

# Irish hawking Club Journal 2016

The Irish Hawking Club is a member of F.A.C.E. and the International Association for Falconry and Conservation of Birds of Prey.



Shipe Hawking  
2014

J.B. Keirman





# IRISH HAWKING CLUB

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## IRISH HAWKING CLUB

### POLICY AND OBJECTIVES STATEMENTS

The Irish Hawking Club is dedicated to the sport and practice of falconry and to the conservation and dissemination of knowledge of birds of prey. Membership is open to those, who support or practice the pursuit of Falconry to the highest standards and traditions. Objectives of the Club are;

To represent Falconry throughout Ireland and to foster International co-operation in order to maintain the sport, art and practice of taking quarry in its natural state.

To preserve and encourage Falconry within the context of sustainable and judicious use of wildlife.

To foster good relations and co-operation with all National hunting organisations with like objectives.

To encourage conservation, the ecological and veterinary research of birds of prey and to promote, under scientific guidance, native propagation for Falconry and the rehabilitation of injured birds of prey.

To monitor National laws in order to permit the pursuit and perpetuation of falconry.

To require the observation of all laws and regulations relating to falconry, hunting, conservation and culture with regard to the taking, import, and keeping of birds of prey, the hunting of quarry species and the right of access to land.

To promote and uphold a positive image of falconry with specialist organisations or statutory bodies which regulate or otherwise affect falconry.

## Signing off...



2005. I was just back from 24 months in the southern hemisphere. Liam O'Broin rang to say he was coming up to Dublin. Could we meet? How about lunch? How was Ecuador? And would I fancy taking on the Journal and Newsletter? I cautiously accepted, liking the sound of both the challenge and the opportunity to learn some layout skills.

Eleven years, ten journals, a glut of newsletters, hundreds of pages, zillions of emails, countless headaches, the odd sore neck and day of crashing software later and the time has come for the IHC Journal to undergo a moult. And given that my ten years as IHC Editor was preceded by another seven of committee duty, I feel I've earned a break.

And besides, it's time for somebody else to take on this annual which, as Director Don Ryan puts it, is the historical document of the Club's existence. It's crucially important for every publication that they're regularly refreshed with a new look and feel to prevent them becoming stale. For continuity, I kept this style throughout my tenure. Whoever sits in this chair after me must be mindful of breathing fresh air into the edition while keeping the fundamentals in place.

My vision for the journal was for it to not only speak to falconers of vintage but also newcomers. There is great cross-pollination in international falconry, and my increasing involvement in IAF means I have the great pleasure of interacting with falconers from across the globe. This rubbed off to the point that I wanted the Journal to have a worldly feel so the Irish reader could feel part of something expansive. The global community of falconry has consolidated in recent years, largely thanks to IAF's efforts to achieve UNESCO inscription in some 13 countries, and as the annual document of Irish Falconry, the IHC Journal must include voices and colours from friends overseas.

Before I sign off, some thank yous.

Firstly, the incredible and consistent talents of Aaron Leavy, who every year puts together a stunning front cover for the publication. I have known Aaron for some 20 years and it is a true mark of the type of man he is that he's never once ignored the emails or phonecalls when, as we always called it, 'that special time of year' rolled around. (I would've got fed up with me years ago). He is an asset this Club is very fortunate to have on call.

Committee members past and present were buttresses when articles were scarce and I felt like throwing in the towel. In no particular order; Liam O'Broin, Don Ryan, Mick Docherty, Terry Turkington, Malcolm Edgar, Paul Lamb, Neil Ross, Paul Larmor, Robert Hutchinson, Eoghan Ryan and Gary Timbrell. Gentlemen, thank you all.

Perhaps most importantly, those regular writers and artists who kept contributing over the years. Content is King, as we say in the trade, and I believe our journal has stood at the top table of world Falconry journals because of the quality and variety you provided. In this regard, I thank you all one last time for making this last hurrah the best edition yet.

There is a massively rich tradition in Falconry writing that dates back centuries. We must not lose this, and I would urge falconers in this digital age to share experiences, knowledge, anecdotes and simple reflection through long-form writing. If, like me, life restrictions prevented you from stepping into the field for a number of years, these memories and impartings are a lifeline. You don't know how much it can mean.

See you in Sneem.

**HW**



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All copy and pictures to be sent to the Journal Editor at [irish.hawking.club@gmail.com](mailto:irish.hawking.club@gmail.com).

Material is subject to scrutiny by the committee.

All news items, notices, short stories, tall tales, pictures, ads, comments etc to the editor at the above email address.

Members who are interested in helping in the production and distribution of the Newsletter and Journal please contact a Committee member.

## Cover Image

### 'Snipe Hawking'

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Manipulated by  
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We are continually look for striking, memorable art images of raptors for our covers. If you have any, please forward to the editor.

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## Johan Kolman

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# News and Updates

We always welcome pieces of info  
– sightings, lost hawks, conservation matters etc – from members.

## IRELAND WELCOMES THE WORLD!

AS YOU read this, some 200 falconers from around the world are assembling in Sneem, Co Kerry for the 47th IAF Council of Delegates Meeting and International Fieldmeet. You may very well just be one of them.

Unquestionably the biggest falconry event to ever take place in this country, the meeting will comprise both the important AGM and Advisory Council meetings of the IAF as well as hawking meet catering for a variety of raptors at wild game.

Delegates from the US, South Africa, Brazil, the Middle East and the Far East will mix it up with friends from closer shores in the UK and across Europe. The IHC will host the event, and a tireless six-man organising committee has been meeting regularly to try to ensure that our guests leave here on November 20 able to say that 2016 in Ireland was one of the best IAF Meetings on record. So if you see Don Ryan, Gary Timbrell, Eoghan Ryan, Malcolm Edgar, Shay O'Byrne or that Editor of ours running around in a flap this week, you'll know why.

If the programme in Sneem was not enough, the second half of the week will see guests and delegates migrate up to Moyvalley in the midlands for not only more hunting but also a world-first international conference on the

stewardship of biodiversity and sustainable use. Some of the biggest names in raptor conservation and ecology are set to talk at this timely event.

With Wild Harvest in this country a yearly bureaucratic chore no thanks to our wildlife services, the conference will go some way to validating the practice as being sustainable and clearly manageable, as it is in other countries. For this reason, we very much hope that officials in the Department will take up our invitation to come and hear the array of scientists and speakers that we have on the bill. Look forward to seeing you there

## IHC BEGINNER TELEMETRY SET

**BFC member and all-round good bloke Tony James has very kindly donated a telemetry set to the IHC. The condition? It is to be lent to a beginner.**

So if anyone knows a young and enthusiastic person starting out in Falconry, perhaps someone who might not have the means to splash out on telemetry set of their own, contact the Committee and tell them why you feel they are deserving.

The set will be given on a loan basis with conditions to be drawn up by the Committee. This is a most generous resource for the Club to have for beginner members, so if you see Mr James in Sneem, buy that man a drink.

## THE IRISH FLY FISHING AND GAME SHOOTING MUSEUM

The Irish Fly Fishing and Game Shooting Museum explores 300 years of hunting and fishing in Ireland.

It is a treat for anyone interested in Country Life

'Museums grow as people visit and share their knowledge'  
Walter Phelan

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# Observations on the Science and Politics of Raptor Management

Bruce A Haak, US

In 1975, I drove from Corvallis, Oregon, to Boise, Idaho, to attend my first Raptor Research Foundation (RRF) conference. A number of fellow falconers, as well as some researchers whose names I recognized, attended this meeting.

A falconer named Don Hunter began conceptualizing the idea for RRF in the mid-1950s, and later wrote its articles of incorporation. In part, Hunter was motivated to propose the creation of the RRF because numerous articles on raptor biology were being submitted for publication by the North American Falconers Association (NAFA). At the time, falconers were concerned about the decline in Peregrine Falcon populations and wanted a more effective way of exchanging information on the captive breeding of raptors, specifically peregrines. RRF began publishing information on raptors as *Raptor Research News* and the *Breeding Project Information Exchange* (Parrish et al. in press). Falconers and raptor scientists were common allies; many prominent scientists were active falconers.

That fall, I was accepted to graduate school at Oregon State University. My thesis objective was to determine the foraging behaviour of Prairie Falcons using a relatively new technology, radio-telemetry. Researchers in Idaho were already using this technique to study raptor movements and

behaviour along the Snake River Canyon (now the Morley Nelson Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area), and I wanted to learn from them.

My interests in both falconry and raptor research were not unique. Over the years, falconers' contributions to raptor science have been diverse and voluminous.

## 50th anniversary of the Madison Peregrine Conference

At the November 2015 RRF meeting in Sacramento, California, researchers and students from around the world gathered to exchange information, make professional contacts, share new ideas, and present papers on the results of their investigations. One of the highlights of the conference was the commemoration of a meeting of 63 scientists, falconers, and raptor enthusiasts convened 50 years earlier in Madison, Wisconsin, where concern for the decline of the peregrine and other raptors in North America and Europe was expressed. Dr Joseph Hickey, the professor who replaced renowned conservationist Dr Aldo Leopold at the University of Wisconsin, organized the event and then served as editor of a publication of the proceedings (Hickey 1969). The information presented therein would eventually launch a global quest for scientific data on peregrine

populations and those of other avian species.

Two outcomes stemming from the Madison conference were the application of conservation biology to peregrines, and the development of captive-breeding technology. The Madison conference also sparked the official birth of the RRF, which gained federal non-profit status in 1966. A group of biologists who participated in the 1965 conference was honoured at the 2015 RRF conference, including: Dr Clayton White, Dr Grainger Hunt, Dr Steve Herman, Dr Dan Anderson, and Dan Berger. Video testimony was provided by Dr Tom Cade, Dr Jim Enderson, Dr Stan Temple, Dr Sergej Postupalsky, and David Hancock regarding the challenges facing them in 1965, and the solutions that eventually saved peregrine and other raptor populations from widespread population depression and/or extirpation. The gathering in Wisconsin set the stage for decades of scientific investigation about various raptor species including: Osprey, Golden Eagle, Bald Eagle, Northern Harriers, and Eurasian Sparrowhawk.

In time, and due in great part to the efforts of these individuals, imperilled raptors would be aided by this information, and the world would come to understand that robust raptor populations are critically important



measures of ecosystem health.

### **Conservation**

In essence, the Madison conference was a status report on peregrines: breeding populations were in decline but neither the causes nor the remedies were clearly understood at that time. A continent-wide survey of North American peregrine eyries was underway, conducted by many falconers. Concurrently, the detailed field notes of well-known falconers including Alva Nye, Brian McDonald, Col R L 'Luff' Meredith, and Jim Rice became the foundations of ongoing studies of peregrine migration along the East and Gulf coasts that continue today (Cade and Burnham 2003, Carnie 2013). Since the 1940s, thousands of migrating peregrines have been captured and banded at the same time of year and in the same places. The details of these investigations helped to document the decline and recovery of northern peregrine populations in North America.

William W Cochran was an engineer who worked on miniaturization technology in the 1960s. A falconer, Robert B 'Bob' Berry, learned of his research on miniature transmitters and encouraged him to develop units small enough to be placed on trained raptors. The resulting transmitters, first tested in 1969, facilitated the recovery of trained raptors, a true breakthrough for falconers (Carnie 2013). Later, Cochran tracked both a migrating Sharp-shinned Hawk (Cochran 1972) and a peregrine (Cochran 1985) from aircraft for hundreds of miles using his tiny transmitters. This technology ultimately led to the wide use of radio-telemetry to study the movements of free-roaming wildlife (Cochran 1987). In the 1980s, following in Cochran's footsteps, Dr William S 'Bill' Seegar, Mike Yates, and Tom Maechtle deployed miniaturized satellite transmitters on arctic peregrines,

launching a new era of intercontinental monitoring of bird movements that continues to the present day (Seegar et al 1996, Seegar et al. 2003).

### **Captive propagation**

During World War II, German falconer Renz Waller's pair of peregrines produced the first captive-bred young in, of all places, a bomb shelter. Of the papers given at the 1965 Madison conference, only falconer Morlan W 'Morley' Nelson offered suggestions on ways to address the reported declines in peregrine populations. Nelson believed raptors could be bred in captivity for conservation purposes. He also proposed transplanting nestlings from healthy populations of northern peregrines into eyries where wild populations were dwindling (Nelson 1969). Following the formation of the RRF, great strides were made in researching these techniques. Ultimately, The Peregrine Fund, under the direction of falconer Dr Tom Cade, was established to breed and reintroduce peregrines into the wild (Cade and Burnham 2003).

British falconer Ronald Stevens discussed the willingness of hand-reared peregrines to form pair-bonds with their trainers (Stevens 1978). Across the Atlantic, parallel experimentation by American falconers Les Boyd, Jim Weaver, and Bob Berry was instrumental in the development of captive populations of imprinted falcons. Morley Nelson observed that when some captive raptors were presented with downy, food-begging young, they showed an inclination to feed them.

Once artificial insemination methods from the poultry industry were applied to peregrines, and imprinted semen-donor males and egg-laying females were groomed as breeders, it was possible to disseminate genetics from a small number of individual

falcons to create a large pool of unrelated breeding stock. Through trial and error testing involving the age and background of breeding stock, pairing trials, nutritional experiments, chamber size, and clutch manipulation, pairs of raptors that bred, incubated eggs naturally, and raised young were also developed. However, despite great efforts, raptors were not routinely bred in captivity until the late 1970s.

For centuries, falconers have used the temporary release technique called 'hacking' for conditioning young falcons. Falconer-scientists adapted this technique to reintroduce captive-bred raptors back into portions of their range from which they had been extirpated. Natural instincts and innate survival skills allowed young raptors to fledge into a hostile environment, without parental guidance or protection (Sherrod et al 1981). This falconry technique was used by The Peregrine Fund to release captive-bred peregrines to augment the struggling wild populations and recover the species with unprecedented success. Ultimately, these released falcons returned to historic cliff nest sites to breed and raise young, but also showed a greater propensity than wild falcons for nesting on man-made structures such as buildings, bridges, and wooden 'hack towers' constructed where no suitable cliffs existed. The speed and extent of the peregrine's recovery is an unparalleled wildlife management success story.

### **Raptor medicine**

Trichomoniasis, known as frounce by falconers and canker by pigeon fanciers, is a primary killer of raptors that feed on doves and pigeons. Rock Pigeons (*Columba livia*) are often used as food for trained raptors and, historically, many captive raptors succumbed to the infection before medications were available. Dr

Robert Stabler, a falconer and biology professor at the University of Pennsylvania, identified the cause of frounce as *Trichomoniasis gallinae*, a protozoan parasite that is carried by birds in the genus *Columba* (Carnie 2013). It is not necessarily lethal to the host, but can be passed on to the host's young and to predators. The medication developed to cure this disease in falconry birds is also used for domestic pigeons and to treat a disease in domestic turkeys—a significant economic benefit to an enormous industry.

In 1974, falconer Dr Patrick Redig, Dr Gary Duke, and others established The Raptor Center at the University of Minnesota School of Veterinary Medicine. They made many groundbreaking advances in raptor medicine including: avian anaesthesiology; the setting of broken bones; and the treatment of a disfiguring and frequently fatal bacterial infection called 'bumble foot,' a respiratory illness called aspergillosis, and lead poisoning. The occurrence of secondary lead poisoning in Bald Eagles (and other wildlife), acquired by ingesting pellets from wounded waterfowl, eventually led to the banning of lead shot for hunting migratory waterfowl in the US in 1991, and in Canada in 1999. The susceptibility of raptors to avian malaria, West Nile virus, avian influenza, and heavy metals contamination has also stimulated important research.

### Looking back

At the time of the Madison conference, few scientists were engaged in the study of raptors. The burgeoning profession of wildlife management was primarily a 'hook-and-bullet' affair focused on fisheries and game species. It would be another decade until the study of nongame animals, and specifically avian predators, would find traction among the institutions offering degrees in

wildlife management.

The logo of the RRF was drawn by artist-falconer Robert Katona, and many of its founding members were falconers. Notables included several past officers of RRF like Don Hunter, Brian Millsap, and Dr Clint Boal. For a time, the late falconer and RRF president, Dr Butch Oldendorff, was the driving, cohesive force within the organization who raised the standard of RRF publications. No doubt, falconers were attracted to the science of raptor biology because of their great love of raptors. Aldo Leopold called falconry 'the perfect hobby' and it was later described as 'the ultimate form of bird watching'. As W K Richmond (1959) stated in *British Birds of Prey*: 'The best way to know a raptor is to keep one.' In my experience, the understanding of raptor behaviour by wildlife scientists is greatly enhanced by the empathy and insight gained through the hands-on practice of falconry. Raptor biologists generally study subjects on the individual level, then extrapolate to the population level. Understanding individual raptors facilitates good research.

### Changing times and directions

In the United States, the public's interest in raptors as something other than targets was started in the 1920s with an article, *Falconry, The Sport of Kings*, in National Geographic Magazine by Louis Agassiz Fuertes. This was followed by articles on raptors and falconry by Frank and John Craighead (*Hawks In The Hand and Life With An Indian Prince*) in the 1940s, and later by their book *Hawks, Owls and Wildlife*.

Dr Francis 'Fran' Hammerstrom, a falconer, pioneering biologist, and founding member of the RRF, once commented that the RRF might eventually consist of 'fewer falconers and more preserve-at-all-costs know-noth-

ings' (R.G. Clarke, pers. comm.). She also contended that the contributions of falconers had either been overlooked or intentionally ignored by this organization (J.R. Parrish, pers. comm.). That RRF has relatively few falconer-members today is a fact.

A plaque hangs on an outside wall at The Peregrine Fund's World Center for Birds of Prey in Boise, Idaho. It recognizes falconers, their families, and friends, who spent several hot summers in the 1980s building breeding barns to house peregrines and other raptors at the soon-to-be consolidated facility. Falconers conceived of The Peregrine Fund, orchestrated its funding, staffed the organization's Cornell, Fort Collins, and Santa Cruz facilities, and over several decades facilitated the recovery of peregrine populations in the contiguous 48 states. Similar successful restoration efforts were conducted by falconers in Canada. The sad epilogue is that, today, there are no falconers employed as full-time staff at the Boise facility. Fortunately, The Archives of Falconry is housed there. It curates the artefacts and tells the history of falconry in North America and elsewhere.

Falconry has always been difficult to practice in most places, and the creep of development in the western world makes it even more so today. Brian Walton, the first Director of the Santa Cruz Predatory Bird Research Group, once said: 'If you are too busy to fly a hawk, you're just too busy.' However, a fact of modern life is that many biologists simply dedicate their time and energy to the study of raptors, without attempting to hunt wild quarry with a trained raptor under suboptimum conditions, even though they might like to practice falconry.

In *Grit* (Duckworth 2015), perseverance, passion, and tenacity are extolled as virtues of success: they are

also characteristics of both good falconers and good field biologists. Curiosity and sheer determination are what send them to the library to study raptors without relying on the Internet for information. Likewise, an intimate knowledge of species and habitats is gained by time in the field, not by querying state or federal resource agencies for nest locations.

### **Wildlife management and politics**

The publication of Rachael Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) caused a sea change in public attitudes about the environment. Seemingly overnight, a movement of self-proclaimed conservationists, often protectionist in nature, was spawned. As the environmental movement became popular, people with no background in hunting or fishing decided to study wildlife in college and pursue careers in the various fields of natural resources management. Hiking and camping skills do not equate to practical experience catching and cleaning fish, or shooting and processing game animals. The 'extinction of experience' and 'nature-deficit disorder' (Louv 2005) have since been institutionalized by colleges and universities that value computer and statistical skills above practical outdoors knowledge. When will experiential learning become the thing itself?

The fact that some of these college students neither related to the culture of the public they served, nor grasped the importance of sport hunting and fishing to a broad section of North American society, created rifts inside and outside state and federal management agencies. Suddenly, outdoor enthusiasts were being governed by people with no field skills, no understanding of or even disdain for their passions, and no understanding of the challenges they faced. This created an ongoing 'us against them' backlash

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against the agencies.

Conflicts are occurring with peregrines and certain endangered species, like California Least Terns (*Sternula antillarum browni*) and Snowy Plovers (*Charadrius nivosus*). The US Department of Agriculture, along with the US Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), is issuing permits to control peregrines in certain areas through lethal removal. Predation on sensitive species by merlins and various raptor species is similarly controlled by selective killing. The present estimate of peregrines in the large State of California is 300 breeding pairs. Numerous pairs of peregrines nest on bridges spanning San Francisco Bay, where young falcons taking their first flights frequently fall into the water and perish. For years, falconer Glenn Stewart and Santa Cruz Birds of Prey Research Group personnel collected these young and placed them on hack towers from which they fledged into the wild. For unexplainable reasons, regulatory bureaucracies now prevent these young from being salvaged, condemning them to drown in the ocean. No harvest of peregrines for falconry is allowed in California.

A small amount of information wielded improperly, spun with a slanted interpretation, can create huge problems. Far too often, passion

trumps data, resulting in the improper prescription of preservation rather than conservation actions. While both have their applications, a carefully crafted management program may benefit wildlife to a greater extent than a 'hands-off' program of benign neglect. A blind approach to monitoring wildlife resources raises many concerns. The most extreme case exists presently in Europe, where scientists and wildlife managers remain at arm's length from or are even hostile towards falconers, despite the major role of falconers in the restoration of the European peregrine.

