

Irish Hawking Club Journal 2017



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Policy and Objectives

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 practise the pursuit of falconry to the highest standards and traditions.

The objectives of the Club are:

to represent falconry throughout Ireland and to foster international cooperation 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 cooperation with all national hunting organisations with like objectives;

to encourage conservation and 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; and

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

Welcome

It is a privilege to edit the *Irish Hawking Club Journal*, especially in this anniversary year.

If you are wondering at the temerity of someone so new to falconry, and a blow-in no less, taking on this editorship, so am I. But the fact is that so many club members have shown Anya and I so much generosity since we came to our first meet in 2015, that I really wanted to attempt to repay it somehow.

I hope you enjoy the mix of articles. Alongside the retrospectives from IHC luminaries and the archive material that you would expect in an anniversary edition, we also have a great spread of the usual range of articles from near and far.

Thank you to all those who see the value in putting their stories and ideas into print in these pages, and in sharing photographs old and new.

I have tried my best to maintain the high standard of editing you are used to. Advice and practical tips from Hilary White made this less daunting, as did the huge amount of help Don Ryan gave in gathering half the contributions. Thanks to Anya for her flashes of genius, and to Paul and Hannah for their time teaching me useful new skills.

The move to a different publishing program has meant some changes in text and layout, but I also could not resist trying out some new ideas. Please let me know what you liked, and what you didn't.

Ed Coulson
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Cover Artist's Note - Shay O'Byrne

The painting *Visitors* is part of a series based on an old garden shed from my homeplace in Marino, filled with childhood memories. The shed was my den in the late 60s, early 70s, where we kept and raised many birds, including jackdaws and hooded crows. Some became pets, including a raven given to me by Dublin Zoo.

Visitors is about the memory of raising a nest of downy sparrowhawks which were in imminent danger of being destroyed by local vandals. The painting, which is slightly abstracted, combines images of the Scots pine from where they were rescued and the shed in which they were reared, with the doveled bars and light streaming in. I can still remember vividly climbing to the top of that pine and the thrill of discovering the first-laid mottled egg nestled on a bed of twigs. It was 1969, I was twelve years old.

Visitors, oil on canvas, 50 x 60 cm, is for sale. Contact Shay: 086 209 3415.

Director's Note

Don Ryan



It is an incredible achievement for a marriage to last 50 years – so much so that they award this special occasion with one of the world's most precious metals – but for a club to make it this far truly is a cause for celebration. A marriage requires only two people to live in harmony but for a club, with its diversity of peoples, and every one with a broad range of likes and dislikes, and all with their own ideas on how things should be done... it really is a wonder we got past the first year!

Yet, here we are, two score and ten years on, basking in the golden rays of our golden anniversary in a golden era of Irish falconry. To have managed this remarkable accomplishment, we owe a huge debt of thanks to all those that have gone before, as well as the current committee and members who continue to fly the flag of Irish falconry as we reach this significant milestone in our history.

In my time as director, I've become aware of how fortunate we are in our practice of falconry on this island. In doing this, I echo the words of 50 years past, in our very first newsletter, of our very first editor, Derek Watson.

Thanks to the dedication and foresight of past members, certain aspects of our sport have greatly improved since then – we now have greater access to birds of prey in the practice of wild take, which is written into our wildlife legislation. Contrast this with half a century ago, when our wild birds of prey were in serious decline due to the use of pesticides, which meant finding wild hawks was difficult and the taking of them impractical. Importing hawks has also become

relatively straightforward, and there is no species of raptor employed in falconry that is beyond our reach.

However, all is not sunshine and roses: suitable habitat is in drastic decline and certain quarry, namely grouse and partridge, are all but lost to us. To this end, we need to fight hard for what we may lose, and work with the relevant authorities so our sport is afforded the same security as many other sports. We also need to get more involved in managing habitats to conserve our game for future generations. Getting falconry recognised as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in Ireland will help this cause. We also need to nurture and protect what we already have, something which this club has always been at the forefront of ensuring.

So where do we go from here? Well, one step at a time is always a good place to start, but for our club to continue in its current trend, or in any trend, it will require more volunteers to step onto the committee in the coming years, and for the members to offer support. My advice to members in supporting your committee is to withhold criticism and judgement, and if you really wish to seek change, put your hand up at election time.

My own term as director is now complete, and when our last meet of the season closes at the end of January 2018, I will stand down. It will be five years since I took on this role and although it has been challenging and indeed testing at times, I have found it very rewarding. I have met an incredibly passionate, diverse bunch of people, and I've enjoyed many days' sport in the field with them.

I also want to take this opportunity to thank all the committee members who stood with me through thick and thin and made it all worthwhile. To recycle the words from Shakespeare's *Othello*, I hope I have done the state some service. Whether they know it or even care is possibly irrelevant. Enough on that!

In this special year, whether it be in the field or at the close of a meet, or at whatever point of time suits you best, I ask you all to raise a glass (if even in your mind's eye) and toast to all that have ever entered this club's doors; to those who are no longer with us, to those that have hung up their glove, to those that still practise this wonderful sport and to those yet to come.

Finally, please enjoy this superb anniversary journal that our new editor has gone to great lengths to produce. The content and quality of the publication make me truly proud to be a member of this esteemed club.

Slán tamaill and go n-éiri leat,

Don



Falconry in Ireland

John W. Greaves

Thanks are due to Mark Upton of the British Archives of Falconry for sending us this article by John (Séan) Greaves, the first president of the Irish Hawking Club. It was included in BFC journal *The Falconer* in 1968, and in it Greaves describes the history and status of falconry in Ireland and introduces the fledgling club to its British neighbours. It is republished here in its entirety, including cheeky footnote. Greaves seems to have left Ireland (and hence the IHC) in the early 1970s.



.....
Séan Greaves

Falconry in Ireland is not young. The silence of 'áit leathadh' – or 'wide place' – was broken long ago by shouts and the sound of hawk bells, and the land that is today flown over is, in many cases, traditional. It was in 1849 that William Thompson wrote of his falconer friends John Sinclair and Robert Langtry, giving a season's score of one of Sinclair's falcons as "taking about fifty brace of woodcock to her own foot, besides grouse, snipe, goldeneye, corncrake, a razorbill and a captive brent goose."



Both Sinclair and Langtry employed Scottish falconers, a precedent established by the Lord O'Neill who in 1761 maintained a large mews at Shane's Castle and employed a Scottish falconer named Thomas Kennedy.

The Irish falcon has been famous since certainly the seventeenth century and quite possibly before that. Richard Dobbs in his description of County Antrim – 1683 – wrote: "The Gabbon is high rocks of grey stone, sixty fathoms high; here the best falcon breeds that Ireland affords."

And Dubourdiou in 1812 (*Stat. Surv. Antrim*) stated that "the peregrine is termed 'goshawk'* and breeds at the ——. This bird was esteemed to be of so much consequence in the days of hawking, from its peculiar excellency in flight and from its docility, that it was annually included in the chiefry paid for this peninsula."

The *Belfast Guide* of 1874 mentions an area that was anciently held as a tribute for so many 'goshawks': "...one day in summer being set aside for the 'lifting of the hawks' which was observed as an occasion of great festivity and rejoicing."

Hawking references turn up more frequently than one would suppose in Irish literature and bear out the existence of a well-founded Irish falconry lineage. It is true that the sport never attained the large and sometimes lavish proportions practised in Britain,

nor did it, until recently, swell its ranks to an organisation and could never boast an Old Hawking Club. There is, however, ample evidence of falconry being practised in Ireland more or less continuously since the sixteenth century.

For the modern falconer in Ireland the recognised standard disadvantages of other countries are gradually becoming apparent; enclosures creeping into once open country, with painfully evident barbed-wire fences, a dearth of quarry in areas where it was once plentiful and the disturbing decline in our breeding birds of prey, particularly with regard to the peregrine. The first three of these are compatible with falconry in that they are identifiable hazards; but the last could easily have sounded the death knell for practical falconry in Ireland.

In the conservation and protection of birds of prey, and in legislation governing such protection, a lot has happened in Ireland very quickly. It is still happening. Under the chairmanship of Professor W. Finley and the secretaryship of Mr John Temple-Lang, the Irish Society for the Protection of Birds has undergone what can only be described as an 'overhaul', culminating in the presentation of a large document concerning proposed conservation legislation to the Minister for Lands. In the many pages of this document the case for the peregrine is highlighted again and again. In Northern Ireland the appointment of Mr Frank Hamilton as Representative for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has given a large boost to the implementing of existing legislation. The effect of this conservation activity was simple; falconers take Irish peregrines, the present numbers of which cannot stand such depredations – ergo, falconry must be stopped.

Until the advent of the aforementioned activity there had been no need for falconry to be organised upon a wide scale, or a need for national representation. To gain recognition in the eyes of the conservationists and governments, and to drive home the differences between responsible and irresponsible falconers in order that our sport may be tolerated, perhaps eventually accepted, there was now a need for an organisation. On the twelfth of July 1967, on a very hot day beside Lord Killanin's

*How Irish can you get! – Editor

swimming pool, the Irish Hawking Club was born. Its founder members were all either full or associate members of the British Falconers' Club (one is a Vice-President) and the outline of the embryo organisation was essentially that of the BFC. The revised BFC Code of Conduct and Rules were adapted and provisionally adopted – later to be passed adopted at the first Annual General Meeting in October 1967.

Falconry in Ireland has not been stopped. The amount of discussion and correspondence undertaken for its continued acceptance would fill volumes. Suffice it to say Mr Temple-Lang gave a great deal of his time, energy and his almost elastic credulity in order to appreciate both sides of the coin and insert certain licensing recommendations into his Conservation Memorandum to the Minister. The Irish Hawking Club is now officially recognised. It covers all thirty-two counties and acts in an advisory capacity in matters concerning falconry both in the North and South.

On the face of things all is proceeding upon an even keel, but it would be an act of extreme foolishness if attitudes were allowed to become complacent. Two eyasses were taken from a north coast eyrie in 1965 and two more were taken in 1967. In both cases people from England were thought to be responsible. In the latter case the theft occurred at the beginning of discussions with the ISPB, whilst tentative requests were being made for licensing facilities. It is difficult to convince a person, however understanding they may be, that responsible falconers do not take peregrines, whilst at the same time admitting that only a week previously falconers did in fact take peregrines. Such cases only make the acceptance of falconry in Ireland more difficult.

The Irish Hawking Club is young, both in time and the age of the majority of its members. It is forward in thinking and, it is hoped, in acting. It is a responsible club and does not give the privilege of its membership lightly. It has been voiced both in Britain and here in Ireland that the IHC is a subsidiary of the BFC. To those misguided enough to think such thoughts it must be emphasised that such is not the case. Whilst having a similar code and aims, whilst recognising, through

establishment, the BFC as the Father Figure of falconry interests both in the British Isles and in Europe and actively giving of its allegiance, the Irish Hawking Club is an entity within itself and is allied by choice. May I light-heartedly add that it would be difficult to image a more unlikely event than a British subsidiary being formed in Dublin on the twelfth day of July.

The sport and fields available in Ireland are, with the exception of some Scottish grouse moors, second to none in the British Isles. There are the wide, flat bogs and moorlands holding grouse and hare. There are the salt marshes, mud and reedy flats which, at certain times of the year, are solid with duck and geese, affording a tremendous spectacle even before a peregrine is put over them. There are woods and small copses from which, with little expenditure or the help of kind friends, pheasant can be guaranteed to give a female goshawk the time of her life. There is the broken country and blackbird a-plenty. There is the Easky Tradition of lark-hawking founded by W. Ruttledge and there are moves afoot to re-establish magpie-hawking. There is good Irish whisky and there are good beds to be had. We cannot, unfortunately, guarantee the weather. There is also the law and the welcome visitors are they who are aware of it and respect it.

I wish to thank the following for their help in the preparation of this short article: The Lord Killanin, The Lord O'Neill, Miss Clare MacMahon, Professor W. Finley, John Temple-Lang, Frank Hamilton, W. Ruttledge, C. Douglas Deane and the facilities of the Ulster Museum. ❧❧❧

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Presentation plaque donated to the BFC by the Irish Hawking Club, then (below left) and now (below, photo: Mark Upton)





Snipe Hawking in Ireland

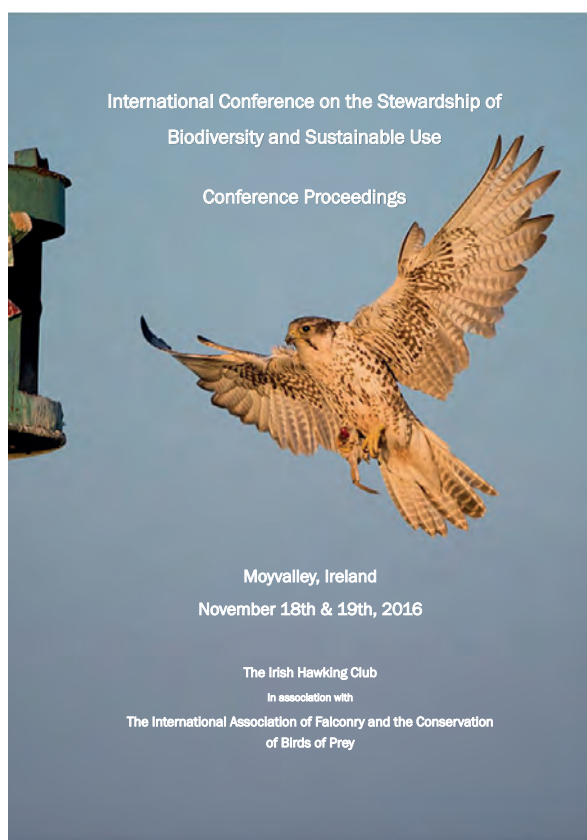
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NOW AVAILABLE

The proceedings of the November 2016 *International Conference on the Stewardship of Biodiversity and Sustainable Use* have been published by the Irish Hawking Club in conjunction with the IAF, and with generous support from the Falconry Heritage Trust.

