crossing a beaver dam.



ground



Houlie

Karl was the first to abandon the no-dogs ideal, a concession originally made for reasons of health. He had been plagued by back problems, and after a couple rounds of surgery, was beginning to consider the possibility of giving up rabbit-hawking in favour of other, less-strenuous forms of falconry. Just about that time, Karl arrived at work one morning to find an apparently stray beagle loitering near the laboratory door. A young female, she was shy but approachable, and Karl realised she might be the key to continuing his rabbit-hawking career. Wanting to do the right thing, he took her to the local animal-control shelter in case her owner might be looking for her, but let the staff know that if no owner came forth, he was more than willing to adopt her. He waited on pins and needles through the one-week impoundment, and adopted her the moment she became legally available.

It became apparent almost immediately that Houlie (short for Houlihan) hadn't had an ideal puppyhood. She was very timid,

especially around men, and would urinate submissively if yelled at or even talked to sternly. But if she had been mistreated before, she now found herself in much happier circumstances. Karl's wife Lynne and stepsons Kyle and Mitchell doted on her, and Karl's own gentle personality soon won her over. She gradually gained confidence, and that process was accelerated once she took to the field with Karl and his tiercel Harris' hawk. A veteran of several seasons, Hawkeye was already very proficient, which took the pressure off Houlie and allowed her to learn the game at her own pace. (Hawkeye is now with IF's North American rep, Donna Vorce, and Houlie is partnered with Karl's female Harris' hawk, Clarice.)

Houlie proved to be a true scent-hound, trailing rabbits persistently until they either went to ground, outdistanced the entire party, or were caught by the hawk. She showed no interest in rabbits once they were caught, giving them at most an extra deep sniff before setting out in search of another scent-trail. This turned out to be her only major "flaw", although that's probably too strong

a word: Once on a scent, she was difficult if not impossible to call off. "It's like her ears get switched off," explains Karl. After a few too many expeditions in which the hawk and hound each pursued different rabbits – generally in opposite directions – Karl's hawking forays became somewhat more organised: He handled the hawk, while a companion (most often one of his stepsons) would be assigned to restrain the dog before she could get too far away.

Over the next few years, Houlie gradually became more responsive to voice commands – at least very insistent ones – and will now sometimes leave a trail in response to Karl's loudly bellowed "Houlie, come!" which has for Mike and me become just another sound of the hunt, one which usually leaves us grinning. Houlie's voice is another of those sounds: When on a scent trail, she bays insistently, a deep resonant sound that leaves no room for guesswork as to whether there are rabbits about. (Unless she's on a pheasant, which she will also trail, but Karl claims to be able to tell the difference by the sound.)

When Houlie is in full voice, her deep baying combines with the ringing of the hawk's bells to make even an ordinary afternoon feel like a special occasion. The shared palette of the tri-coloured beagle and the Harris' hawk is a nice touch as well. On a more practical level, Houlie's performance in the field made an impression on Mike and me. Even more important, we saw firsthand that Karl's relationship with Houlie did nothing to diminish, and might even have deepened, his relationship with his hawk. And there's been no more talk of giving up bunny hawking!

Gypsy on the hunt.

Gypsy

When Mike decided to get a rabbit dog of his own, he considered several breeds but quickly settled on the Jack Russell terrier: perhaps not a surprising choice for someone who had flown several goshawks, even if he now flew Harris' hawks. The high-strung temperament of the JRT is in some ways reminiscent of the accipiters, and must have appealed to Mike at some visceral level.

Mike, who works as a production manager for the local newspaper, found his dog appropriately enough through a newspaper advertisement. The phrase "proven hunting stock" caught his eye immediately, as he had already decided to stack the odds in his favour by starting with a dog from field lines. He visited the breeder and selected a female JRT, who came to be known as

Gypsy after the stripper Gypsy Rose Lee. (Don't ask me why...)

In contrast to Houlie's initial shyness, Gypsy wasted no time establishing herself in her new home. Mike and his wife Linda already had two (non-hunting) dogs, an elderly male boxer named Roscoe and a male Samoyed named Kubla. Gypsy and the boxer almost immediately struck a non-aggression pact, but the Samoyed wasn't as lucky. Despite her much smaller size, Gypsy quickly moved to establish her dominance over Kubla. Since Roscoe's death from old age, Gypsy has assumed the role of alpha, and is not shy about asserting herself. The two dogs get along well enough when alone, but when Mike and Linda are at home and Gypsy wants their attention, Kubla cannot raise his head off the floor without incurring Gypsy's wrath.