There are presently 28 member countries in the European Union (EU). However, only 12 of those countries allow the take of wild raptors for the sport of falconry. Verifiably large and robust populations of high-interest species like peregrines, goshawks, and sparrowhawks exist across western Europe, yet the biological data to support a significant take for falconry is being ignored. In Ireland, for example, some wildlife rangers refuse to cooperate with properly licensed falconers attempting to take raptors from the wild for falconry. Ireland is similar in both land mass and population to the state of Indiana. In 2012, the Republic of Ireland (70,273km<sup>2</sup>) had an estimated 500+ pairs of nesting peregrines (National Parks and Wildlife Service 2012) producing an

estimated 650 nestlings per year (Burke et al. 2015). But it appears there is an element in the Irish wildlife department that openly opposes and seeks to eliminate the Irish annual harvest of even five nestling peregrines (Irish Hawking Club 2013, Don Ryan pers. comm.)

Unfortunately, there are those who contrive to keep healthy populations of raptors on protected lists to perpetuate funding for their research, support their agendas, justify their jobs, or discriminate against falconers. But they fail to grasp how natural systems operate under field conditions. Resource managers sometimes look to such people for information upon which to make raptor management decisions, resulting in information that can be both biased and inaccurate.

The Canadian Wildlife Service's proposal to manage peregrine populations in Canada (Environment Canada 2015) appeared to be the product of ill-informed individuals misstating the status of a species and blatantly ignoring volumes of scientific literature addressing the current status of peregrines within their jurisdiction. In a bold move, Canadian falconers invited raptor biologists and falconers from around the world to respond to this negatively biased proposal. In this case, a shoddy approach to raptor management was rebuffed on a worldwide stage.

For the benefit of wild raptors, the enlightenment of the public, and as a hedge against future environmental catastrophes like that of the DDT era, falconers and scientists should remain actively engaged together in all aspects of raptor biology.

### **Looking ahead**

Science saved the day for falconry, and vice versa, in the United States during the 1970s. Management decisions based on facts, not emotions,

were pivotal in establishing national falconry license standards. Standards now require that falconers demonstrate comprehensive knowledge about raptors and the pertinent laws that protect them, maintain good facilities, and be skilled in raptor husbandry. This is ensured by mentoring requirements and independent testing and inspection. Given that wild raptors have a first-year mortality of upwards of 70%, the capture of limited numbers of hawks and falcons for falconry has a negligible effect on raptor populations. Solid research, such as the study 'Effects of falconry harvest on wild raptor populations in the United States: theoretical considerations and management recommendations,' (Millsap and Allen 2006), has shown that a take of raptors for falconry has no impact on either wild raptor populations or the populations of game birds and small mammals taken via the practice of falconry.

In 2012, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization took a significant step by inscribing falconry on the representative list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Yet, many scientists remain unaware of the contributions that falconry has made to the study of birds of prey, going back to the reign of Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, Holy Roman Emperor from 1194 to 1250 AD.

Academia alone is incapable of fully addressing our current wildlife issues. We must return to the concepts of integrating disciplines and engaging the lay public to ensure that comprehensive studies are undertaken and unbiased conclusions are reached. While cautioning against the overuse of statistics, modelling, and technology in wildlife investigations, falconer-biologist Dr Steven Herman wrote 'the wildlife profession would do well to regraft itself to those natural history roots' (Herman 2002). The signifi-

cance of losing natural history studies was best described by Wilcove (1999) who stated: 'such studies form the empirical foundation for many of our theoretical insights and are absolutely essential for crafting on-the-ground solutions to urgent ecological problems.'

In the past, NAFA and the RRF held joint meetings/conferences to help educate and integrate people whose interests and points of view may differ, but who share a passion for raptors. It is time for similar efforts to be expanded globally. The International Association for Falconry and Conservation of Birds of Prey should engage falconers with raptor study groups around the world in an effort to find common ground.

There are good examples of efforts being made along these lines. An international conference on the veterinary treatment of raptors is being hosted in Doha, Qatar. Also, more falconry associations should follow the good example of the Deutscher Falkenorden in Germany in publishing quality articles on the natural history of birds of prey, as well as scientific studies of raptors. In addition, professional societies focused on the study of raptors should reach out to falconers in an effort to solicit information, volunteer field assistants, and support for their conservation efforts. Only by presenting a united front to bureaucrats, like those governing the EU, will the interests of falconers and scientists generate enough political clout to change the status quo and implement an integrated approach to science-based wildlife management.

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With *Beach Bird*, Bruce Haak revives a forgotten part of America's falconry experience. He restores the passage peregrine to its natural pride of place. Read this book, and you'll want to join Bruce and his friends on the beaches of Texas to trap and fly the best of all peregrines. *Steve Bodio, Writer and Falconer*



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# A Letter from Norway

Ellen Hagen, Norway



**M**y name is Ellen Hagen. I'm 32 and from Norway. I live in the countryside called Ryfylke with my husband, and here we have a flock of silkie bantams and two budgies. Ryfylke is just outside of Stavanger and not far from the fjord where the famous hike to the Pulpit rock is. My grandparents, and even my mother and father, were Norwegian immigrants that travel to America for some years, yet we all eventually ended up back here in the fjords – the homeland of the Vikings. We still have some American traditions, like having turkey with stuffing for Christmas, and I decorate with American flags on Fourth of July. I was raised in the Highlands of Jaeren in South West Norway, which holds an open landscape and is often very windy. This is also a beloved home of the Peregrine falcon, while Goshawks lurk in the deep forests, and eagles soar along the coast. However, it was not until I was in my twenties that I started to be really captivated by birds of prey, even though I've always liked birds in general.

I work as a museum educator at the Museum of Archaeology, which is part of the University of Stavanger. My background is art history and culture. Just recently I specialised in heritage pedagogy, a new credit course

for museum educators, a collaboration with Scandinavian Universities. At the museum, I teach about local prehistory to schools, adult education for immigrants, tourists and the public. Sometimes you can also find me dressed as a Viking, which is the time period tourists are most interested in and love to hear about.

By working at the museum since 2007, I have acquired a good insight into local heritage. Therefore I was intrigued when an academic mentioned birds of prey appearing in some old burial graves in certain places in Scandinavia. This I had to investigate! So after years of thinking about the old graves with birds of prey, I finally booked my own experience in England, took a course, and quickly got swept away by falconry. A whole new adventure started – outside of Norway. First of all, falconry is forbidden in modern Norway, and people know very little about it because of two main reasons; 1) the tradition of hunting with birds of prey here disappeared after the era of the Vikings, and when Norway fell under rule of the King of Denmark, and 2) the subsequent tradition of trapping and exporting birds of prey was done mostly by foreigners until 200 years ago. Due to the tradition of exporting raptors from Norway by mostly none-

Norwegians, Norwegians believe anyone taking birds from the wild is a falconer and therefore a bad person.

In the last two years, people have started to contact me regarding falconry. Not many, but a few, and they are Norwegians, foreigners in Norway or even people from Norwegian companies. Some want to try it or just have an experience, while others would like to bring their birds to Norway. I even had a principal whom asked if I would be able to bring a live bird to her school for my spare time raptor education projects. Sadly, I could not do so because of the law stating no raptors may be kept in captivity. People are interested but not many go actively out to pursue this, or it is a one-time experience only. It takes time, it costs money and you need a network. Had it not been for my falconry friends and network I have today, I would also have 'given up' this passion after my first year with general bird handling, when I needed to be part of something.

My path opened via a conference that took place in Germany about historical falconry, here falconers from the Deutsche Falkenorden were participants. I came in contact with the falconer Karl-Heinz Gersmann who tipped me off



about Elisabeth Leix in the Women's Working Group in the IAF. This was in fact the most essential contact I made. Elisabeth quickly became important for me because she opened doors to a community I did not have, both within her network of hunters and falconers, and with other women via the WWG. She became a role model for me, and I admire her for her overall falconry knowledge and additional conservation work for Peregrines in Poland. Suddenly I did not feel alone anymore. Now the great thing with meeting new falconers is that it feels like we are one big family because we share a fascination for raptors and nature. At the International Festival of Falconry in 2014, I made

active reactions, mostly from elderly people. A retired teacher was really frustrated with me after I initiated the first nest box for Peregrines in Norway and told about my background in falconry. He claimed that my interest in falconry was bad, and he was downright provoked by my passion for it. This has not stopped me from promoting nest boxes, and two new nest boxes are soon ready to be set up for next season. Being able to tackle confrontations regarding animal welfare and outdated falconry opinion also gives me the advantage of advocating a positive light on falconry because people see how serious I am by having open dialogue where they can ask just those questions and get a real answer instead of old assumptions. Yet most of the reactions from the public are a mixture of curiosity and disbelief in a positive way; it sounds like a fairytale to train a wild animal

and cooperate with it in nature.

I can understand where the negative view on falconry comes from because books from after 1950s and to modern times accuse falconry and falconers of wildlife crime. I think it is also the Norwegian modern word 'falkonerer' that ties negative associations to it. Therefore I have started using the elderly form 'falkejakt', which more describes 'falcon & hunting'. Still, most people get



astonished to hear about the connection between human and raptor, that you can build a human-raptor relationship. Through my work at the museum, I have had some public talks, written an article and in general reached out to both colleagues and visitors. Very recently, Helen Macdonald's book *H is for Hawk* was to be translated to Norwegian and I was really honoured to be part of the processes of explaining falconry terminology with the Norwegian translator. This book is the only updated version of falconry in Norwegian, and it became a bestseller in a short time. I could not be happier for falconry awareness in Norway to have Helen's work, and to be





just a little part of it. A faraway aunt of my father called him one day saying: 'I've just read *H is for Hawk*, and I see Ellen Hagen was a consultant for it, isn't that your daughter Ellen?' Word gets around and that is important.

So why do I pursue something that is forbidden in my own country? First of all, I cannot stop thinking about falconry. Never before have I been so taken by anything because I find it extraordinary on so many levels – from hunting to conservation, rehabilitation and education – how falconry can affect you. Not to mention how old this tradition of hunting is, which is so fascinating. A falconer I admire very much told

me while we were talking about how addicted we were to falconry, 'you share the same brain disorder as I have', and that just made me feel very happy. I have one struggle of course, and that is to be around birds enough, to handle them and go hawking. Falconry is known as a living heritage, and for good reason. I have taken many courses and have many certificates, but I do need to handle them every so often. I do my best but I must always travel.

I am happy to say I have written a paper about my experiences from a Norwegian perspective with falconry in next year's falconry book *Raptor and Human: Bird Symbolism and Falconry Through Five Millennia on a*

*Global Scale*, Karl-Heinz Gersmann & Oliver Grimm (eds.)

Finally, if anyone would like to tip me off on anything regarding articles, books, even paintings that have to do with Norwegian birds that you think would interest me, please feel free to contact me. Or if you just want say hi or want me to come along for some hawking, I'd love to hear from you. Email me at [ellen.hagen.9@gmail.com](mailto:ellen.hagen.9@gmail.com)

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## Irish Setters: Red & White and Red (from olden times to 2016, and onwards)

Tom Dunne, Co Tipperary

Of our native dog breeds, the Irish Setter is arguably the most iconic, featuring in such diverse settings as Garryowen Plug Tobacco, Red Setter baler twine and Bus Éireann. Even the sporting brochure of one Grouse Moor in Scotland has a Red & White setting a covey of grouse.

Numbers-wise, the Red Setter is the most prolific, but the Red & White is steadily gaining in popularity. The two are intertwined and the development of Irish setter breeds can be directly linked to the hunting of grouse.

I have put the Red & White first simply because it existed first.

As far as can be ascertained, all setters came originally from spaniels, and the rich chestnut colour possibly evolved through the dogs with this rich burnt-senna colouring possessing the desired trait of stopping when reaching the cone of scent emitting from the quarry species. Well back in time, these dogs were originally taught how to lie down near game – hence sitters or setters – and this instinct developed naturally in the dogs over the years. Hawks were then sent aloft to wait-on and thus stop game from flushing. Meanwhile, the hunters came up behind them carrying a net which was cast well forward over the crouched dog and trapped

what the dog had been setting.

The advent of the shotgun – first the muzzle-loader and later the breech-loader – meant that the net was no longer required, but this setting trait in the dog in the vicinity of game was retained and nurtured. Again, it was the breech-loading shotgun that led to the development of grouse moors, and keeping controlled most of the grouse predators which meant large broods survived. Now the Irish setter came into his own, effortlessly sweeping vast areas of terrain and locating the game. Most of the setting dogs nowadays stand on set, but many, including some of my own, still crouch low on the ground. The

Red & White is easier to see in the distance on a vast moor and was thus favoured. However, towards the end of the 19th Century, a market developed in America, of all places, for these dogs. But these same Americans preferred a completely red dog and thus the Red & White went into decline in the first half of the last century, but was kept going thanks to the dedication of those such as Rev Noble Houston, Mrs Cuddy, Canon Doherty and more. Latterly, there have been several efforts made to revive its fortunes, but the present revival seems to be permanent, and now there is equality among the two strains as regards hunting, ranging and setting ability. Outcross programmes using Red setter dogs carrying the Red & White recessive gene have helped to broaden the genetic base although this is still too small. These outcrosses usually had a Red dog mated to a Red & White bitch, and I know of only one mating which was the reverse of this. Only properly marked pups were kept and registered. Indeed, the Red & White is really white with red patches and a red thumbprint on its head is desired. Flecking is not desired in the coat though allowable on legs.

I will not dwell on the history of the red setter, but refer the reader to Raymond O'Dwyer's marvellous book *The Irish Red Setter: Its History, Character and Training* (2007, Atrium Books). This book has it all.

Perhaps it is now time to document the Irish Red & White in book form?

As grouse are found in rough and inhospitable uplands, one needs a dog that can sweep wide areas as the hunter moves forward. They hunt into the wind and work on airborne scents. With the first touch of game ahead, a setter will freeze, sometimes with a foreleg lifted, often too a hind leg up as they stand or crouch rigid. The han-

dlers will approach – always from behind the dog – and urge it forward. The dog will move in and flush the quarry and lie down. This is essential, particularly in a shooting situation. The dog may be asked to move on to clear the ground and flush any remaining birds, under the complete control of the handler. The type of dog required for this work needs to be a flying machine with an excellent nose, brakes and a handbrake. In order to waft the scent of grouse on the wind, the dog needs a high head carriage, and dogs with the correct body shape will possess this trait.

The setting or pointing ability is completely natural and even small pups running around the yard will suddenly halt and set small birds. The dog needs to be highly intelligent and work for and with his handler. He will have an eye for terrain and be able to use the wind to his advantage. He will have huge endurance and a willingness to please. All of these traits did not arrive overnight. Careful selection and breeding developed all of these qualities, firstly by the great estates and wealthy classes, then later by ordinary folk. The only way to assess a promising pup is to take it to the moor and show it some grouse. The late Eileen Dennehy of Currow always looked after the puppies. She fed them, trained them to lead, took them for walks and they loved her. Then Sean took them to the hill for the first time and they never again wanted to know her. A counting trip to Scotland may be somewhat costly and even arduous, but the virtues are legion. A young setter with maybe only enough manners to get by will show its true potential in a few runs. Even allowing for crashes and other mishaps at the start, there are few better vistas than watching a puppy wind grouse ahead, turn in and hold a set. A simple cord slipped over the dog's neck will help when the grouse explode from the heather and the pup wants to chase. (Painful aside

here – wear a heavy glove!). With the plentiful stocks of grouse, any faults can be rectified within a few minutes by the next covey. By the end of a few short days, you will know the potential in your dog.

Down the years, pupping time always brings an air of excitement and anticipation. The old adage of 'breed the best, with the best, and hope for the best' is sound advice, but it does not always work. Quite simply, 'if champions bred with champions produced champions, the whole country would be full of champions'. When selecting a mate for a dog or bitch, you should always try to introduce an extra trait that will improve on what went before, and here again, the good hunting or rough-shooting dog should be seriously considered. In any event, the choice will have been made, and now it is only a matter of waiting. The bitch has been prepared as much as is possible and now Mother Nature must take its course. The instincts of the intending mother, including first-timers, still astound. The birthing bed is made with great fuss and then swept clean and made again, and there are clear signs of agitation. How will it be? Difficult? Puppies slow in coming? Late/Early/Overdue?

Then it suddenly begins, and one can only watch and marvel at the miracle. A seemingly impossible number of wriggling little life forms, freshly-licked clean, valiantly, though blindly, seeking the life-giving first suck while the mother expertly rotates these whimpering little atoms of energy. The loss of a puppy or two at birth is always disappointing. Could this have been the Champion of Champions? Time to move on.

As the days make weeks, the assessing goes on. Here is where the little bit of white is downright handy to separate and identify the developing litter. (The Red & Whites have it

dead easy). A simple high bench is now a necessity as the demanding puppies make mother's rest impossible. Despite the best of foods, and even long after weaning, the puppies instinctively believe that mother's milk is still best.

Then comes the day when the puppies are released for the first time. They are curious/indifferent, bold/shy, active/lazy, but no rushed decisions yet. They will change and change again, and here the breeders have the advantage of comparison. Do they always pick the right one? No. The best Red bitch I ever had was the least favoured in the whole litter and this by those regarded as pup pickers. But usually one stands out and only time will tell. Never discard a shy pup out of hand. Such a dog will need a bit more patience, but will forever give total trust and loyalty to a handler once the bond has been established.

A good hunting setter, even if not fast enough for the heat of competition, is a great animal to have breeding access to. Possessing the attributes of nose, steadiness on game, stamina, backing, even retrieving, can always be introduced to augment even the best lines and game-finding ability. That indefinable trait that some dogs have should never be discarded. Such a setter will work and work hard in all conditions, although heat does take its toll

on dogs with long hair.

I have always owned Irish Red Setters and some Red & Whites also, but my preference is the Red. Unlike some, I like a little white in a Red dog and I have had many. Some I loved, some I didn't love, but for an all-round shooting dog and, yes, with natural retrieving ability, I think nothing can come near the Irish Red setter.

Field trials are vital for the breeds. I have heard people criticise field trials whereas these are the yardstick by which dogs can be properly assessed. A solo dog can be a great animal to hunt over. He will range, find and pin game and hold the quarry until the handler can reach him, then he will produce the game smartly and lie at the flush. But in a field trial he will be up against another hard-going dog that is equally intent on reaching the game first. This dog might even range wider, be fleeter of foot and generally put it up to his bracedmate that he must raise his game or be left behind. To really assess the dog's true abilities – his speed, style, dash, game-finding, competitiveness – the hot cauldron of an Open Grouse Stake will test every facet of a dog's being. Some of these opinionated people have never seen a field trial.

Show dogs? I have presented dogs at shows to obtain the necessary qualification for a

Field Trial Champion, but I really don't know enough about them to make any comment.

Save one.

One can't see how these dogs that walk around a show ring with a gait reminiscent of Marilyn Monroe could ever gallop wildly and freely on the rough, undulating terrain of an Irish mountain moor. And Marilyn always had the heel of one stiletto slightly shorter than the other just to accentuate her... well, never mind!

Over the years I have known many good dogs. I shot over them, owned them, ran them in trials, judged them, and they all had one thing in common – all of them owe their drive, athleticism, courage, ability, endurance, progress in all stages of their development as mountain dogs, to their association with the Red Grouse and how the hunting of this noble bird over the generations and, indeed, centuries has shaped them.

Due to circumstances, my own kennel is now limited to two – a good Red setter dog and a very smart Red & White bitch puppy that is showing great early promise.

My best dog? Why, it has still to come.





## Sparrowhawk Snapshots

James Knight, Co Mayo

Somewhere I have a photo of my first Sparrowhawk. It is close to 20 years old. Having driven down from Scotland to Nottingham to collect the 10-day-old chick, I had called in at my mother's house in Derbyshire on the way home. I remember revealing the little white ball of marshmallow to my mum on her doorstep. I think it was my birthday.

We used to encourage her to play with scrunched-up balls of paper in the office but my next memory served as a very important lesson. Learning by trauma has to be one of the most sure-fast methods.

One minute she was on the lawn with me as usual, sitting in the sun enjoying the summer evening, the next she was on the coal bunker. 'Wow, look how high she got!' Then the shed. 'Look, look, she can fly!'

Then the house roof. 'Oh my god, she can fly, oh \*\*\*\*'. And off down the track from tree to tree. She had no bells, no telemetry, nothing. The trees were in full leaf. She wasn't even trained to the lure yet!

She didn't come down or even drop to a lower branch through that whole torturously long Scottish summer evening and night. At that time of the year, in Scotland, it only really gets dark just as it starts to get light again. Mercifully, she amazed me by coming down just in time for me to get to work the following morning. It was nothing short of a miracle.

We started her hunting in a sea of golden grass without a tree or bush, just fence posts and lonely telegraph poles. We stayed near the fence posts so we could walk over and pick her up. Her first kill was a 'what

happened there?' moment. Vanishing from the fist as something brown blew by, a leaf, a bit of dead grass kicked up from our feet, or could it have been...? Then there she was, sitting strangely in the long grass. There followed a teasing apart of stalks and feathers, like opening an incredibly fragile Christmas present. She had it – a tiny brown bird with a huge back talon. Once entered she was away, chasing all before her.

Those summer evenings of the dancing, flickering flights at pipits and skylarks that climbed up into the pale sunsets and down again were magical. It was genteel falconry in good weather, sipped out of the finest bone-china tea cups with lacy napkins and doilies. They taught her about agility, footing, stooping and good manners. Each catch was an

amuse-bouche. Afterwards, when the plates were cleared, all that was left were small soft brown feathers floating in the breeze.