It is hoped that the book will benefit countries around the world who wish to maintain or acquire a wild harvest of raptors for falconry.

It was compiled, edited and designed by Eoghan Ryan and Hilary White, with support from Janusz Sielicki.

Printed copies are available through the IHC Committee or via the IAF webstore at iaf.org.

A free PDF download is available via the IAF website. Go to <https://goo.gl/YZ6Cfx>.

The Founding of the Irish Hawking Club

John Morris, Co. Dublin



Who would have believed it? The Irish Hawking Club is 50 years old this year! As far as Brendan Behan was concerned, the first thing on the agenda of any new club was the split! So it is amazing we have lasted so long.

It was the founding of the EEC, now the European Union, that made me anxious. There was nobody to represent falconry in Ireland. So I placed an ad in *The Irish Times* asking any interested parties to contact me in Delgany, Co. Wicklow. This led to the founding of the IHC in 1967. The first honorary secretary was myself, with Séan Greaves as the first president. My father, Lord Killanin, agreed to be our patron, and Alec Phinn was our treasurer. The founder members were Richard Ward, Ronald Stevens and Bill Rutledge.



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Above:
Peregrines, IHC
meet, Spiddal, Co.
Galway, 1984

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Below: The
original Irish
Hawking Club,
Dublin Zoo



Photographs from John Morris



.....
Above: In 1966
with jack merlin
and kestrel



.....
Right: In 1971 at
St Clerans, Co.
Galway



.....
A new generation of would-be
falconers, including Rod and Michael
Morris in the middle of the group

It's 46 years or thereabouts since falconry became part of my life, and to think it all started over a drink in the Brazen Head, the oldest pub in Ireland, in the heart of Viking Dublin.

John Morris and I met there for the first time, although we had been aware of each other from afar. Soon we were deep in conversation about our love of nature and wildlife. He was very impressed with my knowledge of butterflies, and I was fascinated by the fact that he was a falconer and hunted with peregrines. The closest I had ever got to birds of prey was in the pages of Harris-Ching's beautifully illustrated book, which enjoyed a special place on my bookshelves.

That day, that first meeting, sealed my fate and so began a wonderful adventure, taking my first sparrowhawk from a wood in Kilternan, learning how to train her and then having sport. I called her Alanna, and she was so tame and easy to handle – and lethal.

My black and silver Mini, registration TZI227, was our mode of transport and often we would just open the window and let her off at the quarry.

My Hawking Memories

Thelma Mansfield, Co. Dublin

We were not always welcome hunting. Luckily my driving skills (trials champion of Ireland) came in very handy, as we were chased by wardens from the Phoenix Park and the Bull Island.

So we headed west to Spiddal, where we tried Alanna on magpies. Boy did she enjoy it, and boy was she good – totally fearless through any thicket and always successful. She enjoyed hunting so much that we flew her three times a day, seven days a week; do the maths, that's some record.

Needless to say the farming community in the West loved to hear the roar of the engine and the flash of black and silver as the magpie hawk was on the prowl, hunting their least favourite bird. Later a drink in Ti Hughes and a few tunes by the smouldering turf fire, Alanna with her head under her wing, happy out. Such lovely memories to cherish. ❧❧❧



Cherry Brandy and Damson Gin

Dr Mike Nicholls, England

Cherry Brandy
2017

a Mike Nicholls Production
Best to drink after Decem

Damson Gin
2017

a Mike Nicholls Production
Best to drink after December 2018

I like to give these to farmers as well as a bottle of whiskey at Christmas. Here's how I make them:

Method

1. Freeze the fruit for at least a week. (This is like the fruit being frosted and bursts the cells to release the juice.)
2. Put alternate layers of frozen fruit and sugar loosely in the jar until it is full.
3. Put the lid on the jar and leave it for 24 hours at room temperature. In this time the fruit will thaw and the sugar will start to draw out the fruit juice to form syrup. Don't leave it any longer than 24 hours, as the sugar syrup may start to spoil.
4. During this time, occasionally tip the jar upside down and gently mix the fruit, sugar and syrup. Make sure the lid is on tight!
5. After 24 hours the sugar should be infused with fruit juice. Give one last gentle shake.
6. Now add the gin (if using damsons or sloes) or brandy (for cherries) until the fruit is covered.
7. Leave for at least three months, tipping the jar to mix the ingredients every couple of weeks.
8. After the first month, the spirit can be tasted and a bit more sugar added if desired.
9. After three months or more, siphon into small bottles (avoiding sediment) and keep till Christmas.

Cherry brandy and damson gin can be drunk after three months, but are better after a year. So make plenty and save some for next season!

Ingredients

1. A large glass jar (Kilner or similar) with tight fitting lid.
2. Enough cherries (small morellos or 'wine' cherries are best), or damsons (or damsons and sloes mixed), to fill the jar.
3. A couple of bottles of gin or brandy (the best you can afford).
4. 2 lbs of sugar (white or brown) - you probably won't need it all.



How I Became Imprinted on a Wonderful Club

Rowland Eustace, Co. Dublin

Right: with Hil's
spar Sarah Green
in 2015

Firstly, what a year 2016 was. I am so glad to have been around to see the club excel itself in so many ways. Congratulations to everyone on the team who put in so many hours preparing and delivering the International Meeting last year and for the brilliant and innovative *IAF Newsletter* that followed.

For this special anniversary edition of the annual *Journal* to mark 50 years of the IHC, I have been asked what the club has meant to me. It is hard to know where to start, but here goes.

My first contact was as a result of a letter placed in the paper by Johnny Morris, requesting any falconers to contact him with a view to restarting the Irish Hawking Club, which was moribund at that time. This was in 1976. I attended with my young son, who still remembers this inaugural meeting on 20 November, 1976. From what notes I still have, I see that we met again in June 1977 for our first AGM, that contact was re-established with the IAF, and that the Hon. John Morris was president. I was on the committee along with Eamon McCabe, and others who attended, to the best of my memory, were William MacDougald, Alan Walsh, Derek Watson, Pat Warner, Noel McGuinness and Paul Donohue. David Williams became honourable secretary. Dr George Luke joined us the following year. I can't



remember much else at present but I do remember that John and George met with the Department on 23 November, 1979, in yet another attempt to get peregrine licences. George was a licenced ringer and had more knowledge of peregrine eyries than any of the so-called experts, so he was very helpful and well able to argue our case.

Enough of business. First of all, the club meant great friendships with like-minded characters – which is a good description of falconers. We started with some very exciting fieldmeets using the best we could muster: kestrels, sparrowhawks, and the odd redtail, buzzard or eagle owl.

The kestrels should not be forgotten;



many of us started with them. They were brilliant at flying to the lure, could catch frogs (game was scarce) and one member caught at least one young rat, while another regularly caught mice and sparrows in a racing stables where she worked.

Hunting with the sparrowhawks, though requiring more skill, was great fun, particularly if we had willing beaters. There were great afternoons over the years with the likes of Noel McGuinness, Liam O'Broin, Tommy Byrne and Paul Donohue. Paul Fogarty, meanwhile, was one of the club's eminent beaters (as he could create a terrific ruckus all by himself) and was also an expert at throwing spars.

One small hawk very close to my heart is of course the merlin. I bred many of these wonderful little falcons over the years and saw some falconers – especially Edward Mulligan – become very skilled at flying them. We didn't see very many ringing-up flights but it was always nice to gather together to fly up on the Featherbeds not too far from where I live. The kestrels, sparrowhawks and peregrines could also be flown here but the merlins were always the main event. This was a favourite spot for Sean Gibney to fly his peregrines too, much to the annoyance of a woman in the valley who had peacocks but no shotgun (it is rumoured that they exchanged insults by



smoke signals). Amongst those who also used to gather on the Featherbeds and Dublin Mountains were Liam O'Broin, David Norris, Roy Alcock, Derek and Paul Kelly, the famous Mandy, Darry Reed and the famous Hilary White of course. Some of these I introduced to hawking and trained, which was very rewarding indeed.

Another club activity I enjoyed was attendance at game fairs, which gave us the opportunity to engage with the public, who were very intrigued and always interacted favourably. The fairs I most enjoyed were held at Adare Manor in 1982 and 1984, and Clonshire Estate, where we received sponsorship from Xtra-vision. I also attended fairs at Slane Estate and several venues in Northern Ireland including Clandeboy.

The late Derek Watson, who was the club's northern secretary, organised these fairs and several very successful fieldmeets in the North which I attended. It was at one of these, around 1997/98, that Hilary White was chased by a bull while trying to hold on to his sparrowhawk. We were rather dramatically introduced to Harris' hawks at a meeting in 1993, when one of them dropped down out of tree on to a musket being carried by Hilary as he was getting something out of the boot of my car. The Harrisises had been released prematurely (and against the

Left: Gertrude meets a white-tailed eagle at Clonmel Falconry Centre.

Right: King John's Castle, 1994

fieldmaster's instructions) when people were still kitting themselves out at their cars. Derek and David Martin (a former president) stitched up the musket's torn crop, but the little bird unfortunately died during the night.

The Harris' hawks became readily available and popular with many members. They were easily trained and experts at catching rabbits and pheasant. Many meetings were organised for them. I was a witness at one of these when a ferret and Harris' had a tug of war with an unfortunate rabbit.

The club also took part in some re-enactments. The one I best remember was King John's Castle in Limerick, where we met the Norwegian minister representing the Vikings, our opponents



.....
Adare, 1993

in the battle for the castle.

I also remember the special meets we had based at Liam O'Broin's house in Slane. Liam, Margaret, and their daughters were excellent hosts, providing us with accommodation, tenting space and excellent meals. The hawking was good and I remember the club fielded seven sparrowhawks on one occasion. I also have very fond memories of non-hunting events organised by the club. One particularly enlightening event was the 2004 raptor veterinary conference organised by Gary Timbrell in Dublin Zoo, where Irish vets and falconers were given an audience with Neil Forbes. One of the great outcomes of this was the specialist knowledge picked up by our vets here,

.....
Falconry Festival with eagle, 2009

and Dr Forbes' very generous offer to be available on the phone with advice afterwards.

When the peregrines became available we had plenty of exercise on the moors and at least one big meeting in Connemara. Expertise was not great at the time but marvelling at these fantastic predators was enjoyment enough. The hard-fought-for licences to take from the wild were fraught with stupid rules and regulations. The club had given the authorities certain criteria for judging the suitability of applicants, but this was completely ignored in the case of one applicant at least. We were requested to help a non-member who had been issued with a licence simply on the word of a Guard and without meeting any of the standards required. On meeting him and his unfortunate peregrine, we learned that it had worn the hood from day one, was kept in a cupboard, had never had a bath and was given a syringe full of egg yolk every so often. We released the falcon from the hood and it promptly took a proffered bath with fantastic abandon. We gave the owner all the advice we could, but I'm afraid most of it was ignored. His licence was not revoked as far as I know, the falcon was dead shortly after, and we were informed that the owner had actually demanded a replacement from the authorities.

Then, through the club, I was able to





.....
In my garden
with Hilary and
Edward

visit various 'offshore accounts'. My first visit I think was to Bristol University with Eamon McCabe for a seminar on falconry, and then a visit to Phillip Glazier (father of Jemima Parry-Jones) at Newent, and a very cool reception from him. I visited there again and met Dr Nick Fox for the first time. He was visiting Jemima with a group of students. She had a black sparrowhawk at the time, which was understandably getting great attention.

Back in the days when birds were hard to source, I also made slightly nerve-racking trips to Munich and Tegernsee to collect our first German goshawks, thanks to club contacts.

David Williams, Eamon McCabe and I went to Woodhall Spa one year with a small caravan and got a wonderful reception from the BFC. Eamon had brought a very large Irish flag, which they hung above the main entrance to the hotel. This was our first encounter with well-trained falcons flying at partridge and duck. I returned there in 2002 with Robert Hutchinson, Martin Brereton, Sean Gibney, Gary Timbrell and Ian Alcock. We had great action with the goshawks, and Martin's outperformed all others. I did not join the

falcons on this occasion. They have vast areas of open ground and it is easy to follow flights but too much leg work for me.

Then I had the trip to Wales with Paul Fogarty where we met and stayed with Ben Long, who not only showed us how to make hawk furniture but gave us moulds and leather which Paul later demonstrated at a club meeting.

I joined Martin and Paul on a trip to Opočno in the Czech Republic in 2000. (They held their 50th anniversary meet this year.) I met the late Douglas Morgans, president of the Welsh Hawking Club, who kindly drove me around some of the hawking sites. We made one long journey in a bus accompanied by some 20 falconers with golden eagles. On arrival at the hunting ground, the bus disgorged its contents and it was the falconers who lined the ditch in order to relieve themselves, not the eagles. Douglas looked at me and said he had a problem. I asked what. He explained that all the falconers were holding their eagles on their left gloved hand while the other was engaged. Douglas explained that he always needed both hands!

The eagles flew hares which were

plentiful but very hard to catch and hold. They were permitted to take two deer in the day if they could catch them. Paul got some brilliant action shots but I have been unsuccessful in borrowing the video from him.

