

INTERNATIONAL FALCONER

A man in profile, wearing a dark jacket and a green bag, holds a hawk on his gloved hand. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green.

ISSUE 34 - 2009

Flying through time with the Kazakhs
In Focus - 2008 Welsh Hawking Club Field Meet

Reaching for the sky

An end of season reflection

An American odyssey

The golden eagle as a UK falconry bird

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Another hawking season has come to a close. I hope it's been a fruitful one for you and most importantly that your charges are safely back in their moulting or breeding chambers.

We've another great issue for you packed with a variety of articles from here and

abroad. This is a bit of an eagle number, with three offerings on various aspects of golden eagle falconry. They're certainly fantastic birds in the right hands, but it's most definitely a very specialised area of the sport as David Glynne Fox points out. Javier Ceballos Aranda ventures to the very place where the training of eagles, if not falconry itself, first began and Joe Atkinson gives us some training insights with passage golden eagles stateside.

So...plenty of reading there that will hopefully take your mind off, for a little while at least, those fast-approaching closed-season blues!

Until next time...

Seth

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INTERNATIONAL FALCONER

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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: Austringer Chris Frearson with female goshawk at the 2008 Welsh Hawking Club Field Meet.
by Seth Anthony

OBITUARY



FRANK LYMAN BEEBE

MAY 25, 1914 - NOVEMBER 15, 2008

FRANK LYMAN BEEBE was born on May 25, 1914 in Lacombe, Alberta Canada. His parents had immigrated from the US several years before. Frank is the second youngest of seven children. At the time of his birth, his father was off fighting the Great War and did not return until Frank was about three years old. After returning, Frank's father was entitled to a farm provided by the Canadian government under the Soldier Settlement Act. They homesteaded near Lacombe at a time when native Indians still followed a nomadic way of life in the region.

In 1924, the Beebe family homesteaded again but this time in the McLeod Valley west of Edmonton, Alberta near Peers. This is where Frank spent his growing-up years. The great boreal forest, also known as the taiga, surrounds the McLeod Valley. Frank spent countless hours exploring this fascinating world and it set the stage for the rest of his life. Mountain men still trapped fur and mined for gold in the area. These are the men Frank learned outdoor lore from; the knowledge of which allowed him to go on expeditions to the arctic for falcons with few

resources at his disposal and no means of calling for help should disaster strike. He was utterly independent and self-sufficient taking most of his sustenance from the land on these journeys.

It was in the McLeod Valley that Frank's artistic ability first became apparent. Much of his free time was spent hunting rabbits, squirrels, and anything else that moved, and then preserving the skins for sale or for his own analysis. He used these real life study skins to learn how to accurately draw the animals in his world. Even until the end of his artistic career, he did not use photographs of specimens when he painted. Instead, he used the mental images captured in his mind from a lifetime of study. Frank's first written exposure to falconry was through the December, 1920 *National Geographic* article "Falconry, the Sport of Kings" by Louis Agassiz Fuertes, which was the primary introductory source to so many would-be American falconers of that era. In 1932, Frank caught a second-year goshawk and attempted to work with this bird, but his knowledge of falconry was far too limited at this time to have any real success. Besides, the economy was in the throes

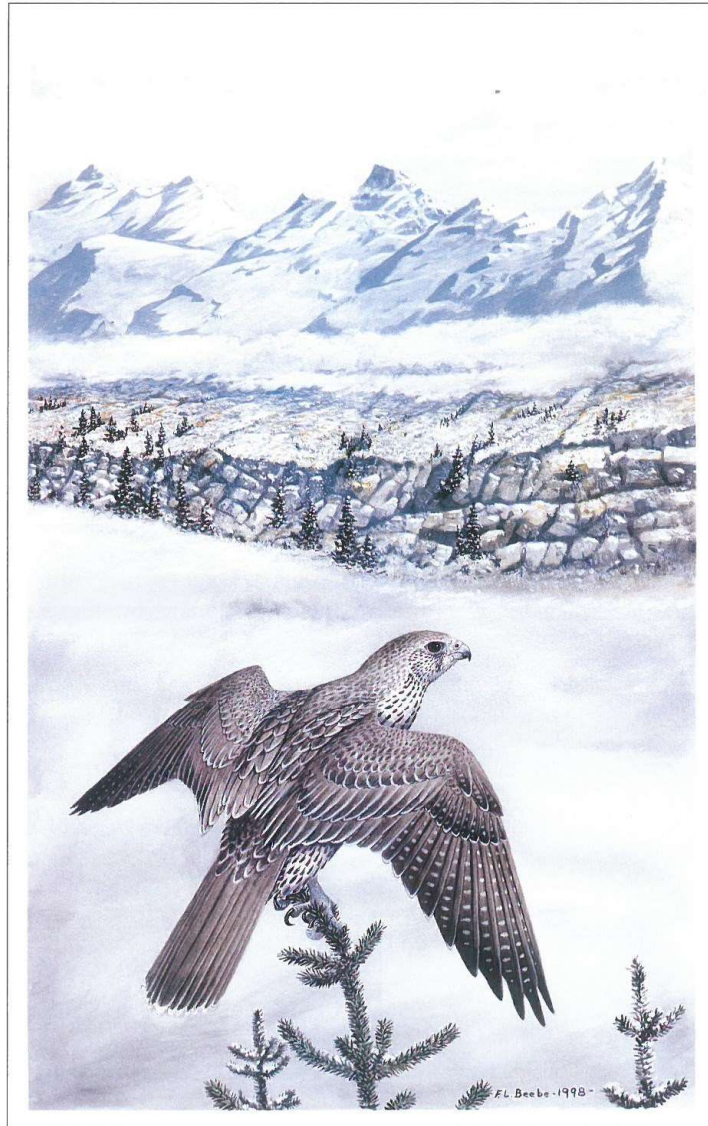
of a depression and Frank had to leave home to find a means to provide for himself. It was a difficult time and Frank spoke of whole families in his region that had committed suicide rather than starve to death. He ended up riding the rails in his search for work. He found himself in British Columbia and with his last dollar he decided to take a chance and cross over to Vancouver Island on a ferry. He believed most drifters wouldn't spend the little money they had to take a ferry across the sound. When he arrived he found there was plenty of work, decided to settle down and ended up staying there for the rest of his life, except for a 2 year hiatus in the Okanagan Valley, British Columbia (BC) after his retirement.

During World War II, Frank held a job with the Insect and Range Laboratory doing bubonic plague surveys. It was understood that the Japanese were attempting to introduce this disease somewhere along Western North America. Frank stayed on this project during the war years, producing illustrations of insects for the laboratory as well as collecting specimens. Frank was married during this period to Vera Hynes

and they had four children together. (Vera passed away in January of 2000. Frank remarried to Klara Roesch on October 13, 2001.)

After the war, Frank worked for two years at the BC Provincial Museum in Victoria as an illustrator. Frank loved the work but found the salary insufficient to provide for his new family. So he managed to find a job with the Stanley Park Zoo as the zookeeper, a position he held for seven years. During this time, he continued to paint, and even started to write professionally. While at the zoo Frank had the opportunity to join the Provincial Museum sponsored expeditions to Triangle and Langara Islands, where he encountered Peale's peregrines. This would later become the source of his first falconry birds.

In 1953, Frank had the opportunity to rejoin the museum at a much higher salary than his previous position, this time as Chief illustrator and diorama artist. He stayed on at the museum for almost 22 years until his retirement at the age of 60 in 1974. During his tenure there, Frank provided the illustrations for the nature handbooks published by the museum. The subject matter in these numerous handbooks, covered the gamut of the flora and fauna of the region. Nearly every page in these books displays a unique Beebe illustration which, all told, number in the thousands. Some of the dioramas



“Chilkat Pass” by Frank Lyman Beebe, painted in 1998.

Frank created remain at the museum to this day. For his final project, the Director of the museum permitted him to write and illustrate *The Falconiformes of British Columbia* (1974). This scholarly treatise on the Peale's peregrine and other regional raptors was the definitive work

at the time, and is still often referred to today by raptor biologists. This was the pinnacle of an illustrious career at the museum.

After retirement, Frank put tremendous effort into painting, carving, writing, and of course falconry. He sold his art in ►

commercial galleries across western Canada. He expanded his work briefly into stone carving. He really enjoyed the media and the wondrous effects he could create from soapstone and jade. Frank's stone carvings were in high demand and made him a handsome profit. He loved working in three dimensions and had to find new ways to express his talent. He found it in woodcarving and soft sculptures. Frank became the master of creating life-like effigies of raptors out of foam and latex. The key to their realism was Frank's gift for painting birds. He was so knowledgeable of the anatomy and colouration of birds that when his work was complete, they truly looked alive. This is even more remarkable when you consider that he used no reference photos, but did it all from memory. He simply 'saw' the bird in his head.

Frank the author, was one of the most prolific and widely read contemporary authors on falconry. Frank and Hal Webster collaborated on what has come to be known as the 'bible' of falconry on this continent, *North American Falconry & Hunting Hawks* (1964) the most widely used falconry book in North America. This was the first falconry instruction book focused on North American falconry. This signal work did more to promote North American falconry than any other effort before or since. Without this masterpiece, the North American falconry community would be significantly smaller and by extension, in political terms, considerably weaker. Unfortunately, instead of receiving accolades from

seasoned falconers, Frank and Hal were ridiculed by some for opening the door to the masses.

More recent publications of Frank's include: *The Myth of the Vanishing Peregrine* (1970), *Hawks, Falcons and Falconry* (1976), *A Falconry Manual* (1984), *FALCOSCAM: Nineteen EightyFour* (1984), *The Compleat Falconer* (1992), and *The Hoax of the Century* (1999).

In addition to the aforementioned treatises, he has also written numerous scientific articles. One article that has been referenced often is "The Marine Peregrines of the Northwest Pacific Coast" published in *Condor*, 1960. Other articles include: "Piracy by the Red-tailed Hawk on the Peregrine Falcon" (*Condor* 1960); "The Bald Eagle" (*Victoria Naturalist* 1944); and "Experiments in the Husbandry of the Peregrine" (*Raptor Research News* 1967). In addition, he has written extensively in falconry periodicals; one of his finest articles having been published in this magazine (see "Superfalcon", *International Falconer*, Issues 7, 8, & 9).

He was a charter member of the Wild Raptor Take Conservancy, along with being its first President, as well as the first recipient of its lifetime membership award. Frank, with his friend Hal Webster, was co-founder of NAFA.

Frank was a man who would tell things as he saw them and was not afraid to tell the truth, even if it might offend some people or if the mainstream judges the opinion politically incorrect. He was one who tirelessly fought for what is right and just, making him

a champion of the common man, and the falconry community is the richer for it. He did not have an elitist attitude toward the sport, believing that every person with the drive and wherewithal to become a falconer should be able to do so. A man of Frank's calibre is very rare and we should be very grateful indeed for his time amongst us.

It is hard to fully describe his contributions to falconry and our understanding of raptors. What has been provided for above is merely a shadow of the full measure of this renaissance man. His insight, knowledge, and abilities were beyond most people. He opened our minds to a whole new world of inquiry. He was an icon beyond most falconers' imagination and our community is the richer for his participation in our sport and the poorer for the loss of such a great man. The 20th century will be thought of as a renaissance for falconry and the period between May 25, 1914 to November 15, 2008 must be recorded as the era that produced falconry's greatest contemporary falconer.

Frank had instructed that there be no service for him, therefore he was cremated and the ashes were then buried next to his first wife, Vera.

Besides his wife, Klara, he is survived by his four children Kerry, Ervin, Merle, and Marylyn. ■

Bob Herrick and Bill Murrin

A website celebrating the life of Frank Lyman Beebe has been created.

Please visit www.frankbeebe.org

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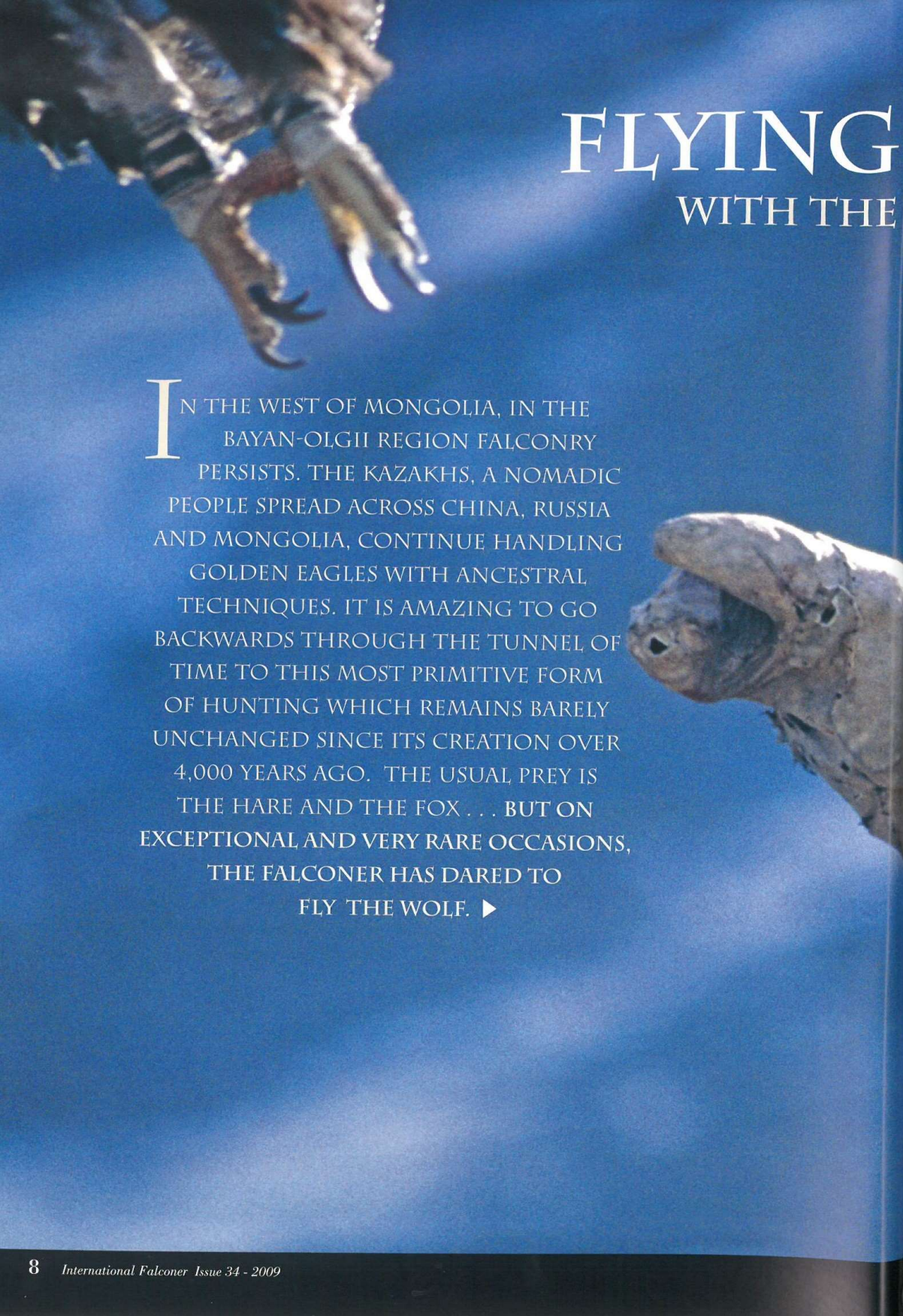
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FLYING WITH THE