**T**he next quarry we hunted was a long way from afternoon tea with your Aunty. It was Formula One with your mates, or better still Drag Racing. Speed, speed, speed all the way, foot to the floor. Thundering wing claps, turbo-charged feral pigeons. We found them in a few old derelict farmsteads that belonged to a large Scottish estate. There was noise, dust, broken glass and old rusty farm machinery. A pigeon is no skylark starter either, so if she caught she could roll up her sleeves and tuck in to an all-you-can-eat buffet.

We would sneak up the side of the old stone barns, their big wooden doors rotted and collapsing. Then step into the large dark opening. There was a pause, on the threshold, as we adjusted from light to dark, dark as a cave. One step in and a tornado of pigeons hurtled past, inches from our heads. It was like being shot at. In a few seconds though, the storm passed and the thunder clap of wings was circling the chimney pots in the sun. We let our eyes delve into the rafters to see if anyone was left...

After a couple of easier ones we could stand to the side of the door and either send someone in or lob a stone in, like a grenade into a bunker. She would take on those first pigeons, those exocets with their after-burners lit, exploding out of the hollow barn. We would

run out of the farmyard desperately trying to watch the chase as they disappeared over the crumbling rooftops, we rarely saw what happened but always we hoped to see the flap of pigeon wings caught in the grass.

At one farm the feral pigeons were in the old house itself, between the rotten ceiling and the upstairs floorboards, to be precise. We would tap along the old plaster and the pigeons would come out between the rafters as if shot by a cannon. Their way out of the room was a large window made up of lots of small square panels of glass. There were three or four in the top row that were broken and the pigeons went straight through at warp-speed 8. The hawk got the hang of it and caught a few of the younger pigeons. With our view again obscured, we had to run back through the kitchen and pantry and out the backdoor. I remember three of us once taking quite a while to find her in a deep patch of nettles on her pigeon. It was a neat sight to see them vanish through those small window panes but we stopped flying there after a near miss.

One pigeon could be heard scurrying in the ceiling and came out in a cloud of noise and dust. There was no panic. We knew what we were doing now. Our hawk was now confident and very fit. She dropped below the pigeon in classic accipiter style. The pigeon went for the broken window pane, the Sparrowhawk chose the one below. It was solid. She smashed straight through an intact pane of glass. She was dazed but unhurt. Even accounting for old and brittle

glass it was some feat, an amazing sight, like something from a modern special-effects film, and a lucky escape.

The pigeons soon became wise, circling up from the buildings as we approached in the Land Rover. Our pigeon hawking there was over.

After a fruitless visit to one of the more remote farms, we had a flight I will never forget. The pigeons had seen us winding through the pot holes up the long farm track but the flock of starlings feeding amongst cattle were still unconcerned as we bumped back down. Few things are as exciting as a busy flock of feeding starlings, bustling, chattering and leap-frogging to the front of the queue. As the hawk left, the starlings lifted in a whirling of wings. About 30yds out stood a cow, a solid black one standing broadside, as obvious as a large black cow in a field of short grass can be. A starling flew slap bang straight into the cow's side followed a split second later by the Sparrowhawk a foot below! Both dropped to the ground as if dead. The starling recovered and wobbled off while we coaxed the Spar back on to the glove.

**D**espite all the successful flights she had, two of the most memorable chases were misses. The first was unintentional.

It was nearly too late. I don't know why but I remember the feeling of resignation. So perhaps I had driven too far for nothing and in the frustration of realising time was running out. I

thought I would just walk along the small river that meanders through the wide, shallow valley, passing close to the road at this farm.

I remember the autumnal gloom, the setting sun fast disappearing, chinks of yellow through the clouds as if tattered curtains were being pulled on the day. It was still and silent and meditative.

Around one bend, two mallards shattered the quiet so noisily that they shook me back to reality. I hadn't even noticed the Sparrowhawk had left my glove. Then she came into frame, as if I was seeing a part of myself, my own hand at a distance. She rose up beneath one and bounced off its chest. The mallard's course didn't alter, I wonder if it even noticed! Nothing spectacular so far, it is what happened next...

I called her to the glove and headed back along the river. It was darker, the sun at our back, the river rippled before us as silver. The explanation for the light on the water, the sky, the bank and rocks, I can't explain

but the next flight is burned into my memory. And I knew at the time that I would never forget it, such was the beauty. The river was curving, slow, deep and flat calm before me, reflecting the clear evening sky above. Further down, it became shallow and wide, rippling over rocks, between boulders and then disappeared over a little waterfall into a deep, dark corner. All black and white, light and dark, not a single colour, like an exquisite paper cutting or the finest focused monochrome print. Then, after one step, a tiny part of the bank shook itself to life and tore off right down the middle of the river, skimming the mirror of the sky. A Dipper. The Sparrowhawk left me, the only spectator, and flew into the silver screen.

Inches off the water, they raced to the rapids, so fast the rippling, shimmering water seemed to be slowed. The Sparrowhawk was gaining. I didn't want her to catch it – I have always loved dippers. There were a couple of twists around dark rocks in the shallows. The flight was disappearing, the two speeding, flickering silhouettes

getting smaller and smaller. The ribbon of light finished as the water dropped over the step into the dark pool. Two fragments of dark racing back to darkness.

The Sparrowhawk was right on it. She was going to catch it! Almost together, they dropped over the waterfall into the blackness. Then came an explosion of light, lightning on the retina, a firework of glistening, shimmering, molten mercury rose into the blackness like a hundred sparklers. The Dipper had hurled itself at full speed back into the safety of the water and sent up a splash that caught the evening light. It was as if a brick had been hurled in by a petulant teenage Sparrowhawk god, or a chandelier exploded.

We applied for a licence to hunt blackbirds around a golf course and I just marvelled at how they escaped, time after time. I can't remember how many blackbirds we were legally allowed to catch but it was immaterial as we didn't



Almost together, they dropped over the waterfall into the blackness. Then came an explosion of light, lightning on the retina, a firework of glistening, shimmering, molten mercury rose into the blackness like a hundred sparklers

catch a single one!

**T**he second unsuccessful slip I will never forget was very much intentional. I harboured dreams of catching a partridge. Very occasionally we would come across a small covey, I think as a neighbouring estate was releasing some. One afternoon, driving down a back road I saw a large covey of partridge trickle across the road in front of me and go into a patch of stinging nettles. I happened to have the hawk in the back of the Land Rover, ready to fly. Really, when does that ever happen? I pulled up at what I judged was far enough away and with the hawk on my fist walked back. Barely able to breathe, heart hammering away with excitement and anticipation. There could never be a better chance. Taking a deep breath, I stepped into the nettles, another step, next step... The partridges erupted in all directions. They rose all around, beating the hollow stems of the dead nettles literally within arm's length. It was overwhelming, where to look, where to look. I felt the Sparrowhawk jump and the urgent, high-pitched tingle of bells but I couldn't see her. She would be tucked down low, pumping for all she could behind one of them, but which one, my head spun round trying to follow all of them at once, which one?! I don't see her, I don't see her! Then the whirring of wings started fading into the distance. Except one, one rapidly slowing flapping of ever weaker wings. I glanced down, there she was, a shredded bat hanging from my glove by her needle sharp talons. The only time

in her life she was ever sticky-footed. I was devastated! The totally gut-wrenching, soul-sucking sadness that fishermen get when the line breaks. You don't cry because you haven't the energy left for that. It was literally a once-in-a-lifetime moment!

**H**er first magpie is as clear as a flight from yesterday. After all, that's what Spars catch. They are the intention, often. The bread and butter through the winter. But magpies weren't common in that part of Scotland, they were spreading, making their way up further north. But people talked of never having seen one until a few years earlier.

We sat in the Land Rover down the inevitable potholed farm track, her and I. A pair of magpies were picking around three or four sheep in a field of rough thistly pasture. Chances like this were very rare – this was our first. I was watching with my heart thumping, my breathing shallow and my palm sweating with the excitement in the way I still get. She seemed to be just watching. Then she bobbed and twitched and craned her head as one of them disappeared behind a thistle. Suddenly, decision made, she dropped off the glove and was skimming across the field like an ice hockey puck flying down the rink. It was my first classic accipiter sneak-attack flight. My heart sank when the magpies rose too early, leaping into the air and climbing on clambering white wings. I didn't know she was just going to keep on rowing, swerving around the tallest thistles. Had

no idea she could stand on her tail and shoot upwards, like a rubber ball hurled down onto a concrete floor, or that she would bind to the magpie in a mash-up of feathers and tumble down through the air. It was a revelation. She made it look easy, and it was. When you have cut your teeth on skylarks and feral pigeons, magpies in the open are mopped up with sumptuous ease.

This same Sparrowhawk moved here to Ireland with us in 1999, where magpies thrive. In those early weeks, I once came across 19 magpies in and around a dead sheep, more than I would see in a whole season in Scotland at the time. She took magpies and jackdaws all season long, revelling in the land of corvid plenty.

Once I flew her too late in the day and without having brought the receiver in the car. Cursing my stupidity, I made the call to drive back and get the receiver and a torch knowing it would be dark when I got back. Returning, I opened out the yagi, and realising that I first had to tell the farmer what I was doing prowling around, opened his little garden gate. Before I had taken two steps down the path there was the jingle of bells and rustling feathers and she came in and fluttered onto the outstretched yagi in the dark. There must have been just enough light, from the farmhouse windows, for her to see.

**S**ean Gibbons owned the Quiet Man Cafe in Cong village at the time. He would open it up sometimes

(well only if he wasn't Woodcock shooting, beating for others, fishing for salmon, trout, pike, perch or playing golf). He was great to me in the first years, showing me all the quiet bohreens where we could find things to hunt. He had a special fondness for the Sparrowhawk, 'the little girleen', and would phone us up to see if we were going for a drive around. He knew all the farmers and all the cars we met on the roads. Sometimes the 'mad butcher of Cong' would come too. I remember one long magpie flight that ended with her binding to the quarry over the road and fluttering down right in the middle of it. To our horror a vehicle was coming, I leapt out and scooped her up out of the way. The car just squeezed past our vehicle at a snail's pace, millimetres to spare, and I looked back at my comrades in the Land Rover with huge relief but they had vanished. They were cowering behind the seats hidden from whoever the woman driver was. I can't recall exactly but she could have been their former school teacher. Or maybe it was something to do with the church. Clearly she was a woman to be reckoned with!

Sean was always optimistic – wildly optimistic. In his mind, there was nothing this little Sparrowhawk couldn't do, and it is because of him that she caught her first rook.

If you drive in the gates of Ashford Castle, as anyone could in those days, you weave through the golf course. Tantalising glimpses of the castle turrets appear over the trees before the whole magnificent vista of

Lough Corrib appears. If we hadn't caught anything, this golf course was our last chance saloon, and if the Gods of Falconry favoured us then something would be there for a flight at least and a recall to feed upon.

On one such occasion, we drove in and just as we dipped down on the last corner there was a rook sat on the 18th green. It looked huge with no long grass to mask its size, striding about on the manicured turf on its own. Sean was keen to give her a go. I told him that she had never caught a rook, and that if she ever was going to catch one it wouldn't be this confident one walking boldly in front of us, it'd most likely be by mistake amongst a flock of jackdaws. I was winning Sean over with my reasoning, dampening his optimism, when she started a little head bobbing 'there, look, she is interested in him'. I looked for wagtails or anything else I thought she might have spotted. 'She is going to go, she is going to go'. And off she went at the equivalent of a funeral shuffle. The rook rose languidly into the air at the sound of the bells and the car that had been stationary for too long. It lifted higher into the air and the Sparrowhawk's wingbeats seemed to match it, slow and measured. 'There, I told you....' But then she rose up and bound to the rook and down they both came. We were out of the car like wild men. It was her first of many.

I had planned on writing an article about Sparrowhawk memories. Snapshots of past

Spars and their flights, coming full circle to our present Sparrowhawk, Mrs Walters. To my mind she is the best of all we have ever flown but this article has lost the run of itself. As I finish writing this, Mrs Walters has a swollen foot. It is hopefully only bruising – the X-ray shows no break – but they are fragile creatures sometimes, so we wait with fingers crossed. Her last catch was a rook so magnificent, I weighed it – 550g. There was not a single black feather on its body, every feather shone with blues, purples, hints of green. It was corvid perfection, and I felt sad to have caught something so beautiful like an enormous dark Kingfisher.

Mrs Walters has become a legend to us, her stories and sagas and feats of flying will have to wait, I guess. Just last week she caught our first ever hen pheasant. Then she made the highest bind to a rook I have ever seen. Another time, I used Google Earth to measure a flight at a passing magpie of 180m (a long way when you measure it and don't just guess). And then she... oh enough already!





# The Passage Falcon



**Bob Dalton**  
Illustrated by Carl Bass



## HOODING

A falcon wears a hood for a variety of reasons which all realistically come down to giving the falconer control over any given situation that he or she and the falcon may encounter. The hood can prevent the falcon getting frightened, biting unnecessarily, trying to get at quarry it has no chance of catching and damaging itself whilst being transported. The fact that a falcon will, on the vast majority of occasions, calm down almost instantly when a hood is put on, even a wild taken freshly trapped falcon, then it is more than obvious that the hood is an essential piece of equipment, not only in the early days of training but for the rest of its working life. Just imagine trying to train a falcon without using



## OBTAINING THE PASSAGER

In this chapter by stating categorically that I have never trapped or under any circumstances any raptor of any description in my life as to do so, certainly for the entirety of my falconry life, has been as well as immoral. There are a considerable number of methods of obtaining a passage falcon and it should be kept very much to the front of the mind that this book is written by someone who has been fortunate to visit a great many different countries and cultures in the pursuit of falconry. I will set down here the methods I have used myself or have used to obtain passage hawks as well as some methods I have never used myself. It should be remembered that what is perfectly legal in one country may well be frowned on and actually be illegal in another. So, accordingly, please do not be misled by any of the methods I have been permitted to describe, as they may be illegal, unethical, or otherwise, and to be avoided.



“The Passage Falcon” at last a book dealing with the ultimate falcon employed in the chase. This book is 175 pages of information gleaned over almost fifty years experience by falconer Bob Dalton and is beautifully illustrated with 11 paintings and 15 drawings by Carl Bass as well as numerous colour and black and white photos. Price is £25 plus £3 P & P. To obtain your copy phone Bob Dalton on 07774 267790 or e-mail at [aplomado@btinternet.com](mailto:aplomado@btinternet.com).



## Assorted Materials

Jan 2014 – Oct 2016

Hilary White, Dublin

**N**ot much happening through the binoculars. A few pigeons doing laps around the rooftops. The odd magpie click. I'm standing in the car doorway and scanning the wasteland and skyline before me. I'm parked in a narrow service lane. Behind me crumbles a once bustling Dublin manufacturing complex that would have employed hundreds of people. Before me, a rich, overgrown oasis about the size of a football pitch, fenced off by 10ft railings, disused warehouses and council flats.

It's ten days, I tell myself, and I'd lost her only five days into reclaiming. If it's her – and the reports of a hawk with a bell give

me hope – it would take hours of surveillance and a bownet to have a chance of getting her back. This is a waste of...

Ting-aling.

\*

'It's relational,' Nick says from the other side of the planet. It's probably never been written once in the long and proud tradition of falconry literature but the two words from my antipodean friend encompassed much to me, something so obvious, too obvious, that I had forgotten it.

If you distil down the concept of man and animal cohabiting

with a common purpose of chase and seize, a day-in, day-out pursuit in several senses of the phrase, is there anything else to really bear in mind other than it being a relationship?

Thirteen years is a long time to have an empty mews or no mews at all. Life elbows its way in. Vocations. Careers. Conscientiousness. Financial constraints. And other passions that have circled falconry without you realising it. In that time, I put on mental weight. I was no longer the teenager walking up pheasant poults in scrub on land that as soon as I turned my back became a motorway. Gone was the yesterday boy who gasped at whinchat flights

on the site of today's housing estate. 'Next year,' I kept saying to myself. And as the 'next years' piled up, so too did the anxieties. Was it like riding a bike or would I need to relearn?

\*

'We're all busy,' Matt shrugged. We're sitting at a dinner table in deepest, darkest Scotland picking our teeth after a feast of talon-scarred grouse. A true friend will confront you when you're leaning on excuses that shouldn't exist. Matt and Bob have been coming here for an extended hawking residency every August for more than a decade. It is a 12-hour drive from where they live further south in England, where their wives and children remain, possibly to get a well-earned break from the drug-addicted. Red hawks are trained at lunchtime before blue pros are sent up over dogs and crouching Red Grouse to deliver said drug.

By evening time, sleepy, whisky-dabbed smiles succumb to tiredness. By morning, everyone prepares via quiet contemplation. Bob practices scales and phrases on his trombone and Matt taps on a keyboard. The pointers snooze on the couches and falcons winnow and pump outside on blocks. Necks crane near window panes to monitor the shifting weather of Caithness. I read *H Is For Hawk* and am not the same ever again.

I travel home to Dublin and go immediately to meet Eamonn for a pint. 'I'm getting a hawk next year,' I tell him.

\*

I'm shouting and flapping my arms like a Jim Henson reject. Everything happened so fast that the world might as well not exist outside this bizarre equation before me. Hawk flies out on to empty football pitch after Starlings. She has no hope but it's been a slow afternoon. She swings up into the air in a resigned glide as the starlings scatter. She has heard the whistle and is now dipping her wings in a gentle U-Turn to return to the glove. Only her aim is off. She's starts pumping hard towards something 60 or so metres off to my right. She has height. The intent in her wing-beat calcifies. A Woodpigeon pants up off the ground and hurtles away over a wall. She is going faster than I've ever seen her and gains ground weirdly quickly before doing one of those wheel-over manoeuvres as they both disappear behind the wall.

Neither has come up.

As I sprint towards the gate to get to the other side of the wall, a huge brown buteo has leapt out of a nearby tree and is plummeting towards them with wings tucked tight. My Fozzie Bear impression spooks the buzzard away before it makes landfall. This variable wasn't around back in those days.

My heart is thumping with something more pleasant than fright but more roiling than leisurely enjoyment. I was only months later with the objective distance of the moult that I could identify this as being the drug I chased every afternoon with Sarah Green.

\*

It's early 2014 and I'm sitting in a hotel café in Doha. It is the IAF AGM, and I'm with two friends whom I have known since I began my involvement with IAF as Ireland's national delegate. One is talking about the odd time things go right when a field of spectators are watching. The other quietly counters that the most special times are when you are alone with your hawk. I say that I agree with this. The first man, whom I'd consider a friend, fixes me with a blank look and says: 'Oh I'm sorry, are you even a falconer?' I excuse myself and walk away, less hurt than baffled as to why he felt the need to say this.

\*

The sound of water from the butt chiming into the old aluminium watering can makes her turn and bob down at the bath. She flutters down and daintily steps into it like a Russian ballerina. She sips and rummages, nibbles at the stream and paddles in small circles as I add fresh water. I lean against the car and enjoy this serving of sorbet for my brain.

\*

Every tree, however unlikely, is scanned. Every copse a kingdom and each stump a butcher's block for small hawks. Emails and phonecalls and letters, all assuring various people that I am licensed, that I merit the license and that what I want to do has zero negative impact on the hawks or habitat that I cherish. And while all this bureaucratic back-and-forth is



being played out, I see real and present threats that no one is pointing out. A greenfield site up for rezoning, lush and dense with trees and foliage, exactly where a hawk would chose to base itself between suburban hunting skirmishes. I wince at the discovery of noisy, intrusive maintenance work being carried out at the Poolbeg Towers at the precise time that the resident pair of Peregrines are incubating. I cycle past Merrion Square, surely a larder for city Spars, and see songbird cover such as hedges, bush and shrubs being ripped out of it in the name of landscaping the public park. There is a quizzical smirk from the Oscar Wilde statue there. I'm sure he'd see the absurdity in all this.

\*

The wind is stiff. I probably shouldn't be flying her but this winter has been the stormiest in 300 years, to the point that for weeks I am only getting out between tempests. It is Sunday at a deserted school pitch outside Dublin. Around 30 or so gulls are far out on the halfway line, all facing into the breeze and walking slowly. SG's tail vibrates which it always does as she fig-

ures out a far-off slip. I like to think it's her winding up her batteries but who knows. She drops off the glove severely and becomes a guided missile. Seconds later, she is among them, coursing one up into the air and downwind in ever-tightening circuits.

She mantles over it in an adrenal stupor, and then comes to and begins plucking. Kneeling down to clip her to the glove, I look back to where the flight began. The car is a spec from where I kneel. The scene feels delicate and hard to hold.

\*

'This is polycarbonate UVP. It's virtually indestructible but completely pliable,' says the friendly sales assistant. 'I think it's perfect,' I say, examining it and gently bending the Perspex sheet into a wide tube. 'What do you need it for?' he asks, hoping he might be able to help me further. 'Well it's complicated,' I smile evasively. 'How many people do you have working here?' I quickly ask. He tells me that the company has weathered hard times and bounced back so well to the point that it has been able

to rehire those it was forced to lay off. I thank him and leave with both a perfect imprint tube and a metaphor I can't stop thinking about for days.

\*

A bad night's sleep. Dreams about a hawk slipping from my grasp. And Tommy. Why Tommy? I haven't seen him in donkey's years. It's probably because I've been thinking I must call him and ask him to keep his ears open. Just in case. Good ol' Tommy. Has his ear to the ground. At least he always did...