A few years ago, I visited the first International Festival of Falconry in Reading, England, with my son Andrew. Paul Lamb met us and arranged a very convenient parking space for me. I helped Paul to man the IHC tent and met very many old and new friends. The festival was run with great efficiency by Dr Nick Fox. It was much more intimate than later festivals and culminated in a great banquet in an enormous tent. Plates piled with quail, chickens (not day-olds but more like month-olds) and lamb arrived at our table which we ate with our fingers on large halved buns for plates. We were entertained by different groups including Paul Fogarty's ensemble, hunting horns from Hungary and a wonderful female singer from Korea.

Another great adventure was the extending of my breeding pens which would not have been possible only for a loan from the IHC Breeding Fund and help from young members at the time: Roy Alcock, Conal and Kieron Gallagher, Edward Mulligan (who acted as Gaffer), Karl Lawlor (who supplied timber), David and Paul Kelly (hammer men – 200 nails each) and many others. Neighbours complained at the time about noise as our hammer men nailed huge 8x6-foot sheets of galvanised metal, which had been used as containers, to 4x4 uprights. The metal sheets were kindly donated by Heaton's. Hilary White escaped most of this but was indispensable to me in later years and became almost one of our large family. He put up with a lot and even my attempts to recruit him as a beekeeper. He still brings me out on occasion with the sparrowhawk, but locks me in the

car.

I have to finish here as my editor hints that I was not supposed to be writing a book. I hope some of this is of interest. It is a little all over the place, I know, and not in chronological order. I don't have much order in my life, thank goodness, but I hope you get my drift as to how much the club has meant and still does mean to me, and I am sure to the rest of you. It is very, very important that the club continues unbroken and gets full support from all falconers in Ireland. Whatever we do, we must never Brexit!

Just before I go, may I take this opportunity to thank the members of the club for all the years of enjoyment and help that they have given me in the past (and the future too, I hope). I have been presented with gifts on more than one occasion which I am very, very grateful for. It was a very special occasion for me when I was given that attractive award a few years ago "in recognition of services to falconry in Ireland." At last year's International Meeting in Moyvalley, I was very honoured to be given a special edition of Patrick Morel's book *The Art of Falconry* by IAF President Adrian Lombard. This year, thank you to the committee for the beautiful cut-glass tumblers commemorating the club's 50th birthday. These, like the many friends I have in the club, are treasured possessions to me. ❧❧❧



Archive: 1969

This letter to Irish Hawking Club member Derry Argue, from an Indian falconer and former High Commissioner, was published in the IHC's second newsletter, in 1969.



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LETTER FROM AN INDIAN FALCONER AND FORMER HIGH COMMISSIONER

Many thanks for your letter and the pictures of the hawks you sent. I am afraid this sport is almost dead in India. Only Anoop's father is keeping it alive, otherwise there is not a soul in India except a family in Dehradun who goes in for the sport. You have asked me about laggars. They are a very inferior kind of hawk. They have been trained to hunt hares (about the size of our rabbit). Butby and large they are the poor man's falcon. I once saw a male laggar which was trained to fly at crows (about the size of our jackdaw) and it was really delightful to watch the bird working. He would stoop from great height on passage crows and as soon as they saw him they would take shelter in the trees. When they were flushed he would bind to one. But otherwise I have hardly ever seen these birds used for anything except for catching Sakers, etc. My nephew, Anoop's late brother, has flown them at paddy birds (a type of small stork), but that is a very tame affair. Beyond that I'm afraid I can't tell you very much about them.

As for using the 'jangauli' we used this for all the short winged hawks and it gives you a balanced hawk on your hand which enables you to fly him at partridge, chukkar, quail and pheasant, etc. I have caught quite a number of snipe with a sparrowhawk by using the jangauli. Of course you have to be straight and quick when throwing the hawk at the bird. It is an art like bowling in a cricket match. One must never jerk the hawk and must never allow the hawk to flap his wings to get after the quarry before you throw him at it. That means you have to keep your right arm back as far as possible with the hawk on your wrist, left foot forward pointing towards the direction the game takes off, i.e. you must be so quick that you main at the bird with your hawk before he has time to flap his wings to go after it. Then and only then, you can shoot him out from your wrist as a rocket in the direction the quail, snipe, partridge, etc. takes.

We used to have competitions for sparrowhawks to be flown at quail. The modus operandi is that you have a wide sheet ten feet by six feet wide fixed on two poles and a four foot hole in the middle of it. Two competitors with the sparrowhawks are posted 15 feet behind the sheet and from the other side a man lets out a live quail. The man who throws his hawk through the hole and catches the quail with it wins the competition. This is the highest efficiency in using the jangauli.

I was most interested in your stories of eagles and of the Black Sparrowhawk of Africa. When I was in Australia as High Commissioner I tried female chicken hawk which was as big as a sparrowhawk but ^{although} she was very young I could not train her. The female was as big as a male gos but I could never get one without a broken leg because all the farmers caught them in 'gin' traps.

In November last I went to see my brother and I am sending a photograph of the hawks that he keeps. He went to Afganistan and bought that sparrowhawk but did not fly it. The hawks in India are cheap but no one catches them because there is no demand. Otherwise I could have sent you any number. In Pakistan people are still keen on catching hawks.

As for bells I should be writing to my brother if he can lay his hands on any of the goldsmiths who used to make bells I shall send you their addresses.

Hawking over dogs is the finest sport in the world. As I am writing this letter to you I have my three pointers sitting next to me. I shoot partridge, quail and jungle fowl over them and they are first class retrievers for duck and snipe. I shoot driven snipe here and sometimes the bag goes up to a century. But there is nothing to compare with falconry. I have caught as many as twenty five partridges with a male goshawk in a day.

The late Maharajah of Bhavnagar, a great friend of mine, used to use falcons and hawks and cheetas. But even he didn't know the use of the jangauli. It was a pleasure to see his sakers going after the kite and also hares and chinka (antelope). His cheetas used to work off a bullock cart and catch black buck at great speed. His Sakers used to be flown at chinkaras along with a grey-hound which would pull him down when the Sakers were stooping at him. This would confuse the quarry and slow him down and the grey-hounds would pull him down.

As for training the gos and spar, Anoop should be able to explain to you on the spot. We do not carry them on our hands in the day time until after seven days. When we get a passage gos we bind his tail with cloth which is sown around so it will not come off. Then we make a cloth jacket and put it round his wings like a waist coat and button up at the back thus preventing him from breaking his feathers. After this we put him in the middle of the Indian bed, or charpoy, and tie him there. The servant takes the bed on his head to the bazaar and keeps it where lots of people are passing. He is brought home in the evening and taken out of his jacket and carried and kept awake the whole night through. We have four men to carry him at night and this goes on for four days. It is a third degree treatment but on the fourth day in the bazaar he sits on the bed and hardly takes any notice of the passers by. He is then fed on the hand in the bazaar. On the fifth day we give him one hour's sleep and on the sixth and seventh day the same. On the eighth he starts coming to the hand for meat but the night vigil goes on for about ten days but we give him a rest for two or three hours every night. On the 11th day he is given a live bird, either a chicken or a partridge, to kill and he feeds on it. The next two or three days we keep him on the lure and when he is good at it we give him a partridge which flies and he's let loose after it. He catches it and is fed upon it. On the 16th day he is flown at wild partridge.

So we can train a wild passage goshawk to work in two weeks. The sparrowhawk takes 8 to 10 days to fly after wild quail or partridge, etc. But all this is when you can get trained men. Now to get these people is impossible. My brother has two hawk men and they kick their heels all the time. Whereas we used to pay a hawk man Rps.30/- per month (approx. 30/-) and food now we pay Rps.150/- (approx £7. 10s) and even at that pay they think they are underpaid.

I was most interested in your friend catching grouse with Peregrines. In India we used to fly male Peregrines after sand grouse. They would go a mile or two sometimes before catching them or give them up as a bad job. We used to lose a lot of birds.

The Red Headed Merlin weighs about as much as a sparrowhawk but they are the cleverest birds I have yet seen. They will go for paddy birds, chakkas, partridge, 'cici' - a kind of chakka with yellow beaks, very fast but smaller than a partridge. Merlins love to fly at the last and when close they take cover in holes and we catch them alive. I used to keep two female merlins and if they caught a lark they would bind it together and come down fighting. If a single merlin was flown and it caught a small bird it would carry it away and recatching the hawk would be a problem. Pink starling and English starlings can be caught by a sparrowhawk as well as merlin but they have to be in top condition as in the case of quail. I have caught Jay, snipe, starling, and various other birds such as kingfisher and merlins. The Maharajah of Bhavnagar told me that he had flown merlins at a kite but I never saw it. Our merlins used to be let off and they would hunt with us and come home in the evening. They are very affectionate.

Perhaps I told you that I used to hawk nightjars and it used to give us a lot of fun. A cast will stoop at it in turn and it will ring up and the merlins will go off at a tangent and when they get above the nightjar they will come down at it like a rocket and the two bind to the nightjar and come down together. I was once hawking with a single merlin and she and the nightjar vanished in the sky. Next day a shepherd brought the merlin to me. She had killed the nightjar 5 miles away.

Good old days have gone and I pine for the old sport. But no one catches hawks and we are helpless, so I have taken to my gun and my pointers. I hope this will give you some idea of training hawks in quick time. As for the jangauli we used it for hawks only as also for the merlin as we have to throw them for quail, snipe, doves, etc. The Red Headed Merlin is not fast enough to catch these unless thrown. Chakkar hawking is the hardest for a goshawk but if properly flown good bags are possible. I took 13 chakkar with my gos in a day and this is a record in hawking eras. (The chakkar is almost identical to our Red Legged Partridge). He was the fastest hawk I have ever owned and if flown at chakkar in decent distance he would catch him in the air which has not been heard of before.

A good thrower (with the jangauli) can catch quail with a female goshawk but you need to be an ace flyer. I have not been able to do so but I have caught partridges with a male gos in the air by throwing them with the aid of the jangauli. As for chakkar hawking we used to have beat and station the hawks about 500 yards ahead on the hill. As the chakkar come within range the hawk was let off the wrist and he would stoop down and twist and turn and get in under the chakkar and then would catch him in the air or hit him like a Peregrine does and drop him on the ground and then catch him. This bird, if flown wrongly, goes about a mile in his first flight and no hawk can catch him in this way. We also catch nightjars with sparrowhawks, both male and female. As the hawk approaches the nightjar turns and makes the hawk miss him and this may take 3 or 4 turns to catch him. But a good hawk will wait for the turn and as soon as the nightjar straightens up from the turn he catches him. I have seen a hawk eagle bring down a Demozelle crane in no time but it was a wild one. I have also seen a shahin pick up a snipe after chasing it for 200 yards. We have hawked peafowl with female goshawks and it takes some doing. I have also seen a female gos catch a Demozelle crane. The man has a trained bullock and he makes a wide circle round the cranes and when he is within range he releases the hawk and catches the crane. The crane bites like hell if the hawk is not quick in getting him by the neck.

I have seen a laggar after a florican but he was too slow and the florican escaped. In Sawat and Die' states of Pakistan frontier they go in for chakkar hawking in a big way. They keep 20 or 30 hawks, both male and female. Their so-called armies are used for beating and they start a line $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles away from where one is told to sit in a chair and watch. The chakkar come in ones and twos at a height of 50 ft. The goshawk is let go from a higher hill and then you see a great chase. We are sitting by the road side and the hawk and chakkar come lower and lower down the valley until they pass over our heads and after another 3 or 400 yards the chakkar goes into the rocks and the hawk 'takes stand' on the rock nearby. The chakkar is flushed and killed as he can only run unless he rests then flies. You can see the flight for half a mile and some hawks, which are very rare and fast, bind to the chakkar in the air. Each hawk is flown 5 or 6 times in a day but it is a wonderful sight. Black partridge is found in swampy areas and our goshawks give great sport when thrown after these. The black partridge rises about 50 ft. in the air like a rocket and then goes slowly down to the hawk which picks him up in the air but your hawks must be in very high condition and the handler must throw them with good force.

I have seen a pair of Red Headed Merlins bring down a plover. 'Did you do that?' The plover has good pace but the merlins rise and soar up and stoop and bring him down. He is twice the size of a merlin.

Submitted by Mr. D. Argue.



Looking Back

When I look back on it now, I realise that seeing a falcon up close for the first time proved to be a life-changing experience for me. It was a bit like setting eyes on my beloved one day as she passed me by on a corridor... nothing was ever the same thereafter.

In February 1979 I arrived in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates to take on a new position as a veterinarian at the Veterinary Hospital in Jumeirah. It promised to be an exciting venture, for the job description had mentioned a great variety of work to be done. There was small animal work at the hospital itself, work at Dubai Zoo and Naghli Game Park, equine work at the racing stables of the local sheikhs, along with caring for the farm animals of the city's Arab population. Almost as an addendum it was mentioned that I would be treating falcons used in the local sport of falconry as well.

Only a week after my arrival, the waiting room door swung open one morning and in strode a moustached young Arab man, a hooded saker falcon perched on a cuff that he wore around his left wrist. My colleague, Dick Collins, introduced me to Sheikh Hasher bin Maktoum al Maktoum and, after the sheikh had removed his khuffihah headdress and wrapped it around the falcon's body, Dick and I proceeded to examine a bumblefoot lesion on one of the bird's digits while the sheikh held her firmly grasped in his hands.

