

Hands-on veterinary training for “female falconers”

John and Margaret Cooper describe their recent experience.

The sport of falconry has been practised for centuries. Women have always played a part. Indeed, *The Boke of Saint Albans* (1486), probably the earliest published work in English about falconry – which includes a section on the diseases of hawks – is generally attributed to Dame Juliana Berners, who was born in 1388 and was an English writer on heraldry and hunting.

She would have known that hawking was carried out in England four centuries earlier and she might have been aware of 10th-century Saxon Queen Ecgwynna, a painting of whom, with a hawk feeding on her fist, is to be seen in Milton Abbey, Dorset.

Women often featured in hawking parties in the Middle Ages, usually flying a merlin, which is sometimes designated the “lady’s hawk”.

Before the Second World War, a few ladies attended falconry meetings on Salisbury Plain and elsewhere. One was Jeannie Knight (later Mrs Jeannie Knocker), daughter of the legendary naturalist and falconer Captain Charles (C. W. R.) Knight. We knew Mrs Knocker, who lived in Kenya, and recall how interested in falconry she remained right up until she died in her 90s in 2020.

Notwithstanding this, until about 40 years ago the sport of falconry was dominated by men. When the senior author (JEC) joined the British Falconers’ Club in 1961, he was only aware of two lady members. They were, however, both forceful and determined women who were eminent in the world of wildlife.

Phyllis Barclay-Smith, CBE (1902-1980), was a British ornithologist and the head of the International Council for Bird Preservation (ICBP, now *BirdLife International*). Frances Pitt (1888-1964) was a British naturalist and photographer who wrote many books and articles about the lives of creatures based on her observations in the wild and of nursing injured animals.

In recent years, the situation has changed greatly in Britain and women have not only flown hawks, but also provided tuition and published excellent books on falconry and birds of prey.



Margaret with a trained Harris's hawk (*Parabuteo unicinctus*).

An organisation specifically for lady falconers was quite an innovation in its time. The Female Falconers Club (FFC) – www.femalefalconersclub.co.uk – has as its main aim to connect female falconers of all ages and abilities across the United Kingdom. It organises training events, social gatherings and field meetings and promotes good practice through shared learning, encouraging new generations to keep the tradition of falconry alive through hunting with hawks, display flying, education, breeding birds of prey and raptor conservation programmes.

Hands-on tuition

Earlier this year we received an invitation from the FFC to attend their annual weekend conference in September. Our remit was to give a lecture and to organise hands-on practical tuition to attendees about the health of birds of prey; in particular, by teaching how to examine “mutes” (the falconer’s word for faeces/droppings), “castings” (pellets) and feathers.

We accepted readily. We explained that we would bring various samples ourselves but suggested that it would be good, if possible, to have some castings and mutes from members’ birds, either collected at the FFC meeting itself or brought with attendees from home. Conscious of current concerns about health and welfare, we compiled some guidelines for those collecting and handling such



John (centre) watches as work starts on castings (pellets).

samples. We also put together a risk assessment for our practical session, based on similar occasions in the past.

The conference was held at Dovedale House in Ilam, near Ashbourne in Derbyshire. The 24 FFC members who attended were not only practising falconers; they included many keen bird-keepers, naturalists, and managers of wild bird rehabilitation centres, together providing a wide range of experience and knowledge.

As a prelude to our practical session, we put a display

of literature and equipment outside the lecture room. This was designed to whet the appetites of the attendees and prepare them for what was in store.

Practical tuition occupied most of the Saturday afternoon. To start things rolling, we gave a short introductory talk about our background (we, the Coopers, have been involved with birds of prey since we were undergraduates in the 1960s). It gave us pleasure to refer in our presentation to our friend and pioneer "female falconer" Mrs Jeannie Knocker – see earlier.

John explained that prevention of disease in hawks was best achieved by regular health monitoring: careful observation of the bird, a routine task which falconers do very well, coupled with examination of samples that could be collected without handling the birds – namely, freshly-voided "mutes", regurgitated "castings" and dropped feathers. Naked-eye examination could usefully be supplemented with investigation using hand-lenses and microscopes.

Margaret pointed out another reason for encouraging

Prestige Medical
PART OF **Tuttnauer** LTD.

Receive £300 FREE
consumables with T-Top Autoclave Purchase

T-Top Autoclave

Efficiency with maximum reliability

**Designed to Meet Your Healthcare
Clinics' Everyday Sterilization Needs**



SPECIAL OFFER
T-Top £3,500 +Vat
+
£ 300 Free consumables



Tuttnauer tabletop autoclaves

feature advanced technology for traceability and documentation, using T-Connect, a cloud based IoT solution

- ★ Full maintenance diagnostics, so you're aware of what the technical issues are.
- ★ Access all documentation remotely anytime, anywhere.
- ★ Monitoring every system for remote diagnostics, vastly increasing uptime.