Hawks and humans are creatures of habit. We thrive off it. It steels and settles us. I came to know every flinch and primary stretch of Sarah Green. The way she'd suddenly start vigorously preening her left alula on the glove to indicate that she was in yarak. Those tail vibrations as she planned out in her tiny reptilian brain how to blindside a greedy Woodpigeon feeding up above on a branch. She would sit every night on a bow perch in the middle of the kitchen floor as Viki and I cooked and ate and drank and chatted and played music and worked on laptops and entertained family or friends. She would twirl her head like a cuddly Gyrfalcon and charm us with diligent preening sessions and what Viki would come to call her 'flamenco-dancer stretches'.

\*

A hawk that is a tiny dot up in the canopy of the tallest tree in the county with no intention of

looking down at me. A hawk that is ignoring me from a towering electrical pylon after squandering the only decent slip of the whole afternoon on the only still day of the week. A hawk that is throwing a complete fit over a life-size statue – a statue! – of a horse. A hawk overshooting the glove on a howling windy day that has seen me jump a fence, dodge flying golf balls and sprint across a fairway to try and find her. A hawk that nine times out of ten doesn't bate on the way out hunting but that one time behaves like it's the first time she's ever been in a car. Petrol lights coming on and horrendous traffic as the evening's light slips away. Footballs, dogs, prams, garish clothing, small children, cows, stress, stress and more effing stress. What the hell am I doing this for? This was a mistake. I'm not cut out for it.

\*

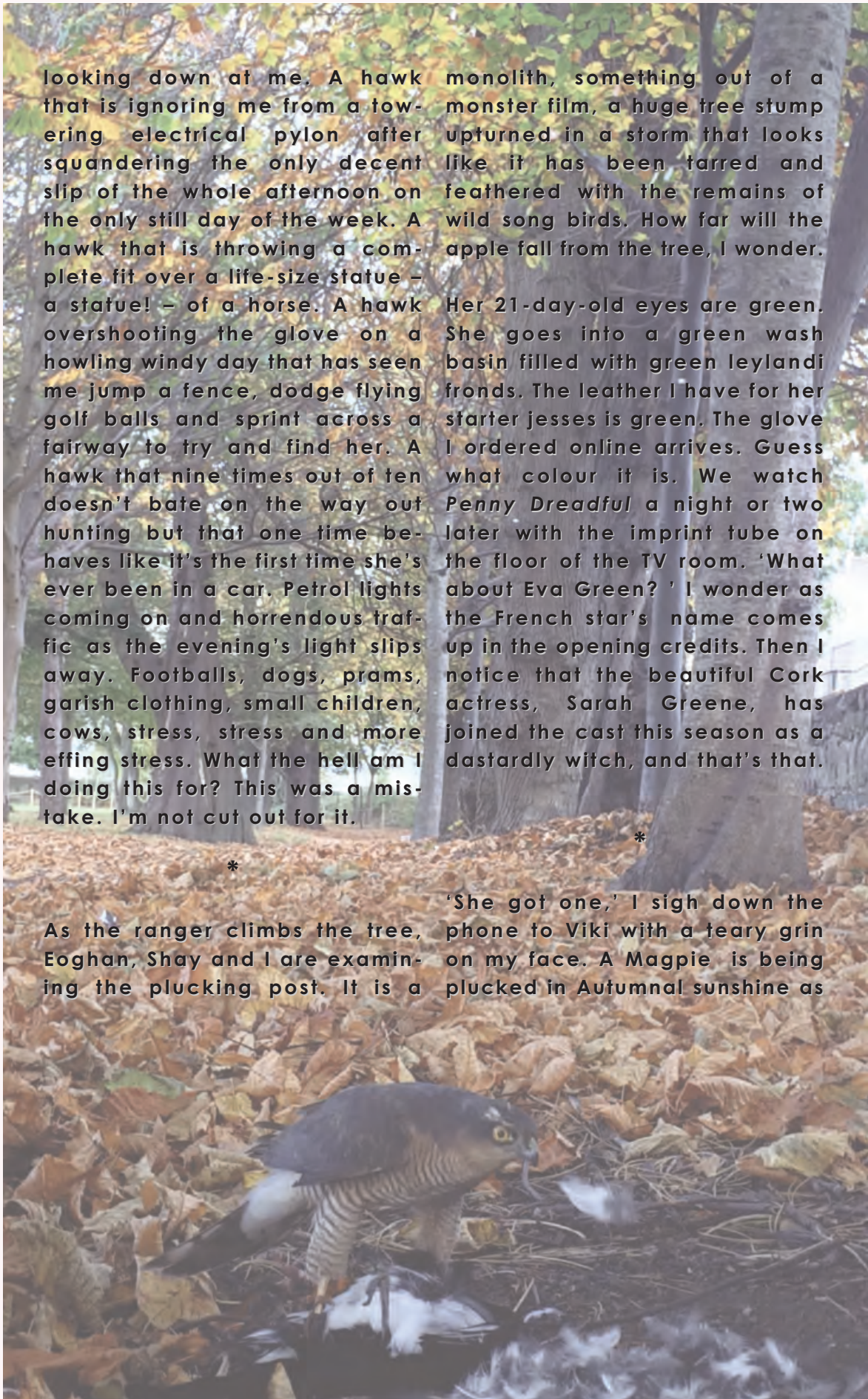
As the ranger climbs the tree, Eoghan, Shay and I are examining the plucking post. It is a

monolith, something out of a monster film, a huge tree stump upturned in a storm that looks like it has been tarred and feathered with the remains of wild song birds. How far will the apple fall from the tree, I wonder.

Her 21-day-old eyes are green. She goes into a green wash basin filled with green leylandi fronds. The leather I have for her starter jesses is green. The glove I ordered online arrives. Guess what colour it is. We watch *Penny Dreadful* a night or two later with the imprint tube on the floor of the TV room. 'What about Eva Green?' I wonder as the French star's name comes up in the opening credits. Then I notice that the beautiful Cork actress, Sarah Greene, has joined the cast this season as a dastardly witch, and that's that.

\*

'She got one,' I sigh down the phone to Viki with a teary grin on my face. A Magpie is being plucked in Autumnal sunshine as





instinct, destiny and conditioning finally rhyme with one another. This is the culmination of hushed sunrise walks through forests, conversations with wildlife officials, round-the-clock imprinting, research and myriad expenses, the accumulation of vital assorted materials such as AstroTurf, polycarbonate UVP, green leather, timetables, phonecall minutes and good friends helping me reacquire the addiction.

\*

A hawk that hops gently from the bow perch onto an ungarnished hand at any time of the day. A hawk puffed and one-legged as wind and rain thump against the kitchen window. A hawk that turns back to the glove after a miss. A hawk that flutters onto the back seat headrest after every single solitary day of flying to feak and rouse before the journey home because that is *her thing*. A hawk with a train forged by an infant diet of natural food and minerals that proves bizarrely resilient to tackling big game. A hawk who goes into her first moult with 80 odd head under her belt. An intermewed hawk, gilded in slate blue and rust.

The bliss of uncertainty and the enrichment of five or six afternoons a week away from the computer. The drug administered via outrageous feats of speed, agility and heat.

\*

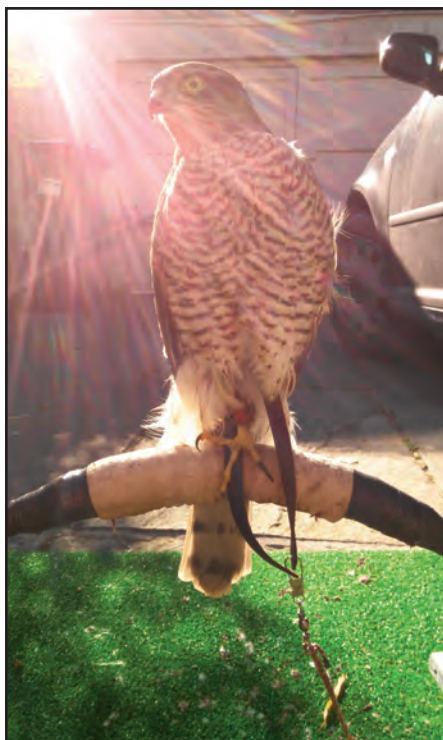
I'm back in Caithness once again. I won't lie, the holiday Sarah Green and I are taking from each other has been a pleasant one. She is very much in my thoughts as four of us chat over dinner. It is two years since I first came here and made the decision to get back on the falconry horse. Once more into the accipitrine breach. For now, there is roaring laughter and uncontrollable giggling to be had with the most unpretentious grouse hawkers in Scotland. There are dogs, fit and willing to help with the drug delivery, to enjoy out on the vast stretches and folds of tweedy moorland carpet. There are hipflasks to be passed around as all four of us smile in silence at a tiercel plucking a tough and tricky grouse. There is another silence, one more ominous and tense, as we watch a golden eagle quartering on a distant hillside before finally shadowing itself away

over the ridge. And there is the silence of yearning as a point is locked on and a tiercel mounts, a silence and a tension so beautiful it takes you out of yourself.

\*

I remember this, alright. Yes indeed. The way adrenaline and determination slowly wilt into self-loathing and despair. The questions – the *why didn't I's* and *I should've's* – shove their way into the clear, analytical thinking needed when a hawk has evaporated into the breeze. I return again and again to fruitless spots that I *feel* she might end up in. Einstein defined madness as doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results, and if so, welcome to the madness of lost-hawk hunting.

And ah yes, the way a poxing Chaffinch does a marvellous impression of a polished Nobel bell tinkling idly. I want every pinging flagpole in the land felled for the same reason. That tedium rings a bell alright, every pun intended. Good to see both myself and the man upstairs still have our senses of humour in tact (rumours of the latter's decline were surely exaggerated). Take the modern state of mobbing; when I took Sarah Green for manning walks on busy thoroughfares, Hooded Crows would follow us, lamp-post to lamppost, complaining about her very existence. One evening after hawking, I fed her up on the glove to the soundtrack of a column of five corvid species cawing bloody murder at her and the Hoodies even dropped tiny bits of gravel on



The panic, the self-flagellation, the embarrassment. Everything is coming back to me now except the one thing I want.

\*

'I have to get a woodpigeon with her,' I say to Rowland, sitting in the back seat as we head off. 'Oh she owes you nothing,' he bellows back. 'Absolutely nothing.' He is not a man who dishes out compliments freely.

\*

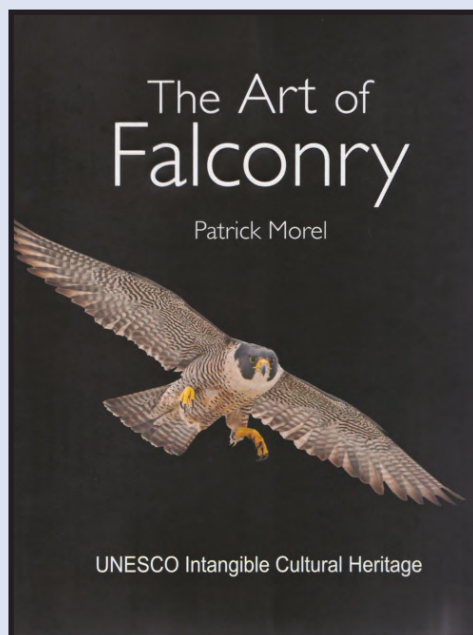
us from up above. Now, when I need them most, the crows have gone silent. Magpies chit-chat casually to one another, or you hear their alarm calls and inspect only to discover you are the source of the alarm. Nature is now entirely antipathetic towards hawks, especially Sarah Green. She gets a hall pass now when I'd dearly love the black-winged patrol to mark her down for me on the enclosed Dublin city horizon of walls and gates and chimney crows. They have gone quiet, as have her bells.

The odd wild spar zooms about as I blast the whistle with increasing desperation, and everywhere I look I see absurdly ideal slips and new hunting grounds that remind me in mocking tones of what I will now have to do without this season. Ah yes. Lost hawks. Lost through the avoidable yet somehow unforeseeable. An unseen faultline through leather, yet another material that this whole game relies on.



# THE ART OF FALCONRY

BY PATRICK MOREL



**THE ART OF FALCONRY** represents a milestone in titles on the sport, quite unique in scope, style and content. It presents falconry in theory and in practice, celebrating it as both an art form and a living cultural heritage. Far from being merely another 'how-to' book, however, it takes the reader into the field with contributions from experts in all branches of the sport, and is lavishly illustrated with stunning photographs and artwork.

The first new practical falconry treatise in the French language since the 1940s, this English edition brings a fresh perspective to the English-speaking falconer and is further enhanced through contributions from a number of internationally renowned authorities, including UK, US and South African falconers and austringers, and even a chapter on Irish snipe hawking by Robert Hutchinson.

The author's vast falconry experience, combined with that of his fellow contributors, make this volume heavy yet light and entertaining in style. It covers all aspects of modern falconry, from the traditions that shaped the sport we know today to its underpinning ethics and philosophy as it continues to evolve in the 21st

century. It takes the reader around the globe in search of ultimate quarry species, relating methods and motives through the hawking experiences of those who seek the most challenging flights in their art. Scottish red grouse and Belgian crows; wood pigeon hawking with peregrines and goshawks; sand grouse, snipe and sage grouse with high-flying falcons: this book gives the falconer pride in the sport's traditions and enthusiasm for the future development and evolution of this living heritage.

*Patrick is a consummate master falconer and a wonderful servant to world falconry. Patrick supported Christian de Coune through his Presidency of the IAF as Executive Secretary and went on to be the President himself. Few others have this depth of insight into both the practice of 'hunting falconry' as well as the political work needed to ensure that falconers can continue to take the field. The Art of Falconry is a beautiful book which feasts the eye. It is a modern treatise on the principles and philosophy which underlie the practice of falconry. It is exquisite; the product of a life spent pursuing that dream of all falconers: to attain the perfect flight. This book, in its beauty and wisdom, will help the reader along that path.*

**Adrian Lombard, IAF President**

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## *First Flight*

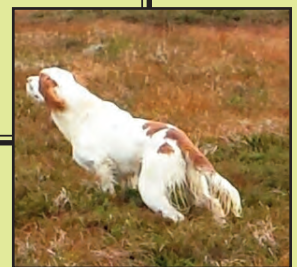
*by Don Ryan*

*Unhood your falcon gentle, boy  
Reveal the world you stole  
See the fire in her dark gaze, ignite  
the skies of heaven's soul*

*Release the bonds that keep her, boy  
Feel the rouse upon your fist  
Let her outspread wings, embrace  
the freedom you resist*

*Send her to the sky, boy  
Now the raven's eye is turned  
Hear the song of her bright bells, recite  
the lessons you have learned*

*Call down your falcon gentle, boy  
For the snipes have left the moor  
Let the winds that blow the moon to wax  
taste your scented lure*





## Whatever next?

Dr Nick Fox, England

I've often imagined what my hawking grounds would look like if each falcon left a silken thread, like a spider, for each of her flights. The skies would be criss-crossed with threads, and each one a memory.

Look! That's where Spitty chased a magpie and they both hit the side of a cow! And that's where we had that super ringing flight and Tony pulled me off my horse and kissed me (most embarrassing!). And that's where Tamsin caught her crow above the loch and swam ashore with it... So many memories, so many triumphs and disasters.

In the 25 years when I have run the Northumberland Crow Falcons, things have gradually got tougher. More wire, more plantations, more walkers, more traffic. These are not just the ruminations of a grumpy old man, the hawking diaries show the changes. This season we had two falcons killed by cattle (the new continental breeds are particularly nasty) and another ripped on barbed wire. Every time you unhood you are taking a risk. But the

alternative is to stay at home and play dominoes.

We have done our best to counteract these hazards and challenges by developing techniques and equipment to help us. I have been lucky to have lived through a period which has seen the most changes throughout the whole history of falconry. I still have two hoods that I made 59 years ago. They are awful! They are kept hidden in a drawer and I would be ashamed to show them to anyone. I also have a Mollen hood from Jack Mavrogordato from about 1900. It's a terrible thing. Nobody in their right mind would cram that onto a falcon's head. How things have changed in hood making since then. Now there are plenty of skilled hood makers and I have switched to plastic spring hoods.

Anthony Jack, former President of the BFC, when asked about the greatest developments in his lifetime, suggested the deep freeze. That made a huge change for us in being able to store food and not

rely on shin of beef from the butchers or trying to catch sparrows around the ricks. Then hatchery chick culls became available, with a network of commercial hawk food suppliers. Will the ubiquitous day old chick still be available in five years' time now that sexing eggs at 10 days old is possible? What will we do then? We will have to adapt.

We should also not forget the car. When I was young my hawking was confined to the area around my home that I could reach by push bike or horse. Nowadays most falconers rely totally on their cars both to reach distant hawking grounds and even to hawk from. This has been a massive boon, even though a distinct loss of glamour. I am privileged to still kill 95% of our crows from horseback and regard the car as a necessary evil. But for most falconers, the car is a life line and I notice with a smile how even the diehard 'traditionalists' use them.

By the 1960s, the pesticide era started to bite and legislation against obtaining raptors became so stringent that

it looked as if falconry was doomed. The RSPB delighted in our vulnerability and hoped to strangle out falconry. So, many of us resolved to develop captive breeding techniques and after a lot of hard work – and more triumphs and disasters – we have become self-sufficient for our raptors and some countries are even net exporters.

Even then we had doubters and Luddites amongst us. 'Oh no! Breeding raptors is impossible!' And then, when we succeeded: 'Oh no! These aviary birds will never be any good for falconry!'

By the end of the 1970s the populations of captive raptors were breeding up and more and more people took up the sport. The Americans discovered the Harris Hawk and there was a spirit of trying new things. But flying powerful falcons in enclosed country was courting disas-

ter, and just in time, telemetry came to our rescue. Now most codes of conduct specify that telemetry is mandatory, at least for non-native raptors flown in falconry. Whereas the Old Hawking Club expected to lose half their team of falcons each season, touch wood, in Northumberland we have never lost one.

So we have our nice hawks, something to feed them on, a means of transporting them, and a way of finding them again when lost. But what is falconry without quarry? Nowadays hawking land is harder to get and suitable quarry gets scarcer each season. Farmed game birds are often disappointing. And of course as we always had hammered into us when we were young: 'A hawk is not a gun! You cannot leave it in a cupboard and just take it out when you need it'. Hawks

need the opportunity to hunt virtually every day and they need to start hunting within days of being hard-penned. Who nowadays can offer these opportunities to his or her hawk? Most of us have pressures of work or family commitments, and precious hawking grounds may be some distance away.

We are lucky in Northumberland. Our crow hawking grounds extend to over 100,000 acres and we have enough meets to hawk 2-3 days a week throughout the season, which is as much as our horses and physical fitness allow. So what to do for the falcons on the other 4-5 days each week? The one thing with crow hawking is that horses, riders and falcons all need to be properly fit. Also in Britain it is illegal – and rightly so in my opinion – to use bagged prey. Crows are not an easy quarry for a young falcon and it is important to build up their flying



skills and confidence first. So after years of trying various artificial dummies and presentation methods I could see that the technology was now available and that the time was right to develop robotic prey. It has taken us four years to develop the models we want and this season my crow falcons have hunted robotic prey 'rocrows' on all days when we have not been hawking. The results have made the effort worthwhile. The young falcons have all switched from catching rocrows to real crows straightaway, sometimes on their first flights. The old falcons have improved in stamina, tenacity and height ceiling. Whereas previously some would give up on a ringer, now they carrying on until they have fetched their crows, and their climb angles are much steeper. They hunt the crows and the rocrows with equal vigour and we can tailor their flights to match their levels of fitness. Looking overseas, we could see that Arab falconers were also limited for prey and had opted to develop falconry

competitions to compensate. So we have developed a 'robara' for them as an alternative prey for their falcons, and indirectly as a conservation tool to reduce hunting of wild Houbara.

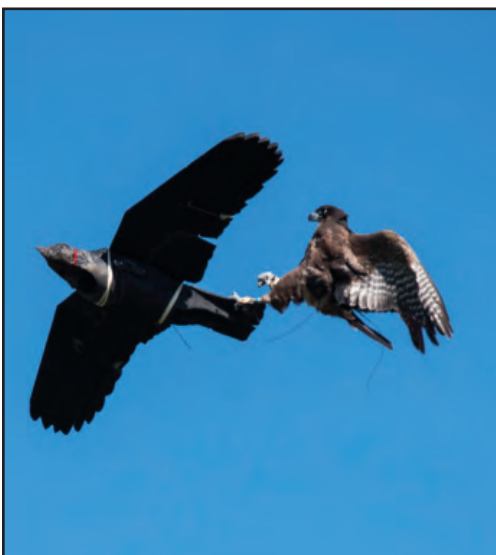
Since the day, long ago, when the first person took a hawk on hand and hunted prey with it, falconry has been evolving. Early British falconers did not use hoods until the Crusades. Available species were limited until travellers brought back exotics, such as the Aplomado or Alethe from the New World. Our dogs have gone from being wolves to highly bred pointers, and our horses have improved in size, speed and bone density.

As falconers we have managed to adapt to meet modern contingencies. I might lament the 'good old days', but actually as a vicar's son, in the Middle Ages I would have been lucky to have flown a Musket, as the allocation for a 'Holy Water Clerk'. Most of us would have

been serfs, not Frederick the Seconds.

UNESCO pointed out that Intangible Cultural Heritage is about passing on our heritage to future generations. We take what we inherited from our forefathers and pass it on to our children, adapting it as we go. Heritage is not about freezing something in an unchangeable point in time.