In close, I could smell the wild spicy smell of the falcon's body and the contrasting sweet scent of her breath as she hissed and panted nervously. Sheikh Hasher whispered soft soothing words as we examined his charge and, when we had finished, he gently slipped the hood from her head and let her sit unfazed on his covered wrist, all the while stroking the front of her breast



with long sweeps of his fingertips. The dark pools of her eyes flashed with a blend of wildness and intelligence, confidence and calmness. She was the most self-possessed wild creature I had ever seen. While Dick and Sheikh Hasher were deciding the treatment protocol for the falcon's bumblefoot,

Maurice Nicholson, Co. Wicklow



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With Heather and
Chilli on Midfearn
Moor, 1988

I drank in her beauty and decided something of my own: I was going to learn everything I could about these beautiful birds and how to hunt with them. I was going to be a falconer.

I knew absolutely nothing about falconry, but I came from a family background steeped in the pursuit

of field sports. My father had been a shooting and fishing man all his life, travelling to Scotland and Iceland for his sport. In our childhood he had an excellent English setter over whom I saw him shoot many pheasants. Only recently did I discover that the dog we called Sherry was in fact Hardware Boy, who went on to sire a number of field trials champions, notably Dashing Gilbert. Sherry, it turns out, had been one of the stalwarts of the English setter breed in Ireland in the 1960s.

With my new passion well and truly ignited, I began to trawl the bookshops of Dubai for any books on falcons and falconry. Soon I had Philip Glasier's and Michael Woodford's books by my bedside, later to be followed by that great source of information, Mark Allen's *Falconry in Arabia*. A few weeks later I met Hasher's brother – Sheikh Butti bin Maktoum – when I was treating a falcon of his for a trichomoniasis infection in the mouth. Soon we became friends and, as he lived close by, I often called in to him in the evenings and began to watch him with his falcons and quiz him, trying to learn anything I could about falconry.

“Come out training with me anytime, Doctor. I go every day at four o'clock,” he told me.

As Dick and I were the only Western-style vets in the UAE, our working days were long and tiring and it was never easy for me to slip away and follow this new passion of mine but, whenever I could manage it, I called by Butti's house and went out to the edge of the desert to watch him and his falconer give the falcons their daily exercise. He flew passage peregrines and sakers trapped further up the Gulf coast or sometimes acquired from trappers as far away as Jordan, Syria or from across the water in Iran. These passage birds were manned almost continuously once acquired. Cut back sharply in condition,



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Sheikh Marwan bin Maktoum and his brother Sheikh Hasher, who introduced me to falcons and falconry, Dubai, 1980

they grew accustomed to their new life and were flying free in 20 days and often a lot less.

As they were well muscled and conditioned when trapped on migration, the Arab falconers didn't have to get these birds fit; the sakers had travelled from the Asian steppes and the calidus peregrines had just flown all the way from Siberia, after all, so the aim was to get them manned up quickly and move straight on to hunting. Over those first few weeks they were brought everywhere on the mangalah, so that the normal noisy daily Arab life soon was hardly noticed by them.

Sheikh Butti's daily toning-up exercise was to call them off individually from a distant sand dune, usually about a half mile away, with lots of whooping and shouting and swinging of a lure with houbara wings attached. They were then given their full ration for the day on the lure. The sessions often ended at dusk with the falcons feaking on their blocks while Butti and his falconer prostrated themselves on the sand and prayed towards the setting

sun. Butti told me that the locals shied away from flying the haggard falcons as they were regarded as too unreliable and easily lost so that, unless they were particularly good, they released all their falcons at the end of the hawking season in March and started with fresh passage birds the following October.

I discovered a local trapper as well, an old Dubai Arab named Suedan who spent much of September and October every year out on a sandbank in the inner reaches of Dubai Creek inside a 'choca', a trapping hide constructed of sacking and timber which blended in well with the sand all around. He used a combination of pigeons on lines and placed bow nets to capture the falcons but he told me he only caught three or four peregrines a year.

I had another great piece of fortune when a Californian falconer from San Diego, John Hoolihan, came to work for Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, a first cousin of Butti and Hasher. John had a degree in avian biology and had worked for the Peregrine Fund for a number of years at the falcon breeding

facility in Fort Collins, Colorado, and among other things had trapped and banded passage tundra falcons on the Texas beaches for a few seasons. He had a lovely, slow, gentle way about everything he did, whether he was talking or handling falcons, and I picked his brains unmercifully as I watched his movements and listened to his lore, often while I was carrying a falcon around on my fist, hooding and unhooding it. When a new batch of passage falcons arrived in from the trappers abroad, he would often call me up, all excited: "You gotta come in and see these falcons, Maurice. There are some real beauties."

The two of us would sit on the floor in the palace majlis and just drink in the loveliness of 25 or 30 freshly trapped and hooded juvenile peregrines and sakers while the falconers came and picked them up and excitedly pointed out the features of the most stunning of them. I remember John turning to me and saying, "Sometimes, I just can't believe I get paid for doing this. It was the same when I was trapping on the Texas beaches. The suckers in the Peregrine Fund paid me but I would have done it for nothing!"

John told me too that one of the most famous of modern falconers –

Ronald Stevens – lived in Ireland, and he copied his address out for me from the NAFA membership list. I soon had some of this master's books added to the growing pile by my bedside.

In spite of my growing knowledge and confidence at handling falcons, I soon had to come to terms with one disappointing fact: I was never going to be able to hunt with a falcon in Dubai. Apart from the time constraints of my professional life, quarry was the main problem – or rather the lack of it. Stone curlew and the migratory houbara (McQueen's bustard) were the staple quarry species of the local falconers and both were getting scarcer year by year. If a houbara was spotted by tribesmen anywhere in the desert within 200 miles of Dubai, word would soon pass to the local sheikhs and they would be off in pursuit. The Dubai sheikhs had already taken to hunting abroad in Iran, Pakistan and North Africa, sometimes hunting for weeks on end in groups of 20 or 30 falconers. I knew I could never compete with the local falconers, never mind managing to hunt abroad, so I decided to keep learning what I could as a sort of falconry apprentice during my four years in Dubai and hope that in years to come I would become a real falconer.

In 1983 I moved to Kent in England, becoming partner in a practice there. Within a few months I bought my first peregrine, Arabella, a one-year-old female that had been bred by David Myatt in Wales and flown in the north of England, and I finally began to put my falconry life together. I commenced rook-hawking on the South Downs in Sussex with Warren Earp, a local falconer. It was real 'harum scarum' stuff as we flew without telemetry so that accurate weight management and conditioning were vital. It was great fun, but always a bit nerve-racking, and having a falcon out overnight without

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 Hawking with
 Umberto Caproni,
 Roger Upton,
 Thelma Morris,
 Mark Upton,
 Alec Finn and
 Sean Ryan in
 Sutherland 1990





telemetry, I discovered, is one sure way to keep one awake all night. I flew a tiercel bred by Ceri Griffiths and a falcon bred by Martin Jones over the next few years, either out on the flats of Romney Marsh or the slopes of the South Downs, and started killing rooks on a regular basis.

Then in 1988 I met David Frank (later of Western Sporting) as he had arrived as Curator of Birds at the nearby Leeds Castle Estate. Within a few weeks of meeting we decided that we would try grouse-hawking together that season in Scotland. I had already bought Moanruad Chillli, a trained Irish red setter from the famous John Nash of Pallasgreen, County Limerick, with this possibility in mind. David took a trip to Scotland and sourced a moor for us in Ardgay, Rosshire, and so the Glorious Twelfth found us heading out together on Midfearn Moor overlooking the Dornoch Firth. David had a penchant for country music so we drove up the long track to the moor every morning to the sound of Hank Williams Jr singing *Family Tradition*, also known as *Why Do You Drink?* It's a song that seems to have lodged in my brain ever since!

Over the preceding six weeks we

had been training two eyass peregrines together and David had been nattering on every evening about his intermewed tiercel, a gyr-prairie hybrid, Jerry, whom he had flown for a few seasons at duck back in California.

"Maurice, you will be amazed – no, astounded – at the pitch this falcon will kill from," he told me over and over again. "I can't wait for you to see him fly in Scotland."

Only a few minutes after heading out on the flat home beat on our first day, David's pointer had a nice solid point and he walked forward and unhooded Jerry. The burly hybrid just sat there, looking around and checking everything out, preening and rousing then scratching his chin, and then he repeated the whole exercise again and again. Three or four minutes that felt like three or four hours passed and still he sat there. David shook his head in exasperation and turned back to me.

"Pray to the god of mutes... he won't take off till he mutes. If I cast him off, he'll just go find a rock somewhere."

Well David's words and movement must have awakened a drowsy grouse, for suddenly a single burst right from under his feet. Quick as lightning Jerry dropped off the glove and grabbed it on the ground and dispatched it straight away. David was disgusted, but I couldn't help myself.

"I'm amazed – no, astounded – at the pitch that falcon killed from, Dave," I said, uncoiling the leash from around my fingers and dropping the end to the ground making a show of estimating its length. "I figure a pitch of five feet two inches."

Soon he was laughing too and he pulled out a cigar and lit up. "I can't believe he did that; that's the damn prairie coming through."

Jerry went on after that and found some great pitches and killed a nice number of grouse that season, though

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Heather and
Silver (Moanruad
Fairaisle) with
Irish grouse, Sally
Gap, Wicklow,
1990

I never let Dave forget about that first day.

I had the great fortune that season to have acquired an excellent female eyass peregrine whom I named Heather. Raised as an imprint, she hardly ever made a noise but had a great natural confidence in everything that she did. She was a very pale compact Scottish peregrine that would probably have been brilliant at pursuit flights as well, had I ever tried her. She mounted naturally from day one of training and always flew with great energy, continuously pumping her wings until she was right up there. Luckily 1988 was a good year for grouse on Midfearn and all the falcons got plenty of opportunities at good sized coveys breaking below them. Heather killed on the third day and went on to kill another four grouse over the next three weeks. She became the stalwart of my hawking team for the next ten years and I am unlikely to ever have a better grouse hawk. In her second season she killed 17 and a half brace of grouse as well as duck, pheasant, and grey and red-legged partridge, but I decided to follow Roger Upton's advice and keep

her for grouse only, as I felt pheasant-hawking especially was likely to lower her pitch.

The next year I added Shadow to my team, a wild take eyass that came from Liam McGarry, and a year later when I was back living in Ireland, Dromana, another Irish falcon taken on John Morris's wild take licence.

I had acquired my bitch Moanruad Chilli on breeder's terms, so Jack Nash and I decided to breed her to the UK Pointer and Setter Championship winner Rustler Boy, trialled by Billy Darragh from Yorkshire. I kept two of the pups and they both went on to become excellent falconry dogs, especially the bitch Moanruad Fairaisle, who was quite brilliant on grouse. She was everything you could ask for in a grouse-hawking dog; a wide ranger who very rarely false-pointed, she would stay locked on to her birds until given the word. She became very clever around game and developed the habit of giving me a certain glance to tell me when the grouse had crept away from the point and then it took just a nod from me to get her to cast backwards and sideways to relocate them again.

Heather lived to be 18 but I had to stop flying her at age ten as she damaged a leg joint in her ninth season and started to go lame every time she hit a grouse. Although I came back to live in Mayo in 1990, I continued to go to Scotland for a couple of weeks of grouse-hawking most years, and hawked on moors in Moray, Sutherland, Caithness, Badenoch and Dumfriesshire. Going to Scotland regularly provided a great opportunity to meet and hawk with many other falconers from all over the world and it was a great privilege to hawk with Roger and Mark Upton, Umberto Caproni, Steve Williams, John Gardner and Martin Jones, among others. I was joined for a few years by John Morris



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Shadow and
Heather at Fearn
Lodge, Scotland,
1990

and my brother Jeremy, and we did have some successful grouse-hawking here in Ireland too, but it took a lot of dog work to find even a few good points on this wonderful quarry, and their scarcity meant that the falcons just didn't get enough opportunities to keep flying with real style. I flew the falcons at duck as well, having reconnoitred many of the small ponds around the south Mayo area.

In 1997 I returned to the Middle East for six months and helped to set up a falcon hospital in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. I flew a tiercel *calidus* peregrine while I was there, but the most interesting time was probably camping for a couple of weekends with the Al Otaibi family of trappers on the Tihama, the flat coastal strip that borders the Red Sea from Jeddah all the way to Yemen. Watching them at their work in the early morning, shooting chukar partridge and sandgrouse in the afternoons and sleeping under the stars with this group of men was an experience that I will treasure forever. Ali Al Otaibi, the elder of the family, had been a falconer with the former King Faisal bin Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia and recounted to us many tales of old times every evening as we rested. Luckily, one of my Arab friends had good English and was able to translate for me.

In the 2000s I continued with a Scottish trip every couple of seasons, flying two captive-bred tiercels. One came from Denmark and the other, Pip, was bred by Martin Jones in Wales and was the first tiercel I killed some grouse with.

The great thing about our sport is that as well as being participants in it we can be observers of it too, and I have often gone back over in my mind (with the help of my diary) some of the great sporting flights we had.

With Heather, one sticks in my mind always. We were out on the

Midfearn Moor at the end of August 1989 on a squally wet day with half a gale blowing, making it hard at times to even carry the cadge around. Chilli got a point right on the lee side of the top of Garvary Hill. It looked very unpromising. The wind was gusting straight down the slope driving the rain into our faces, so David Frank stayed to mark the dog for us and my brother Jeremy and I did a big half circle to the windward side of the hill and I let Heather go. She went out into the gale and was thrown around like a bit of spume at first, swinging over and back over the shoulders of the hill just above the ground but then, using the lift from the slopes below, she began to mount on her set wings and went out into the valley ahead of us. She rose higher and higher but without a single beat of her wings.