IN THE WEST OF MONGOLIA, IN THE BAYAN-OLGII REGION FALCONRY PERSISTS. THE KAZAKHS, A NOMADIC PEOPLE SPREAD ACROSS CHINA, RUSSIA AND MONGOLIA, CONTINUE HANDLING GOLDEN EAGLES WITH ANCESTRAL TECHNIQUES. IT IS AMAZING TO GO BACKWARDS THROUGH THE TUNNEL OF TIME TO THIS MOST PRIMITIVE FORM OF HUNTING WHICH REMAINS BARELY UNCHANGED SINCE ITS CREATION OVER 4,000 YEARS AGO. THE USUAL PREY IS THE HARE AND THE FOX . . . BUT ON EXCEPTIONAL AND VERY RARE OCCASIONS, THE FALCONER HAS DARED TO FLY THE WOLF. ►

THROUGH TIME KAZAKHS

Words and photos by JAVIER CEBALLOS ARANDA



THE ADVENTURE begins in Ulan Bator, capital of Mongolia. There is good reason why this is the coldest capital city in the world and we are greeted by -25°C upon landing. Olgii, our next destination, is 1,600km to the west. This time we fly by propeller aircraft. The landscape is spectacular: huge areas of smooth mountains with frozen rivers and lakes show us how inhospitable the place is. There is no sign of life, not even trees. Once in Olgii, we continue our journey in a Land-Rover. After almost six hours following tracks and crossing rivers, we arrive at the village where Artak, our host, lives.

During spring and summer the

Kazakhs live in yurts, circular tents that they pitch, dismantle and transport in their nomadic life. When the cold arrives they stay in small adobe houses. The means of family subsistence is mainly based on livestock. The yak is the most copious animal: meat, milk and cover come from this bovine. Its dung is even used as fuel in the fires of their rudimentary kitchens (there is no wood in the area). On the other hand, Bactrian camels and goats provide two important materials to Mongolia's textile industry: wool and cashmere.

In the village, the elderly and the children are the kings of the family. The kindness and hospitality of people is striking,

as well as their curiosity about what they find new, which is almost everything we are carrying: torches, books, gloves, multi-purpose penknives....all are the objects of admiration. They are astounded when they see themselves on the digital camera screens or on the filming team's monitor after being filmed.

The house where we are staying has a passageway-cum-room at the entrance and two inhabitable rooms, one with rickety old beds to sleep in, and the other, larger, serves as a living room and a place to eat. Besides the kitchen, there are two small pieces of furniture, stools and a low table. In this same room, to the left of the door, are the



protagonists of our story: two golden eagles.

The golden eagle, *Aquila chrysaetos*, has six sub-species spread out around the world; the one from this region, *A.c. daphanea*, being the largest of them all. It is particularly renowned for its enormous talons. The *berkutchis* (the falconers who handle eagles) only train females, because, like the rest of falconry birds, they are larger than the males, reaching 2.3 metres in wingspan and more than 7kg in weight. They hunt with them between October and April.

The falconry tradition is passed down from father to son and it is the youngest male sibling's duty to maintain it. This son, when

the day comes, will also assume responsibility for looking after his parents when they can no longer manage on their own.

Falconry equipment is totally home-made. A *pihuela* (leather strap) is put on to each of the eagle's legs in order to facilitate its handling. The falconer puts on a thick pelt glove each time he wants to hold his bird. In order to avoid any struggling due to slight shocks or the apparition of prey that it has no interest in pursuing, the eagle's head is covered with a *tomaga* (home-made hood). They fix a wooden *baldak*, onto the saddle in order to support the fist they carry the eagle on.

Additionally, and for merely superstitious reasons, they fix

a tuft of eagle owl feathers onto the eagle's back and onto the hat worn by the hunters. They believe that by doing so they are protected from evil spirits.

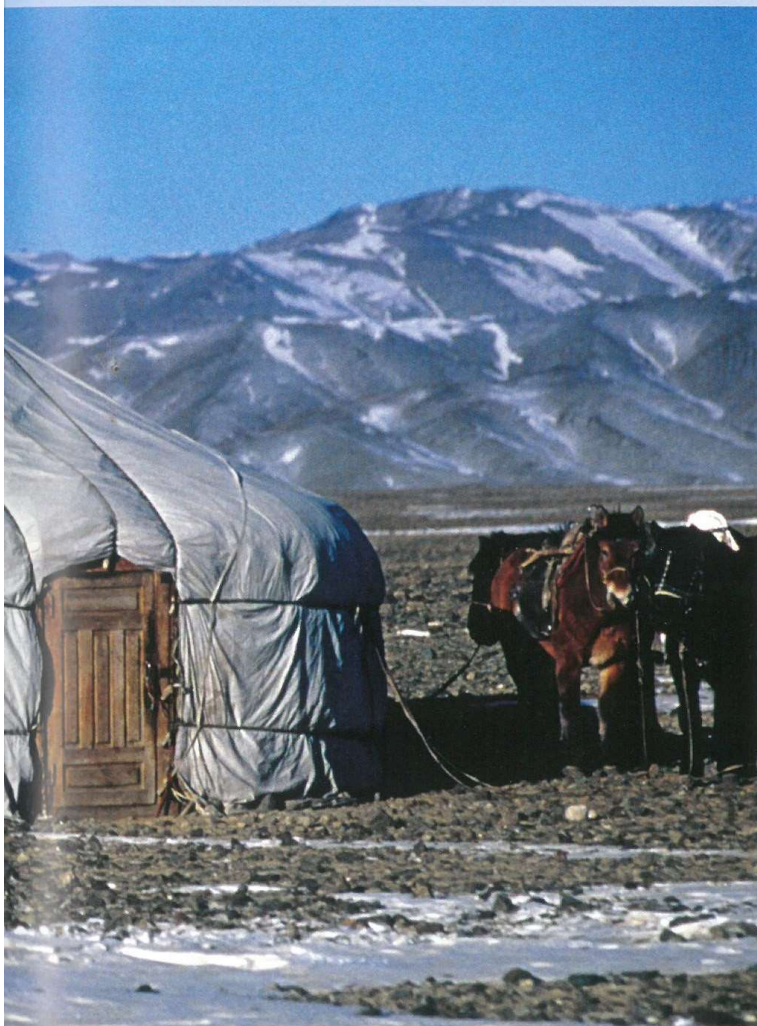
In this region, prey is available and danger is scarce for raptors, which means the population of wild eagles is in good health and a sustainable resource for the *berkutchis*.

Several weeks lapse from the moment of seizing the fledgling until the day in which eagle and falconer share a day's hunting. The taming process is less difficult if the bird has just fledged. Adjusting to new noises, horses, dogs and people requires less attention than when the eagle is a few months old. In both cases, offering food from the fist facilitates this introductory phase.

Once the bird is eating quietly, the first flights to the fist begin. As it continues gaining confidence and strength, the flight distance continues increasing.

A lure, called a *chergá*, is used for introducing the hunt. It consists of a stuffed fox or hare skin. While the *berkutchi* remains still on horseback with his hooded eagle, an assistant rides along dragging the lure. The hood is taken off the bird and its instinct urges it to pursue the piece of pelt sliding along the snow. Words of encouragement from its companion and his extended fist invite it to flap its wings until capture. As a prize, it eats the piece of meat previously tied to the lure.

Gradually the falconer gets to know his bird. He tries to find the point of hunger that provokes its main aggressiveness. In the rest of the world, scales are used



During spring and summer the Kazakhs live in yurts.



craftsperson who made artificial brass talons for those eagles injured from wolf bites.

The *berkutchis*, on horseback, position themselves on the side of a mountain using height as an advantage. Their eyes comb the steppe until they find a potential quarry. Once discovered, they remove the hood from their eagles. Reaching the wolf does

to find out a bird's weight, but the *berkutchis* monitor this without using any such utensil. They just touch the bird's breastbone in order to check it.

Capturing hares, and even foxes, with these eagles with enormous talons is not excessively difficult. Hunting the wolf is another matter. Its size and especially its bite, make it a fearsome quarry for an eagle of scarcely 7kg in weight. The quarry is in clear advantage compared to its adversary. The Kazakhs know it and therefore seldom does anyone encourage this flight to take place. However, there are those who find that their eagle possesses such hunting prowess that they do feel the urge to challenge the king of the steppe.

The battle, although preposterous, is traditional in Kazakh culture. In the Aimag Museum of Kazakh culture, the only representation of hunting by falconry shows the capture of the wolf with the golden eagle. And we had the opportunity to meet a

Above: High up on a mountain slope, using height to their advantage, the mounted *berkutchis* slip an eagle.

Right: After a ferocious battle, the eagle breaks into her prize. Note the bandaged toe after a previous wolf encounter...this is a quarry reserved for only the very toughest of eagles.



FLYING THROUGH TIME WITH THE KAZAKHS

not entail as much difficulty as overpowering it does. The powerful beating of the wings shortens distances, but once the wolf feels under pressure, it bears its fangs at its small assailant. The first talon reaches the spine, the other one the head, avoiding being bitten. After writhing and wrestling David triumphs over Goliath, technique and bravery

over brute force. The group of *berkutchis* ride incredulous and exultant for the successful outcome. The two eagles in pursuit have not dared to touch the wolf still being subdued by their courageous companion. It is clear that this is an extreme flight, reserved for the bravest and best endowed.

Gathered around the quarry,

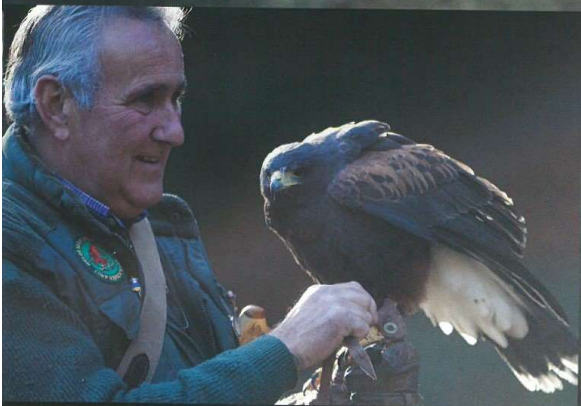
Yaiderkhan is congratulated and praised by his companions. Artak ties the defeated animal to his horse's hindquarters. Alongside his father he rides off merging into the horizon. As we watch them, it truly feels as if we have joined the Kazakhs at the very beginning of falconry's time. ■





IN FOCUS

WITH INTERNATIONAL FALCONER



Photos by **SETH ANTHONY**

The picturesque town of Llangollen in North Wales was the venue for the 2008 Welsh Hawking Club Field Meet. Some 35 hawks, mainly goshawks and Harris hawks were flown over the three days in some often stunning and dramatic landscape on commercial sporting estates, not far from the meet base of the Chain Bridge Hotel. In all, 91 head of game were accounted for including pheasant, brown hare, duck, partridge and rabbit.

Thanks go to the estates in Llandegla, Bryn-A-Pys, Carrog, Foelas and Hope for hosting such a productive and enjoyable three days of hawking.







IN FOCUS

WITH INTERNATIONAL FALCONER



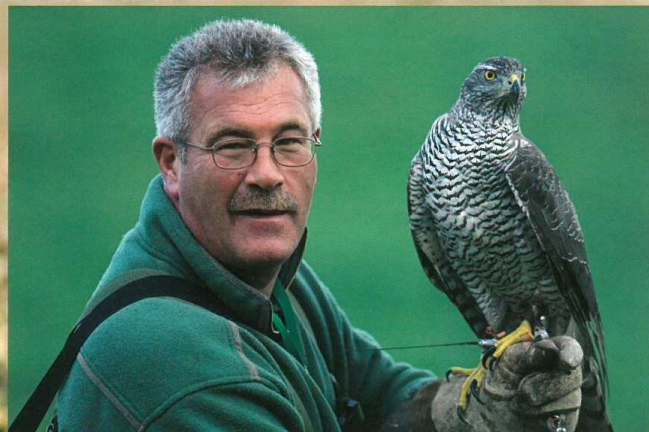
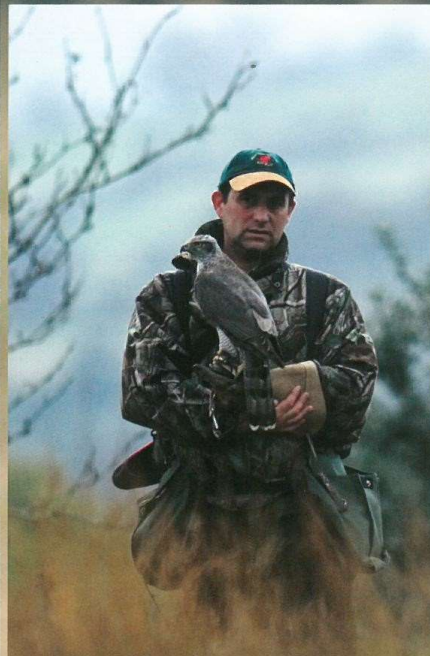
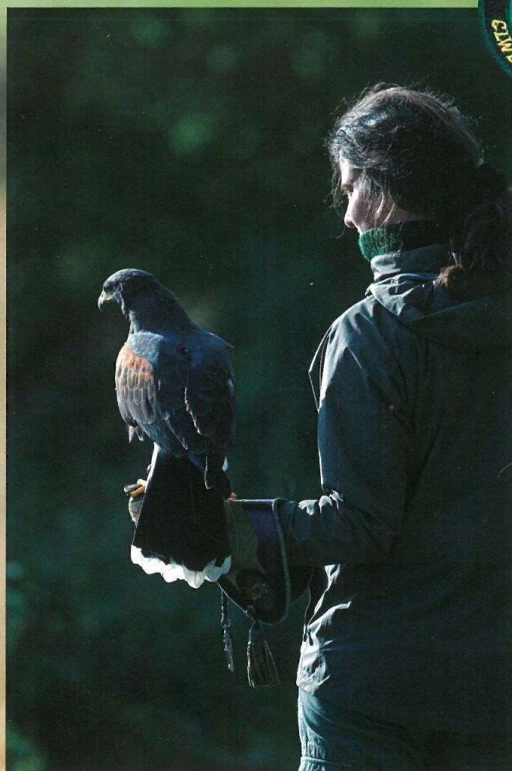