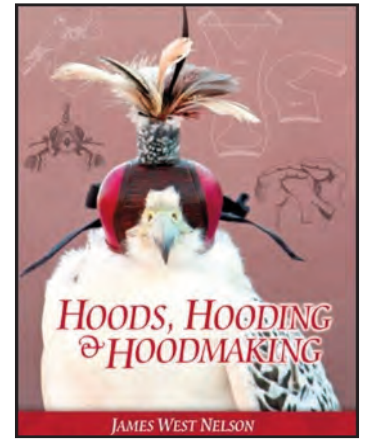
And so my old imaginings have come true. Now I can actually see the spider's thread of my falcon's flight. Modern GPS technology and barometric altimetry allow me to see the whole flight on an iPad. It looks like spaghetti thrown up into the air! I can learn so much about falcons, and when piloting the roprey I can experience what it is like at first hand to fly in the sky with a falcon chasing me, intent on killing me. I realise that I have only just started to scratch the surface of understanding falconry.



# Hoods, Hooding & Hoodmaking

By James West Nelson  
(Western Sporting, 2015)

Reviewed by William Dempsey



Having spent a number of years buying hoods from England at great expense, I decided last year to take matters into my own hands and make some of my own. My first attempts were more misses than hits but eventually came some success which I posted on our club Facebook Page last year.

My enthusiasm buoyed as I got some more patterns from Club members and more success followed with dubious information from the Internet. Unfortunately, while these sites are helpful, including YouTube videos, none really gave me the insider tips that I was looking for.

I therefore splashed the cash this year and decided to buy this book as all the reviews were very promising. The book has a large introduction to the author before it gets going. After that, it remains true to its title and is strictly about hoodmaking and the art of hooding. For anybody interested in the history of Falconry and hooding, Chapter 1 is a very interesting read on the history of hoods.

The book is then split into three parts; hoods, hooding and hoodmaking across 23 chapters, with numerous pictures, drawings and detailed instructions (emphasis on

'detailed'). The book is very large, consisting of 553 pages, hardback with extra pages at the back for notes. It weighs approximately 2.5lbs.

At the end of the 23 chapters there are four appendices covering everything from size, leather thickness, troubleshooting and hood patterns of various styles. As this is an American book, the size charting for the hoods is in the American format and not in the UK format that most of us would be familiar with in this country. In saying that, this should not be a problem to work out once you have the information to hand as it is readily available.

What I really like about this book is that it makes everything simple and everything is covered and in the one book. I particularly enjoyed the chapter on making your own hood blocks as anybody who has tried making a Dutch hood and bought the blocks from either England or America will know how expensive one block is, never mind a set. This chapter goes into great detail on how to make inexpensive but practical blocks.

The book cost £60 plus £10 P&P and took two days to arrive. I strongly recommend this book for anyone who has an interest in making their own hoods for their falcons.

It is a great way to spend the long winter evenings, either making your own hoods or browsing a thoroughly enjoyable and informative book. All that remains is for me to put some of this new found information into practice. You may see some of my efforts on the club website in the near future.

[www.westernsporting.com](http://www.westernsporting.com)

## Review a book

**Has your day been saved by a trusty piece of text, or do you find some are not worthy of the hype they get?**

**Tell the rest of your club your verdict on a falconry book, old or new, and why you think it does or doesn't deserve to live in every member's bookcase.**

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# Beach Bird: Renaissance Falconry with Passage Peregrine Falcons

By Bruce A Haak  
(Falco Sapiens Press, 2016)

Reviewed by Don Ryan

I was first introduced to a draft of *Beach Bird* in a city-centre pub in Dublin in the spring of 2014 when I met with Bruce Haak. From that point on, I anxiously awaited the finished version of this piece of work. When it finally arrived in October of this year, I certainly wasn't at all disappointed.

It must be said from the outset that this is not a how-to falconry book in the traditional sense. It is rather an evocative journey into the heart of American falconry, one that invites you to meet the characters and visit the places that are the foundation of the American Falconry tradition, right from its beginnings through to its current position as a leading light in global falconry.

Beautifully written by somebody who is a seasoned falconer and author, *Beach Bird* chronicles the development of falconry as a hunting sport in the

United States and focuses on the use of passage Peregrines that began in the US back in the 1940s.

Haak describes the various techniques used to capture northern Peregrines along their coastal migration routes, and the visionaries who pioneered beach trapping as a source of birds for American falconers.

The author concludes this wonderful book with an examination of the future of falconry and the important tradition of wild harvesting of birds of prey. At the same time, he gives many strong arguments for its continuance. It is an important work in the historical sense as it documents the development of American long-wing falconry. *Beach Bird* is also strikingly illustrated with an array of archive and contemporary photographs as well as an array of magnificent paintings by well-known falconry

artists such as Andrew Ellis and Hans Peeters.

It truly deserves a space on every falconer's bookshelf.

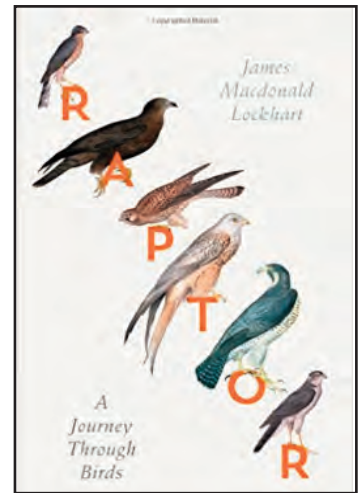
*Beach Bird* is available to purchase online at [falcosapienspress.com](http://falcosapienspress.com) and retails at \$75 for the standard edition and \$200 for the leather bound collector's edition.



# Raptor: A Journey Through Birds

By James Macdonald.  
(4th Estate, 2016)

Reviewed by Rowland Eustace



This book confused me at first as I rarely read a book cover to cover, rather I hover like a kestrel over it then stoop on certain pages and become involved. The first chapter (it has 15) that I stooped on was 'The Sparrowhawk', wouldn't you know.

This chapter in common with all others is full of wonderful descriptions of the terrain covered in his search for all the raptors.

The author draws you into the landscape with his caressing language so that you smell the heather, hear the sounds, feel the wind on your face and the tremble of the bog under your feet. Your eyes are also drawn to the vastness of the sky and those dots that plunge to reveal themselves as one of the many raptors we so much enjoy.

Each chapter though designated to a particular bird of prey contains sightings of many other raptors and birds as he walks considerable distances, start-

ing in Orkney, moving to Aberdeen and on to London. He frequently refers to William MacGillivray, an 18th century naturalist who died in 1852.

MacGillivray wandered over immense distances in his searches and on one occasion walked from Aberdeen to London by a circuitous route. His observations are referred to by Macdonald throughout the book in parallel as it were with his own journeys

Each of the 15 chapters, referring to different birds of prey, contains vivid descriptions of each hawk, their hunting methods, courtship displays and nesting habits. A very interesting and worthwhile read which gives great insights into the lives of our birds of prey.

This is not a book on Falconry but should be of interest to every falconer.

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**Lauren McGough, US**

I've been fortunate to have spent several years living in the United Kingdom and Central Asia, where I hunted with captive-bred, chamber-raised and passage Golden Eagles. In the United States however, my home country and where I currently reside, regulations for those wanting to hunt with a Golden Eagle are extremely restrictive. Captive breeding and importation of Golden Eagles is not allowed, and currently there is not a licensed harvest of either eyass or passage eagles. The only avenue to hunt with these birds is to fly an eagle for rehabilitation that is destined for release, or, after some heavy red tape, to acquire a former rehab eagle that has been deemed non-releasable.

This previous summer I was

contacted and asked if I wanted to fly such an eagle. This was a male eagle that had been taken illegally from the nest in 2002 and attempted to be kept as a pet. When it was discovered, the eagle was confiscated. Having been raised and hand-fed by people, it was a hard imprint. For more than a decade, the eagle was passed around to different rehab facilities and falconers who, quite unfortunately, did little with it. It was never flown and mostly left tied to a perch and thrown food. The last falconer to acquire him had the best intentions but was physically limited and not able to fly him. She hated to see him only sitting and asked me if I would fly him.

I enthusiastically agreed though I was not at all sure

how it would go. I hated to think of how his muscles might have atrophied, how he'd never been fit in his life, and how he had no experience whatsoever of getting food for himself. Would an eagle's innate instinct to catch and kill hares trump that? When he came to me, he was not overly aggressive but clearly had an expectation of being fed by people, and you had to be vigilant with him on the fist.

For initial weight reduction and familiarity to his new surroundings, I bowl-fed him. This was a technique I learned in Mongolia and also saw utilised in Europe. It is a way to feed an eagle that takes its feet completely out of the equation. A bowl of cut meat in water is held up to the eagle's head and he eats from it. It

doesn't encourage any possession of the fist, kill, lure, mews or what have you.

Once he was comfortable with his surroundings, I introduced the lure. Every day he got a meal on the lure. It began very simply – the eagle held a few feet away from a twitching lure with lovely red meat tied on it. After his initial reluctance, we proceeded quickly. Once someone dragging the lure a distance away became too easy, I attached the lure to an off-road RC car. This is brilliant fun and great fitness work. I would hide the lure in some brush and tie perhaps twenty feet of line to the RC car. With the eagle on one hand and the control in the other, I'd send the car rocketing across the field and the lure with it. You can get up to a good speed – depending on the model, 20/30/40mph – and make tight turns and sharp angles for the eagle to pursue.

That was all we did. I did no calling to the fist, no tidbit games, nothing. He was fully aware that I could be a food source and I had no reason to encourage it. Once his response to the lure was instant, with maximum effort, and I thought he'd developed a good baseline of fitness, we hit the field.

I live in prairie country in Oklahoma. We have flat grass-covered fields that stretch for miles that, in the right spots, are filled with black-tailed jackrabbits. These hares are very similar to European brown hares, though I'd guess slightly smaller. In early No-

vember, I stepped into the field fairly nervous. This was the moment of truth – what would he think about a real hare hauling it in the opposite direction?

To my delight and excitement – he chased, and hard! He was all wings and feet as he tripped over himself to chase the hares that flushed in front of me. Although he didn't have much trouble catching up to the hares, it was obvious that he wasn't quite sure what to do to counter their evasive manoeuvres. In fact, he fell for every trick in the book. They'd jink left and right, spin around in circles, stop short, leap into the air, and pin their ears back and motor towards the horizon. He came close to several but his inexperience was painfully obvious, as was his mediocre fitness. After twenty minutes of flying, he'd be very winded. I made sure to give him ample rest when winded, and when the sun finally set, plenty of food to allow for the building of muscle.

The following morning, we returned to the field. When the first hare burst from the tumbleweeds he was all business! He stayed on it for a good fifty yards and just barely managed to put a foot on its hind leg as it tried to jink away. The pair spun around and he planted the second foot on the head. One wonderful thing about eagles is that once one foot makes contact with a hare, it's virtually always in the bag. I was ecstatic! Even after sitting for nearly a decade and a half, on his second day hunting he caught a hare!

I've come to the conclusion that, with eagles, the chase itself is a reward, as is the act of killing, and in an eagle's mind, there is little difference between a few bites of warm food and a full crop. I traded him for half a quail and then we kept on hunting. I know this can be counter-intuitive, but particularly with individual eagles that are prone to aggression, I've found its good practice to not involve a large quantity of food in any circumstance where I'm present. By shifting an eagle's attention away from you after a kill, and back towards the open field, they 'reset' quite quickly and it mitigates possessiveness on the kill. In Mongolia, eagles are never cropped on a kill, as the fox pelts are too valuable. They are traded to a hare's leg and then the bulk of the eagle's ration given from the bowl at night. I've come to really enjoy this method, and if an eagle is needing to be topped up at the end of a day's hunt, I feed from a bowl. After I returned to the car on that first successful hunt, I turned on the local station to hear Miles Davis playing jazz. It was relaxing and wonderful after all the effort we'd put in – I decided to name this eagle Miles.

From then on, things moved remarkably fast. Most days out, Miles would make a kill. By December, he had caught his first double and triple. His fitness increased remarkably. No matter how good lure work is, there is no substitute for real hawking, and I love flying hawks into shape. On Christmas Eve, we flew for three

hours straight, and he flew equally hard on each slip – night and day from his twenty-minute limit a month or two prior. He also learned much faster than I anticipated. The hares were getting away less and less and I started to see him manoeuvre in ways that I had never seen him do before. He learned to pitch up vertically and wait for the hare to commit to a direction before coming crashing down on top of it. Instead of overshooting a hare that would suddenly stop, he'd sharply turn and wingover into it. When they would leap, instead of hitting the ground confused, he'd try to roll over and throw his legs upwards. It is astounding at how deeply embedded their instinct for hunting hares is.

I feel it is also worth mentioning that fieldcraft is incredibly important in entering an eagle. The type of slip that you are attempting to provide, taking wind and cover into consideration, can make or break the flight. It is the falconer's job to provide as advantageous a slip as possible – this is as important with hares as it is in other forms of gamehawking. To walk through a field willy-nilly with a new eagle is usually asking

for a frustrated eagle.

Thankfully, as our hunting progressed, the aggression that I had seen from him started to vanish. It is true that mal-trained eagles can be dangerous, but I have yet to see an aggressive eagle whose behaviour consistent hunting didn't largely 'fix'. They have such an incredible prey drive that if you can direct towards hunting, you can't help but build a good relationship.

**I**n January, I took him a thousand miles west to New Mexico and Arizona.

Although the local hares are also black-tailed jackrabbits, they are very different from what I hunt on the prairie. These are desert dwellers. They regularly contend with resident eagles and are extremely adept at using cacti as cover. I wouldn't have the luxury of foot flushes – these hares were very aware and almost always flushed in the distance.

While I was used to walking on the flat, in New Mexico I walked the top of canyon walls and ridges while flushers worked the valleys below. It was certainly a challenge. He had a height advantage, but

the hares usually had a few hundred yards of a head start. In this type of hawking, the ideal scenario is to have a dog to keep the hares moving. If the hares freeze in heavy cover, it is rare that an eagle will crash it. Eagles seem to be quite cover adverse. Several flights started well but ended uneventfully when the hares froze in thick cactus. After a day of work, we succeeded in flushing a hare into the grassy open. It had nowhere to hide and Miles hugged the ground as he gained speed and scooped it up.

Arizona was very similar. Miles tried to get his feet on jacks that juked around catci but ended up with feet full of spines instead. I spend several minutes picking them out after these flights, but if it bothered the eagle, he didn't seem to let on. In the United States, I don't hunt out of the hood. I fly my eagles off the fist, unhooded. Because there are so few eagle falconers in the country, and so much game, it is rare that I have to share a field. Although flying out of the hood has its advantages, namely being able to choose precisely the slip you want, flying without can be really rewarding. The air is

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electric as both you and the eagle are hypervigilant for every movement, every noise. When that flash of fur appears, the eagle explodes from your fist faster than your brain has time to process and, despite their great size, the eagle gains incredible speed, and before you know it is closing in on the hare. He spied a distant hare in Arizona and decided he wanted that one. Miles powered away and as it tried to use a small cactus as cover, he bluffed it with his wings to turn away and just freight-trained right into it. An eagle's brute strength is incredible!

Arizona is one of the few places where people hunt regularly off horseback. Falconers use Harris hawks,

small falcons or accipiters in pursuit of quail from horseback. Harry McElroy, the author of the Desert Hawking series, is arguably the founder of this kind of hawking. The local horseback hawkers followed along behind and beside me while I walked the desert for hares. The countryside there is gorgeous and ringed by mountains – it looks an awful lot like the Altai Mountains of Mongolia. It was a surreal experience, I felt like I was back in Mongolia with horses all around me. Hawking alone has its own magic, but there is something special about being able to share a successful day with friends. Watching this eagle transform and take several challenging desert hares with friends has

been one of the most rewarding experiences I've had in falconry. He's caught upwards of a dozen hares thus far, and I am sure he has many more in his future. Despite his unfortunate history, Miles has been astonishingly resilient. It has changed my view of what is possible.

Sometimes all a raptor needs to excel is opportunity. No matter how long you practice this sport, there will be hawks, falcons and eagles that will surprise you and put a smile on your face. I still stand open-mouthed in the field after watching an eagle flight, unbelieving at the action that just played out before me.



## So Man Hath his Desires...

Don Ryan, Co Dublin

If asked my views on an ideal day's hawking, my thoughts would surely drift to the kept grounds of shooting estates and the opportunity to share good company with the reassuring guarantee of meeting game. Well stocked shooting estates make ideal venues for fieldmeets by preventing tempers from fraying from the inevitable frustration that arises from not finding birds for dogs and hawks. Many of the shooting estates in Ireland are built on the grounds of what was commonly known in the local area as 'The Big House'.

These were, and in many cases, still are, magnificent country manors and castles that originally belonged largely to the Anglo-Irish ascendancy. They were designed as grand symbols of power and privilege that reflected the landed gentry's status in society. Granted the choice of prime land, they chose idyllic locations to erect these magnificent mansions with one of the fundamental conditions to be able to host elaborate hunting parties. This

in turn provided the subtle opportunity to display their fortune. Of the grand houses still standing and not turned into exclusive spa resorts or hotels, they remain very much the same as they were when first built, although the surrounding land would be much reduced – in many instances, sold off to pay for the upkeep of the house. The more manageable 300-1,000 acres is still an ample tract of land for a day's hunt and being in close proximity to the Big House, it will invariably have a diverse range of ground to cover. As many are well over 200 years old and typically built on the grounds of older castles and prehistoric settlements, these estates are steeped in a palpable history, one made all the more atmospheric by mature trees, manicured parklands and well-built stone walls to define the outer boundaries. Driving through the main gates, you feel you are entering into an old-world adventure.

The fieldmeets at these grand houses are formal occasions with attention to appearance a

matter of respect and courtesy. Preparations begin the night before when wellie boots receive a spit and polish. The club neck tie or at least one with a game bird is searched for and hopefully found; usually in a ball in the press or a pocket of a coat worn at the last meet. Anklets and jesses are greased, feathers straightened and impeded if necessary, talons polished clean with an old toothbrush. You stop short of taking the bell off to give it a lick of Brasso only for fear of it looking too bling.

The gamekeeper is met on the morning whose manner can be either gruff or pleasant or both, depending how he's addressed. Either way, he is granted a certain latitude. He is the master and holder of the key to your permission in the Garden of Eden. He owns the knowledge of where the birds will be and his dogs will faultlessly find them regardless if they lead you downwind. The tension of whether your hawk will fly well is eased by the general good humour and banter



The hawks will already have a foot raised as you back them onto their nightly perch. Content at their day's efforts with a good feed inside them, the dogs will raise no more than a weary eyelid as you leave the creaky lodge to go to the village. The sweet smell of a turf fire will hit you long before you sit beside it in the quiet pub

between flights where neat flasks are produced from inside pockets that contain elixirs to suit all tastes; from cough syrup to paint stripper. The weather can play a major part in the mood of the day but by far the greatest factor in determining a favourable outcome is the number and fitness of the game encountered.

Days on these estates are days to be preserved and cherished. They are showcases of our sport and deserve a place of honour to be savoured each season.

Less formal and more my bread-and-butter falconry is hunting the unkept ground in wild remote places. These are days I look forward to most each season. Not to take the shine off the kept

moors and estates or question the fitness of managed birds, rather it's the element of the unanticipated when hunting wild game in wild places. Nature is manipulated in the managed estates with the right environment created to hold game in particular areas to be consistently found and flushed. On unmanaged ground, there are no certainties. We rely on our instincts and try to think like the game we hunt. We learn over the passage of seasons and build on it. Similar to the knowledge gained from years fishing a salmon river. We learn their lies and moods in the varying weather and different heights of water. Even then, there are no hard and fast rules. We do however glean vital information with experience and take advice from locals and the written and spoken word of the

more experienced and we build on that knowledge. Like the stages of the moon and direction of the wind, the plants that are in bloom or whether the birds are singing. All of nature is in harmony. We just need to find the right notes to learn its tune. We hunters can so often be guilty of considering ourselves the great adventurer and having exclusive insight into the ways of nature but when we compare the journeys the wild creatures undertake to reach and survive in these wild places, our ventures and knowledge pale into horrendous insignificance.

One of these wild places I visit each season is on the Iveragh peninsula in Co Kerry in the South-West of Ireland. It is an area where the ice age, when sculpting the landscape, con-



sidered the eye of the adventurer above the hand of the farmer. It is a rugged landscape of mountains and lakes, of bogs and protruding boulders. Streams fall abruptly from corries in mountain sides to meander over rocks and around rocks and through rocks, past forests and marshes to inevitably empty into the tempestuous Atlantic. The varying rustic shades of brown on the blanket bogs and mute and mottled greys of the sandstone that cover most of the region give the landscape an altogether antique hue.

I stay at a hunting/fishing lodge that sits beside the main salmon pool of a spate river. The lodge itself is a creaky affair; built from stone and wood salvaged from a derelict 'Big House' in the war years when supplies were hard come by. It was built to replace the wooden lodge burnt down by poachers (who kindly swore they would), prompting the Major who owned the sporting rights to take out extra insurance, the proceeds of which funded the new build. The threadbare mats do little to silence the loose creaking floorboards and on a windy night, the rattling door latches can interrupt your sleep. But it has all a sporting person could ask; a large open fire; worn but comfortable chairs and beds; dripping taps that cause water pipes to shudder; burnt down candles in wobbly candleholders; incomplete decks of cards, draughts and domino games which can be found in the Victorian oak pedestal desk that sits beside the French doors that look out onto the river. The game registers can also be found in one of the drawers

whose pages are filled with entries dating back several decades telling of sporting days with accounts of fish and fowl.