When she was nearly a half mile out and up around 700 feet, Jeremy and I headed downwind towards the point as fast as we could. We watched her over our shoulders as we shambled along. I knew she would only get one chance at the grouse as the conditions would be impossible for her once she came back downwind over the hill, so I made the call and gave my glove a few waves over my head. We both began to run as she flared and began her turn, away in the distance. Slipping and sliding through the peat hags we ran on, seeing her starting to jet across the sky behind us. Swearing with the effort, we ran as fast as we could towards the crouching dog.

Twice I fell over on the slippery surface and, as I rose the second time, I looked up to see Heather crossing way above me, her wings swept back and riding on the crest of the gale. As we shouted, the covey burst from the ground ahead and seemed to be torn away on the wind. Above us, Heather turned over and down she came with the full gale behind her. The covey of

.....
With David Frank
at Forsinard, 1992

ten was disappearing fast over the hill when suddenly she sliced down through it, cutting the cock of the covey over. As she threw up high into the gale, the grouse tumbled over and over, caught by the wind as he dropped from the sky. He bounced along the heather and never moved again. By the time we got to him, Heather was already plucking and as calm as ever. We were still gasping for breath as we sank down into the heather and pulled out the hip flasks. It was a brilliant performance in almost impossible flying conditions and the sweet peaty scotch never tasted so good.

I always had the idea that, as I got older, I would be able to spend more and more time hawking. Life, of course, has a way of getting in the way of even the best hatched plans and ideas and, at times, I have had to stop hawking completely for long periods when other considerations just had to come first. In recent years I have set off to follow the trail of the pioneer snipe-hawkers in Ireland – Martin Brereton, Kevin Marron and Eric Witkowski – who year after year have produced fantastic

sport out on the raised boglands of our beautiful country. With a tiercel red-naped shaheen which Dr Mike Nicholls very kindly gifted to me, I finally made the mark last season and nabbed my first snipe. Snipe-hawking is such a wonderful field sport that pits a truly wild quarry, fit and agile after its migration in from Europe, against nature's finest predator, and it never fails to produce some great sporting contests. Add in the best of bird dogs flowing across the bogs and doing their work in the midst of the wild landscape all around and you have the perfect recipe for some great days of sport. Writing this at the beginning of September, with the season just kicking off, it's time now to look forward rather than glance backwards at former times. I can't wait for my shaheen to complete his moult and get back out there again on the bog and on the hills and in the fields where we all really want to be at this time of year. For good and all as the memories are, there is nothing like the real thing... the practice of this great sport of ours. ❧❧❧





How It All Started

Paul Fogarty, Co. Dublin

I found a small brown teddy bear belonging to my daughter and thought, "That will make a fine lure. All I need now is a piece of string."

It was a bright sunny Sunday afternoon in October 1984. My wife and three kids had gone off for a long walk, leaving me home alone to enjoy a rare afternoon of peace and quiet. The armchair in the recently completed conservatory at the back of the house seemed just the place to relax. So, armed with the Sunday papers and a glass of rosé, I settled down to do just that.

I barely had time to read the headlines when through the open window I heard the tinkling sound of a small bell.

"That bloody cat from next door must be fitted with a bell," I thought. "Now I'll be able to hear him as well as smell him when he comes to pee in my flowerbed again."

Out I went to send him on his way. The tinkling sound was coming from the back of the shed, so in order to surprise the little bugger in his ablutions, I crept forward to shoo him on his way with a handful of pebbles I'd picked up on the way.

On rounding the corner of the shed I could see there was no cat. Instead, perched on the wall at eye level not four feet in front of me was a magnificent female sparrowhawk, complete with jesses and a bell. She didn't seem in the least bit alarmed to see me, she just carried on preening and totally ignored me.

My first instinct was to reach out and try to grab the jesses but on second thoughts I felt that it wouldn't be such a good idea. Then I remembered a TV programme I had seen, in which Jemima Parry-Jones used a lure to bring in a falcon which she was able to pick up quite easily on her gloved hand. So I

quietly walked backwards towards the house to find a glove and a lure.

I found an old gardening glove which the dog had been chewing beside the doorstep. A frantic search for the makings of a lure then followed. I found a small brown teddy bear belonging to my daughter and thought, "That will make a fine lure. All I need now is a piece of string." A search of all the drawers in the kitchen yielded no string. What to do? Then I spotted the lead between the TV and the video recorder. That will have to do. A granny knot around the teddy bears neck and *voilà* – I've got me a lure.

A quick check out the window confirmed the spar was still there. I walked slowly towards her and stopped about eight feet away. I dropped the teddy to the ground intending to swing it (*à la Jemima*) in an ostentatious flourish around my head, but in a flash she was on it, right at my feet. I reached down with my gloved hand and managed to grab one of the jesses. I then made the mistake of moving my ungloved hand in to catch the other jess, and learned two things: 1) sparrowhawks are very fast, and 2) sparrowhawks have very sharp talons!

Four of those talons were buried in two of my fingers. The spar was hanging from the teddy by her other leg. I stumbled back into the conservatory, closing the door behind me with my foot. Then, as I was trying to release my two punctured fingers, she decided to drop the teddy and buried the other four talons into the back of my hand. More blood and pain. Now what do I do? In a flash of inspiration I picked up the teddy and threw it onto the armchair. That did

the trick: she let go of my hand and proceeded to pluck the teddy bear.

Now, at that time my knowledge of falconry was limited to a few TV programmes I had watched and a few articles I had read over the years. I figured out that the bird was very hungry, so I went to the fridge to look for some meat. All I could find was a packet of sausages, so I cut one up into small pieces which she eagerly devoured.

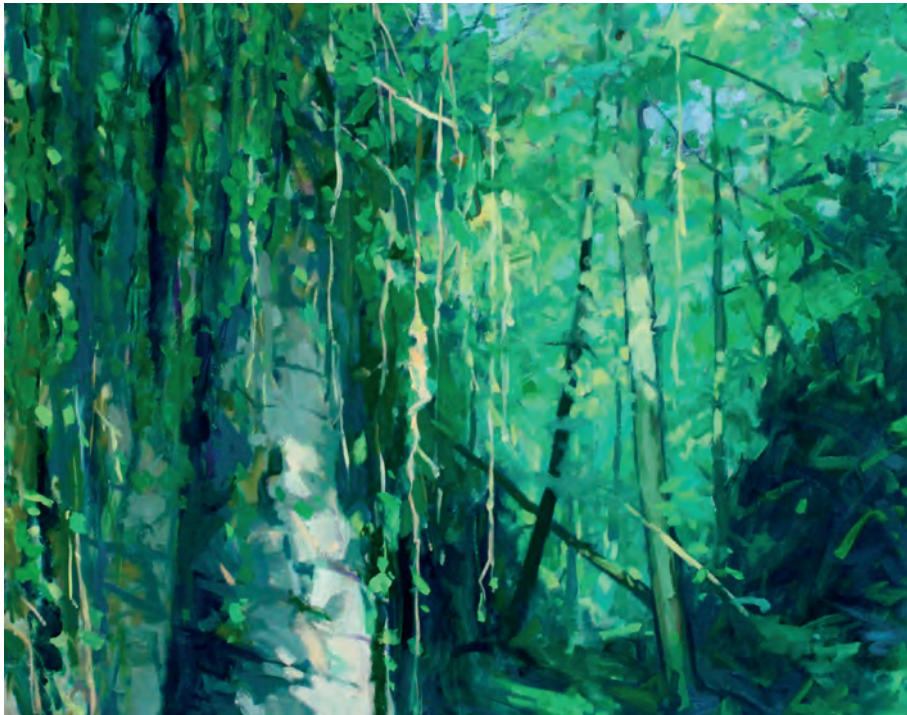
Now this is where the amazing coincidence comes into the story. On the previous Sunday I had taken part in a land yachting race in Skerries. After the race one of the guys, Barry Mason, invited some of us back to his house for a cup of tea. While sitting in his kitchen I noticed an ornate gauntlet hanging behind the door. I commented on it and he told me it was a falconer's glove, and that he did have a falcon in a pen outside the back door. We went outside and he showed me his kestrel. There followed a long conversation about falconry and he told me of the existence of the Irish Hawking Club. For many years I had thought about

joining such a club to learn about the art of falconry, but didn't know how to go about it. He promised to get me an application form to join, which he would give to me at the next land yacht race.

Fast forward to the following Sunday. I'm in the kitchen washing the blood from my hand and sloshing on some antiseptic. The spar is locked in the conservatory with a full crop of sausage, and crapping all over the carpet.

I gave Barry a ring and asked him if he knew of anyone who had lost a sparrowhawk in my area. He said he had heard of another member of the Club who lived in Clontarf, about three miles away from my house, who had lost a sparrowhawk a couple of weeks back. I got a call from the bird's overjoyed owner later that evening, gave him my address, and he called to my house later that evening to pick her up.

I joined the Irish Hawking Club a couple of weeks later. And the rest is history. ❧❧❧



Woodland Cascade, oil on canvas, 80 x 100 cm

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Reflections... with Hawk and Hound

Robert Hutchinson,
Co. Offaly

The phone rang. It was the Lesney's agent dedicated to relocating me to Ireland from London.

"Do you mind me asking..." (long pause)... "I don't want to come across as rude, I really don't, but are you some kind of cave man? The reason I'm asking – most Guinness executives are looking to be relocated to a Dublin 4 dwelling with carefully manicured gardens and close to all amenities. Your completed questionnaire states you are looking for a place in the mountains close to a trout stream, no neighbours, with a landlord who won't mind you putting up a few shelters for dogs and hawks. And for the twenty questions that relate to the specification of the house you have simply put 'not applicable.'"

Three months later I arrived in Ballyknockan, a village carved out of West Wicklow mountain granite, with a hard-bitten working Border terrier,

an English pointer and a fourth season goshawk. That was the summer of 1995.

My first summer from a weather perspective was glorious, and with the eye of a magpie I spent every daylight hour exploring the local woodlands and mountains. In comparison to my hawking ground in England, game was in extremely short supply, but this reality was more than compensated for by the fact that the game was wild and I seemed to be able to hunt where I liked. The woods on the Blessington side of the lake held pheasants, the mountains held grouse and Sika deer, and the King's River held wild brown trout: small, dark and delicious fried straight from the river. I called my grouse-hawking friend Gary Cope, who supplied me with an eyass peregrine falcon, Comagi, I imported a rifle, and got to work – or rather play.

My goshawk, Fire, from a wild German strain, bred by Mathew

Irish grouse, 1997

Gos, 'Fire', 1995

Kimpson (who recently sadly passed away after many years bravely fighting cancer), like all the best was very tenacious, but what set him apart from many was his 'killing intelligence', fast and furious in enclosed ground, pacing himself for the long flight and tumble in open ground. I killed a lot of quarry with him but my heart was always with the falcons, and I reluctantly sold him after five seasons to Martin Brereton.

I focused my time on Comagi but the shortage of grouse meant you had to take every point even if it was in a bad spot, e.g. downdraft wind, close to deep heather, etc. For a young gamehawk you have to ensure her early experiences are carefully orchestrated for success, and mine weren't. The next season I killed grouse with her but it was apparent to me, and confirmed by a short conversation I had with the then president of the Irish Pointer Club, that the grouse numbers are just not here to be harvested – so the joy went out of it.

At the same time, I had noticed the abundance of snipe on the bogs around Edenderry and decided to relocate to

The woods on the Blessington side of the lake held pheasants, the mountains held grouse and Sika deer, and the King's River held wild brown trout: small, dark and delicious fried straight from the river. I called my grouse-hawking friend Gary Cope, who supplied me with an eyass peregrine falcon, Comagi, I imported a rifle, and got to work – or rather play.

my present home and 'start' the sport of dedicated snipe-hawking. In 2000 I arranged for a number of English longwing falconers who specialised in taking small quarry to come over to see if it could be done. Grant Hagger with his famous perlin was on this first outing, but it was Greg Liebermanns who killed the first snipe with his perlin over my pointer Croga and the rest, as they say, is history. No Irish falcon was available to fly at this first outing, so it



just shows you how much the sport has gone from strength to strength thanks largely to the commitment of a small band of 'hardcore' falconers and the IHC, who have done much to promote the sport. The next keynote event I organised was the first International Snipe-hawking Meet, attended by English and French falconers. It was a great success and was followed up by two more meets.

My relocation to the midlands enabled me to commit time to my other passion: hunting hounds and working sporting dogs. At my peak I had a pack of 18 couple (36) hounds (beagles & griffon Vendéens), six working Border terriers, two coursing deerhounds, four pointers and two setters. I hunted my hounds on ground in Westmeath every Sunday during the season, worked my terriers every Saturday morning, and flew my falcons at least five times a week. As my long-suffering wife used to say, "Everything around here works apart from you!"

Last season, from September 2016 to the end of February 2017, I enjoyed 143 sporting outings, not days, on a few occasions going out at first light with hounds locally, then out with my tiercel for a flight, then checking local earths with my terriers. My true passion is in experiencing nature, and the hunting experience makes that much more intense.

In terms of my most treasured sporting moments: catching four salmon on a light fly rod in four hours' fishing on the Blackwater, the smallest being 7 lb; hunting a hare non-stop for over 90 minutes at my Mornington meet with a pack of hounds I bred myself; my pure bred deerhound Caper that

On reflection it's the quiet moments that are most magical: looking at hounds on their beds after a hard days hunting; pointer pups coming of age; alone with a falcon on a kill relaxed and unhurried, sun going down; and, most of all, sporting friends



took me three generations and huge expense to get right and whose sporting exploits will remain private; pointer Sally (bred and owned then by Jimmy Dalton) after two hours' hard running on a Scottish grouse moor, watching her wide quartering to perfection, tackling high banks of deep heather when 99% of pointers would have retired to the bench; taking snipe from a single stoop at great heights; flying Jordan (female peregrine, so named because of her big chest!) over a regular hunting spot, a big hazel copse, and watching how she positioned herself off centre, cutting any flushing pheasants from making the next nearest cover; Battam, my Border terrier, weighing less than 12 lbs, who never in seven years let me down – much to the red lads' cost...