"This dog is so dominant," says Mike, "she goes around peeing

on posts." I thought that might have been an exaggeration until I saw her marking a fencepost at the parking lot of a wildlife management area. This wasn't a case of a dog squatting to relieve herself after riding in the car – no canine behaviourist could have missed the assertive body language of an RLU.

Gypsy typically rides to the field in the cab of Mike's pickup truck. She'll wander from seat to seat while driving through his neighborhood and some of the arterial streets, but drops to the rear-seat floorboard once Mike reaches the highway, remaining there until she hears the crunch of gravel beneath the tires. That is her signal that the hunt will soon begin, and she resumes her patrol of the cab. Upon arriving at the field, she eagerly jumps out of the truck; then, while Mike opens the back of the pickup and readies telemetry and other gear, Gypsy ▶



Nose to the ground

signals her readiness to hunt in typically subtle fashion: She repeatedly jumps up into the air at the tailgate, yipping madly all the while. This continues as the hawk hops out of the box to Mike's fist, and continues until the hawk flies to a tree and the hunt is truly underway.

Once released, Gypsy works cover with an intensity that suits her personality. Despite her aggressiveness, she has surprised Mike on several occasions by pointing a rabbit she smelled, or more likely spotted, in cover. But more typically she fulfills the role of a flushing dog and gives head-long pursuit to the rabbit herself. She's a long-legged Jack Russell, quick enough that she often arrives just after the Harris' hawk but before Mike. This is when Mike is most likely to use the electronic collar, or "Gypsy's hearing aid" as he calls it, as she does not always respect the hawk's possession of the rabbit and is likely to crowd in too quickly. She's been footed several times, but that fact doesn't deter her. Mike's sharply worded warnings, coupled when necessary with a jolt from the collar, usually keep the situation manageable.

Gypsy's toughness extends beyond her indifference to Hannibal's talons. She regularly accumulates injuries from thorns, barbed wire, etc. and keeps on hunting. This has necessitated stitches on several occasions – Mike says that Gypsy's initial cost and food expenses are nothing compared to her vet bills. She has also tangled with skunks on at least two occasions, and Mike now travels with a "skunk kit" of tomato juice, enzymatic deodorants, and other potions in case of further run-ins with these aromatic mustelids.



Maxine

For the record, I did not set out to get a rabbit dog. In fact, for several years I took a break from pursuing rabbits, chasing small birds instead with a series of American kestrels and later a passage sharp-shinned hawk. But then my wife and daughter decided that our household was not complete, could not possibly be complete, without a miniature dachshund. Believing that dogs are happiest when doing what they've been bred to do, I agreed to a new dog on one condition: that she be allowed to chase rabbits with me.

Like Mike, we answered a newspaper advertisement, although our dog was just a "farm dog" with no particular hunting credentials among her immediate ancestors. Instead, we trusted to information gleaned from several sources which indicated that the hounds generally, and dachshunds particularly, have retained strong hunting instincts

even though some lines might be several generations removed from the field. A red smooth-haired dachsie, with a classic profile and old-fashioned crooked legs, she might have stepped straight out of a William Osborne painting. We named her Maxine, but just as often call her Max, Maxwell, or Maximilian, and she answers to any of these.

Because dachshunds are prone to back problems, their owners are usually advised not to allow them to jump on and off furniture, go up and down stairs, etc.; instead, a great deal of picking up and setting down is called for. That, we decided within just a few days, was going to be a losing battle. While somewhat shy socially – as a puppy, she would bark fiercely at neighbours and other dogs, then retreat behind us as soon as they made eye contact – she was fearless of heights, athletic, and far too impatient to wait to be picked up. So we gave up on that issue, and just let her flow up and down

Right: Maxine with Mark.



the stairs as she wanted.