Being a spate river, it requires sufficient rain to create a flood to motivate the Salmon to move upriver which is really the only opportunity to catch one on the fly. Rain is not a big ask in this part of the world. When an evening rain falls, alarm clocks are set for an early rise to catch the river at the right height. A quick glance out the bedroom window can determine if the flood is sufficient to warrant booting up or whether curtains can be drawn closed for a few more hours sleep.

There is great life by a river lodge. Otters scuttle along banks causing Salmon to stir from their sleepy trance to head and tail in pools. The blaze of electric blue from a passing Kingfisher is always a welcome sight as is the flight of the flapping heron along the river's course. From the back window, I have seen Woodcock at dusk cautiously feed near the ditch and along the flooded grass at the side I've disturbed snipe to watch them ricochet into the morning sky with the urgency to share a secret. Wild Pheasants call from the far bank finding security close to the river to hop across if danger approaches. Bold Hares have run past the front door sending me frantically searching for the whistle to call back the pursuing dogs. Ducks have erupted from the pools in early morning when the river is low and a few hundred yards down river just beyond the Bathing Pool where I caught my biggest Salmon, I was fortunate

to see a White-tailed Eagle lift from the rocks beyond an old ford.

I like to start each season in this special place as I find it a great bonding exercise for hawks and dogs. It helps build a strong relationship that lasts through the season. I make a point to come alone so as not to be distracted by family or guests. Besides, I'm torn between shortwings and longwings and find it easier to divide my time when I don't have to consider the needs of others. It is not the place to bring a dog you intend to teach the disciplines of trialling. It is rough terrain and you need them to hunt hard with a certain independence of whistle. You need dogs that want to find game as opposed to dogs that happen on game and it makes a world of difference on unkept ground. Contrary to what you'd expect of wild areas where game is less abundant than the kept estate, the dogs seem to be always on scent. It's like the hare and wild Pheasant have covered every inch of its territory each day staking its claim and checking for trespassers. No doubt the residual scent from Woodcock and Snipe still remain from feeding on open ground during the night. The hawks too appear more in tune. They've measured this wild environment and know they need help from the team to put game in the bag. Recall is sharper – anxious to get back on the fist to continue.

You can expect to cover a variety of ground in a day; from scrub to open moorland; from dense impenetrable cover to neat copses. Crossing streams

where dark Salmon linger in deep pools narrow enough to step over. The level of growth can be phenomenal; benefiting from wet summers and mild winters. Game can spring from almost anywhere and when least expected. You need to be on your toes at all times to have any level of success. There is no gamekeeper to lead you along the rides to feeders as there are none. You follow your nose or more correctly, the dog's nose, and you can end up wandering anywhere. Often in the most remote place where you feel no one has been in years, you meet an old farmer checking his sheep or fixing a fence. Nothing too permanent; maybe a piece of damp mountain ash to hold up the rusty barb wire that's slumped after the untreated posts have failed. If you

bid them time, you are sure to hear talk of the weather and if you're in no hurry, perhaps you'll hear tales of other sportsmen that have come here over the years; of the Parish Priest that crossed the mountain to course for Hares or the old Colonel that arrived in December to hunt the red bogs for Snipe. Or maybe the one-eyed Captain that stripped fish at the hatchery he built with the eager young Lieutenant that was never quite right after the war. You may be surprised to hear of the number of fish the locals once poached from the Major's river in pools far up, now long forgotten and heavily overgrown, 15 salmon in a day with not one under 8lb; or the geese that came over the hills each year to rest on the wet mountain marshes now drained

from afforestation. Depending on the date they arrived, the winter could be reliably forecast by many of the old sages in the area.

If you take the last week in September, one of the chores you are given is to return the boat from the pier at the mouth of the estuary (once famous for its oysters) down along its winding course to the safety of the sheltered pier in the village to be stored up for winter. It is on this journey, if you stop the engine and allow the boat to drift, the taste, fragrance, sounds and lack of sounds fill your senses and open your mind to the possibility that other worlds exist.

Oystercatchers pipe as they surf above the leaden depths stirring the lolling seals on nearby



I've only ever been fortunate enough to catch both a Pheasant with the Goşhawk and a Snipe with the Peregrine once on the same day. I believe when it becomes a regular event, my days of hawking will come to a close

islands to raise a lazy eyelid to watch you pass. Cormorants gather on rocks like old men at a funeral, their beady eyes glaring at you down hooked beaks as if you were listening to their private conversation. The lapping of the waves against the boat and the cry of the Curlew on the estuary's haunted bogs send you into a blissful trance. You feel you could drift into another dimension, somewhere long lost where only the sea remembers. There is an indescribable feeling of sadness that slumbers here, like a great knowing that all things will pass.

A typical day will see me out after a light breakfast with my tiercel Goshawk and two or three cocker spaniels. Depending on the river height, I'll cross the swing bridge in front of the lodge to the far side where there's always a Pheasant or two in the marshy ground or skirting the rhododendrons down river. If we fail here, I'll try further up the main river or down by the estuary. You never fail to find game of some description. I'll expect to flush a number of Woodcock but have yet to catch one. I witnessed my last Goshawk, a parent-reared male, have his best flights here. One flight sticks in my mind where I saw him mid-air a cock Pheasant then watch in horror as they tumbled over a 30ft embankment to the river below to find him safely at the bottom with one foot on the bank and the other on the head of the completely submerged pheasant. Daft as it may sound, on a number of failed flights across the swollen river, I'd swear he consciously

returned to me knowing I'd have difficulty crossing. My latest imprint tiercel Goshawk is showing an equal love of these wild places. Unlike kept ground where multiple kills are not unusual and even expected, once the hawk catches, I call it a day, regardless if it's the first flight; for you can be sure against wild game, the flight will be of the highest quality. A good day's hunt with a hearty workout for dogs and hawk will see three to four flights at various game and a Pheasant in the bag to finish. If all goes to plan, I'll be back at the lodge by 2pm for a quick cup of tea and to collect the tiercel Peregrine and setter for a flight at Snipe.

There's a fine red bog a short drive up river that always holds a few and the surrounding views of the looming mountains are just the tonic to close the day. I've only ever been fortunate enough to catch both a Pheasant with the Goshawk and a Snipe with the Peregrine once on the same day. I believe when it becomes a regular event, my days of hawking will come to a close.

At the end of a day's hunt, you will have covered many colourful miles, your legs will be more toned and you will have earned your pint. The hawks will already have a foot raised as you back them onto their nightly perch. Content at their day's efforts with a good feed inside them, the dogs will raise no more than a weary eyelid as you leave the creaky lodge to go to the village. The sweet smell of a turf fire will hit you long before you sit beside it in the quiet pub. Watching the welcome and re-

warding sight of the pint of Guinness settle on the bar, it's hard not to have a silly smile of contentment break out on your ruddy weathered face.

*'As the ox hath his bow, sir, the horse his curb, and the falcon her bells, so man hath his desires...'*

# A Sweet Treat of a Season

Jeremy Bradshaw, US



Late winter in Utah's Salt Lake Valley is not typically when or where most falconers would expect to find prime merlin hawking. But for an ever-growing bunch willing to brave the cold at the Utah Merlin Meet, spectacular climbing flights on large flocks of starlings are the reward. Whether participant or spectator, watching merlins driving these flocks into the cold February sky, with towering snowcapped mountains in the background, is thrilling. By February, the quarry has been battle tested by wild raptors and they are ready to match wits and flying skills with any aerial predator. Most of the merlins brought to the meet are birds of the year trapped during migration. This was the case for my merlin and me at the 2016

meet. Our road to Utah began in October in Washington State.

I live in the south-eastern portion of Washington along the Columbia River. The area is a fertile agricultural belt producing apples, cherries, and grapes and hosting a smattering of cattle feedlots and dairies. All of this agriculture supports starlings - massive black swarming flocks of starlings. In late September, migrating merlins begin to arrive in the area and stage up for hunting opportunities each morning and evening near these large flocks. Often a merlin will establish a territory on one of these feedlots that will hold her throughout the winter. This is where I seek them out on my trapping runs. It was late in Oc-

tober when I started trapping in earnest, and I was looking for merlins that were actively pursuing starling flocks in high-climbing flights. The golden leaves of fall were largely off the trees, leaving perched merlins more visible. Each day out trapping I would find merlins perched in various locations, but I specifically wanted to trap a bird that I had witnessed driving a flock high.

Trapping that fall was complicated by my commitment to attend the Ontario Hawking Club (Canada) Fieldmeet in mid-November. Just shy of one week before leaving, I headed out the door for a morning trapping run. This was the last day that I could trap and still have any chance to properly man-

down a bird before leaving. Approaching a local dairy, I saw a large murmuration being driven by a merlin. I watched as she cut through the flock dividing them into two smaller clusters that quickly morphed back to one mass when she passed through. She made one more cutting flight through the flock before ending the hunt and heading for a row of high power poles. This was my chance.

I have a great deal of confidence in my traps, and when I place them out with the appropriate bait, I expect them to do their job if the merlin will give us a fair pass. In falconry, as in many aspects of life, expectations are folly and are simply fodder for the hobgoblins that cause a seemingly easy trapping scenario to fall to pieces. The placement options for setting the trap on this merlin were limited. I managed to find a decent spot on a service road that ran under the pole line where she was perched. As soon as the sparrows were out of my hand and fluttering, she was on her way. I barely had time to make the cover of my parked truck before she reached the trap and pitched up in a high arc. She made contact with the trap, but only just enough to knock it out of her way! I stood up to distract her from making another pass at my sparrows and she returned to her original perch, hardly perturbed by my interference. I gathered the trap to make a new set, but much to my chagrin, a wild kestrel drove the merlin off and into the trees at a farmyard just across the street. The two of them circled the tall trees time and again in

what seemed to be a never-ending game of tag. The only remotely workable spot for the trap that would serve to give her a hunting line to the sparrows was the narrow shoulder of the paved road right across from my truck. I put the trap where I thought it best provided a chance and placed the bait sparrows. Neither sparrow wanted to move, having just witnessed these two small falcons engaged in their little game. I stood right next to the trap impatiently watching the falcons going round and round the trees. Suddenly the merlin swung wide and was out over the paved road. I stomped my foot sending the sparrows into a thrashing fit of panic, and to my astonishment, it worked to get her attention!

She was on her way in a direct line straight towards me. I had time to do nothing other than crouch on the spot, being careful not to make eye contact. I swear I could feel the rush of her wings as she sped right by my ankles! Out of the corner of my eye I saw her pitch high into the air behind me verifying that my trusty hoop trap had failed again. I dared not flinch as she rolled over to make another pass at the flailing sparrows. The chink sound of metal on pavement told me that this time she was hooked. I sprang into action to claim my hard-won prize. She was a beautiful, feather-perfect, passage female Columbarius merlin.

I raced home and got her jessed-up. She sat calmly on her perch with only an occasional scratch at her new hood and an odd tug here and there

at her new anklets. I, on the other hand, was in a slight panic. I had finally caught the bird that I spent almost a month looking for and there was less than a week before the field meet in Canada. I had to dig in. I like to have my merlins in the mix of daily household life but I tend to take a little time getting them ready to deal with it all. A few days are usually spent offering food in low but ever-increasing light until the new merlin shows that she is calming down and responding positively to the initial manning. Then the level of light and distraction are increased incrementally so long as the merlin is not reacting adversely. I didn't have that option with such a limited initial timeframe. I work from home, so most of the day is available for manning. This merlin showed herself to have a calm demeanour in the initial unhooding and food offering. I did this in lower light, as I usually do, but once I saw that she was willing to accept her new circumstance in stride, I put the pedal to the metal. The very next evening she was fed on the glove in the fully lit living room with the television on and my wife, Stephanie, in the room. The merlin bated a few times, but ultimately handled every new intrusion with disinterest. As long as there was food on the glove or tidbits on the end of my finger, she wasn't too concerned about the world around her. Three days before my departure, the merlin was perched on a tall barrel-style perch in the living room. My wife and I offered her tidbits each time we got up from a chair or re-entered the room. It was working. This merlin was folding into our lives seamlessly.

In less than a week she was calm enough to go through a full preening session and to be given all her meals in tidbits by my wife while I was away.

The Ontario Hawking Club puts on a wonderful meet in November, and it was really exciting to watch my friends Louise Engel and Dave Doughty flying their new passage merlins. It was a pleasant surprise to see five or six merlins in the hands of happy falconers at the meet. Wild take was previously illegal and has only been available in Ontario for the past five years. I was the guest speaker at their meet the first year they had wild take and there was only one merlin there that year. I certainly approve of this growing trend. I had a wonderful time in Ontario but I was increasingly anxious to get home and resume working with my new bird.

Stephanie did a superb job of managing the merlin during my absence. We were discussing the details of the merlin's behaviour over the week and my wife kept stressing that the bird was just so sweet. She said: 'You should really name her after some kind of sweet treat.' The name that popped immediately into my mind was that of a chocolate-covered marshmallow-centred cookie called a 'MoonPie' that was popular when I was a kid.

MoonPie progressed at an excellent pace, taking each new step in stride: short hops to the fist, lure introduction inside, short distance work on a creance in the yard, anti-carrying training, to first free flight with tidbitting being a regular prac-

tice throughout each stage. On the third day of lure flying, she made a few passes at the lure and then took a perch on a light post at the edge of the field. She seemed distracted and was ignoring my calls and swinging lure. About the time I thought I might need a live bird to get her attention, she launched into a hard pumping climb leaving the area. She climbed rapidly to about 200ft and then turned back in my direction. She continued to climb as she approached the field where I stood. It wasn't until I noticed the three starlings approaching us from another direction at about 300ft high that I realized what was happening. MoonPie reached their height just after they passed over my head, and she pursued them for a quarter mile to the nearest cover where they took refuge. I was concerned that she would continue to look for birds to chase and wander farther away, but to my surprise, she turned and sped back in my direction. I called her in to the lure and rewarded her handsomely. It was time for us to go hawking.

**W**hen pursuing starling flocks, the longer a slip, the higher the flight will potentially go. Releasing the merlin a quarter-mile to a half-mile back from the flock is a good distance for big flights. However, when starting out with a new merlin, I tend to slip them on a shorter range to make sure they are focused on the specific slip that I have in mind. For the first few slips, I set MoonPie up on smaller flocks of around 1,000 birds, and she would leave her perch each

time at a steep angle as she approached the flock. The starlings would rise in tight formation to meet her approach, but her natural tendency to climb allowed her to maintain a dominant position. This enabled her to make hard driving stoops through the middle of the flock forcing the starlings to split into two or three smaller groups. These cutting stoops were intended to intimidate and to cause an individual bird to leave the relative safety of the flock and hurl itself earthward in sheer panic. The higher the attack originated, the more room she had to overtake her prey. If the initial cut through the flock did not have the desired effect, she would rapidly climb back into position above the now re-gathered mass and make another cut through them. These kinds of flights on larger flocks would sometimes result in her separating out a small group and pushing them ever higher away from the safety of the ground and cover. Eventually one or two starlings succumb to their fear and break out in either long arcing races or meteoric plummets toward a safe haven in an orchard, vineyard, or when all else fails, the gangly legs of a dairy cow nonchalantly chewing her cud. In our early flights success was infrequent, and MoonPie would just miss the starling as it crashed headlong into cover. However, as she became more practiced, the starlings weren't given the chance to make cover, and success became more regular.

As her confidence grew, so did the size of the flocks that I was slipping her on. In colder winter temperatures, the flocks pulled

together into sky-filling swells that rolled like ocean waves over the landscape. One flight in particular left me standing by my truck in awe. I had put MoonPie up on the roof rack on my truck a half a mile from what appeared to be about 10,000 starlings milling around a local dairy. The sound of these starlings was intense and loud enough to drown out the general noises of cattle and large equipment coming from the farm. One of my favourite aspects of hunting starlings is the moment of silence that happens when the flock realizes it has to react to a threat. The constant chatter ceases instantly as the merlin launches from her perch; an eerie quiet blankets the hunt for just a moment superseded by the uniform rush of wings. Even though these hunts were initiated from a good distance away, the flock sentinels always knew MoonPie was there. This day was no different. The alarm was signalled as she launched her attack; the moment of silence was observed by all and a race skyward began. What I didn't realize until the starlings were airborne was that there were twice as many of them feeding in a small orchard directly across from the dairy. An absolute wall of starlings arose from the ground to a height of perhaps 300ft. They were wheeling in all directions as she approached. Smaller flocks were pulling together in amoebic formations within the greater mass, and she was in the midst of it all driving the herd at her whim. It was truly rewarding to see this bold little falcon addressing such a behemoth flock. MoonPie and I had many exceptional flights and I was excited to bring her to

Utah for the Merlin Meet.

The Utah Skytrials were started in 1975 by the legendary Gerald Richards, and over a decade ago, a Merlin Mini Meet became part of the tradition. About seven years ago, a core group of falconers dedicated to flying athletic merlins in climbing flights on large starling flocks made it a point to regularly attend the meet and made themselves available to anyone that came to see the merlins. Attendance has grown steadily and in 2016, an effort was made to bring more organisation into what is now known as the Utah Merlin Meet. The meet is still held around the same time as the Utah Skytrials but has become its own standalone attraction bringing together falconers from all over the world with an interest in merlins and merlin hawking.

Each morning, falconers leave the meet hotel and head off to the hawking grounds. Most years we have only to drive to a single mink farm on the edge of town where there are more than enough starlings. The snow-capped Wasatch Mountains make for an awe-inspiring backdrop to every flight and add to the drama that plays out each time a merlin is slipped. This particular location has worked well for us over the years because it only takes a short while for flocks to return to the food source there after having been pursued by one of the hard charging little falcons.

At the end of day, we retire for a short while to the hotel before joining up some-





where for dinner and more lively conversation. Two evenings of the week are given over to guest presentations. In 2016, Jim Ince talked to us about trapping merlins on the beaches near Houston, Texas and flying them on various types of quarry in his home state. On Friday evening, Adrien Reuter treated us to a wonderful presentation about the history of falconry in Mexico and flying merlins there.

Anticipation was high each morning to see the merlins fly, and MoonPie was making me proud putting on a good show when it was her turn on a slip. She settled into a solid routine that week in Utah, launching readily into aerial attacks on the flocks. My favourite flight took place on the last day. A group of falconers from Scotland joined our ranks, and since it was the end of the week, we decided to vary the slip.

We moved away from the mink farm and found a flock feeding in a smaller farmyard. We picked a location for the main party to watch the flight, and then I drove about a half mile away with a slight crosswind be-

tween us and the feeding starlings. Several hundred of them were rising back and forth from the field to some large trees. The slip was excellent. I put MoonPie out, and with no hesitation, she launched her attack. As soon as she took wing, the flock left the field and began to rise as one through the trees. Merlin and flock ever-climbing came together above tree height giving a good view of the flight to the spectators.



MoonPie cut through the flock several times driving them back down in the trees. It seemed the flight would end sooner than we hoped, but we were not to be disappointed. MoonPie set out on another attack and drove the flock up out of the trees to send them into another series of wild undulations in order to avoid her high speed passes. It was just the kind of show I was hoping she would give.

The end of the merlin meet signalled the downhill slide towards the end of the

season. MoonPie and I returned to Washington and continued to hunt into the middle of March. She was extremely effective and made kills in fantastic climbing flights. I don't usually intermew merlins, preferring to trap a new one each fall, but MoonPie was something special and I decided to keep her. It is late September as I write this article and she has just about finished her moult. I am more excited than I care to admit about the possibilities of this coming season, and I am already daydreaming about cold February flights with my friends, and maybe you, in Utah.

*For information about attending the Utah Merlin Meet, please go [thepassagemerlin.com](http://thepassagemerlin.com) and click on the 'Merlin Meet' link. The meet will officially start this year on Wednesday February 22 with our dessert social, but there are always a few falconers flying merlins Monday and Tuesday as well. I hope you will consider joining us.*







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# An Intermewed Nigel

by William F Johnston Jr, US

When Hilary White asked me to write a few words describing my experiences with an intermewed musket, I thought, how could I add anything to the lexicon of knowledge about the species, and a musket in particular? After all, they are native to Europeans and considered an exotic in the US. To the best of my knowledge, I am the only person flying one here.

In my first article, published in the 2014 edition of the Irish Hawking Club Journal, I expounded on how I raised, imprinted, entered and flew a hawk whose only near counterpart in North America is the Sharp Shinned Hawk, a species that I have no personal, first-hand experience with. I've flown NA goshawks as well as Finnish birds, as well as the occasional passage Coopers hawk.

There are some lessons already learned that somehow don't stick. Or, I just lack the discipline to restrain myself from following the easy path. One of the cardinal laws of training an eyass of any species is choose your slips wisely. Judicious selection is the key in the

formative months after your bird is on the wing and starting to explore the possibility of catching prey available to it.

Here, in the US, a body of state and federal law protects all passerines. House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*), European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) and the common, Rock Dove (*Columbidae*) are the exception. Its therefore legal to hunt, trap, poison, shoot or control by whatever means appeals to the pest control professional, or in this case falconer. So, sparrows and starlings were my quarry of choice.