I could go on, but on reflection it's the quiet moments that are most magical: looking at hounds on their beds after a hard day's hunting; pointer pups coming of age; alone with a falcon on a kill relaxed and unhurried, sun going down; and, most of all, sporting friends who, despite years of neglect – I am the guy who said, "I haven't got time for friends!" – continue to reach out.

So, as far as falconry is concerned, what is my plan going forward? I'm going to focus on two things.

With every ageing year 'the drag is getting tighter.' My plan is to cut back on hunting a registered large pack of hounds and working the terriers, and focus more time on snipe-hawking.



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Opposite: magpie-
hawking



.....
Irish grouse, 1995

.....
Opposite: Greg
Liebermanns and
Snipe, 2000

By more time I mean taking my time instead of chasing the light. I will arrive on the bog early and stay late, leaving the road far behind, running the pointers hard, picking the point, sipping tea from a Kelly kettle... 'slow falconry' I guess you could call it. I also plan to spend more time flying with others, both here and on grouse moors in England and Scotland.

.....
Hounds, 2015

I am proud of what I kickstarted,

but I sometimes think what might have been if, at that first event I organised, instead of having falcons trained to multi-stoop at small birds bashed out of bushes, a team of high-pitch gamehawks was disciplined to a flight consisting of a single stoop and then taken in – kill or no kill. It's a fact that it's easier to kill a snipe from a low pitch than a high pitch. It's also my experience that all high-pitch falcons are eventually ruined by multi-flushing. Advantaged as the falconer is with a dog on point and the falcon at high pitch and in position over open ground, the sporting snipe deserves to be taken by the highest of sporting standards. So, I am going to actively promote the 'single stoop' style of flying and hopefully one day I will witness the delight of observing a trained gamehawk consistently taking snipe in a single vertical stoop from over 1000 feet. The wild falcons can do it, so the code is there to be cracked – and whoever achieves this standard of falconry will truly deserve to go down in sporting history. ❧❧❧



The Good Falconers of the IHC

Reflections on 25 Years' Membership

Hilary White, Dublin

I'm going to resist saying how long ago it was that I joined the Irish Hawking Club but I'll just say that my voice hadn't broken.

There was nothing particularly original about my first seeds of obsession with falconry. Like so many falconers, it began with a bird-mad boy who spent so much time drawing pictures of raptors that it's hard to comprehend today. There was a sense of falconry in my mind, something thumbed past in a book or in a scene in a medieval film, but the tangible idea of it didn't connect with me until my father and I went out with Johnny Morris's two young peregrines one day. I was about nine years of age, and to this day I can remember Johnny giving me a quick quiz on the names of the equipment before we left – "Jesses," he smiled when I couldn't remember what the leather straps were called. "Like Jesse James."

Nothing much happened for another couple of years and I'm not entirely sure why. The first real breakthrough came when my mother rolled down the car window to two lads walking along a country lane in Ticknock. One was carrying a jack, the other a spar. Shy as ever, my mother announced to them, "My son wants to do that!" while simultaneously reaching for a paper and pen. A phone number and address was passed for one Rowland Eustace who, we were told, could provide more information on falconry and something called the Irish Hawking Club. The young gentleman who was so helpful that day was Edward Mulligan, a friend to this day and a huge part of my falconry tuition.

"Come on, we're going up there right now." I was sluggish and mopey and my mother had had enough. It was a midweek evening. We found the house and rang the doorbell.

Looking back now I can see what that house meant to that young and confused boy. It was a haven to disappear into twice a week, somewhere filled with animals and anecdotes, head-clearing work and quenching cups of tea

My nine-year-old hand wears a falconry glove for the first time: Johnny Morris's home, Co. Dublin, 1990

We've shared days that I'll recall on my deathbed, and experienced moments and spectacles together that can't be bottled

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Rowland with spar,
IHC Minimeet,
Portarlinton,
County Offaly,
1994

"Oh, good evening Mr Eustace, I hope we're not disturbing you," Mum said by way of an introduction.

"Well actually you are," Eustace replied with one of his trademark twinkles in the eye. Queue the first of hundreds and hundreds of bellylaughs I would have in that house.

After a frank and de-glamorised chat in his front room about the realities of this pursuit, an agreement was reached: every Wednesday and Saturday afternoon, I would visit the Eustace household to learn about hawks and hawking. What I never considered was that so much more would be imparted to me – basic woodwork, carpentry and metal work, animal husbandry, butchery, repairs and maintenance, beekeeping, entomology, and lots and lots about the world around me and its people that school would never have told me. My parents were separating at the time, and looking back now I can see what that house meant to that young and confused boy. It was a haven to disappear into twice a week, somewhere filled with animals and anecdotes, head-clearing work and quenching cups of tea.

Mum got me a copy of Emma Ford's *Falconry: Art & Practice* while I found a fresh gardening glove and put an eyelet through it. Every jockey must start out



.....
On the
weathering:
Johnny Morris's
home, Co. Dublin,
1990



mucking out the stables and the same rule applies to falconry. It separates the determined from the time-wasters. I was given a typed checklist of the equipment and procedures I would have to learn about, and these would be ticked off in due course. A passage spar arrived not long after I did, a window concussion and a bumped cere the worst of her injuries. She would live at Rowland's but he would show me how to train her. The timing couldn't have been better. She and I sat in the dimly lit shed making hushed introductions. She was raw and anxious and I wasn't much better.

Every item of equipment bar bells and swivels was made at home, some horribly so. The synthetic leather from a golf bag is, I discovered, perfect for a lure that is destined to be dropped on to wet grass very often. My father cooled down after a few days.

Rowland and I travelled to Carlow to meet two Pauls, a Derek and an Aaron. They weren't just 'grown-ups' regarding me with warm handshakes and acceptance – they also looked and sounded like (semi)normal people. Maybe this falconry thing wasn't so weird after all. Biscuits were eaten that day, my friends, while one of Ireland's first red-tailed hawks (remember them?) sat on the lawn.

Yes, it takes a village to raise a child and so it is with a falconer. IHC journal articles were read and re-read. Some were tales and observations by excellent amateur scribes who could write with wit and melody (a line could probably be drawn between one in particular and my career as a writer today). Different voices and perspectives were gradually encountered. I banked away experience and hard lessons from people I got



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All the Pauls, a brace of Dereks, along with a Mairead and a Jill: (L-r) Gill and Paul Donohue, Mairead and Derek Latimer, Paul Fogarty and the late Derek Watson, IHC Annual Fieldmeet & AGM, Banbridge, Co. Down, 1993

to know at fieldmeets, AGMs and afternoons out rustling hedgerows. Some I would cold-call precociously of an evening and badger for information. How they put up with me...

Clubs are, by their very nature, places where the passionate can be amongst kindred spirits but the IHC is a little bit more than just a community for me at this stage. I have met some of my closest friends through it. We've shared days that I'll recall on my deathbed, and experienced moments and spectacles together that can't be bottled. I've attended weddings, funerals and landmark birthday celebrations for fellow members and their kin. I've laughed until I've cried with them, and stayed up late to sing, imbibe and generally misbehave. There's the slagging and joshing that you only do with people you like a great deal.



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Karl Lawlor with saker, IHC Annual Fieldmeet, Blessington, Co. Wicklow, 1994

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Opposite page: a pre-sniping Martin Brereton with Rowland Eustace: IHC Pheasant Fieldmeet, Tayto Castle, Co. Armagh, c. '95/'96

And like every family, it is the source of many headaches too. Committee meetings – 17 years of them, in my case – and thankless after-hours work at the computer. Bickering and score-settling, sometimes when guests are present, that is unbecoming of our proud tradition. Apathy and absence when there is work to be done. Passion-fuelled temperaments and egos elbowing themselves to the front to stamp their names all across a team

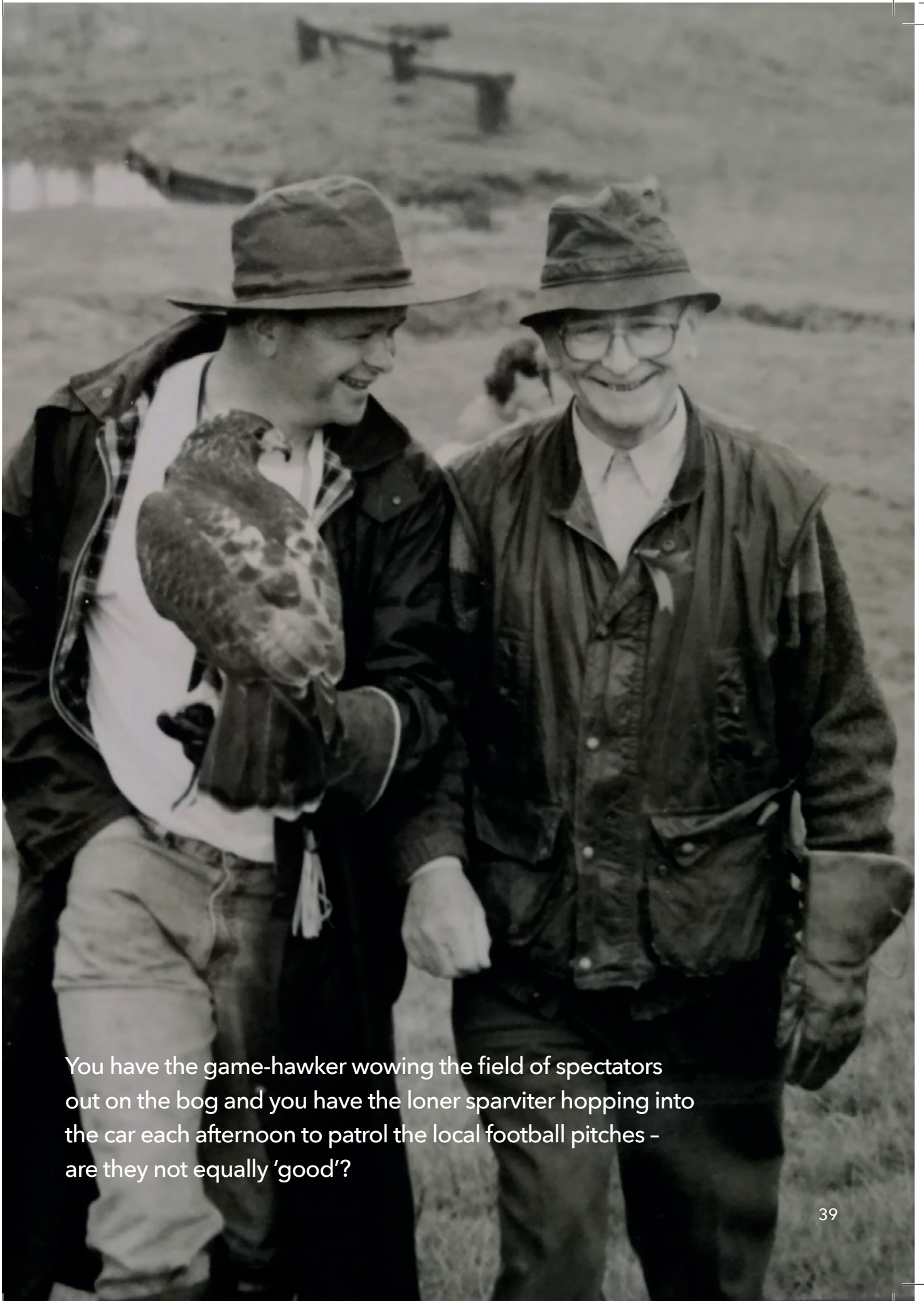
effort. Noisy types who have little to back up their proclamations, and the dreaded Falconry Police who insist on telling you that so-and-so is “not a Good Falconer”. And then there are those who have stormed off in a huff because the club wasn't doing enough for them, or the hecklers who believe that throwing stones from the sidelines will bring about change more effectively than stepping forward, rolling up your sleeves and trying to fashion a club to your liking through cooperation and – vitally – compromise.

But what must also be remembered is that family are ultimately those who will be there for you when you need it. A friend cancelling plans in order to help me look for a lost hawk on a sopping wet Saturday morning. Two elder statesmen driving from far through the night to examine bumblefoot in a hawk I had many years ago that was causing me much worry. A flawless hand-welded indoor bow perch made especially for me as a gift by one of the many skilled craftsmen and artists I have had the privilege of befriending. A telemetry set lent to me for two seasons and offers of good hawks without fee. Wise counsel over the phone late at night. Understanding and empathy when a hawk doesn't perform and quiet backslaps or giddy whoops when they do. Beds snored in around the country and bread broken at two-dozen dinner tables. Are you still looking for a travelling box? I have a spare one I'll drop over to you later along with some leather and a bag of quail.

After all these years, I'm not even sure I know what a 'Good Falconer' actually is, because there are so many qualifications.

Is it the person who has one single hawk that flies consistently well season after season, or is it he with the revolving door on his mews but whose birds are always consistently good?

Is it the falconer who has sacrificed career opportunities, human comforts and even relationships for falconry, or is it the ones who manage to fit it into an already busy and full life? What about those who rarely, if ever, fly a bird but who stay up late, working to protect falconry legislation and culture, organising fieldmeets and events, or doing other important work that benefits the whole falconry community?