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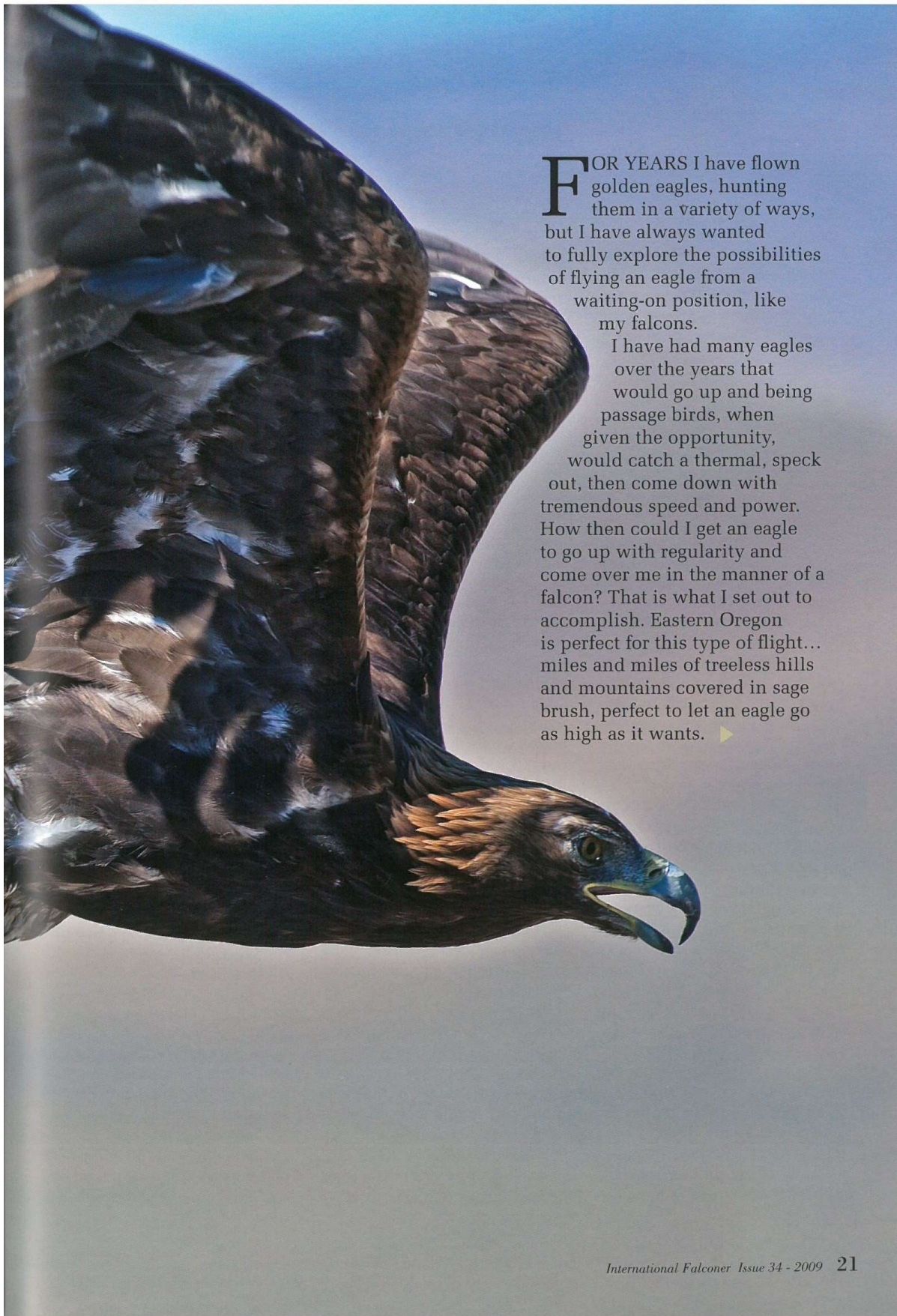




REACHING FOR THE SKY

Words by JOE ATKINSON

Photos by CORDI ATKINSON



FOR YEARS I have flown golden eagles, hunting them in a variety of ways, but I have always wanted to fully explore the possibilities of flying an eagle from a waiting-on position, like my falcons.

I have had many eagles over the years that would go up and being passage birds, when given the opportunity, would catch a thermal, speck out, then come down with tremendous speed and power. How then could I get an eagle to go up with regularity and come over me in the manner of a falcon? That is what I set out to accomplish. Eastern Oregon is perfect for this type of flight... miles and miles of treeless hills and mountains covered in sage brush, perfect to let an eagle go as high as it wants. ▶

REACHING FOR THE SKY

PASSAGE GOLDEN eagles already know how to soar and hunt and catch game because they have already done all that on their own. Therefore, the trick was to get one to stick around and hunt over me. When an eagle goes up it really goes up, thousands of feet, and from there they can see miles and miles in all directions. So, looking down at me, a small dot running around like an ant must seem....well....boring. Just like in training a falcon, when an eagle is at the height you want, you need to reward it, by flushing game, swinging the lure, something that lets the bird know that, hey, when I do this something good happens. But trying to flush something, anything, under a waiting-on eagle is very difficult. In fact, I never thought much about it. Send in the dogs and things flush, like pheasants, chuckar, and jack rabbits, all game that eagles catch in the wild. But that is the key, in the wild. Here in eastern Oregon we have eagles flying around everywhere and just about anytime you can see an eagle hunting something. What does this mean? It means that anything that is on the food list for a golden eagle lives in fear because they are hunted all day, every day. So, when my eagle is waiting-on over a given area nothing will move. And that is the problem; wild game is not going to show itself to the eagle. This presented me with the dilemma of how to reward my eagle for doing the right thing, waiting-on. Sure, I gave her the lure but that was not my goal. I wasted too many flights having my female golden directly over my head and not being able to produce something for her, which resulted in her not paying

attention to me and wandering off. Wandering off, for an eagle, can mean finding her twenty-five miles away the next day, not something I want to repeat too often. On the occasion that this happened I found her up in a very steep canyon, halfway up a sheer cliff. Thankfully, she came down and saved me the pain of having to find a way up the cliff. I did, however, have to carry her the mile or so back out of the canyon which, on that day, seemed to be the meeting place for every rattlesnake in Oregon. (Note to self: rattlesnakes get very angry when you're carrying an eagle, and they tend to strike.)

It took me more time than I care to admit to figure out that flushing game under my waiting-on eagle was going to be very hard. I needed more flushing power that would make whatever I was trying to flush more afraid of what was on the ground than in the air, because screaming and running around was not working. I made the decision to add dogs to the team, thinking they could create enough fear that something would flush. This in itself does not seem like any big deal, except that I had never hunted any eagle with dogs. Well, I did try it once, way back with my first eagle. I was walking down a dirt road with my female golden eagle and four dogs, looking for jack rabbit slips. A ground squirrel flushed and made a beeline to its hole. Off went the dogs and I launched the eagle. As I stood there and watched I could see that the eagle and dogs were all going to arrive at the squirrel at the same time. With one swipe my eagle snagged the squirrel and with the other foot tried to snag a dog! Even though the eagle and dogs had all been around each other

and I had flown them all together before, things changed after that day and my dogs would not go out in the field with the eagle anymore. So, the vision of one of our sweet dogs getting stabbed by an eagle has remained with me for years. I have had eagles take coyotes so I know full well what an eagle can do to a dog. With all that said, these were desperate times and I needed more flushing power. And, after considering some very important factors, such as this female eagle is not aggressive toward dogs at all and my dogs have a very healthy respect for eagles, I moved forward. Nonetheless, I was very careful, as passage eagles and dogs do not generally get along.

So, I added my dogs in the hope that they, along with me, could get something to flush under my eagle and, so far, the addition of the dogs has helped as they do flush game, particularly pheasants. However, not having flushed game under my eagle for such a long period of time created a new problem....she was not looking at me. Therefore, the few times we actually did flush something, my eagle did not react. Talk about frustrating! Fortunately, here in the US, we can use bagged game to aide in the training of falconry birds and by using baggies, as we call them, I could create a scenario for my eagle in which she would see game flushing under her at the exact moment when she came over. I picked a particularly large, flat bench area that offered a good area for creating a hunting situation and one where I could see in all directions.

These two changes in the program, the addition of my dogs and the use of bagged pheasants, created new questions and,



The author prepares to launch Widow during a training session in the wide-open sagebrush country of Eastern Oregon.

like all falconers do, I tried to anticipate things that could go wrong. The first major question was what happens when, like the ground squirrel with my first eagle, dogs and eagle arrive at the pheasant at the same time? Would she attack them? Would the dogs get too close while the eagle was on the kill? Both my dogs are trained to find my falcons and sit down next to them while they are on a kill and wait for me to arrive. This has proven very useful, keeping large raptors, particularly eagles, from coming in on my falcons. But now the bird they were keeping away is the bird on the kill and they must tread carefully. Another question: how far can a female golden eagle fly with a pheasant? And if she is going to carry the pheasant, do I want major canyons around that she can fly across and, more importantly, canyons that

I would have to carry her back across to the truck? I don't think so.

The bagged pheasants would, as I have said, serve me in a couple of ways, both being very important if I was going to reach my goal of flying my eagle from a waiting-on position. However, they did bring their own set of problems. First of all, even though these pheasants are extremely wild acting they are not wild birds and simply do not have the drive to fly like wild birds. With an eagle up at 2,000 feet-plus these domestic pheasants just do not stay in the air long enough to be caught in the air and that's what I want...in-the-air strikes, not pheasants getting caught on the ground. I have had to adjust my timing on when to launch the pheasant; if the eagle is too high the pheasant will burn out and land, if the eagle is too low nothing will flush short of setting

the hillside on fire. One method that has proven successful with this eagle is to show her the lure which brings her pitch down to a more workable height, then launch the pheasant.

Typically the flights go like this: I drive to the top of a large mountain that has huge areas of flat ground on the south side. On the east and west sides it falls off rather sharply, creating thermals which eagles love and my female is very good at finding. I launch her off my fist and she flies up to a mile or more out over the valley searching for rising air. Once she finds what she is looking for she goes up, sometimes out of sight. She can be counted on to eventually come over and drop down low enough so I can see her but this is still very high, too high actually. I have the dogs at the ready and as soon as she is directly overhead I send in the dogs looking for the wild ►

REACHING FOR THE SKY

flush. So far, as of the time of this article, I have not flushed anything wild under her since I started using bagged game. But what has happened is that my eagle is now coming over me and looking for something to

happen around me, and that is a positive thing. At least now, I would hope that when I do get something flushed under her she will react. To date she has taken about a dozen bagged pheasants launched in various situations

that were set up to mimic wild flushes. Only a few resulted in the pheasant being caught on the ground, which does happen while hunting in the wild, so I can live with that. ■

*Widow, female passage golden eagle
Wt. 9.9 lbs
Temperature 72°
Wind 3 mph SSE*

Journal Entry:

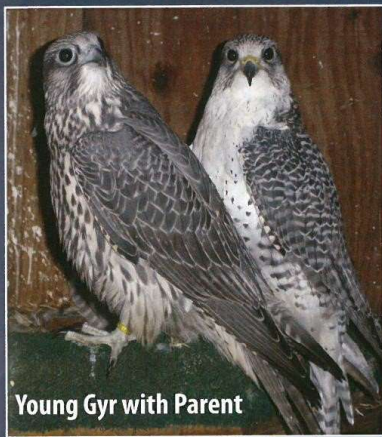
I drove out into the vast sage desert which goes on forever. It's more like an ocean really, as far as I can see is sage brush. Driving out into the BLM (Bureau of Land Management) land, I get the feeling I could drive forever and never cross my own tracks. But that will have to wait for another day.

I found a good looking spot to plant a pheasant, in cover, to flush under Widow when the time was right. I attached the tail mount transmitter onto Widow, checked to see if all was in order, and walked away from the truck, launching her into the wind. Widow flew along a ridgeline and landed, roused, jumped back into the air, caught a thermal and was being pulled up into the heavens. In a matter of seconds she was thousands of feet in the air and still climbing. I stood and watched her six-foot-plus wing span shrink down to the size of a pin dot. More than a mile out and I'm not sure how high up, she broke off her climb, set her wings and started to come over to where I was standing with my dogs. She was, by all accounts, way too high. I could barely see her. I pulled out the lure and started to swing it in an attempt to bring her down to a more workable pitch. Widow folded up and began a spectacular stoop, straight down! I waited until she was roughly the size of a pigeon in the air and picked up the lure which caused Widow to break off her stoop, and sent in the dogs. They already knew there was a bird in the weeds so it only took a few seconds and, sure enough, out flushed the pheasant. I had lost sight of Widow so I watched the pheasant rise up and fly, gaining height as it went. The first thing I noticed was the sound, not of the pheasant, but the sound of speed, the sound of something big moving fast through the air. With the pheasant in a full burn, wings just a blur, Widow came in, overtaking it with ease, delivering a blow that sent feathers flying in all directions and sent the pheasant falling to the ground like a stone. With a quick wing-over, Widow was on her pheasant and I stood there as feathers were still settling down to the ground, my mouth hanging open in disbelief at what I had just seen.