Early on, I gave Nigel equal opportunities on sparrows and starlings and he pursued both with equal vigour in buildings that housed them, or outside in fields, trees and shrubs. Our principal success was, as expected, in structures that attracted them in sizable numbers. My principal hunting venue is a farm that's part of a veterinary college. Part of the vet student experience is the health, husbandry and care of chickens, pigs, cows and sheep. Hygiene is one principal that the school takes pains to ensure. Pest birds, their droppings,

nest, roosts and the feed that they spoil create an intolerable nuisance, and must be managed at all costs. As a result, I am welcome to fly any raptor I like. Disperse or kill (kill is better). Campus police, professors, university workers and students are likely to see me anywhere on school grounds. Students in particular are always curious, but surprisingly know little about the natural world and birds of prey.

Nigel and I soon discovered that there were a lot more sparrows than starlings and that starlings, for the most part, were far more cautious and difficult to approach. So, we went for 'the low-hanging fruit', with flying inside cow barns, chicken coops and sheep sheds the norm. Our only slips outside these structures more often started inside one and ended with quarry making good its escape. So, lazy me, the university is just six miles from home and I have carte blanche to go where I please. With a relative abundance of prey, why go, somewhere else, or try something different. Farm sparrows, like their city relatives are

accustomed to people and their activities and thus are fairly easy to approach. I usually hold the musket behind my back to avoid a bate as I draw closer to the little birds. Sparrows under these circumstances can be caught on the rise, or chased into a corner and captured. If they scatter and the hawk misses, I call him to the lure and wait. Generally within a half hour, or less, the sparrows are back.

As might be expected, Nigel figured all of this out too. He has become wed to sparrows, and will only put any effort into catching them if flown indoors. I have even tried positioning him above my backyard bird feeder, where I watch all sorts of feathered friends enjoying their repast with impunity. They are perfectly safe. Nigel has become a birdwatcher. His stock would trade well with the protectionists!

Several days ago, Nigel and I discovered a group of sparrows se-

questered in an area off the cattle shed where cows are stanchioned for examination and health procedures. It was a gloomy day accompanied by a cold rain. Bits of scattered bovine feed and a cosy sheltered place created a sparrow magnet. A cursory glance confirmed about 25 birds in residence. The area has two doors, one from the outside and another leading into the barn itself. Windows line the outside wall.

Why, after so many years of doing this with all sorts of hawks and falcons chasing all sorts of quarry, I still thrill to the chase, get tense with anticipation and excitement, I can't explain. Suffice to say that do.

So, I ease up to the external door and close it. Then make my way to the internal one and make sure that one is open. Now, the sparrows, although in a compromised situation, do have a means of escape, as the cow barn is completely open on one side thus

allowing any birds that manage to elude Nigel, a way out. Now, I retrieve the musket from the truck, check the transmitter and walk back over to the exam room.

I slip silently in and ease the door closed behind me. Nigel is free to go, sparrows can only escape through one open door, or seek refuge in some dark corner, or within the cow equipment itself. Plus, a bonus, Nigel is restricted and unable to carry because there is nowhere for him to go. I will close the open door if he succeeds. Before it registers with me he is off the fist and gone. An explosion of tiny wings all seeking salvation somewhere. Most find a place to hide or manage to get out through the open door. One unfortunate sparrow seeks asylum under a deep sink. A fatal mistake, he is doomed. Although this scenario might seem a bit lopsided in favour of the hawk, I know that part of my covenant with the university is to reduce the hordes of pest birds that fowl feed and place nesting

Nigel, with the advantage of height and surprise, ambushed the unsuspecting sparrow and caught him in a short chase across the paddock



material in places that cause a fire hazard. So, although the population has been only reduced by one, daily trips to the farm soon educates most of them to the foibles of hanging out in a particular place.

Nigel stands erect and perfectly still. His reptilian eyes fixed on nothing, or perhaps he is communicating with his ancestors who wore the same implacable expression after having secured their daily bread. This catatonic state lasts for several minutes before he assesses his surroundings and decides to stay or split for safer environs, taking his prize with him. This is my short window of opportunity, as I creep up and secure him to my hawking vest. My choice now is, to transfer him to the lure with a tid bit and continue hunting, or let him crop up.

We had selected the sheep shed today, principally because the cow barn and chicken coop held nary a sparrow. This structure has three walls and is completely open on the field side. The opposite side is also open half way down, with windows that can be opened or closed depending on the weather. Today they are open as it's sunny and warm. So, our structure has two solid end walls, one half open, and nothing on the other long side. This was Nigel's third slip, or should I say second, as after missing two, he was perched on one of the roof rafters contemplating his failures. I have never been able to convince the sparrows to abandon this place. Easy food, along with easy ingress and egress provides a measure of safety. This was amply demonstrated by the two failed attempts that had led outside and resulted in a very frustrated Sparrowhawk sulking in the rafters. This time, instead of a flight from the fist,

I decided to leave him there to his own devices and repaired down to the far end of the shed. The dejected hawk sat motionless for almost a half hour before several intrepid sparrows elected to explore the relative safety of their return. One greedy bird threw caution to the wind and hopped into a feed trough. Let's just say his genes will not populate future generations.

Nigel, with the advantage of height and surprise, ambushed the unsuspecting sparrow and caught him in a short chase across the paddock. I decided to call it a day and after giving Nigel an opportunity to crop up, we left for home. I don't charge the school for my services, although I do receive free treatment should any of my hawks or falcons become ill or injured. They view what I do as sociably acceptable and I get to enjoy myself – a pretty good trade.

**M**y adventures with Nigel have been nothing short of amazing. Of course, like a photograph that once developed (for those of you who predate the digital age) can't be changed, so it is with Nigel. He is a hawk of my making, wed to sparrows and will only put forth the effort under very specific circumstances. Were I given the chance to redo things, I would have made the effort to find more varied slips and not at sparrows, exclusively. I entered into this relationship as something of a lark, thinking that flying a Sparrowhawk after the duck season was over and I had retired my falcons for the season would be good filler. In that, I short-changed both the hawk and myself. I bought him on a whim and did not pay him the respect that he deserved. Shame on me – Nigel

is a well-mannered, awesome predator, as aggressive on game as any hawk or falcon I have ever flown. I did not fully appreciate the fun and excitement that this little demon was capable of. He is a warrior with the grit and determination to match it!

Would I recommend flying a Sparrowhawk? If you live in an area without easy access to large quarry such as ducks, grouse, partridge, pheasants etc and want to hunt birds, then a micro hawk such as a merlin, aplomado or small accipiter is a good choice. If your hunting venue lacks large open spaces or is predominately urban, then a spar or musket is an excellent choice. Although my experience is with just one, he is no more difficult to train and hunt than a goshawk.

The only real caution is the muskets are delicate – Nigel hunts at 131g. His high end is 136g and his absolute low is 127g. He spends the warm summer months moulting in the mews. As the weather becomes cold and I want to fly him, he is brought indoors. There he is kept at a constant temperature and weighed several times a day. Depending on what he is fed – quail, pheasant, duck – I can calculate an average 24-hour weight loss and have him ready to go pretty much when I want. So if you want an action-packed adventure and plenty of opportunities at game with a hawk that has the heart of a lion, go for a Sparrowhawk!

# Desert Duck Hawking

Bruce A Haak, US



## Background

Within the sport of Falconry, the same quarry may be hunted in different ways and habitats in various parts of the world. In the 13th Century, Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen wrote *De Arte Venandi cum Avibus* or *The Art of Hunting with Birds*, an extensive treatise on the sport of Falconry. In it, he described the hawking of waterfowl with Peregrine falcons. The English translation of this work by Wood and Fyfe was published in 1943.

Students of Falconry literature may know that duck hawking was practiced for centuries in India. There, ducks were flushed from isolated ponds and forced to fly over sparse vegetation where they were attacked by waiting-on falcons. In 1618, Latham chronicled a contrasting approach that used flushing dogs and strategically placed blockers to move ducks off streams, which changed the complexion of the sport considerably. This technique was commonly referred to as hawking at the brook.

Another aspect of the sport, which does not involve water, occurs when large numbers of waterfowl land in open grain fields to feed during daylight hours. Falcons are released at a distance to take a commanding pitch and then brought into position over the feeding masses of ducks. This is the approach used when hawking field ducks.

North Americans knew little about duck hawking until the Craighead brothers, Frank and

John, wrote a National Geographic Magazine article about their visit to India as guests of royalty during the 1940s. They took many still photos, as well as film footage, during their adventure. Artist-falconer Robert Widmeier lived in India at the time. He brought back many illustrations of the equipment and raptors used for Falconry, along with accounts of hawking and the training techniques he observed. Many of his illustrations are on exhibit at the Archives of Falconry in Boise, Idaho, US. Eventually, American, Canadian and Mexican falconers would try their hands at catching ducks with falcons.

## My Introduction To Duck Hawking

My family moved to San Diego, California when I was a teenager. It was there that I was introduced to duck hawking with Peregrine falcons. Most of the falconers I knew used Arctic Peregrines, known as either 'tundra falcons' or 'beach birds'. Trapped after travelling over 9,000km from the Arctic to southern beaches, tundra falcons were well-conditioned, competent hunters when captured in October.

Tundra falcons could be trapped during autumn migration along the Atlantic Coast and Gulf Coast, and the best trapping places were Assateague Island on the shared coastline of Maryland and Virginia, and the coast of Texas. Here, falcons were mostly captured from vehicles along the beaches with pigeon harnesses. They could also be caught from trapping blinds with lure poles,

bow nets and dho gazzas (small mist nets). These trapping stations were loosely patterned after Dutch designs, and placed at opportune migration points, such as narrow coastal peninsulas and the shoreline of the Great Lakes.

In contrast to the resident Peregrines that were large and dark, tundra falcons could be medium-sized, and often had 'blond' immature plumages. They are the New World version of *Falco peregrinus calidus*, though likely smaller overall. Many individuals showed extremely pale plumages and could be easily confused with Prairie falcons. An early European colonist, Thomas Morton, actually declared them to be Lanner falcons, which do not exist in the New World. Unlike the ill-mannered eyass Peregrines of the day (*F. p. anatum*), tundra falcons were typically nice to handle and trained relatively quickly.

San Diego in the 1960s was nirvana for Falconry, and game of all kinds was plentiful. One advantage of the era was that falconers had almost unlimited access to hawks and falcons for training, with few legal constraints. In those pre-telemetry days, falconers used trial-and-error methods to learn the best ways to hawk quarry such as quail, rabbits, doves and ducks.

Arctic waterfowl production was routinely high in those years, and numbers of ducks of a dozen species wintered in the region. San Diego County was growing at a rapid rate, but there were still miles of rural

countryside to be explored.

Located just north of the border with Mexico, with a coastal plain next to the Pacific Ocean, San Diego had fantastic weather and was known for its 'bluebird' winter days. Autumn and winter rains filled many small ponds and low-lying areas with water. These were the places where migrant ducks could be found on a regular basis. On the worst days, a falconer might have to put on a light jacket. One often came home wet and muddy after attempting to flush reluctant ducks from ponds or marshes, but there was no frostbite involved.

I have fond memories of hawking ducks with experienced falconers under these idyllic conditions. Unfortunately, the only constant in the world is change. During the 1970s and 1980s, San Diego County was ruined for Falconry by rampant development and overpopulation. In addition, waterfowl populations underwent drastic changes in recent decades, and weather patterns have often altered or impeded the southerly movements of ducks.

Southern California will never be the same. However, there are other places, sadly without inspiring ocean vistas and good surfing, where determined individuals can still practice duck hawking at a high level. After several years of exploring, I found such a place.

### **The Desert Southwest**

The Intermountain West region of the United States encompasses a large and varied landscape between the Cascade and Sierra Mountain ranges in the west to the Rocky Mountains in the east. It ranges in elevation from 4,200m in Colorado to 86m below sea level in Death Valley, California. Southern temperatures in summer reach 49°C. In winter, mountain temperatures may dip to -34°C. For those willing to travel, an amazing array of climates, topography and habitats may be accessed without ever presenting a passport.

### **Access to Passage Peregrines**

My first Falconry mentor was Alva G Nye, Jr. In 1938, he and William Turner discovered the tundra Peregrine migration route along Assateague Island in Virginia. However, it was the leather pigeon harness, the brainchild of Brian McDonald, that revolutionised access to passage Peregrines in North America. Falconers driving the beach could quickly deploy a trap for Peregrines found resting on the sand or observed flying down the beach.

I learned to trap Peregrines safely and efficiently, as well as make proper equipment, by assisting the research crews studying their migration. These skills would serve me well when, after a four-decade moratorium on the use of passage Peregrines for Falconry, limited numbers of capture permits began to be issued in 2009.



These falcons now make up my team of game hawks. They are beautiful, reliable and well-travelled Peregrines

## **The Quarry**

Waterfowl are the most plentiful large quarry for Falconry in North America. Because they inhabit a wide variety of habitats, ducks are commonly sought out by falconers. Where they are found in open country on small bodies of water, they are an ideal quarry for falcons, especially Peregrines.

Duck species are divided into 'dabblers' and 'divers'. Dabbling ducks include Mallard, Pintail, Widgeon and Teal. North American divers are represented by a suite of species: Canvasback, Red-headed duck, Ring-necked duck, Greater and Lesser Scaup, Goldeneye and Bufflehead. In Europe, divers include the various species of Pochard, Scaup and Tufted duck.

These groupings differ in behaviour, flight style and aerial adroitness. Divers, as the name implies, are strong swimmers that feed at or near the bottom and can stay submerged for some time. Dabblers prefer to glean their food from the shallows or near the surface of the water. Characteristically, dabblers dunk their heads while wagging their tails into the air, a manoeuvre called 'tipping'.

Divers are heavy-bodied birds and must run across the surface of the water while flapping their wings in an effort to become airborne. They fly straight, turn slowly and offer great opportunities for a falcon to deliver a debilitating blow on the first stoop. Because their legs are located towards the rear of their bodies, divers run poorly on the ground when knocked out of the air.

In contrast with divers, dabblers spring into the air from the surface of the water, are relatively manoeuvrable in the air, and are more likely to do a U-turn and return to water when under attack. Of course, there is much variation between the species in this regard. Mallards tend to flush readily and will fly with

great power away from a pond. Teal, on the other hand, may drop into brush ahead of a stooping falcon or be impossible to flush from larger bodies of water. Identifying the duck's species on the water, and knowing how best to flush it for a waiting-on falcon, are important elements for a successful flight.

## **Desert Hawking**

No place is more suited to the classic waiting-on flights with long-wings during winter than the desert Southwest of North America. The two factors contributing most to the success of this type of Falconry are the topography of the landscape and the weather. Wide expanses of open, often treeless, terrain offer grand vistas where falcons can be trusted to fly high and wide. Mountains border the basins on most sides, which provide orientation to a game hawk that is given free rein to find its own way skyward. Often freezing at night, daytime temperatures reach 18 degrees C. The combination of clear, blue skies and calm winds creates perfect conditions for witnessing grand stoops.

Desert duck ponds are generally isolated. In this arid country, there are no feathered distractions (what the British call 'check') like pigeons or crows. Thus, falcons can be encouraged to mount high into the sky, using rising currents of air to elevate them to spectacular heights, without concern that they may wander off and become lost.

Falcons key on the water, especially when ducks are paddling around nervously, which keeps them focused on the location while flying wide of the pond. Conversely, ducks are not anxious to leave the safety of the pond when an aerial predator is visible overhead. This means that a missed stoop often results in ducks returning to the pond. The falcon then remounts, sometimes drifting off for long distances in search of lift, and

there is time to judge the best pitch and position of the falcon before the ducks are reflused.

Once flushed, ducks have little choice but to fly. If they are able to evade the falcon in the first stoop, ducks are fully capable of shoving their chests into the wind and out-flying a peregrine. In most cases, the next watery refuge is far away. Where ducks are found on large bodies of water, or where multiple ponds are adjacent to each other, the falconer may need to refluse several times before the falcon makes a kill. Ducks circling the pond at speed create curious angles of attack for the falcon, sometimes resulting in head-on collisions. These flights may last a long time and involve multiple stoops within the general proximity of the falconer.

No environmental influence is more important than good weather for training and perpetuating high flights. The waiting-on manoeuvre is a process solidified by positive reinforcement. Once this behaviour is fixed in the brain of a trained falcon, extraneous factors like location, weather and quarry may change but the flight style of the falcon should not. But as we all know, all falcons are not created equal.

When I lived in rainy western Oregon, which looks surprisingly similar to parts of Bavaria, I had Prairie falcons that would fly to great heights during the dry, early part of the season. However, some lowered their pitches substantially once the clouds and constant rains of winter arrived. Others willingly mounted high despite the conditions. They all caught game, but some falcons were just more rewarding to watch than others.

Under heady warm-desert conditions, weight management is imperative to avoid losing the falcon. Consulting the scales daily to determine the proper flying weight for each falcon

may mean the difference between success and failure. Flying in road-less areas, especially near the border with a foreign country, should also motivate the falconer to make good decisions on when and where to fly.

Successfully killing ducks from high pitches on a routine basis helps to solidify the mindset and confidence of a game hawk, and reduces its inclination to wander off. The combination of good weather, clean flushing opportunities, and regular kills instils the waiting-on inclinations in a falcon, rendering the additional use of artificial manipulation (kites, balloons, drones, etc.) unnecessary.

It is true that ducks will never display the take-off speed, evasiveness or ability to withstand a strike from an attacking falcon like North American Prairie Grouse. However, the beauty of this endeavour is the flight style that a properly schooled falcon can demonstrate.

### **Dogs For Flushing**

Using dogs for duck hawking can be a double-edged sword. A well-trained dog is a great asset for the lone falconer attempting to flush ducks. Nowhere is this more useful than when hawking waterfowl from small lakes and reservoirs. Over the years, my friends and I have used Springer spaniels, Labrador retrievers, English pointers, English and Gordon setters, German short-haired pointers, Drahthaars and mutts for the job.

Years ago, my hawking partner was a terrific Brittany Spaniel named Nugget. On occasion we would attempt to fly ducks off a 6hectare irrigation reservoir. Here, Nugget was invaluable as she swam determinedly after the ducks, barking at them all the while. If a duck was downed in cover, she was capable of both pointing and retrieving it.

The downside to using dogs is

the element of control. When things go wrong with a flight, it is difficult to stop a dog in mid-stride and have it tread water patiently while waiting for instructions. If the falcon does not kill on the first stoop, the dog is already in hot pursuit of the ducks, and there is no way to settle back quietly as the falcon gains its pitch. In this situation, ducks may panic into the air when the falcon is out of position. This can result in either the quarry escaping, or multiple stoops where the falcon kills from a low pitch. In another scenario, the falcon is so close that ducks become intimidated, refuse to flush, and start diving. None of these situations yields a positive lesson for the falcon.

For successful high flights, several people agitating the ducks by yelling and clapping may be the best way to engineer a flush. This would be especially important where one anticipates that a clean flush may be difficult, and where giving the falcon time to remount for multiple stoops may be necessary. Experienced flushers who know when to stop advancing, or who hide from view of the ducks when the falcon is out of position, will generally be more reliable than a dog.

### **Building a Team**

In 2011, by a stroke of good fortune, I was awarded a capture permit for a passage Peregrine by the State of Texas. There was no question as to my destination in October – I was going to South Padre Island. I had trapped with the research crews there in previous springs, and knew the terrain well.

The island is over 48km long but only about half of its length is suitable for trapping falcons. Falconers are restricted to trapping on the outer beach front, which is often narrow and lined with dunes.

Three of my friends also received capture permits that fall. So we converged at a

motel on South Padre and trapped numbers of passage Peregrines in an effort to select just the right one. Every day on the beach was different. Some days we saw relatively few falcons but were able to trap them. One morning, we saw 42 falcons before noon. It was a 'moving day', where falcons flew over the surf, mounted high into the sky and motored directly south. Despite our best efforts, these falcons were determined to migrate and we caught none of them.

All together, we filled our permits by taking three falcons and one tiercel off the island. I selected a robust falcon with atypical plumage that I named Vinda Lou. Her name was a play on words. Fans of Indian curry will recognise vindaloo as one of the spicy hot dishes. In the southern US, ladies often have two first names, so I thought this too was appropriate. The famous falconer-artist, Hans Peeters, later told me that the name was Portuguese meaning vin for wine and loo for potato. The coastal weather in Texas was oppressively hot and sticky, so I was hoping she would become one hot potato. She lived up to her name and exceeded my expectations.

Two years later, I drove across the US to acquire another passage peregrine. I thought that Texas was a long, three-day drive from my home in Idaho. However, my destination on the Atlantic coast was a gruelling 4,000km drive. There, I acquired a slightly smaller falcon that I called Sandrine. She had the pale first-year plumage of a typical tundra falcon. As we know, good things come in small packages and she was particularly aggressive. While some people might downplay the striking ability of some Peregrines, I can assure you that Sandrine, although weighing only 750g, hits like a hammer.

I also flew a 482g tundra tiercel



The great advantage to flying passage peregrines is benefiting from their real-life experiences and the life and death nature of hunting



named Tiki. I wanted him for hawking fast, elusive birds like doves, snipe and quail. Every slip on small game resulted in a zippy, twisting stoop that sent him into hysterics and left me trying to figure out what had just happened? Simply put, his lightening-fast turns in the stoop became a blur to the human eye.

When given an opportunity on ducks, Tiki showed me just how 'macho' a little tiercel could be. As expected, he handled Teal readily. But he was equally competent when presented with Ring-necked ducks, Widgeon and Gadwalls, some that were easily twice his weight and size.

Vinda Lou has just finished her fifth season and Sandrine her third. These falcons now make up my team of game hawks. They are beautiful, reliable and well-travelled Peregrines. An advantage to flying Peregrines is that they adapt well to both warm and cold weather. However, I have found that extreme cold and strong winds negatively affect their performance. There is, after all, a reason that arctic Peregrines migrate to South America each autumn, a round-trip journey of approximately 22,000km.