You have the game-hawker wowing the field of spectators out on the bog and you have the loner sparrow-hopper hopping into the car each afternoon to patrol the local football pitches - are they not equally 'good'?



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 Left: Amber (bred by Rowland) and Guinness, two great loves, at home, 1994

.....
 Below left: Merlin Maestro Edward Mulligan, a huge influence on my falconry to this day, the Featherbeds, Co. Dublin, c. '96/'97



Surely they are fundamental?

You have the game-hawker wowing the field of spectators out on the bog and you have the loner sparrow-hopper hopping into the car each afternoon to patrol the local football pitches – are they not equally ‘good’? One man’s hawk doesn’t catch much but is in immaculate condition, while another’s sits roughed-up on a manky glove but never comes home empty-handed. And does a specialist with one species rank higher than someone who has experienced all forms of the sport?

Maybe the only answer is that the Good Falconer is all of these things. And given that the IHC has allowed me to meet all these variations over the years, I have to conclude that it must surely be a fitting abode for Good Falconers. I have learned from them, looked up to them and stood alongside them in the field. I’ll disagree with them on Monday and drop everything to be by their side on Tuesday. I’ve seen soul-stirring flights by their hand and set pre-dawn alarm clocks to help find birds lost by their carelessness. I’m just like them, for better or worse, because we belong to the same tribe. That’s ‘good’ enough for me. ♪~X~X~♪

Falconry, a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage: does this recognition have any effect on us falconers?

Elisabeth Leix, Germany



.....
Elisabeth Leix
and her daughter
Laura. Photo:
Klaus Leix

How much poorer would your life be without falconry? Have you ever asked yourself this question, or can you imagine if you had to give up falconry? I do not want to imagine how it would be if I could not go out hawking with my falcon or goshawk. If I could not have that original feeling of being part of nature, of living an original tradition that has fascinated many generations before me and which carries a deep love of nature and of birds of prey, I wouldn't be complete. It has become a part of my personality, and without it I am sure I would not have become the responsible person I am today.

In most European countries we have a relatively secure hunting situation, which is covered by game laws and hunting rights, and falconry is usually anchored with them. But we must be aware that this situation could change any day. There are too many people who define nature according to colourful marketing materials. In their brochures there is little room for a passion in which

an animal is killed at the end. Animal welfare and animal rights are gaining so much importance, while hunters and falconers fall behind and lack influence because of their small number.

In addition, the rapid demographic, economic and social change of our highly technological society has increasingly fragmented the structure of our dealings with nature, and many ordinary citizens no longer see the necessity of hunting and, consequently, of falconry. Through growing industrial agriculture and meat production, ordinary society has lost connection with the principle of sustainable use, because most people have no relationship with it. Thus death, as a part of life and as a part of hunting in daily life, is also suppressed. This is a worrying and threatening development with a serious impact not only on the natural perception of life and death, but also on the idea of 'eat or be eaten'. For this reason it is not surprising that hunting and falconry, where killing with a weapon or with birds takes place, is misunderstood in this society, or

even rejected, because it has become something strange.

Therefore I am very glad that the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee on Intangible Cultural Heritage has, since 2010, recognised falconry in 18 countries (Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Kazakhstan, Qatar, Morocco, Mongolia, Austria, Pakistan, Portugal, Saudi Arabia, Spain, South Korea, Syria, the Czech Republic, Hungary and the United Arab Emirates) and placed falconry on the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Falconry, the hunting of wild game in its natural habitat with trained birds of prey, a centuries-old cultural form, as an art technique.

Of course, this acknowledgment does not protect us against attacks and misrepresentations in the public domain, but falconry is now given a completely different status in society, which is equivalent to a certain protection.

If you go through the UNESCO website you will quickly see the importance of recognition as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) and what it means for us. In the following paragraphs I have summarised some important passages from the UNESCO site.

Why it is important to preserve intangible cultural heritage?

It is important because it causes people to feel part of a community and provides a sense of continuity/identity that strengthens social cohesion. The preservation of traditional and at the same time contemporary forms of cultural expression is an important social task which challenges the positive appreciation of the 'old' in the age of globalisation and in particular through rapid social and demographic change.

Why is a convention necessary to maintain intangible cultural heritage?

The adoption of the Convention for the Conservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage by the UNESCO General Conference in 2003 created a legal, administrative and financial framework for the preservation of this heritage. States that ratify the Convention agree to be bound by all the rights and obligations set forth in it. The main objectives are to preserve intangible cultural heritage, ensure respect for the heritage of the relevant communities, raise awareness of its importance, and

promote international cooperation and support. Thus the Convention brings into wider view traditions that are directly related to human knowledge and ability.

What benefits does the title of Intangible Cultural Heritage give?

The globally recognised designation of 'Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity' does not include direct financial support from UNESCO, but it promotes respect and appreciation for the communities, groups and individuals concerned and their intangible cultural heritage. In addition, it helps to protect cultural forms of expression permanently through cultural policy actions. This is particularly important because it is understood by and attracts the attention of decision-makers and legislators.

What does this mean for us falconers at a national level?

It means that each State Party to the Convention shall endeavour to ensure the preservation, development and promotion of the intangible cultural heritage in its territory. To this end it is required that public policies promote the recognised heritage within society, and that one or more specialised bodies are designated or established as responsible for preserving it.

Of course, this does not mean that UNESCO is now responsible for defending falconry against all attacks, or for promoting it in excess. However, the obligation exists to protect a recognised cultural heritage against public attacks. This gives us the possibility of building stronger public perceptions, as well as an obligation to present ourselves accordingly. We can preserve falconry only if the general population tolerates it, and for that they need to understand what we do and why we do it. We must give them opportunities to learn about it, and this is what is required by the ICH designation.

For me personally the UNESCO recognition of falconry was a huge step in safeguarding our tradition of falconry, of hawking with birds of prey, for future generations. That is why I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who have committed time, effort and engagement to achieve the falconry ICH recognition, and who therefore have given many of us a little more security.





The IAF School Links Programme

Connecting schoolkids with their peers worldwide, through falconry and conservation

Nicola Dixon,
United Arab Emirates

.....
Falconers visiting pupils at St Patrick's Primary School and St Michael's National School

The IAF School Links Programme would like to thank Irish falconers for their time and support for the programme and for giving students the opportunity to glimpse the ancient art of falconry.

During the 2016 IAF meeting, falconers visited St Michael's National School in Sneem, giving a great presentation on the types of birds used in falconry. The students loved it and asked lots of interesting questions. Students were given a presentation about the placement of artificial nests for saker falcons on the Mongolian steppe and made model artificial nests. Following the visit, St Michael's joined the School Links Programme, creating a great PowerPoint about their school and selecting five students to become penpals.



St Michael's will soon be linked with an international school with students exchanging information and learning more about falconry, bird of prey conservation and local raptors.



Andrew Savage and vet Brigid Delahunty recently visited the school and described the anatomy of birds of prey. Andrew will continue to meet with students and teachers at St Michael's to develop and continue the programme.



We also had the pleasure of visiting St Patrick's Primary School in Eskra with Marc Ruddock and the Northern Ireland Raptor Study Group. The students took part in a lesson explaining the importance of raptors in food chains.

Jamesie King attended the session

with his male gyr-saker Ajax, and Terry Turkington showed the students his tiercel peregrine and lanner falcon, Rosie. Falconer Karl Hamilton also attended. The birds put on a great display for the students.

"It was really good to see how much the kids got out of it," Jamesie said. "We stood at the front of the class and were bombarded with questions, including some really difficult ones! The kids took so much from our visit. It was a couple of hours drive for me, but well worth it – the students thoroughly enjoyed our visit."

The whole school excitedly waited for a falconry display and watched in awe as the falcons swooped over their heads.

If you have time to get involved with the IAF School Links Programme by visiting a school with your falcons or hawks, please contact nicola.dixon@iaf.org. I promise it will be a worthwhile experience for you and will bring big smiles from students and teachers.

All resources are written and ready to use and full support will be given. See www.schoollinksprogramme.org for more information.





Small-game hawking in Mexico.
Juvenile tiercel red-headed merlin
(red-necked falcon) on North American
blackbird. Photo: Carlos Santos

Small-game Hawking: Hubris* and Hedgerows?

Dr Mike Nicholls, England

By small game, I mean birds, from sparrows to starlings, which can be found in country sufficiently open to permit a long-wing to operate.

A certain amount of cover, such as small hedges and scattered bushes is unobjectionable, and indeed essential if the quarry is to be found: but woods and trees are barred.

For such small game, it would be absurd to use a large hawk, and so the best hawks will be the smallest kind of Peregrine tiercels, Barbary tiercels, Lannerets and Red-headed falcon.

— J.G. Mavrogordato, *A Falcon in the Field*, 1966

Does it seem odd that although 'large' game-hawking is often celebrated in print, little or any mention is made of small-game hawking? It seems to be a branch of falconry that is at most whispered about, and sometimes it seems that practitioners are meant to keep quiet that they do it or even feel ashamed. Certainly small-game hawking isn't promoted or catered for at British Falconers' Club (BFC) field meets.

I've been an active small-game hawker for the past 12 years and over this time I've collected together negative comments from those who practise what they perceive to be

more legitimate branches of falconry. The reasons given for why hawking small game is thought to be less than respectable were various and included:

- it's not a traditional form of falconry
- songbirds are not natural or traditional quarry for gamehawks
- it is unsustainable or immoral to kill songbirds
- it's indiscriminate and all small birds are targeted
- it's cruel, as songbirds are continually re-flushed before they are taken.
- landowners (and their wives) don't like it!

* Incidentally, the word 'hubris' is derived from the ancient Greek meaning 'insolence to the Gods'.



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Juvenile
peregrine and
magpie at DFO
crow-hawking
meeting. Photo:
Walter Bednarek

I'd like to take these points in turn and debate them. However, because often prejudice comes from lack of understanding, I'd like to briefly discuss how small-game hawking is currently conducted by myself and those who I know who practise it.

Let's begin with a definition. The 'game hawking' part of 'small-game hawking' refers to the style – hawks trained to wait on over quarry – while 'small game' refers to the relative size of quarry as compared with 'large game' – pheasant, grouse and partridges.

In my part of the south-east of England a staple quarry for this style of hawking is the European blackbird, and during the winter months there are thousands of migrants from the near Continent. The stronghold for blackbirds is dense woodland, but they also occur in more sparsely vegetated marginal habitat. They therefore occur along sparse hedges and small copses in sufficient numbers to be a readily available quarry species. Furthermore, there is no problem in obtaining a DEFRA/Natural England licence to hawk blackbirds, and other protected species for that matter, with a trained

falcon. Other larger species, for example magpies, are also targeted by this style of hawking (photo above).

A typical technique of hawking small game of this kind is for the falconer to walk on one side of a hedgerow with a beater level on the other side. The photo opposite shows a suitable hedge setup, where a small wood (out of shot to the right) is a reservoir for blackbirds and these can be shepherded into the adjacent hedge (right to left on the photo). Blackbirds and other hedgerow species will move along in front of the falconer and beater, and eventually the birds will feel pressured and some will start to flee to the sanctuary of other hedges, copses and woodland.

At this point the falcon – a small tiercel peregrine or small hybrid (photos overleaf) – already trained to make a pitch, is cast off. The remaining potential quarry in the hedge will then 'clamp' and only attempt to flee with vigorous beating. This, to me, is no different from a falconer or spaniel running in to flush a clamped game bird on open ground or an austringer beating to encourage a rabbit or pheasant from cover. Non-target species, such

as robins or hedge sparrows, can be avoided as the beaters 'leap-frog' around them, i.e. cessation of beating until they bypass where the small bird is crouching in the hedge.

Once the end of the hedgerow is approached it is essential to engineer a clean flush for the hawk waiting on above. This can be more difficult to achieve than in 'traditional' game-hawking, where the target quarry is clamped out in open field or moorland. With hedgerow hawking the instinct of the intended quarry is to avoid flying across open ground, and so they try to fly wide from the hedge, around one or other beater and nip back into the hedge behind them. This is particularly true if the hawk's pitch is low, as its closeness so intimidates the quarry that it prefers to face the humans rather than the hawk. Inevitably such flights are unsuccessful and the hawk must learn to take a higher pitch if it is to succeed.

With a higher flying hawk, and where alternative cover and shelter is available nearby, the quarry bird will 'go for it', and with a clean flush a nice vertical stoop will be achieved. This of course is what we want to see! However, it is a balancing act between when the hawk is at a very high pitch, where alternative cover for the blackbird is too close to

.....
A favourite hedgerow in former times, now impossible to hawk since a sheep netting fence has been erected alongside



result in a kill, and a hawk too low and intimidating to achieve a clean flush. This is comparable to where partridges flush from open stubble and make it to a distant hedge before the hawk has time to stoop from a very high pitch.

A note of caution is worth mentioning here. If you ever fly along hedges that have wire fences alongside them, eventually you will have a dead hawk. Small birds are not silly and will fly along wire fences for the small amount of protection they offer. A keen hawk will hit the wire and become a dead or maimed hawk. The hedgerow shown here was formerly a favourite hunting spot until it was ruined by the erection alongside of a sheep-wire fence.

Now to return to the objections to small-game hawking I have heard:

“It's not a traditional form of falconry.”

According to the BFC Code of Conduct, “Falconry is the traditional sport of taking quarry in its natural state and habitat by means of trained hawks.”