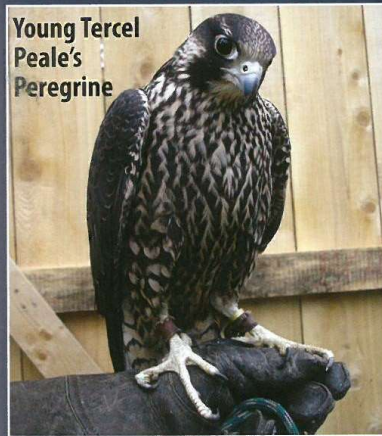
I have not reached my goal yet of actually hunting wild game with an eagle waiting-on but I'm close. Seeing an eagle stoop is one of the great spectacles of the natural world, something that will keep me working for my goal and reaching for the sky.



Nestling Harris' Hawks



Young Gyr with Parent



Young Tercel Peale's Peregrine

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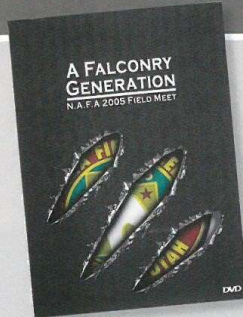
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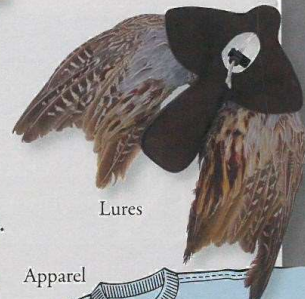
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2008

An End of Year Reflection

Words by BRIAN MORRIS

A man wearing a dark vest, shorts, and a cap stands in a grassy field. He is holding a red leash. Two brown dogs are in the foreground. The background shows rolling hills and mountains under a cloudy sky.

NEW YEAR is an occasion that is celebrated the world over. It is a time of reflection, but more so of optimism, hoping the year ahead shall be less challenging. However life is never straight-forward, presenting disappointments along the way and generally at times when you least expect it. And some of these disappointments shall be significant enough to challenge and so test your inner self belief. For me 2008, from a sport perspective, whilst holding some 'glory' moments, also held a number of 'dark' ones.



JANUARY

Early January marked the end of the end of my falconry season and with that Myleen's (2007 eyas falcon) weight was increased. 2007 had been an incredible first season for her and one that was littered with memorable field scenario after memorable field scenario. However it was time to draw the season to an end and also allow the two setters to be rewarded with a well earned rest and respite from the falconry field routines of the past four-and-a-half months.

Ray O'Dwyer's red setter book arrived in the UK and at last I'm able to put an image to the dogs I have often seen in pedigree charts and heard while on the field trial circuit. The book is encyclopaedic, being data rich and crammed with breed details as well as countless photographs of famous dogs from the past. It is a truly wonderful book and testament to the character of Ray who saw this seventeen-year personal project through to the end. In doing so he has provided the rest of the red setter community, and future generations, with a modern, quick reference guide to the Irish setters' lineage and heritage.

FEBRUARY

Weather was reasonable and I started getting Marty (Lusca Celtic Boy) ready for the spring trials. At the same time I intimated to a few people that I was, pending summer puppy situation, prepared to release Mitchy (Lusca Artic Jack) to a ►

Brian with daughter Caroline out grouse counting plus Marty, plus pups plus cocker spaniels.

Photo: courtesy of Brian Morris.

2008 AN END OF YEAR REFLECTION

good home. At 6 years old he was an honest working dog, though lacked the competitive edge required to gain awards at open field trials.

MARCH

Field trial preparations continued, being ever thankful to the local estate staff in allowing a number of early morning weekday counting sessions, thereby permitting me the opportunity to train before I went to work. Additionally the ever generous Wilson Young allowed me to run Marty against his top-tier pointers on grouse-rich, moorland near his home. I personally benefitted from these outings as Wilson was ever willing to share his knowledge of breed differences as well as field situations, thereby improving my pointer and setter understanding and field scenario interpretations. As such I believed Team Morris was adequately prepared for the spring pointer and setter field trails as held each year on the Tomatin moors of Inverness-shire.

However heavy snow falls occurred just prior to the trial week, resulting in the bulk of the trials being cancelled. During that week, while holed up in a hunting lodge and huddled round a fire, I called Ireland to get puppy updates. Colin duly informed that Penny (Lusca Gin) had given birth on St Patrick's day (was this an omen) to six puppies, two dogs and four bitches. Additionally Colin and his dad Jimmy (training partner to the late John Nash and a present-day family friend to the Nash family) were comfortable with my increased request for two puppies.

The month of March was further charged with good news

when Seth Anthony sent me a picture of Fern's first eggs of 2008; as such another Langley Mews falcon was in the making.

APRIL

Contacted Seth towards end of month and obtained an update of Fern's eggs. Having laid ten in total, nine were viable hatching candidates. As such it was a waiting game until May.

News from Ireland was that pups were getting bigger and more adventurous and that a mid-May collection (when the pups would be 9 weeks of age) would be ideal.

MAY

By early May Seth confirmed there were four falcons and with that I scheduled a selection and collection visit for the first week of July.

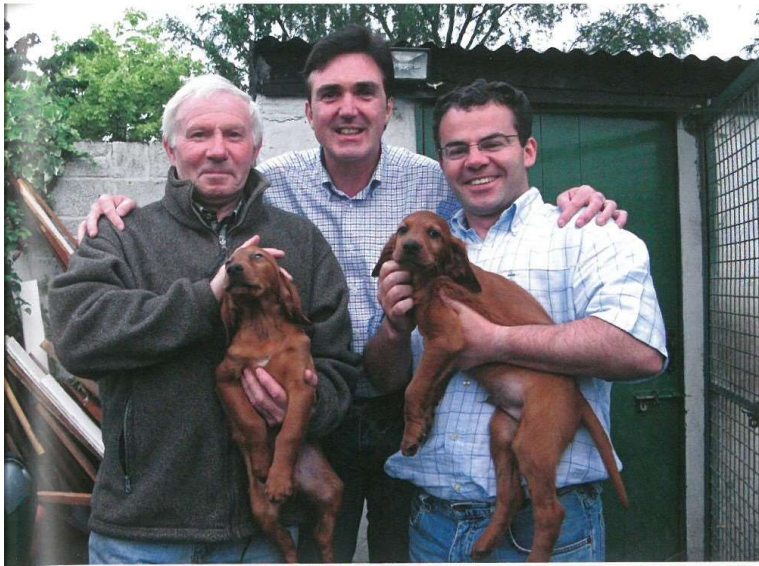
Mid May saw my wife and I travel to the south of Ireland to collect the two Bownard pups. The weather was idyllic, allowing the ferry crossing to be comfortable for the non-seafarer types like myself. Furthermore my wife had offered to drive, allowing me to literally sit back, relax and enjoy.

Colin called to check on our travel progress just as we were exiting Dublin. Information obtained during that conversation allowed us to make a slight lunchtime route change to a retail mall. With that my woman was now happier given some shopping therapy.

Arrival in Limerick was unbelievable in terms of the warmth the welcome offered by Eleanor and Jimmy Forde. They were fantastic hosts and we exchanged family and dog stories as we awaited arrival of son Colin and his wife Orfhlaith. Once they arrived, the garden area was

boarded up and the pups were let out to exercise. I tried to capture some of their running on film, but the pups were hyper as they raced up and down the garden. There was nothing between any of the pups with regard size, colour or conformation and each one of them was intent on running until out of energy. But what an amount of energy they displayed, thanks to Eleanor's rich, home-cooked meals and Jimmy's exercise schedule.

Bored with running the length of the garden, the pups then started to go to work on Eleanor's vegetable plot, digging and so spraying dirt everywhere. Jimmy informed he had long given up trying to prevent this activity, being content to see the pups use their muscles. However he did add that he tidied up after each puppy outing; something to do with an Eleanor order. At that point the pups seized on his broom and started a tug of war, but Jimmy simply watched and spoke of what he was seeing. It was then I began to appreciate what a fun time the pups had experienced of life so far. While Eleanor had busied herself in the kitchen, operating the puppy food production line, Jimmy had ensured that the pups saw enough of the outside world in allowing them to free run, play-fight, socially interact and pretty much do anything they pleased. What a wonderful start to their lives and I doubted any of the pups knew or appreciated the level of freedom and level of detail Jimmy and Eleanor were applying to their upbringing. But this was the second Bownard litter and perhaps the last time that Bownard Ali (a direct descendant of the revered Moanruad B and Z litters) would be used as a sire. Regardless those



Jimmy and Colin Forde with Brian and the pups. Photo: courtesy of Brian Morris.

scenes made me aware that both Jimmy* and Eleanor had been on the tiring puppy 24/7 shift rota to ensure these pups had the best start in life possible.

At dinner that evening I brought up the subject of names for our two boys and it turned out to be quite a conversation piece as there was not a widespread uptake with one of the names as presented. However after some banter and a few more glasses of wine, the names of Miller and Morse were agreed upon. With that the boys were duly christened and I do believe we cracked open another bottle. What a great night it was.

Departure was early the next morning to allow us to reach the ferry and get home by dinner time. And it was a surprise to see that the whole family rose to see the two boys depart for Scotland. While it was a long journey for the pups, they comforted one another and the journey was over before they realised.

JUNE

The puppies had settled in really well and did not react negatively, even when I uprooted them to my daughter Caroline's home, as she was

assuming position as kennel maid while my wife and I went on vacation. Returning home the pups were 15 weeks and fully inoculated. As such it was time to start introducing them to the big wide world that lay outside the garden.

While it was incredible (though hoped for) to see the pups' natural instincts surface in investigating game scent and backing Marty so quickly, it was a joy to see the boys engage in play activities during these field outings. This was the first time we had raised two pups at the same time and for all I was witnessing, it would not be the last.

The boys were growing fast with one of the pups being Lusca in shape and character, while the other was Bownard. I could not have wished for more in getting the best of both worlds.

Seth sent through some crystal clear eyas falcon pictures for me to view and perhaps make a selection from. However I found this to be incredibly difficult to do in spite of the quality of photographs. However viewing these did feed my enthusiasm for the season ahead and also assisted in softening the thought

of July's lengthy round trip to South Wales.

JULY

With summer trial circuit looming I once more benefited from use of the local estate. Additionally Wilson Young was ever generous in accommodating my visits and allowing access onto the grouse-rich moorland near his home. These sessions allowed me to run Marty in a brace situation with his excellent pointers and such outings provided me with an insight into how good (or bad) our field trial preparatory activities have been.

Over the years I have come to appreciate Wilson's field trial readiness approach and am ever vigilant to pinch an idea or two. Wilson in his younger days was an athletics coach in his spare time and in doing so coached some well known Olympic athletes. And it was those Olympic governing principles with regard diet, exercise, preparatory disciplines and general management that he has fined tuned to apply to his beloved pointers and be such a success on the trial circuit. On top of all this he is one hell of a character, having many, many comical tales to relate, making these outings a social occasion.

The falcon collection went well, though I found it quite difficult to select an eyas as there was next to no noticeable difference between the four eyas falcons. However I ended up selecting eyas falcon No.3 for no other reason other than she had pretty facial features. I elected to name the falcon, Meisha and (just like 2007 eyas Myleen) she settled down in double-quick time allowing me to safely take her to the trials in mid July.

Grouse counting on the local ►

moor was undertaken and this brought about a few instances whereby the pups scented and pointed grouse on their own. At barely four months of age they were truly showing the field qualities I sought. Furthermore their adaptation to life on the road (while at field trials and grouse counting) came and went without so much as a whimper. This was noted by fellow field trial competitors who commented on how relaxed the pups appeared while on the lead absorbing the trial atmosphere or resting and lying in the heather gnawing roots. For me this was all thanks to Jimmy and the time he had spent socialising the pups and allowing them so much free rein in the garden. As a result these pups were well balanced and were accepting all sorts of situations without complaint or negative reaction.

The much anticipated Irish Setter Association centenary event at the end of July unfortunately had to be replaced by the perennial Breed Stake event. This was a blow to the committee who had worked long and hard at organising something special to mark the centenary event. However the weather was sunny and pleasant and a good day was had by all at Shap in Cumbria; a trial ground that the club has held for the past fifty-five years.

AUGUST

Marty had been a wee bit unlucky in trials, though a 2nd place award in an Open Stake in his puppy year of 2007 made him eligible for Championship entry. However the number of eligible entrants of 56 prohibited his automatic entry and as such all dogs with 2nd place awards were placed in a ballot. Marty got



Meisha on block at field trial.

Photo: courtesy of Brian Morris.

lucky as his number was drawn and as such we both attended our first pointer & setter Champion Stake as competitors, joining fellow falconers and pointer and setter enthusiasts Daryl Edwards (English setters) and Lee Cooper (pointers). Both gentlemen have been successful at trials in recent years in addition to establishing their own kennels. Daryl has made a significant mark on the setter world and trial scene with his Stanedge home-bred English setters.

The Champion Stake was well covered by journalists and photographers, though it was a journalistic remark in the *Shooting Times* that made me smile. The quote is as follows: "Brian Morris's Lusca Celtic

Boy found a huge covey from at least 60 yards....". If that gentleman had been a falconer, he would probably have known the distance was greater than 70 yards; regardless it was one hell of a find. Just a shame a snipe flushed wide to curve round and fly in front of Marty to break his pointing concentration in the second round. The situation caused him to move and be disqualified. Just a situation you cannot train for. However he is only a young dog and there is always another year.

I collected Myleen just as the trial season was coming to an end in mid-August. While she had a great moult, there were some key primary feathers that required time to come down fully before

introducing weight disciplines. As such she was left to wait out August on the block.

Pups continued to develop their pointing and backing powers and with that I eagerly looked forward to a Game Conservancy open day on the local estate where I was scheduled to provide a grouse counting demonstration. However the weather on the day in question was simply awful, being wet and windy. Nonetheless after a relatively long run, Marty scented and pointed two coveys of grouse that had packed up together. He held point long enough for the two boys to come into back, while the gallery viewed this and the later production from relatively close quarters.

SEPTEMBER

Having educated Meisha with regard high flying to the kite, the month of September was almost exclusively taken up with educating her with regard game and differing game situations on lowland and upland landscapes. Additionally Myleen was now off the block and undergoing kite fitness training and some game re-introduction scenarios.

The sad news of the passing of Eppie Buist was received. While I did not know Eppie for very long, her enthusiasm and love of pointers and setters was widely known. Eppie passed away in her 98th year of life, a life that since the age of 21 years, she had pretty much devoted to field sports and pointers and setters. Age was not seen as a barrier or obstacle to Eppie, and as such she held office as field trial secretary of the Northern Pointer & Setter Club for 60 years. Furthermore she attended both spring and summer trials,

following the day's activities while seated in an argo cart.