Phone: +44 (0) 1254 682 622 | sales@prestigemical.co.uk

responsible keepers to perform initial, relatively simple tests themselves was the rising costs of veterinary treatment and the legal duty to provide for the welfare needs of falconers' and rehabilitators' birds. Some veterinary surgeons, recognising the financial pressures on owners of less usual species, were already advocating less expensive in-house tests – for instance, for clients who keep reptiles. The FFC workshop therefore aimed to demonstrate some of the basic health-monitoring steps that bird of prey owners could undertake themselves.

The hands-on practical session that followed enabled the participants to observe, describe and examine mutes, castings and feathers from their own and a whole range of other birds, some kindly provided by our friend, falconer Graham Wellstead.

The falconers were divided into six groups, each working on a table in the grounds of Dovedale House, appropriately clad in plastic aprons and with a generous supply of gloves. One person served as scribe and note-taker, using a laboratory form and a clipboard.

Equipment for examination was provided, including Petri dishes, spatulae, stirrers, scoops, scissors, forceps, lenses and simple microscopes. We were pleased that the mild weather meant we could perform most of the investigations out-of-doors, using "field" techniques that we, the Coopers, employ regularly in our work in East Africa.



Kestrel imping in progress. The new feather is being attached to the shaft of the old.

Practical work in groups proved very popular and great fun. Participants initially searched wet preparations of mutes and feather specimens for parasites and abnormalities using hand-lenses and the simple "field"

Helping vets, helping pets

Preventing problems with Puppy Academy

Puppy Academy is free for Napo members and helps owners get to grips with puppy training and prevent problems before they start.

- Almost half of accident claims are puppies <6 months
- 73% of owners find puppy training the most stressful part of being an owner

Puppy Academy features live online courses led by vets and animal behaviourists. Including:

- Toilet training
- Feeding & nutrition
- First aid & health checks at home
- Walking & recall and more

Fast, fuss-free claims

We know owners and vet staff alike are frustrated by clunky and long-winded claims. That's why we created our vet portal.

- Submit a claim online in <5 minutes
- Claims paid in 1.5 weeks on average (Whether that's to you or your client!)



Find out more at napo.pet/vetedge



Detailed investigation of prepared samples using a stereo microscope, a light box and a compound microscope.

microscopes. The latter were monocular, mirrored instruments, originally used in secondary schools and kindly provided by Fraser Smith, that could operate *al fresco*.

Investigations

Hand-lenses, later a light box, were used to investigate normal and abnormal feathers using transmitted light. Following initial investigations outside, the groups brought their specimens into Dovedale House, where there was mains electricity, and were shown – and practised for themselves – more detailed examination using a stereo (dissecting) microscope, a light box and a compound microscope.

Castings had been soaked in advance, making it easier for them to be analysed and examined. One from a free-living owl provided much fascination and interest. Careful dissection by one team of participants showed it to comprise hair and bones from wild rodents. An almost complete skeleton was assembled, enabling the rodent to be provisionally identified as a field vole (*Microtus agrestis*).

We well know that clearing up after a practical session can take a lot of time, especially hygienically disposing of samples, but the female falconers took it all in their stride and got everything done before we two had had

time to recover from our exertions!

Ours was not the only lively event at the conference. Charlie Heap, the owner and director of the National Centre for Birds of Prey in North Yorkshire, gave an animated “chat”, with slides about his involvement in falconry and working with birds of prey. Montse Rey gave a talk about the forces behind avian flight which helped explain how shape, weight and speed affect birds; Naomi Hayne presented an overview of the different dog breeds commonly used in falconry and demonstrated training techniques and exercises that could be used from a puppy to a fully-seasoned dog; and Amy Nicklin showed participants the finer points of lure swinging!

On Sunday morning a small group gathered to watch a kestrel (*Falco punctatus*) being ringed and one of its tail feathers “imped”. The latter term refers to the repair of damaged plumage by grafting an intact piece of feather from another bird, usually a healthy feather dropped during the moult.

William Shakespeare was familiar with the term and sometimes used it metaphorically. In *Richard II* Act 2, the Earl of Northumberland urges his followers to “imp out our drooping country's broken wing” by rebelling against the monarch.

John E. Cooper, DTVM, FRCPath, FRSB, HonFFFLM, FRCVS, and **Margaret E. Cooper**, LLB, FLS, HonFFFLM, HonFRCPath, are a husband and wife team: John, who has had a lifelong interest in natural history, trained as a veterinary surgeon and is now a specialist pathologist with particular interests in wildlife and exotic species, tropical diseases and comparative medicine; Margaret is a lawyer who qualified originally as a solicitor and has made the study of animal and conservation law her special interest.

Network to foster innovation in animal well-being

A new “network” called Animal Health Angels has been set up with the aim of connecting investors and early-stage animal health businesses across Europe.



The co-founders, Nick Park and Wendy Furness, describe it as a pioneering initiative led by a team of experienced veterinary surgeons and accomplished animal health industry experts, which seeks to connect visionary entrepreneurs with the resources and guidance necessary to develop innovative solutions that enhance the well-being of animals across species in the UK and Europe.

The organisation states that it is committed to promoting sustainable practices and safeguarding the environment while promoting the long-term well-being of animals, and is a signatory to the Investing in Women Code.

■ www.animalhealthangels.com