Another thing the books all say is that dachshunds are difficult to houstrain. In this at least, the books do not lie. After many frustrations and setbacks, we finally did make some progress, but she remains at best a "recovering" house-pisser. Just as alcoholics are never really cured, she will most likely never be completely housebroken. We've decided we can live with that, albeit reluctantly, for she is such a good companion in all other ways.

I began Maxine's training by playing scent games with her. A plush toy rabbit, quail, or pheasant would be anointed with a drop of an appropriate training scent, dragged through the house or across the lawn, and hidden. Then she would be released to find the toy. She usually gave the rabbit a good thrashing, but was inclined to retrieve the birds to me - better than some Labs I've seen. All this while, I continued flying the sharp-shinned hawk, but when Maxine was about a year old I released the sharpie and went trapping, eventually bringing home a nice passage redtail I named Stekoa.

Maxine was present at every stage of Stekoa's manning and training - until one day, as we entered the mews, the hawk without warning launched from the perch and bound to her face. Fortunately no serious injury ▶

Nose to the ground

resulted, but this behaviour was repeated a few days later during a creance session. Because she was still a shy dog, I was concerned that Max might be ruined for the field, and reluctantly continued Stekoa's training without her. After Stekoa had caught a half-dozen rabbits, though, I cautiously reintroduced Max on a weekend hawking trip. With good friend Donna Vorce as well as my wife Susan and daughter Ellie in the field, I reasoned that we had plenty of manpower available to intervene in case something went wrong. As it happened, nothing did. A few minutes into the hunt, both Stekoa and Maxine found themselves chasing the same fox squirrel across the forest floor, and I got the impression that at that point they realised they were supposed to be working together. We've never had a problem since, and I feel quite comfortable handling the two of them even when hawking without other human company.

In contrast to Houlie's soulful baying and Gypsy's manic yipping, Maxine is nearly silent in the field. Occasionally, when she gets very close to a rabbit, she lets out an anguished-sounding yelp – the first time or two that I heard it, I was afraid she'd stepped into a leghold trap or sustained some other grievous injury. Otherwise, and notwithstanding the fact that she can be quite noisy at home, she doesn't vocalise in the field. For this and other reasons (including my desire that she not be mistaken by Stekoa for quarry) she usually wears a blaze-orange vest in the field, which enables me to keep track of her more easily. Not that she's often far away. Houlie might trail a rabbit for miles, completely forgetting that she started out with humans and hawks, but Maxine is decidedly pack-oriented and checks in frequently with her

hunting partners. I carry a whistle, but she's never failed to respond when called by name, and indeed it's uncommon for her to be out of sight for more than a minute. (Thus far, she's shown no inclination to hole work, which is fine with me – rabbits are abundant enough that if one goes to ground, we can usually find another fairly quickly, and it saves me the trouble of digging to her, although I do still keep a NATO-issue folding shovel in my car in case of emergency.)

A FEW CONCLUSIONS

As I cautioned earlier, this is an essay about three individual rabbit dogs, not a monograph on three breeds. While many of their behaviors are breed-typical, others are characteristic only of these three dogs. Your mileage may vary. But I will hazard a few general observations, based on what I've learned with these few dogs.

The three of us – Karl, Mike, and me – hawked without dogs for years because we didn't need them. And while life with dogs has been so rewarding that none of us are likely to again go without, the basic absence of necessity hasn't changed. In productive habitat with accessible, easily negotiated terrain, hawking with dogs will not necessarily increase the number of

rabbits taken. Instead, the rewards tend to be intangible: the pleasure of watching a good dog work, the timeless sounds of a beagle's baying or terrier's excited barking, the companionship of a dog in the passenger's seat on the drive home from the field. (In more difficult locations, where the terrain limits the falconer's mobility or where rabbits are intrinsically scarce, dogs might offer more practical benefits.)

When selecting a rabbit dog, be open-minded. A dog from proven hunting stock might in fact be more valuable, but in the hounds at least, a hunting background isn't necessarily necessary.

Neither is full-time kenneling necessary. I've always been somewhat dubious of those hunters who live apart from their dogs, treating them essentially as employees. Life might be easier – no worries about housebreaking, for instance – but I suspect that these people are missing out on some of the best qualities dogs have to offer. The three of us, though, enjoy living with our dogs. They are emphatically not employees, but rather friends – or better yet, family members – who just happen, like us, to enjoy hawking. ■



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