Spring weather in the highlands can be fairly hostile and a day on the hill can be lengthy. However Eppie was never put off by weather or the length of a day's sport and as such could always be counted upon to stay for the awards

pointers from her in the past.

Her funeral at Dornoch Cathedral was filled to being capacity as hundreds of people gathered to celebrate her life. The service was conducted by Rev Susan Brown and assisted by retired local minister Rev Charlie Robertson; the congregation sharing many



Miller and Morse in an upland environment.

Photo: courtesy of Brian Morris.

ceremony. She always sported an enormous smile and a charming nature to winners as well as offering comforting words to those who were not so fortunate on the day.

From a falconry perspective all the falconry greats of the present and past knew her, especially those who focussed on upland grouse hawking and as benefiting from her kennel of renowned Fearn pointers and setters. Of note is that Eppie often used the late Gilbert Blaine's Westdown dogs as sires, while the likes of Roger Upton, Stephen Frank, Alistair McKissock and the late Gordon Jolly have obtained

joyous memories of Eppie's unique life.

OCTOBER

This year's British Falconers' Club AGM was held in Latham, Lancashire and I journeyed south as this was no more than a cross-border raid. On the Saturday we were scheduled to hawk on land close to Latham, though our inspection uncovered that the ground was devoid of gamebirds. Richard Newton took his group to a roadside pond that held about a dozen mallard ducks. Two gamehawks were put up in succession, though situations were not right and the ducks still ►

had not been flushed. It was my turn. Given the time of the day I elected to fly Meisha (the eyas falcon) first. With that I noted a slight change of wind direction and so changed my tactics from the previous falconers.

What I was not aware of at this time was that the Martin Mere wildfowl reserve (forms the backdrop for the BBC *Spring Watch* programme as starring Bill Oddie) was literally just a stone's throw away. So the bold and yet unaware Brian released Meisha. The young falcon had been kited to high heights during August, though September and game introductions had produced a best pitch of 350 feet. I was relatively at ease she would do something similar today, given pond location and light wind conditions, and comfortable that she would give chase.

Heading downwind about 500 grey and pink-footed geese rose from an out-of-sight stubble field. However Meisha weaved her way through the flocks to come overhead, but kept going to achieve greater height. I ran to road side to swing my glove and bring her over. But just at that point a small group of ducks rose from underneath her. She stooped and chased two of these putting them into a row of poplar trees. Running to car, Andy Dobson jumped in to assist. On pulling the vehicle off the road about a mile down the road (and adjacent to the line of poplars) I noted high security-like fencing. Looking at Andy, he obviously sensed my despair and said "Brian, that's the wildfowl reserve Richard was talking about earlier" Wish I had been listening!

At that moment the signal thankfully moved to now indicate an origin at the sewage works,



Falcons on cage with Martin Mere estate manager and Andy Dobson.

Photo: courtesy of Brian Morris.

situated just behind the original flight "launch" site. Upon arrival at that location the signal moved again, and again, and again, and again. For the next half-hour or so Andy and I ran through the Martin Mere wildfowl reserve, noting flock, upon flock, upon proverbial flock of ducks rise in front of us. In doing so we were witnessing the havoc a falcon can create, but also witnessing the senseless tactics of an eyas falcon with no game plan and next to no field experience.

Having jumped drainage ditch after drainage ditch we then reached a span of water where there was no option but to wade, as the breadth of water was just too great to jump. However the signal was strong and static; the falcon had to be nearby. Andy somehow managed to get elevation and noted (through his binoculars) that there was a falcon about a third-of-a-mile away. I swung the lure using a lot of line in order to make the swung lure as visible as possible. With that Meisha returned.

However, just as one situation ended another was about to start and that came with the arrival of the reserve manager in an argo cart. He was less than pleased

and expressed his displeasure at our un-authorised entry onto the reserve, as well as informing about the significant amount of disturbance we had caused in running in front of countless observation hides hosting sizeable numbers of weekend ornithologists. The ever tactful Andy and this humbled falconer offered apology after apology. And with that the reserve manager relaxed, took pity on us and began to show an interest in Meisha.

He had seen many wild peregrines, but had never seen a peregrine up close and even explained that in all his 23 years on the reserve he had never seen a falcon create as much disturbance. Given this empathy he took further pity on the two dehydrated beings in front of him and offered us a lift back to our vehicle, where a photograph was taken. In all I reckon Andy shall not be as eager to tag along next time when one of my falcons goes fly-about! And as for wet feet; well I reckon Andy knows now that a Martin Mere run-about and leather walking boots don't mix. ■

To be continued.



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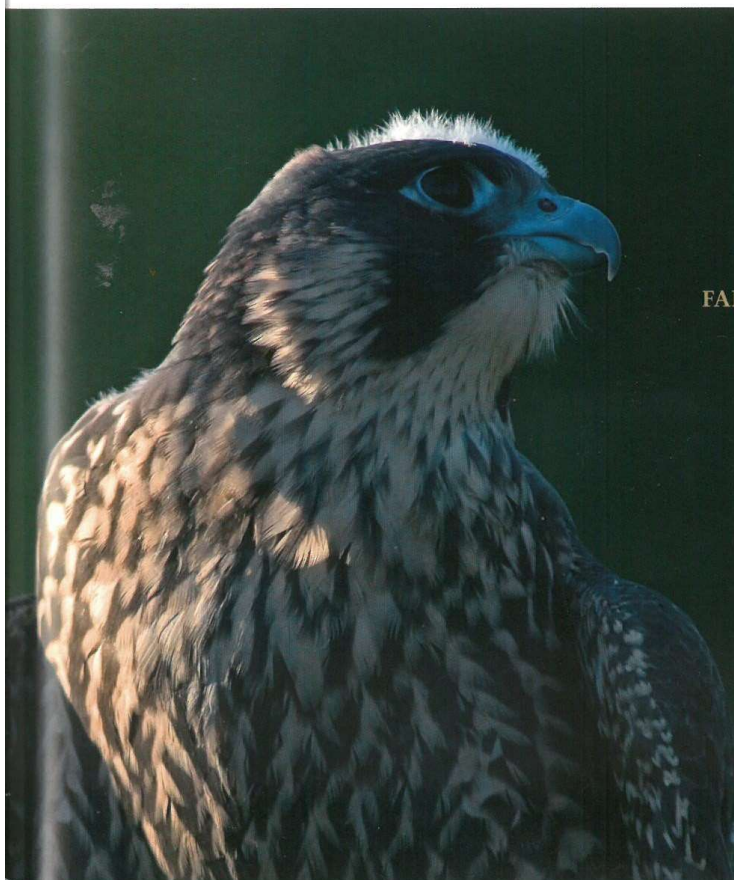
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PART TWO: A Longwinger's Dream

Words and photos by BEN CRANE



SPEAKING WITH Bill Murrin later the following season, it seems that the prairie we had trapped had turned out to be a “fine specimen of a falcon”. After struggling through the typical prairie ‘irritability’, she came through with a disposition “as sweet and as well-trained an eyass” as Bill had ever owned. He named her Dakota for obvious reasons, and has had some pretty decent flights at pheasant. The long term plan will be duck, the plethora of ponds, particularly early season will provide character building set-ups for what Bill describes as hopefully “a long and productive career”.

With Bill and his prairie safely back at home, Craig and I met with Frank Mattello the following morning. He had travelled across from Illinois, with what transpired to be the second only out-of-state license for trapping. He was ready to try for a passage gyr, so we drove around the town, across the dam, then back out towards the Sioux reservations. We had some fun with a few prairies and one or two other birds of prey, but came away empty handed. We also had the pleasure of getting right up close to a fleeting, hunting merlin. She was flitting and skimming the snow-dusted grass in a determined flight at what looked like sparrows.

Even though I had only trapped on one or two occasions previously, I could clearly see that the overall conditions were not suitable for trapping; the weather had slowed to a still, cloudless morning. The overnight climate had not been

nearly dramatic or forceful enough to bring in migrating falcons. Frank was not too bothered, as this was more a legal fact finding mission, and I am sure he would return after the proper conditions had blown through. So later in the afternoon and towards evening we headed across to his hunting ground, in a secluded, secret location somewhere further south.

Driving miles, we criss-crossed roads, always on the look out and as night fell we upped the pace and made it to an obscure small town, and our tiny lodge for the night. We ate fine pasta and drank a couple of Buds while one of Frank’s friends came over and talked about the hunting conditions he had had over the last few days.

The over-riding explanation of the prairie chicken (a species of prairie grouse), was of a quarry beyond anything I had ever come across. They were very skittish and took flight easily during the day. The key times were at dawn or during the last semblance of dusk. At both times they would fly to feed or roost. The previous days had been tough, as the snow had fallen heavily and the grouse were on guard, and certainly not staying still long enough to get a falcon in the air above them.

The next morning the hunting lodge had been cast in white and a strong wind was blowing through. Crystal sugar snow whipped up through and around the vehicles and we made a slow squeaked sound in the trucks as the sunrise pinned and popped into view. We rolled gently into the maize stubble and zig-zagged across the drains zoning



out before us. Deep drifts of snow had fallen between each foot-wide crop coating the earth with a good 4 inches of snow. I now completely understood the reason for the grouse being so tricky. A wild covey would glow like gold in any one of the running corn furrows. There is no way with the wind howling, the deep cold, over exposure and most vitally a burning energy level that staying still would be an option. At the slightest pressure from predation, these wonderful little game birds clearly survive best by numbers and movement.

My first glimpse was a lone individual, perhaps a cock bird, scurrying under a bush then stopping. Even at a quarter-of-a-mile we presented a distraction too much. Through the binoculars I saw a light puffing of snow as the grouse lifted, turned into the wind and began banking sharply. He shifted on a fluttering wing beat at a tremendous speed across the corn, way and away into the distance. Almost like a partridge on steroids, the snow had only just settled as he became a black pin-dot prick, arching down into the arable fields nearly a mile away.

Across the radio Frank and the others registered the movement ▶

Frank Mattello's jerkin on his hen pheasant.

of another covey breaking to our left. They were so far away and rising at such a massive incline I had trouble identifying them. There were a dozen to twenty grouse flying in a strong confident manner very high off the ground. The truck rocked and buffeted sideways in the wind as these distant birds hardly looked to be breaking sweat. With the rising sun pulsating low to the left, they were mottled silhouette black greys against the sky. Like a glitter of distant crows or a flock of starlings vibrating against the sky, the covey flew unlike any gamebird I have seen in the UK. Driving down wind they covered a couple of miles drifting over the scrub and into the horizon.

There was a most audible silence in the truck as everyone sat slack jawed and saluted a most complex and difficult quarry. I cannot over emphasise the fact of their alert, fearful nature. They are antsy, loath presence and fly easily in conditions so extreme that traditional methods of hawking would be pointless. Trucks, binoculars, mobile phones, radios and big powerful falcons were the only way to get close. Even then, what unfolded before me was a realisation that hawking in these conditions was both highly technical and as sporting as any type of falconry I have so far seen.

About twenty minutes later, I witnessed my first proper flight at these formidable little birds. We parked the trucks on the highest point of a dam. The crackled OK came through and I followed everyone out into a crystalline landscape, a white scudding sky, and a wind that whipped across burning ears and frosted, frozen eyelids. Frank slipped the hood, the jerkin roused immediately and swung out low left coming

back tight overhead.

By the time he had ran down the bank, the pointer was out of the truck, the jerkin was at 200 feet and counting. At this point I was stood on the dyke within full view of the unfolding vista. This male was pumping hard and quickly banking higher following Frank with determination. Halfway into the field the falcon had climbed to about 500 feet. As both men spread wide and flanked the grouse the height had increased once more. Suddenly one or two grouse broke up into the wind. Three more then broke left. One turned downwind. Numerous others went left and right.

The shout went up and the remaining grouse broke hard right over the stubble a long way down wind from the jerkin. From an estimated height of between 800 to 900 feet the jerkin went over into a low angled flight, a parabolic type curve, rather than a straight line, picking out a single bird at the back of the covey. The grouse began to climb and level out against the descending jerkin. Feeling the pressure, the bird picked up the pace and imperceptibly opened up the distance between itself and the falcon. The young jerkin visibly faltered and halted at the bottom end of his stoop.

This infinitesimally small split second pause gave the grouse time to twist a little and get the wind behind its tail feathers. The jerkin began working hard, pushing and pumping to close the gap. He got very close to a decent striking distance; but within that shear contained space between success and failure, the grouse twisted a little into the wind and quickly mounted above the falcon's head. Clearly it had not been clocking out at a

As the after burners kicked in, the jerkin was left vibrating in the wake of a superb winter-fit adversary; she was most definitely a class game bird at the pinnacle of her instinct and at home in conditions long well known.

top speed. As the after burners kicked in, the jerkin was left vibrating in the wake of a superb winter-fit adversary; she was most definitely a class game bird at the pinnacle of her instinct and at home in conditions long well known.

The jerkin, recognising the impossibility of the situation arched back around on a long, low right-hand turn. To his eternal credit he built up a good head of speed pumping back to position. He was still flying hard as he climbed over the disappointed heads of Frank and his friend. He was slowly swinging around and around in an increasingly tighter set of figure-eight patterns. For such a big falcon, he was lost in the vastness of the landscape and the severity of such elemental forces.

Running along the dyke, the cover was deep and by chance as Frank returned he kicked up a pheasant underneath the still mounting falcon. I have never known a pheasant to be a pest to any longwinger, certainly not in the UK. But then, I have never set foot on such hard conditions solely in pursuit of grouse. These pheasants are totally wild and fine weather-worn examples

of the genus. Nonetheless they still represent unworthy check for the might and power of gyrfalcons and their owners. On the plus side the jerkin was still climbing, still flying and more or less overhead when the inevitable happened.

The hen merely became a crash pad; a piece of broken flotsam and jetsam washed up in the wave of the jerkin's initial strike. By the time I reached them, the frustration and electric tension felt at missing the grouse was plain to see. The jerkin was repeatedly stamping the hen into the ground. With one final blow the pheasant's head was buried in the snow, its body cantilevered into the air amongst a spray of snow and earth. The gyr turned his head skywards and away from the quarry in adrenaline hyped satisfaction. As Frank reached us it was all over, the falcon was feeding and no doubt gaining great psychological strength and satisfaction from a prolonged battle with every conceivable problem nature could throw at him.