The great advantage to flying passage peregrines is benefiting from their real-life experiences and the life and death nature of hunting. Their time in the wild has taught them to cut corners when attacking prey, and they can be excellent footers. Also, they are not intimidated by a large flock of birds and are quick to capitalise on situations where prey makes itself vulnerable.

In my experience, the risk of losing passage Peregrines diminishes over time. After several seasons, they are as reliable as any falcon and are unlikely to wander. However, they will always be wild falcons and, as such, should not be flown in areas where they might be tempted to go off self-hunting. A passage falcon that spies flocks of ducks milling around grain fields, or groups of pigeons frequenting barns and silos, could be expected to leave on a hunting sortie.

### Two Flights

One day last winter, my good friends Ben Elliott and Erik Powell joined me for hawking. Conditions around noon were ideal and we found a slip at our first stop, a medium-sized pond. Peering over the dike of the pond, I spied a drake Ring-

necked duck. Ring-necks almost always travel in groups and I assumed there were others. So, not wanting to risk ruining a perfect setup with further reconnaissance, I slid carefully away from the pond and walked back to the vehicle.

It was Sandrine's turn to fly and she left the glove as soon as the hood was removed. Taking her time, she coursed around the small valley looking for good air with which to make her ascent. The three of us watched as she made her way up and across several thermals, drifting slightly downwind in the process. About 10 minutes later, she appeared as a speck in the sky, working her way back overhead. Even with Polaroid sunglasses, I could not make her form out against the blue sky without binoculars.

The three of us then moved into position along the dike that formed the long side of the pond. In unison, we charged over the dike and flushed the sole occupant of the pond, one drake Ring-necked duck. It left the water readily and gained speed crossing the open landscape. By the time it saw or sensed danger and began turning back towards the water, Sandrine had arrived in a verti-

cal stoop to hammer it into the ground. Her strike was lethal.

We spent the rest of the afternoon looking for a second slip. Late in the day, we found a mixed flock of Shovelers, Green-winged teal and Ring-necked ducks on a large pond with a long arm running off to one side. Vinda Lou was primed and she powered up to an excellent pitch. On the flush, she chased Shovelers that spun around and landed before she could strike one.

Ben, Erik and I crawled away from the pond as best we could and remained motionless while Vinda Lou regained her pitch. When she was once again in a commanding position, we rushed the pond and watched as she stooped behind the far dike and pitched up unexpectedly. From my angle, it appeared as if she had made contact. However, she once again regained her pitch. Erik motioned Ben and me to come his direction. Apparently, there was a marshy area just out of sight, and Erik was sure that the duck had crash-landed into the shallow water. Gathering together, we made a united front coming into view from the larger pond. At that moment, a Ring-necked duck flushed away from us across the pasture and was pummeled by the falcon.

### Conclusion

Most passage Peregrines do not finish moulting before November. Thus, I miss the fine weather for training and hawking available at my home in the north-western US during September and October.

Because Peregrines have a high metabolism and perform well in warmer temperatures, and because waterfowl winter where temperatures are mild, December, January and February are good months for duck hawking in southern states. I prefer hawking ducks on public lands in the desert Southwest. There, the only prerequisite for access

is a valid hunting licence.

Unlike the falconers I saw flying passage Peregrines decades ago, I have radio telemetry to recover a lost falcon. Because these are highly migratory falcons, I do not experiment by flying them in this fashion past mid-March. I also benefit from four decades of experience flying passage Prairie falcons and Red-naped Shaheens at ducks in a wide variety of settings. One situation that my mentors avoided was flying ducks on large bodies of water. However, years of experience have shown me that successful flights may sometimes be had from high-flying falcons when these places are frequented by large numbers of ducks. Passage peregrines excel as game hawks when faced with these challenging hunting opportunities.

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# Food for Thought

Rowland Eustace, Co Dublin



The article on raptor food by Neil Forbes in the brilliant 2015 Club Journal (and what a cover) reminded me of my many efforts to keep hawks happy.

My first task was to feed a Kestrel which I obtained from Dublin Zoo in exchange for 20 mice. The very depressed Kestrel was standing on concrete in a monkey cage with no perch. This was in the early 1940s so I headed to the National Library where I eventually got permission to look at some very ancient books on Falconry. Having assured myself that a Kestrel was OK for my social standing, I headed home and my local butcher donated some shin beef as I had parted with all the mice to the Zoo. Training went well, even though much of it was gleaned from TH White's *The Goshawk*. She responded well and I managed to fly her to the lure successfully but she was killed by potential food. A rat managed to pull her down through a hole by the wingtip.

Minced Meat was my next choice as I took and 'trained' kittiwakes, herring gulls, jackdaws and even some blackbacks. Meat had to be purloined from the household 'meat safe' (no fridges in those days). The food shortage caused my parents to suggest boarding school so I had to change tactics.

This time it was a passage Sparrowhawk. Shin beef again and foreleg of rabbit which I was told was nutritious. I paid for these in Honey as I now had several hives.

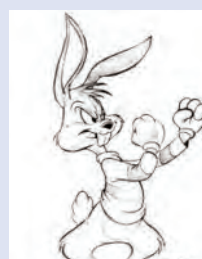
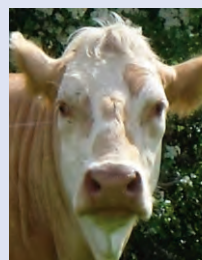
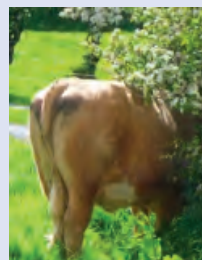
Some years later, I am breeding Kestrels and

have a juvenile Eagle Owl who can ingest large quantities of food. Problem solved – I located a local hatchery from which I could get a small quantity of day-olds every two weeks. I had to obtain a large chest freezer at this time as my wife objected to chicks being embedded with the family roast in our new fridge freezer.

More Sparrowhawks meant more food, so I had to make periodic visits to the large hatchery in Enfield. This entailed bringing home warm chicks and trying to find space to spread them out for cooling before packing in freezer. The chicks were also shared with other Club members and on one occasion I brought a load to Roy Alcock and we spread them out on his front lawn in the dark. Two women strolling past asked where we managed to get the seeds that produced yellow grass.

I was given a licence to take two unrelated Merlins from the wild in 1985 and believe I was the first to breed them in Ireland. I was given great help in this project by David Norris (of Department of Wildlife's Scientific Dept), Roy Alcock, Edward Mulligan, Derek and Paul Kelly, Conal and Kieron Gallagher and others. It was partly financed with a loan from the IHC Breeding fund.

I now required better quality food so I started rearing quail but gave this up when my hens ganged up and murdered the cock. Roy Alcock came to my rescue by breeding more quail and some rats but he too became disillusioned. A famous duck farm also came to the rescue with quail, mainly spent layers. They delivered ducks locally to a wholesaler





and delivered boxes of quail free to my door every Tuesday if required and free of charge. These were mostly spent layers and probably not very nutritious but the hawks all thrived. I used a supplement called SA 37 (even on my cornflakes, which helped me anyway).

At various stages I had four pairs of Merlins, a pair of breeding Kestrels, a pair of breeding Sparrowhaws, an Eagle Owl, a pair of Snowy Owls, a pair of Barn Owls and a



dog. Which reminds me. A helpful Club member was skinning and de-yoking about 100 day-olds at one end of the garden while I was preparing quail in the mews. He came to tell me he had finished but when we went to collect them my dog Kim had eaten every last one. I was asked what now so I replied as quietly as possible 'start again'.

In the search for food I now headed to Howth on the Dart with my Wife. She thought we were going for a walk on the beach and became quite alarmed when I

picked up over 100 live pet mice from a young lad who was emigrating. My wife was convinced they would escape on our return journey and cause a riot on the train.

Next trip (on my own) was by train to Arklow where I picked some live bantams and a large bag of culled pullets.

Friends started dropping in Magpies, which was fine until one delivery was left with a neighbour. They were not impressed (talk about 'neighbourhood watch').

Club members were very helpful with food. Johnny Morris left me in a batch of Snipe and some small ducks and another Club member turned up with Woodpigeons. The pigeons contained lead shot so I sliced up the breasts very thinly. I missed a bit however and lost one of my precious Merlins. I still have the X-ray showing the shot in its gut. A sad lesson.

I should like to have tried an insect diet for the Merlins, particularly the nestlings but it was very difficult to source at the time.

Falconers are very lucky to have good sources of food nowadays, though I hope it will not progress to the stage of opening tins as is the case with so many pets.

The Neil Forbes article comes at a very opportune time and should be well studied by all. He held an excellent seminar at the Club's invitation some years ago. It was held in Dublin Zoo and we invited as many vets as we could muster

along with members, non-members and some rangers. The seminar was very professionally organised by Gary Timbrell. Workshops were arranged, one for vets and one for members. We were given practical advice in medicating and caring for hawks.

Neil made it clear that he could be



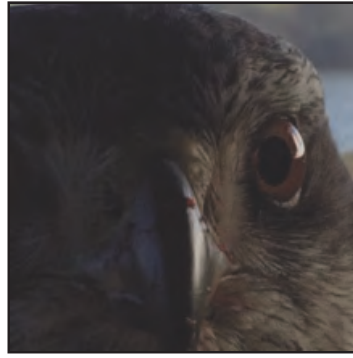
consulted by phone if any problems arose, which was very generous and I myself had reason to contact him through my vet when a serious problem developed with one of my Merlins.

Maybe the Committee would consider arranging a workshop or workshops off-season to be given by our Club experts or others on practical matters such as making of jesses, hoods and other items. Also, how to go about purchasing, fitting and using the new electronics as well as guidance for beginners on manning, imprinting, training and health.



# BABY D

James Knight, Co Mayo



Last season, I watched my seven-year-old female Goshawk get shot. I was a witness to the whole thing and walked right up to the guilty man...

Fieldmeets are good things. They add a certain panic to your season. There was one coming up and my rook-catching female Goshawk – Baby D, to her friends – needed a quick reminder about the benefits of a dog and hopefully what a pheasant or hare looks like. Hence we found ourselves (hawk, dog and I) walking the large bog on the outskirts of Galway. Quarry is usually very scarce here but it's a great place to test her recall because of the myriad of un-jumpable drainage ditches and a main river that really punishes you if she takes stand across it. On this day, we had been out for too long without a sign of anything and things were unravelling. The dog was ranging further and further and the Goshawk's attention was no longer on rustling vegetation but on scanning the horizon for distant grey crows. Needless to say, it wasn't what I had hoped for. Without a slip, nothing was being tested, her fitness nor her recall. So as we dropped off

the main track into another section of bog, I could see she had spotted something away in the distance and, when she went to go, for want of exercise, I released the jesses.

She set off out into the bog and the Labrador, on hearing the bells, followed as fast as he could. I stood straining to see. A hare ran out onto a really big open area of very short vegetation. The Goshawk was closing in and the dog was doing admirably so I started off too. Running after a hawk and dog is not an ego-boosting exercise, especially on a bog. There is just one overriding sensation, that of slowness. But it was better than standing still so off I went like a lame donkey.

The Goshawk had gone down and missed, but had turned the hare enough for the Labrador to get closer and catch sight of it. Off all three of us went again (oh yes, only the best classically disciplined falconry for me!), straight towards the main road. My heart sank with the sight of a galvanised gate. The road and bog are separated by a wide drainage channel but here was a gate and a bridge. As anyone who has ever hunted hares knows, the only place this

hare was going to go was right under the gate, closely followed by hawk and dog. There was no point in yelling, it was too far. Suddenly all I could hear was roaring traffic. How did that happen? How, in all this space, did I suddenly end up here? 200yds or more had been gobbled up in seconds. I just stood and watched the inevitable disaster unfold.

In the end, I don't know exactly what happened but the hare disappeared, the Goshawk swung up into a low tree and the Labrador finally returned, without having gone onto the road. It was an incredible relief but the Goshawk was still sitting precariously beside the roaring traffic. It was time to cut our losses and head home. Far too much stress for me. Little did I know we hadn't even started yet.

The dog went on the lead and I was getting ready to recall the Goshawk, when she dropped out of the tree, flew across the road and out into the opposite bog, finally settling on a distant telegraph pole. Things were not looking good. I decided it was back to the vehicle to put the dog safely away. Time to get a grip on the situation, think rationally and just get everyone home and be incredibly thankful that dog or hawk hadn't been run over. Before we got to the vehicle, I saw the Goshawk (being chased by the hoodies) move yet further away, right out into a distant bush with the yo-yoing hoodies clearly marking her pres-

ence. In fact, this was good news because I was sure the bush was right beside the opposite bog road that went diagonally from the main road, so I jumped in the Land Rover to follow.

As I was waiting to pull out and cross the main road, I saw a small red van slow down, indicate and turn down the very track that I was about to take. Perhaps it was my already shattered nerves and heightened state of stress but I felt the first tingles of foreboding. The traffic was heavy and I had to

wait while watching the van slowly bump its way down the track in the distance. This feeling got worse as I crossed the road and drove down the track following the red van. I bounced too fast through the potholes as I realised that, yes indeed, the van was heading straight for the Goshawk. I was desperate to catch up but could see it was futile. For the second time that morning I could only watch helplessly. There was palpable panic when the two brake lights of the van came on like evil eyes. I saw the gun barrels

poke out of the window. I had already wound down the window in the vain hope of shouting.

Then I heard the dreaded bang.

The Gos seemed to labour out of the bush. She flew weakly, slowly across the track before faltering, hovering, unable to go on, and fluttered down into the heather.

What do I do now? What would you do? Take a minute to consider, you have just



A hare ran out onto a really big open area of very short vegetation. The Goshawk was closing in and the dog was doing admirably so I started off too. Running after a hawk and dog is not an ego-boosting exercise, especially on a bog

seen someone shoot your pride and joy and in 20seconds time you are going to park behind the van. Don? Keith? Neal? Eric? John?

I pulled up behind him and got out roaring, not really words at first but then, 'you shot my Goshawk! You shot my Goshawk!' He was saying that he hadn't but I had just seen him. I yelled some more, 'I saw you do it!' to which he replied: 'No, I didn't, I shot a grey crow.' 'No, you didn't, it was my Goshawk!' Eventually, the roars and yells were out of me. So it was not deliberate but a case of mistaken identity and this ignorant Neanderthal had thought she was a grey crow? It was still the same outcome though, my seven-year-old Goshawk was dead, lying in the heather. Still he insisted he hadn't shot her and I remember beginning to notice strange things. He wasn't a rogue, car-shooting vandal, he was dressed well, had dog whistles round his neck, a nice gun, tidy van. Then he said: 'I shot the grey crow and your hawk landed on it.' I was practically slumped against his van at this stage and he muttered something about me having to calm down before I had a heart attack. Then I heard bells.

We walked out into the bog and there she was, sitting on top of the dead Hoodie, happily plucking it. It was time for some apologies.

Looking back on the whole episode, a few things became clear. Most shocking of

all is that what I saw, unobstructed right in front of me, isn't what happened. If this was a crime and I was a witness, I would have sworn 100%, copper-fastened, life savings betted, that this man had shot my Goshawk. There was not a shred of doubt in my mind. That was a revelation that I haven't experienced before. I think the explanations are, firstly, that the sound of the shot was naturally delayed over distance, so to me it coincided with her struggling out of the thick bush. To me, he had shot her sitting in the tree. In reality, she was leaving to get the already shot and falling grey crow. Secondly, because I was fixated on Baby D in the bush, I had completely lost track of the crows so didn't see them all leave and one later drop. Thirdly, she flew so differently to whenever you see a Goshawk leave a tree. She flew slowly and fluttered up, hovering, to catch sight of the grey crow in the long grass before dropping down onto it. To someone else not used to seeing a Goshawk fly, it wouldn't have looked so totally alien, but to me the only explanation was that she was mortally wounded. It resembled just how a heart- or lung-shot pigeon or corvid can behave.

It transpired that the shooter was on his way for ducks. He was a local gun club member and they kept the number of grey crows and vermin down. He had seen the hawk and her presence had kept the normally unapproachable hoodies' attention long

enough for him to get a shot at one. He took photos while I continued to mutter apologies and offered him money for a pub meal, which he didn't accept.

**A**nd so that story ended happily. But since then, Baby D has gone, for real this time.

She was eight-years-old, eight solid seasons of hawking, each one better than the last. She was all I dreamed of in a Goshawk and more, and the longer she is gone the more I realise what I have lost. The short story is that she flew out of the aviary door, simple as that. I was excitedly going in with semen from my male Goshawk, my first of 14 years old. She was fidgety, and as I came out she shot straight over my shoulder and away. I realised why – an alarm company were here installing a firearm licence-required alarm to the house. She hates ladders. I wasn't worried at first. I felt sure she would be back. I left her aviary door open with food in it for weeks. I had been training her to fly back into her aviary for food and as a baby she had a very short period of hack in the garden. I felt sure she knew her way around. Every time I drove back to the house I glanced in expecting her to be perched on her high perch as usual. That was six months ago and it is time to accept that Baby D has gone.



# Crop Impaction in Falcons

Dr Peter McKinney MVB CertZooMed  
Avian and Wildlife Veterinary Consultant, Dubai

Falconers have to be a little bit crazy. We constantly scrutinize our birds for the slightest sign of illness and when something is wrong we panic. The bond between a falconer and his or her bird is deeply personal and when your falcon is off colour you worry and fret like a parent. At least some of us do!

Modern avian medicine has been of great advantage to falconry but there is always more to learn and falconers should be able to do some basic first aid for their birds. Some health problems need veterinary attention but falconers have historically been adept at providing basic medical care for their own falcons.

I have been a 'falcon vet' in the Middle East for many years. I am familiar with comments like: 'That vet was useless. I took it to him and it died.' So let us start with that comment. Why would anyone say that? Yes, I hear you say, it is

possible the vet is an idiot. In my defence, I believe all birds mask the signs of disease until a critical point is reached and suddenly all systems crash and even 'supervet' cannot fix it. Use a vet with a specific interest in raptors and both of you will learn from each case you work on.

As a vet, I like to know the whole picture to make a diagnosis. Has the bird been flown excessively – ie over-trained? Has there been any sudden change in the weather causing chilling or overheating? Cold Irish weather can drop a small bird's weight very fast. Conversely, hot Dubai weather can cause exertional heat illness. Has there been any change to the falcon's feeding regime which might be linked to the problem? All these factors influence how we determine the cause of an illness.

The art of falconry is the skill in balancing a bird's keenness with

maintaining body condition. If a bird is being kept in low body condition and it burns more 'fuel', more than normal, by over-exercising or being chilled, then the body breaks down protein to maintain energy. There is a normal range of blood protein and extremely low levels indicate starvation, protein loss or calorie deficiency. Dehydration then kicks in and the bird becomes weak and unable to digest or pass a large meal.

A common 'emergency' with hunting falcons is crop stasis leading to sour crop. In Dubai, one of our gyrfalcons chased a duck on a long flight, then disappeared into deep sand dunes out of sight. By the time we found the bird, she had nearly finished off the complete duck and was sitting there with a massive crop.

In many cases of overeating, the crop will pass without a problem but this bird was in early training,



in average condition, and could not handle the unusually large meal. After six hours, the crop was not passing so action had to be taken. Does this sound familiar to anyone? Crop stasis or impaction can lead to a life-threatening condition unless treated properly. The difficulty is knowing when to take action.

**Step 1:** Using a crop tube (which everyone should have in their first aid kit), I give oral water or de-gassed white lemonade. This often promotes the passing of the crop or induces vomiting. Take care not to accidentally put water down the trachea. Then you really might need a vet.

**Step 2:** If not responding to oral fluids, I cast the falcon – head down, tail up – and try and massage the meat out manually. I prefer to anaesthetize the falcon to do this but it can be accomplished by the falconer in an emergency where there is no access to a vet.

**Step 3:** Once the meat is out, I give intravenous fluids and a drug called metoclopramide by injection, which stimulates stomach and intestine movement.

**Step 4:** Crop-tube more water with a little sugar added until faecals are passed. Ideally 15-30ml for a gyrfalcon. At least four

times at intervals. Clostridial bacteria, which are normally present in the intestines, can multiply rapidly and produce a lethal toxin. Oral fluids flush out the clostridial toxin from the intestines and can be lifesaving. Oral antibiotics like metronidazole and azithromax are the most useful.

**Step 4:** Fast the falcon for a few hours but be careful with sparrowhawks as the hypoglycaemia (low blood glucose) can induce seizures. I like to give a blended egg by crop tube. If the falcon passes this then I offer small pieces of moist meat without bones until the stomach and appetite returns to normal. Casting is offered on day 3 and this helps clean the stomach and crop.

**Step 5:** I restrict exercise until the appetite has returned and the crop is passing normally.

Many wildlife rehabilitation centres and falconers now provide emergency care under veterinary advice for injured wild raptors. Most of these wild raptors are presented to the vet in a state that is weak and emaciated. Rehydration is critical prior to feeding. Once the bird is rehydrated, small amounts of easily digested food can then be given frequently. Over-feeding a weak raptor is a serious and often lethal mistake.

**W**e invest so much time and energy into our birds so we should be capable of providing basic veterinary care. Set up a basic first-aid kit and establish a good rapport with a vet you trust. The best possible scenario is bird alive, falconer happy... and vet rich!



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