With the whole team secure and everyone warming up in the trucks, we trundled across the embankments and crossed out through the farm. The sun was climbing high into the sky, casting ice-white reflections in the snow dust puffed up by the trucks. By this time the wind had pushed the mottled, low cloud out and before us a huge panorama of blue sky and the vast curvature of the earth.

We headed down a road devoid of any trace of black tarmac, packed snow dipped down from small curved drifts either side of the road. Frank pulled ahead and crossed a small creek and called across the radio that he had seen a pair

of ducks sitting tight out of the blast freezing wind. They were swimming contentedly against the eroded wall of a tiny turn in the flow of the water. Frank carried on and we followed, passing quickly so as not to alert them to our potential threat.

The falcon was removed from her cage, the hood struck, a rouse and away she went to the left. The wind briefly caught her at an awkward angle and sent her to the ground for the slightest of moments. From there on in she made a wide initial circle and once on terms with the roar and pace of the pressure, began to mount steadily into the face of the relentless wind.

We all watched her climb slowly and when she was no more than a black dot to the naked eye, the team moved along the road and aimed straight for the creek and its now alert residents. The brace of duck had now evaporated into one, solitary, lone drake. We hopped a bent wire fence and rushed in to flush him as the falcon moved into a perfect position.

As we hollered and shouted, from behind nearly every tight little turn in the stream, a huge flock of ducks seemed to rise and scatter every which way. Some went up wind, some down; the others broke in small groups towards an old farm. There must have been about 15 in total, all quacking and ripping about frantically trying to get the hell out of the way of both humans and a near vertically descending falcon.

One particular duck was flying hard away from me into the wind; she made a quick turn then headed directly back across my line of vision at about 30 feet. In total this took about 5 seconds before the falcon tore across the

duck, bouncing it hard into the snow about 8 feet in front of me.

This initial strike left a twirling cloud of feathers whipping, curling and scattered across the sugared snow. The remaining feathers, still attached to the duck, left the ground wobbling in a dipping stunned flight for the sanctuary of the creek. The falcon mounted again, but in my heightened stupidity I rushed in before she had a chance to reclaim the wind and a decent pitch. It was a very foolish mistake made in the heat of the moment.

There were still many more ducks sitting it out tight, the falcon lunged one into the brook and got herself a douse of water for her troubles. The ducks easily dived and re-launched into the sky over the snow, across the fences and out into the steel blue day; leaving the falcon sitting furious and exhausted on a small snow-covered island in the bubble and gargle of the stream.

It was not however a sad or dejected group that returned to the lodge. Far from it, the education I received in just a few hours was phenomenal. I am used to the fine tuning of a small hawk, but the monumental checks and balances needed for success in this environment was head spinning to the nth degree. Again it comes down to facing experience directly. No book can convey the practical experience of being a first hand witness. No piece of writing, now matter how masterfully written, will ever convince me that this is not so. The sheer effort required and the total understanding of the balance between predator and prey in these conditions was an exemplar of the sport.

I suppose anything that looks ▶

AN AMERICAN ODYSSEY

this easy and flows so smoothly from start to finish can only be understood by falconers who know their sport inside out. On the surface it appears so easy. But underneath lies literally years of patience, observation, failure and an intuitive understanding of how falconry works. Seen in this way, the tools of Frank and his friends' 'modern' trade are not so much more removed from the past than some European traditionalists may think.

After a huge breakfast of eggs, spiced sausage and a round of thanks and goodbyes, it was pretty clear that we had a long journey ahead of us if we were to make it back to Chicago for New Year's Eve. By our estimation we were near Colorado and had about 10 hours to do a 16-hour journey if Judy was to cook us anything to eat. Thanks to a masterful piece of cocked-up map reading on my behalf we arrived back at the small holding to darkness and a few packets of chips. However the adrenaline rush of the journey and the mesmeric spectacle of absolutely text book grouse and duck hawking made us drink several bottles of champagne slightly longer into the night than we had expected.

New Year's Day came and went, by which time we had got ourselves back together and as the chairman of the Great Lakes Falconry Association (GLFA), Craig had arranged to go out club hawking with a bunch of red-tails and a few Harris' hawks. The conditions were absolutely ridiculous. Once again we were in near white-out storm with snow moving left, right and almost horizontal in some instances. But it was the best way to chase away the last remnants of our extended



GLFA member Adam with a fine looking male red-tail.

celebrations. The combination of non-stop passage red-tail action and white-washed horizons lifts the heart of even the hardest falconry snobs I am sure.

The best flights were once again provided by Heather and her monstrous red-tail. But to be fair there were so many rabbits breaking left and right through the blanched reeds and dust-brown trees, even a budgie would have been successful!

As we arrived and made our way across to the members of the GLFA, a rabbit was being pushed out from a deep drainage gully packed with wind-bitten pampas. At least five beaters had shouted up 'HO!' as the red-tail was launched from Adam's fist.

From a good distance and from a high vantage point the male red-tail made a strong, powerful flight at the scuttling rabbit. The deep snow hindered its progress and gave the red-tail the upper hand. In a momentous collision they both came together in a flurry of snow dust and chain-link fence.

As the scene was only a few feet from me, I began taking shots as Adam came running in. In a moment of distracted confusion the red-tail let his concentration slide and away up from his formidable talons the brave rabbit skipped across the snow, under a fold in the fence and deep into the stripling trees on the other side.

Hawks secured, the little gulley running along an old rail track produced another rabbit of equally fit and fantastic enthusiasm. We were aligned along the rusted remains and heavyweight metal of a large locomotive as the shout went up. A supremely fast rabbit popped up and only just missed a battering by a big female red-tail. This flustered the little chap, so he quickly turned right and ran over my feet, then Craig's and over Judy's. Much to my amazement the red-tail picked himself up and continued in a decent chase before raking off into a tree. The jubilant GLFA crowd ran to rattle the reeds and winter brush trying for a re-flush. Unlike the last winter bunny, this one was not so lucky and the red-tail did what they do best, broke through branches and nailed it firmly on the back of the head, forcing part of it through the wafer thin ice holding fast on the reeds.

Once the last of the winter weather had broke back and reduced to mere -20°C wind chill, the score was well and truly in the favour of the hawks. One or two Harris' hawks even braved the conditions to fly from T-perches in a cast. But for them the time for blood in the snow was limited. One looked a little on the low side and after a few flights they were both boxed up as we retired to a large, warm restaurant and finished off the New Year celebrations.

The last day of my trip was dedicated to hunting rabbits with Kirk Williams and his goshawk. Unlike our previous sojourn we were no longer mooching the liminal industrial, various urbane spaces. This time we rolled into a small piece of ground fresh in snow and where

plenty of rabbits congregate.

Similar to much of the Great Lakes land, there were plenty of waist-high marram grass, tiny short dipping banks, hard spindly woods with cuffed and dusted snow drifts. A small creek with ducks and disused old piping and curled up tubing and drainage systems providing ample cover for a plethora of rabbits.

Kirk's hawk was a little bit higher in weight than previously and consequently a little more switched on. An initially blundered slip at duck was quickly turned to gold by a chase on rabbit that was what one would expect from such a formidable predator. Both short lived, quick in the angular motion and final in its execution.

We spent a while searching for a flush but the depth and scope of the branches and small saplings meant that one or two rabbits slipped and slid clean away. In fact the gos was just too wide to give them too much pressure. We dropped down along the bottom of a bank and then circled heavily through a complex mound of bramble. In the middle was a large up-turned and de-rooted tree base. I gave it a hefty kick and sent a rabbit scurrying through a clearing and out into the relative open. The gos lifted and closed the gap quickly. There was a short tussle and the rabbit escaped and ran back beneath the log. Thankfully it stayed stock still as Kirk regained his charge. Another short shove and a longer twisting flight and the gos caught it easily. I had managed to blunder in a running pant through the cover and met up with both the rabbit and hawk in time to quickly dispatch it before Kirk arrived.

It was a fine way to finish, I

had got as close as I could have in the final fleeting moment and the hunt was both fair and square. She was well mannered and took to the dispatch as well as if I was her seasoned team mate. Ultimately I knew this may have been a bit presumptuous, but the hawk needed to kill and to lose its kill twice in one day may well have sent it spiralling into the abyss of cut weight, lack of motivation and further accipiter complexities. As my flight was early the next morning, we said goodbye and headed off back to the smallholding to pack bags and head off for a meal.

All in all this was one of the most intense and educational trips I have had; I covered nearly all the branches of contemporary falconry available. I took in some of the most memorable natural sights the USA has to offer and came away richer for the experience. I have always loved the expanse and generosity of the American culture. But this was certainly one journey through the far reaches of falconry mostly un-available in the UK.

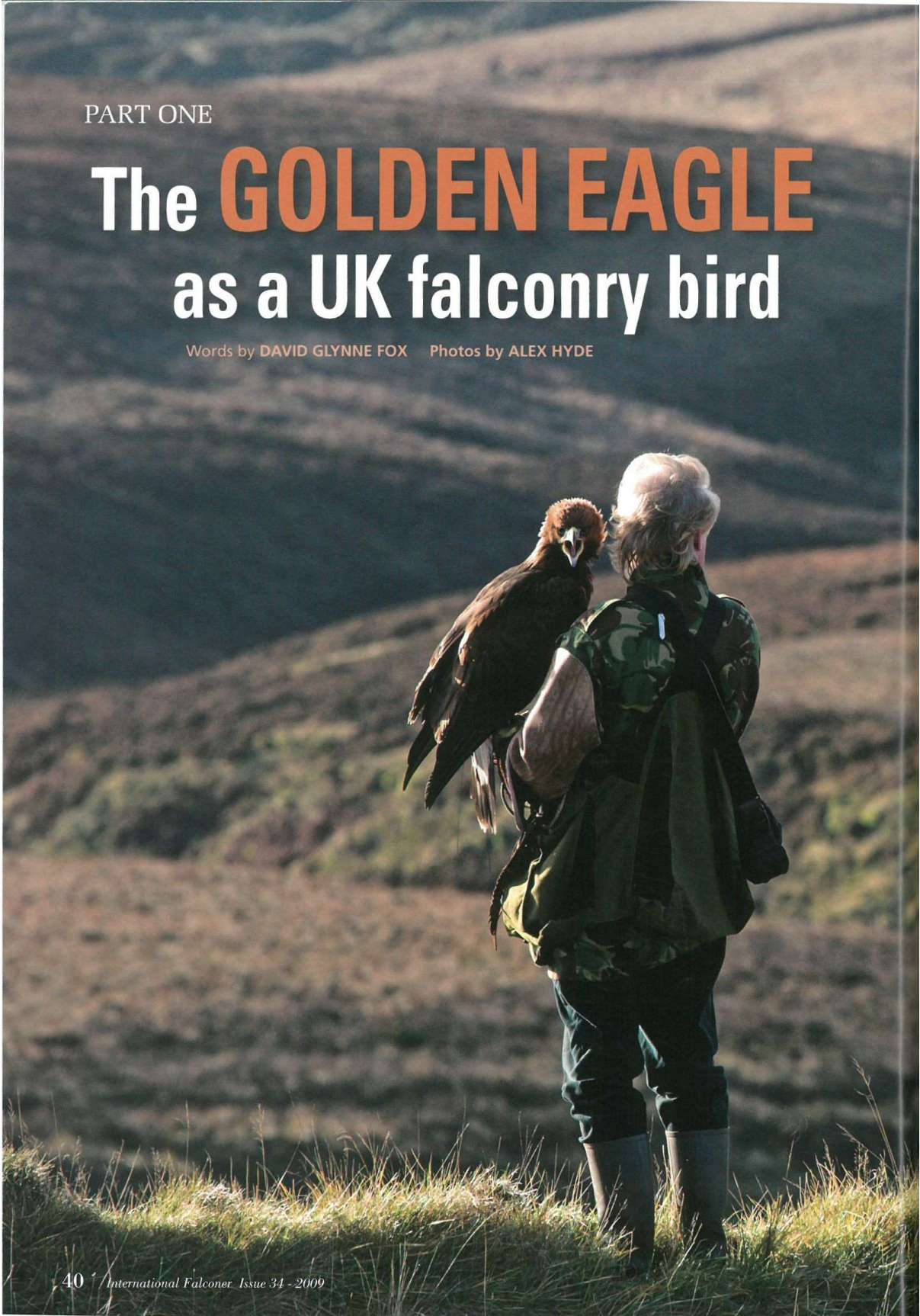
So my heartfelt thanks go to all those people who gave me an abject lesson in how contemporary falconry can be best practiced if trapping traditions remain un-changed and the politics of our sport are wrestled to a favourable position by those who care. ■

Written in memory of Adra who courageously lost her life chasing and fighting a coyote on Craig's smallholding.

PART ONE

The **GOLDEN EAGLE** as a UK falconry bird

Words by DAVID GLYNNE FOX Photos by ALEX HYDE





THE GOLDEN EAGLE (*Aquila chrysaetos*) has long been flown in falconry in far-flung places such as Mongolia and Kazakhstan, usually at such formidable quarry as wolves and foxes, and has even been flown with success in more recent times in parts of Europe, but this merely stems from around the late 1930s. In the UK however, the species has been virtually ignored, except by a perceptual few, until very recently. British falconers in general disdained flying eagles of any type and this was often because of the writings of other well-known falconers. The golden eagle has long been considered to be far too big, heavy and powerful to be of any real use against quarry in these islands and references to them being sluggish, with a slow, heavy flapping flight are commonplace in the literature. I met all of these brick walls from other falconers when I began flying eagles in the early 1960s, and yes, the birds are big, heavy and powerful, but sluggish and of no use in falconry? I don't think so!

Over the years, and with a fair amount of practical experience behind me, I can confidently state that many of the large eagles, the golden in particular, are far from sluggish in the field and will operate successfully in a variety of habitats, including, perhaps surprisingly, open woodland and are excellent falconry birds, but only in the right hands. I heartily concur with the American falconer Joe Atkinson whose viewpoint is that the male golden eagle is the best game hawk around, but then, I too am biased. ▶

THE GOLDEN EAGLE AS A UK FALCONRY BIRD

Because golden eagles are really birds for the specialist, and most certainly not for beginners, I believe it would be advantageous for the introduction or formation of a group catering specifically for the large eagles which could act as an advice centre for those who wish to become involved with these raptors. Personally, I would like to see such an organisation come under the auspices of the British Falconers' Club (BFC) and be represented by the Hawk Board. At the time of writing I understand that a group is in the offing and due to be launched at the Festival of Falconry in Reading in 2009. I have no details of this other than I believe it is to be named The UK Eagle Austringers' Association. In due course, I expect that its remit will be revealed to all and I hope it will follow the foregoing in some way and look forward to seeing it reach fruition. In my view it should encompass all who wish to fly eagles and not for just a chosen few.

There are few places left in Britain today where a trained golden eagle can be flown as it really ought to be, i.e. slope soaring in hill country. Even Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire, once famous for its flights at rooks with peregrine falcons, is but a mere shadow of what it used to be with much of it now enclosed and other parts inaccessible through being owned by the Ministry of Defence for military manoeuvres. Rook hawking here with peregrines is a mere shadow of what it once was. Our wide open spaces are being invaded more and more as leisure time is increased, so in my view, greater than usual

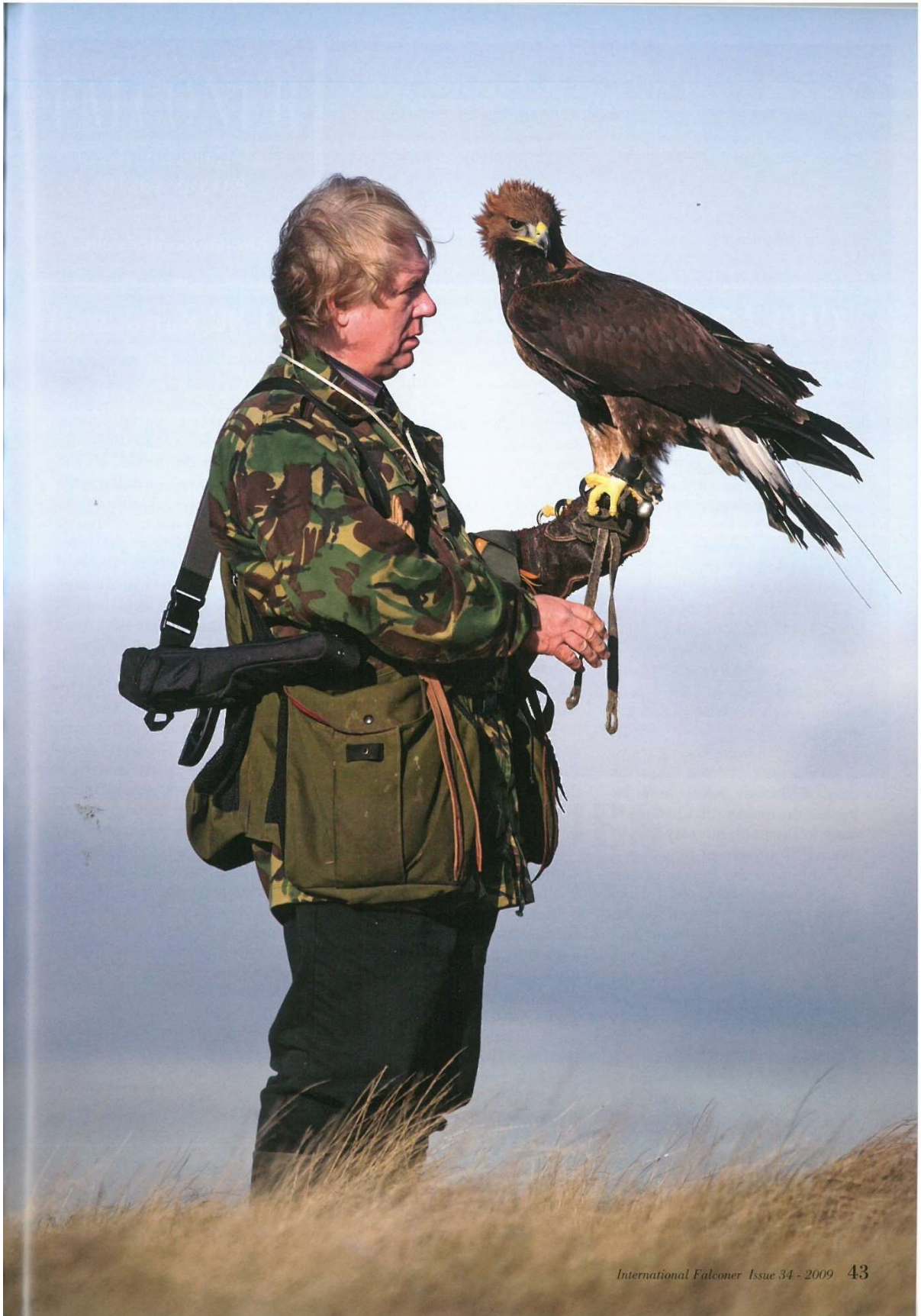
care is going to be required when exercising and hunting with golden eagles. Nowadays I tend to carry my eagles on the fist and identify the target species before release, and on the land at my disposal, this is perhaps the safest method. This does not generally give me the stunning flights I strive for, because often the eagle spots the quarry first and if held back repeatedly for any reason, eagles can become frustrated and aggressive. Flying out of the hood negates the latter problem because the bird cannot bate at what it cannot see and therefore effectively rules out frustration and the resulting aggression. A golden eagle will test the falconer to the limits as it is, without adding further unnecessary complications.

The golden eagle is not just an oversized Harris' hawk, and for those who believe the transition from the latter is going to be an easy ride are in for a real surprise. I must emphasise that not all eagles are of an aggressive nature, but many are, especially when their weight is being reduced for training. Both of my current golden eagles are sweetness and light at their top weight, but are very different characters once in flying trim. As the weight reduces, they become ever more aggressive, grabbing the glove and anything else in their way with unbelievable force. This is why I prefer longer than average jesses. One needs to be able to keep those huge feet under control and short jesses do not really work well enough. One needs to be able to grasp the jesses as quickly as possible because golden eagles are like lightning when it comes to striking with their feet. If one is unfortunate

enough to be grabbed and held, then prising the talons out of the affected portion of the anatomy is reminiscent of attempting to prise the end of a spanner apart, it is almost impossible, and each movement on the part of the austringer results in an ever-tightening embrace. Believe me, I have been there. Another form of aggression that I have witnessed is something that I term 'wing-striking.' This is exactly as it sounds, a rapid downward strike with both wings, often followed by a direct assault. This can even occur when the bird is hooded and is something to be aware of.

Another strange trait, which appears to be linked to aggression is that at feeding times, some eagles become almost rigid and appear to be unable to grip the glove and stand properly. This frightened the hell out of me when I first encountered the phenomenon and believed that I must have reduced the bird's weight too far, but this is not so and has happened on numerous occasions when I am fully aware of the bird's correct flying-weight. My current male seems especially prone to it. He will make a lunge at my hawking vest where he knows his food is stored, and when this fails, he will hang upside down from the glove in this ridiculous frozen posture. Upon lifting him back on the glove, his legs appear rigid and remain so until I allow him time to calm down. Usually the best procedure is to hood him, because he will only make another attempt at my hawking vest. Once he calms down, he is fine and flies well, but this is something to be aware of as I have never seen this mentioned elsewhere. The only explanation ►

The author with his current golden eagle.



THE GOLDEN EAGLE AS A UK FALCONRY BIRD

I can deduce from all this is that it is brought on by aggression and this is perhaps best dealt with by getting the eagle flying at and taking quarry as soon as possible, for this does appear to channel much of the aggressive behaviour in many eagles. A male golden eagle is usually considered to be far less aggressive than the female, many books of the past indeed allude to this, yet my male is as aggressive as any female I have ever experienced, the only difference is that he is somewhat smaller, but make no mistake, a male is still a large bird and they can be very intimidating, especially to newcomers to eagle flying.

Regarding quarry species, many ask why I primarily fly at rabbits, with the odd hare now and again and not at foxes or roe deer. Firstly, it is illegal to hunt deer in England with eagles and I have yet to visit the great field meets in Austria and the Czech Republic where these flights are so commonplace, so it would not be worthwhile training any of my eagles for the flight at deer. Although foxes may be legitimate quarry in England, I have to say in all honesty that in almost fifty years of hawking, I can count on the fingers of one hand how many foxes I have flushed in broad daylight, which would have made a suitable slip. I have seen hundreds of foxes of course, but mostly in towns and gardens or too far away or on the opposite side of a river to risk a flight. I caught one once, by accident with Sable, my big female *berkut* but I have never tried since. The golden eagle is a match for any fox, but that does not rule out the fact that this animal is formidable and quite capable of doing damage to the bird with those strong jaws. Quite

frankly, I have never desired to risk my valuable birds by flying at a quarry that I consider to be dangerous to the eagle and therefore run unnecessary risks. But many do and I take my hat off to them. An eagle that is to be kept for foxes should be wedded to them and not used for smaller quarry. A whole fox pelt for use as a ground lure will also be necessary, just as a roe deer pelt is required for the flight at this large animal. Regarding the flights at fox and wolf in Mongolia and Kazakhstan, all I can say here is that there appears to be little else inhabiting these desolate regions worth flying a golden eagle at, so little choice remains for these eagle hunters. I personally believe the maxim that a falconer should enter his hawks at the quarry he has most access to. Two or three foxes on one's land are unlikely to make much of a season, whereas hundreds of rabbits certainly will. The fact that my eagles do not take on foxes or deer, despite their capability is of little importance to me. I have thoroughly enjoyed many flights at lesser game and continue to do so.

The flight at hares is not without risk either. I remember a flight many years back when a friend of mine, David (Slim) Symons and I were out flying two eagles. He had a female Bonelli's eagle named Wong Dai, (she came from Hong Kong) and I was flying Ajax, my female imperial eagle. Slim's bird took off after a hare and bound to it, but there was a tremendous struggle and it was difficult to observe who was getting the bigger mauling, eagle or hare. Eventually, the hare, with one almighty kick, sent the eagle reeling and the former made its escape. The eagle was later

found to have damaged a tendon in the carpal joint of the wing so severely that the bird was unable to fly ever again. And this from a single kick from a hare! I have never forgotten that incident.

If reading the foregoing has deterred some from thinking about taking on a golden eagle then all well and good. They were probably never going to enjoy the relationship anyway and valuable eagles may have been saved from ruination. I repeat, it takes a special kind of motivation to successfully fly eagles and without this, all the other necessary requirements will never really fall into place. But for me, and others of similar mind, the golden eagle rules supreme. The advice I would give to anyone considering taking on a golden eagle would be to ask themselves why they desire to fly this powerful and potentially dangerous raptor in the first place and before embarking on such a project, obtain any help and advice from experienced eagle austringers. This of course is where the UK Eagle Austringers' Association may well prove to be such an asset when it is launched. My undying hope is that eagles, and the golden eagle in particular, continue to be successfully and safely flown in British falconry circles. ■

To be continued.

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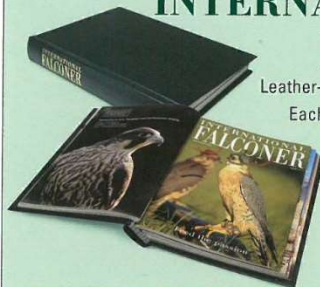
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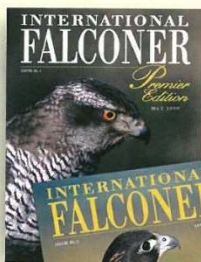
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The Highest of Highs, The Lowest of Lows

or, "What goes down, must come up!"

Words by ANNE PRICE

"Larkyn!" I yelled. She looked up at me for a brief moment, but I was already crying and yelling to Shelley with relief. The amazing thing was that she was, in fact, exactly where the signal said she was the whole time. But now I had a bigger problem: that chamber was at least 40 feet deep, with sides that resembled a stretched out squeeze-box. It was 6:00pm, and the light was fading fast. Looking around the inside, I realised there was absolutely no way to get down to my bird.

SHE WAS SITTING on a narrow ledge where the sides transitioned from the vertical zig-zag, to the slanted, funnel-shaped chute at the base. I could see pigeons below her, and others sitting on some kind of torn, rusted edge, about 6 feet above her. Those same one-inch diameter braces ran perpendicularly across the chamber, which was approximately 6x8 feet in size. A pigeon could easily fly down onto those braces, then drop to the edge where she was sitting,



Photo: courtesy of Anne Price.

and fly down even further quite easily. But a falcon, not being used to dark, cramped spaces, and being unable to take off vertically and fly straight up several feet...escape would have been impossible. There was a huge, ragged hole, probably 4 feet long and a couple of feet across, that the pigeons were

probably using, as it gave them easy and direct access to the braces. Larkyn must have chased a starling near the top, which immediately dove for the cover it knew well, trapping Larkyn inside.

First, I tried lowering down my lure, but the line (a Flexi-Lead leash) wouldn't reach far

enough. Shelley found some baling twine, and as she reached up the slanted roof to hand it to me, commented, "I am going to have to SERIOUSLY re-think this falconry thing!" I replied that anyone actually WANTING to take up this sport was clearly insane! With the twine, my lure was long enough. If only Larkyn would bind to the meat, hang onto the lure, and I could pull her up, at least high enough that if she let go, she might see enough light and fly out of the large hole in the roof. But she would have nothing to do with the lure. I whistled like a fool, but she just stared at it, then hopped away when it got close enough to almost hit her. Keeping it under control, dropping it between the braces, and then bringing it near her were no small feats either, especially with the ubiquitous pigeons smacking and flapping everywhere. After a few minutes, it was quite clear this wasn't going to work.

In real panic now, I called a friend and experienced merlin hawker. "You mean she's down IN the chamber?!" he exclaimed. His suggestion was to lower a *bal-chatri* with sparrows down to the bottom, and hope that by the next morning she'd be hungry enough to jump on, and then I could pull her up. Yeah, theoretically it could work, but I knew of only one person that might have sparrows this late in the season, and it was a long shot. And, it meant leaving my bird in that cold, dark metal box overnight. My heart sank. "You're sure I can't call 911, like when fire departments used to save cats stuck in trees?" I pleaded.

We left the feedlot at 7:30pm, after updating my husband as to the situation. My mind raced, as

Shelley and I tried to come up with a plan. I called my friend Jen, the falconer I hoped still had some sparrows and a *bal-chatri*. As we 21st century humans often say, "What DID we do before cell phones?!" I followed Shelley home, as she had a spelunking lamp that I thought I would need the next day. She had to go to work the following morning, unusual for her on a Sunday, and she looked me straight in the eye and said, "Don't give up hope; it's dark, she's not going anywhere, we know exactly where she is, and you'll get her out tomorrow morning". I confess I did not share her confidence.

As I headed to Broomfield to get Jen's *bal-chatri* (I am now in possession of one, but wasn't in April), Shelley called my cell phone and reminded me that one of my bird vets was an avid climber. "If only we had a rope or harness, this would be so easy to get down into!" I had said about a hundred times while on that roof. Of course! I knew Matt had all the gear, and he even lived on my side of town. I left him a voice mail, and arrived at Jen's house around 9:30pm, emotionally and physically exhausted. She, her boyfriend and parents, were enjoying some conversation and wine, and I felt terrible about intruding on their evening.

Covered in bird poop, filthy and dejected, I staggered up to Jen's apartment, where her mother, whom I know, met me with a glass of wine and hug (but not before I insisted on removing my fleece which had the bulk of the offending matter plastered on it). It was all I could do to not start crying again. Do guy falconers have this problem, like ever? I re-explained the situation to Jen, which was much easier

to do in person instead of on a cell phone with a spotty signal. Of course, her last sparrow had died two days earlier. When I lamented for the 101st time that evening, that if I only had climbing gear, I could rescue my bird, Jen's boyfriend Nick looked up and said, "I know someone with climbing equipment."

The next thing I knew, Nick was on the phone with a guy named Jared, whom he and Jen had known since 6th grade. Jared was not only a climber, he was a certified ropes technician and alpine rescue climber. Suddenly, plans were being made, five conversations were going on at once, and then my cell phone rang. It was Matt, my vet, calling me to say that he wanted to help, but was in Missouri until Monday. It was Jared, or nothing. Nick looked me in the eye and said, "Jared wants to know what time you want to meet tomorrow morning." For a second, all I could do was blink stupidly at him. I couldn't believe there was somebody I didn't know, willing to drive from Parker to Nowheresville eastern Colorado on a Sunday morning to help some crazy woman try to rescue a bird!

We agreed to meet at 8:00 am off the interstate the next morning. After Nick hung up with Jared, he stopped me as I was gathering my things and warned me that Jared took his work seriously, and if he felt the situation was unsafe or too risky, he wouldn't go up. "Of course", I replied. "This is not worth anyone dying or getting seriously hurt over." But even as I uttered the words, thinking of my kids, my family, I thought about Larkyn stuck in that hole, doomed to starve to death.

What would you do, how ▶

far would YOU go to save your bird?

I called Shelley and updated her on the plan, arrived home around 11:15pm, ate a bit of food and collapsed into bed. My eyes flew open around 1:30am, and I tossed and turned until about 5:00am. The folks at my neighbourhood doughnut shop were surprised to see me so early on a Sunday, but mercifully, Brad just filled my cup and wished me well, asking no further questions. I met Jared, his wife Heather, Nick and Jen at a Taco Bell, and thanked everyone profusely for their help. We arrived at the feedlot around 8:30am, and the first thing I did was jump out of the truck and flip on my receiver. Immediately, that precious beep sounded, loud and clear, in exactly the same place as the day before.

"Now, she's WHERE, exactly?" Nick inquired. I explained the set-up to the guys, while Heather announced that she would be photographing from the ground with her new camera. Jen, who is not fond of heights, declared she would be Manager of Ground Operations. Once again, Jared asked me if he should go down the hopper, instead of me. I explained that Larkyn would never tolerate his approach, if she were alive, and really, I wasn't afraid of the descent. I was more afraid of finding my bird dead, or gravely wounded by an owl. It seemed to take an eternity for Nick, Jared and I to climb up to the roof of the hopper, and bring all the ropes, climbing gear, etc., to the top. At least this morning, there was no wind. When all three of us were staged on the edge of the roof, and the ladder, Jared took one look at the decrepit scene before him, turned to me and said,

"You were out HERE, yesterday, not tied off or anything?". "Well, yeah," I replied, sheepishly.

Finally, we were ready. Jared had rigged everything on the struts and braces under the infamous catwalk above us, insisting on tying me off before letting me peer down the hole to spot Larkyn. She was still there, amongst the pigeons, though she flew out of view the minute the first rope went down. The tricky part was getting everyone and everything into a safe position for descent; there was barely enough room for me up there the day before; with three of us and hundreds of feet of rope, I couldn't keep anything straight. Jared explained how he and Nick would lower me down, so, weighted with my vest, climbing harness, and a ridiculous amount of hooks, loops, carabineers and various doo-dads, I squeezed into the hole feet-first, and soon found myself dangling and rotating in the space above the birds below.

I've only rappelled one other time in my life, exactly 20 years ago when I was in college. I was with a military fraternity behind the third Flatiron in Boulder, and it was an exciting afternoon. I have since outgrown the need for this kind of excitement, but at least my legs were still able to keep me fairly stable as the light grew dim and the smell of pigeon droppings grew more potent. Jared shouted instructions to me, and I replied back. Looking down, the pigeons had moved to the bottom of the chamber, but I could no longer see Larkyn. At last, I spotted her near the bottom, but on the opposite side of a narrow, pyramid-shaped wall which separated the two sections. This entire area had not been visible to me from the

top. The hopper itself was a sealed 6x8 feet chamber, but the bottom part funneled down to an area only about 4 x 4 feet, which actually connected to another identical chamber to the south, separated by that pyramid-shaped wall about 5 feet tall.

I called out to her, whistling softly and talking. Often she whines and chatters when she hears me, but she just stared at me, subdued and silent. "Lower!" I hollered. I adjusted the lamp on my head, but staring at her face, her eyes seemed so big and dark, and her face seemed very white. I thought the lack of light, sleep, and stress were playing havoc with my eyes. Closer and closer I moved, trying not to swing or make any sudden movements. I stared at her, trying to discern if she was hurt, when suddenly, despite all evidence to the contrary, I came to an inescapable conclusion:

I was not looking at my merlin. The bird in front of me was a male prairie falcon!!

For a moment, the chamber seemed to spin, and I literally blinked and shook my head. It was a prairie all right, with a big white throat, hugely-pronounced malar marks, and large, scared eyes. I instantly decided that he had eaten Larkyn, and made a mental note to start looking for a leg with a transmitter on it. "Jared, you are NEVER going to believe this....there is ANOTHER falcon stuck down here! Tell Jen there's a tiercel prairie in here, but I'm still looking for Larkyn!" I continued to peer around the inside of the two chambers. Where the devil was my merlin?

Probably two minutes later, I found her, for real this time. She was at the very bottom of the opposite chamber, but on the same side as the prairie. She

**As I got closer to her,
the prairie bailed, and
all hell broke loose with
pigeons, the prairie
and feathers flying
everywhere.**

was up against a wall, standing in what we soon found out was pigeon poop about 3 feet deep. Her right eye was closed, and I feared for a moment that she was badly hurt. It turned out only to be a pigeon feather stuck to it, but as I got closer to her, the prairie bailed, and all hell broke loose with pigeons, the prairie and feathers flying everywhere. When the dust settled, the prairie was somewhere behind me, but Larkyn hadn't moved. I still wasn't low enough to stand, so Jared inched me down, and my feet sank in the layered muck, alternately dry, then mushy. I garnished my fist, trying to figure out if I should try to grab the antenna on her transmitter (which was close, and visible), or try to reach her jesses, which were completely out of sight.

Suddenly, something startled the prairie, he whipped underneath my right arm, and ran right into Larkyn, who turned and hissed at him, eyes and mouth open wide. Both falcons stood staring at me, panting at my feet. I was concerned that he might kill her; looking at the two of them side by side, I realised that visually, he was only about 50 per cent larger than she was, and nearly the exact same colour. The falcon I spotted on the ledge from the roof the day before, had not been Larkyn, it had been this prairie. It all made sense, as the scene replayed in my head. He was about the

size of the pigeons; she would have been much smaller. His back was darker than hers, and I should have noticed the obvious malar stripes. But what were the chances of finding a falcon that was not my bird at the bottom of this hell-hole?

I needed more rope, and once I could not only stand, but bend down as well, I grabbed Larkyn on the second try by the tip of one jess. She yelled at me once, more of a bark really, then settled down to eat. I hooked her up to my glove, breathing a huge sigh of relief once I knew that I truly had her under control. Other than being covered with tiny flecks of blood and lots of pigeon poop on her tail, she was unharmed. I let her eat for about a minute, then hooded her.

My next challenge was vaulting back over the rusted wall separating the two chambers, so I could be pulled straight up. Problem was, I was now minus a hand and arm, and it was the stronger of my two limbs. It was while scrambling up over the top, assisted by the guys pulling me from above, that I sustained my only real injury of the day. I managed to get one foot up, requested to be pulled up a couple of feet, and when the guys yanked, I was pulled somewhat up, and sideways. I swung across the entire north chamber, heading for the side, but leading with my left arm. I threw my right arm up and tried to stop the impact, but realised my left side would still hit first. I turned my left shoulder and shoved my fist across my chest to prevent Larkyn from hitting the wall, so of course, my left elbow hit first, with a bang. "You alright down there?" shouted Jared. "I'm great!" I replied, wincing and rubbing my elbow

with my right hand.

The guys determined that I could not use the ascenders and loops which they had clipped to my harness, because I had only one free hand. So after a shouted conversation, I unclipped one rope and carabineer, sending it to the surface. Nick and Jared would pull me up by hand, no small feat even for two guys in their 20s. By about 10:15am, I was near the top, and I pulled off my left glove (which was actually Jen's, as I had absentmindedly flown out of the house without mine) with Larkyn attached, and transferred her to Nick. Being the boyfriend of a falconer, he knew how to hold her and I knew she'd be perfectly safe with him. I then requested they lower me back down again so I could catch the prairie. I saw the guys exchange quick glances, and I'm sure they thought I had lost my last brain cell. But how could I leave him there, doomed to the same fate I had feared for my bird?

Catching him was easy, but this time I only had a nylon and Gortex climbing glove on my left hand, and the same leather glove on my right. The prairie had had just about enough of this crazy intruder in a space he couldn't escape, but he could no more climb the slanted, smooth, metal sides than I could. When he scrambled over my head, and slid down the wall behind me, coming to rest almost at my feet, I just twisted over and backwards, grabbing him behind his right shoulder and neck area. He hissed and did everything in his power to bite me, but even the thin climbing glove afforded some protection. I looked the little guy over, feeling his keel. He was not hog fat, but not starving either. With the exception of a broken tail feather on the right

side, he was fine. How long had he been down there? There were pigeons to eat, if he could catch them, and I suppose the blood would provide moisture, but still....how long would a falcon survive under such conditions? I remembered that earlier in March, one of my flights had been blown by a tiercel prairie busting the starlings, slicing through the pens like a knife. Shelley and I saw him go in, but not come up, nor fly out the opposite side, so we imagined he caught something and we simply missed the end of the flight. Was he the same prairie falcon from that day?

Almost as an afterthought, I had tucked Larkyn's leash into one of my vest pockets early in the morning. I took it out and hog-tied the prairie's tarsi together, then made another loop like one of the knots I had seen Jared tie above me. Finally I clipped him to my vest with a carabineer, just in case I needed both my hands. I announced I was ready to Jared, who told me that this time he'd be pulling me up alone, but using one of the ascenders to lock me into place. Bottom line, it was going to be easier on him, but take longer for me to be pulled up. I hung there in the space of the chamber, bracing myself with both legs, and laying the little prairie on my right thigh to support his back. He hissed and panted every time I had to change positions, but remained quiet.

About twenty minutes later, we were at the top. Jared grabbed my arms and my harness, and I flopped onto the deck like a fish falling out of a net. I was in the process of untying the prairie's tarsi, demonstrating how much bigger he was than a merlin, when Jared asked if he could

touch the falcon, and would it bite him? Unbeknownst to me, Nick was behind us both, with Larkyn still on his fist, with a big cheesy grin, nodding "Oh, yeah, that sucker WILL bite you!" And, of course, he did, in a most ungrateful manner.

We yelled down to the ladies below that we were about to release the prairie, and with a toss to the west, Heather actually captured a shot of him in flight. And pretty poor flight it was....he was flying like Woodstock from the Peanuts cartoons, and with a very heavy, sluggish wing beat. However, he headed straight for the exact same telephone pole where we had seen the tiercel prairie on March 16 (this is why we keep good logs). I am convinced it was the same bird, and he stayed on that pole for a good half-hour before taking off again.

Nick handed Larkyn off to me, once my safety rope was removed, and I slowly climbed down the ladder, at times using one finger from my left hand for support, and wrapping my entire right arm around the rungs of the ladder. I didn't care; I could have climbed that hopper at least twice more, I was so happy. Near the bottom, I handed Larkyn off to Jen, and asked her to take off the transmitter, and try to clean her up a bit. I went back up part of the way, to grab ropes and other gear from Nick. Finally, we were all back down, and I went to speak with a couple of the guys who had arrived for work and were obviously wanting to know what was going on around the abandoned mill. It definitely helped being able to turn around and point out the prairie falcon just a few dozen yards away on the telephone pole, who then chose that moment to take off

to the east, somewhat like the proverbial bat out of hell.

I thanked the guys once again, then we all caravanned back to our meeting spot, for a bit of a celebratory lunch. As soon as I had a strong enough signal, I called Shelley and told her the good news, warning her that I had one heck of a story to tell. I think Nick put it best, when, riding in the back of my truck, he declared, "Well, that pretty much went flawlessly, and I can't believe it actually WORKED!"

As for Larkyn, her weight that night definitely indicated that she had indeed caught a starling the previous afternoon/evening, even accounting for the small amount of food I fed her in the hopper. I've explained the hazards of the roof area to the lot manager, and I'm hoping that we can get at least some kind of net or temporary cover over the top to prevent any other raptors from becoming trapped until the structure can be torn down. Some may say the chances of such a thing happening again are remote, but as far as I'm concerned, she caught two starlings at/in that mill, twice in a row, and I am NOT about to tempt fate a third time, even though it's a great, almost perfect place to fly.

What a way to end the season...the best of ways, still in possession of my bird. My eternal and most profound thanks to Jared and Heather, Nick and Jennifer, Shelley, and last, but not least, St. Tryphon! ■



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