It seems to me that a preponderant form of game-hawking – the current tradition, on low ground at least – is the taking of artificially reared game birds. Grouse-hawking is of course an exception, but as small-game hawking is mostly practised on arable land I limit my comparison to lowland game-hawking.

At a snipe-hawking meeting in the west of Ireland a few years ago, well known French falconer Henri Desmonts praised the attending falconers that the quarry they were hunting was “born in the wild, hatched in the wild, reared in the wild.” He further added that he was so passionate that falconry should only involve the taking of wild quarry, that in his native France if he accidentally took a pen-reared partridge with his game hawks he didn't bother recording it in his game book! Blackbirds are certainly

hatched and reared in the wild.

How long then does a practice need to be practised before it becomes traditional? Is the taking of rabbits in the UK with a Harris' hawk traditional? Harrises only featured in the UK from the 1960s and then only rarely. Gyr x peregrine hybrids have been flown at grouse and lowland game birds since the 1980s. Have they been around long enough for this form of hawking to be traditional?

The Old Hawking Club used to fly peregrines at magpies over isolated bushes. The mechanics of this type of flight, although not the quarry, is essentially as I have described above for blackbird-hawking. Mavrogordato was practising his form of small-game hawking with a lanner in the 1960s. In the 1970s in the US, prairie tiercels, and in South Africa lanners and peregrines, were waited-on for doves and other small birds in bushes, while in Germany, Walter Bednarek used a cast of red-headed merlins waiting on over hedgerows to hawk sparrows in true Mavrogordato style. In the 1990s and 2000s flying perlins (peregrine x merlin hybrids) became popular in the UK, and they were particularly effective at small game. Currently red-headed merlins (pictured opposite the title page) are popular in Mexico, and in Germany the DFO has an annual crow-hawking meet where peregrines are flown waiting on at crows flushed from copses and isolated trees: another 'non-traditional' form of hawking, and the quarry is anything but small, but the principle is the same.

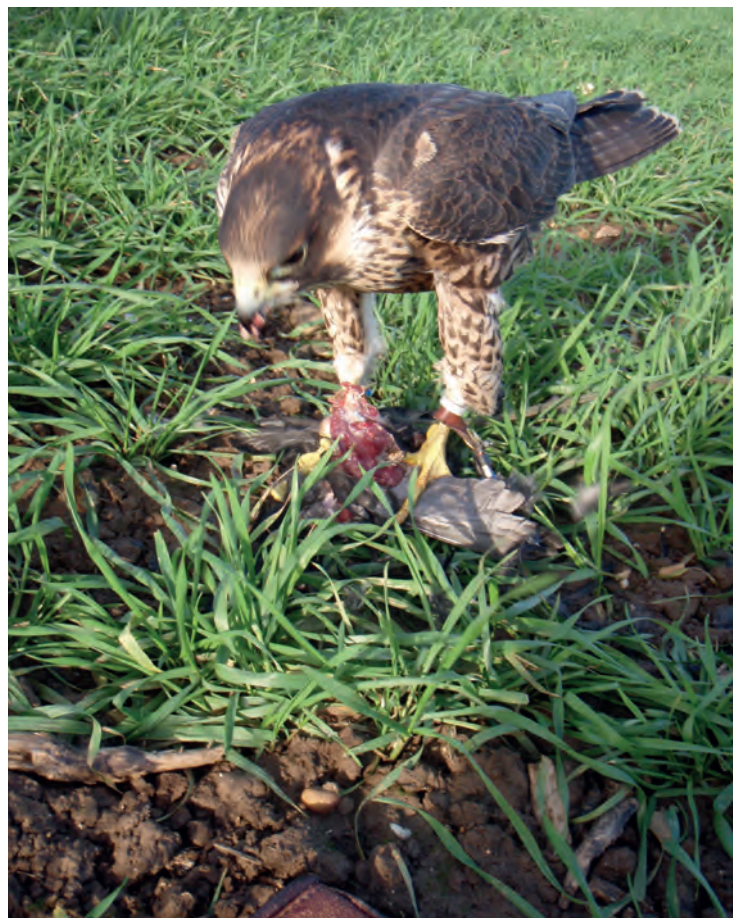
The list goes on and undoubtedly there are many small-game hawking examples at home and abroad that I don't know about. Why then doesn't small-game hawking qualify as traditional?

“Songbirds are not a natural/traditional quarry for gamehawks.”

It is difficult to say what 'traditional' quarry for a trained hawk is. So much depends on the falconer and what he or she chooses and persuades their hawk to catch. In years gone by, red kites were successfully taken by trained falcons, and according to Ferreira (*Arte de Caca de Altaniera*, 1616) lesser kestrels were a desirable quarry for trained sparrowhawks, trained to drag them from their nest cavities. But just because these were 'traditional quarry', does it necessarily mean it is still acceptable?

If one considers the natural prey for wild hawks, it's considerably easier to respond to this criticism. Surveys of wild UK peregrine nests during the breeding season show that pigeons are usually the commonest kills. By comparison, and except (controversially) near grouse moors,

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Peregrine tiercel and blackbird kill. Small game such as blackbirds may be taken with trained hawks under UK Government licence





.....
Barbury x merlin
hybrid with
blackbird. Photo:
Steve Knight

game birds figure low down on the list of prey species. Passerines and small waders usually figure somewhere between the two, and the fact remains that wild peregrines eat a lot of songbirds!

“It is unsustainable or immoral to kill songbirds.”

The morality or otherwise of any sort of hunting is a thorny issue: it is culture dependent. In some parts of Europe, human consumption of small songbirds seems to be relished, while the average UK citizen would find it deplorable. Further, is taking the life of a partridge or pheasant any less ‘immoral’ than taking that of a blackbird? I think I will leave this one for the philosophers!

The sustainability question is much easier to answer. The populations of pen-reared pheasants and partridges are within certain constraints, whatever a land manager chooses them to be, while the population of wild grey partridges in the UK is somewhere around 60-90,000

pairs. A conservative estimate of the overwintering UK blackbird population is around 25 million individuals.

The actual number each year rather depends upon the weather and the cold fronts which sweep down across continental Europe from the north and east. I have a friend in north-west Germany who tells me when the flocks of blackbirds and other migratory thrushes arrive there from Scandinavia and Russia, and then tells me when they leave. They are then on their way to the south and east of the UK and this is inevitably when a cold front hits that part of Germany. If it is a mild winter, many of these migrants will survive, but in harsh years many will starve to death. The level of additional mortality levied by taking small numbers in falconry is infinitesimally tiny compared to the total population size and level of natural mortality.

While game birds such as partridges are hawked on their primary habitat,

small game such as blackbirds are only vulnerable to a waiting-on falcon in marginal habitat. A mere fraction of their population will be found in sparse hedgerows and isolated bushes, while the vast majority will be in thick woodland and other situations where they do not present a potential flight. Thus, if a covey of partridges are flushed from open stubble, they have virtually no option but to return to other stubble fields where again they will be vulnerable to further hawking. Blackbirds on the other hand, that are flushed from marginal vegetation, are usually within reach of deep cover where they are impervious to further hawking.

Quarry licences are usually valid in the UK from the first of September till the last day of February, but we invariably finish small-game hawking by the end of January. This is because we find that migrant blackbirds begin to leave during January, and if you walk hedgerows in February you find fewer and fewer. Those that remain are the resident pairs with their mind on breeding, and even though it's still lawful to hawk in February, we think it unethical to do so.

“It’s indiscriminate and all small birds are targeted.”

I don't think there is any branch of falconry that doesn't at least occasionally record a “various” in the game book. Undoubtedly other species of small birds inhabit the same hedgerows and bushes as intended quarry such as blackbirds. However, as explained above, the indiscriminate taking of non-target quarry can be avoided by appropriate fieldcraft and prudent beating. Further, familiarity with our hunting territory enables us to concentrate on those copses and hedgerows favoured by migrant blackbird flocks or other key species such as magpies. During the winter

months and in our preferred hawking spots, overwintering blackbirds far and away outnumber resident small passerines, and so unwanted, non-target flights are uncommon and with good fieldcraft can be avoided almost completely.

“It’s cruel, as songbirds are continually re-flushed before they are taken.”

Distinction must be here made between ‘re-flush’, ‘multiple flush’ and ‘multiple re-flush’. A re-flush, as the name suggests, is where after avoiding the first stoop of a hawk and making it to cover, a single quarry is ejected again by the falconer so the hawk can have another crack at it. If this is repeated several times – multiple re-flush – the quarry becomes so worn down and exhausted it can be easily taken by the hawk. This is deplorable in any branch of falconry and is neither unique to, nor characteristic of, small-game hawking.

Further, it is virtually impossible to re-flush a blackbird that has evaded a stoop by circling back to the hedge from which it was originally evicted. Instead of risking facing the hawk again it will disappear back through the core of the hedge and past the beaters.

What is likely, however, is that several birds are shepherded along a hedgerow in front of the falconer and beater. With careful management it is perfectly possible to flush these singly, one at a time – multiple flush. If the hawk misses on the first stoop, it can be trained to re-mount to its original or an even higher pitch, and have an opportunity at the next bird to be flushed.

A characteristic of ‘traditional’ game-hawking is a high pitch followed by a single, hopefully spectacular, vertical stoop: a one-off. The opportunity for multiple flushing – not multiple re-flushing – and several stoops, each at a fresh quarry, for me is the essence

of small-game hawking. Three or four stoops, each at different birds, can sometimes be achieved from a single setup and high-flying, hard-hitting hawks can be cultivated.

“Landowners (and their wives) don’t like it.”

This can’t be argued with! If a landowner decides he or she doesn’t want to allow the hawking of small birds, even if the falconer has a quarry licence, then that’s a fact of life. This might be especially true if their spouse puts feeders out in their garden to sustain the local songbirds. By the same token though, I know of landowners in my part of the country who would look at you as though you have horns, cloven hooves and a forked tail if you asked if you could hawk their pheasants or partridges! It’s the same with lark-hawking with merlins. Some landowners would allow it and others wouldn’t: it’s their choice.

So there we have it. I don’t believe small-game hawking can be condemned as non-traditional, unnatural, unsustainable, immoral, indiscriminate or any more cruel than other forms of modern hawking. Further, I suggest as well as being perfectly legal, it is closer to our preferred definition of falconry – the taking of wild quarry – than forms which rely on artificially reared and released game birds. I would also add that once hawks have served an ‘apprenticeship’ hawking small game over hedgerows, they can be continually challenged with more difficult quarry and situations. Small-game hawks wed to a hawking situation rather than a single quarry. Once they become proficient at, say, blackbirds, a comparable scenario can be created with magpies or jackdaws. They also seem to understand that they must adjust their pitch depending on whether they are flying over hedges or in the open.

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Not bad for a blackbird hawk!
Tiercel peregrine initially trained on small game, with his first snipe

An accomplished small-game hawk can eventually graduate to other quarry species such as teal, partridges, snipe, woodcock and others, in addition to small birds.

As an illustration I’d refer to the monumental rise in snipe-hawking that has taken place in Ireland over the past ten years and the inspiration behind it. Several times now I’ve heard Martin Brereton – president of the Irish Hawking Club and a champion of Irish snipe-hawking – speak in public and acknowledge its recent origins. No one in recent memory had tried hawking snipe in Ireland, and the inspiration for Martin came when the ‘English lads’ came over with their (hedgerow-trained) perlings, and showed that snipe could be caught with them out on the open bog. The rest, as they say, is history – or should I say tradition?



An earlier version of this article appeared in the 2016 edition of *The Falconer*, the Journal of the British Falconers’ Club.

Review:

The Peregrine, by J. A. Baker

Hilary White, Co. Dublin

“It has prose of the calibre that we have not seen since Joseph Conrad. And an ecstasy, a delirious sort of love for what he observes. In a way, it’s almost like a transubstantiation, like in religion, where the observer becomes almost the object.”

Hearing German auteur Werner Herzog expounding his love for *The Peregrine* has been intriguing for those who have cherished this landmark of nature writing in its 50-year lifetime. “This is what I do when I make a film,” Herzog has said about the way Baker “stepped out of himself” while infiltrating the realm of a wild animal in his native Essex between 1954 and 1964.

As the director of *Fitzcarraldo*, *Aguirre*, *The Wrath of God* and, more recently, *Grizzly Man*, Herzog has always been drawn to stories of obsessive figures venturing forth into the wilderness in search of all-consuming holy grails. Opera houses. Lost Cities of Gold. Alaskan bears. Falcons wintering near an estuary.

Since its publication in 1967, *The Peregrine* has felled readers of many hues, from birdwatchers and falconers to nature-writing students and the literary elite themselves.

On the face of it, it looks like a slim and simple volume of painterly field journals. Its principal focus is one of the sexier species in ornithology, an animal that has lent itself to everything from the faces of ancient Egyptian gods to travel-agency logos. It is also a cornerstone animal that is as fundamental to the entire history of falconry as sunlight is to plant growth.

But birds and birding are only part of the picture in a book that, as nature-writing doyen and Baker researcher Robert Macfarlane puts it, still somehow “locks on to its readers, and they pass

involuntarily into it”.

Little was known about this reclusive author until very recently, a factor that hasn’t hurt the book’s near-mythic status over its half-century existence.

Born in 1926 in Essex, John Alec Baker was so short-sighted that he needed thick glasses from an early age and was even excused from wartime national service. Severe arthritis would take a greater toll on his life, however – beyond the obvious physical restrictions it imposed: the medication needed to manage the condition eventually caused cancer to develop, which he succumbed to in 1987 at the age of 61.

After being introduced to bird-watching by a colleague at work in the Automobile Association, an obsession sprouted that would see all his free time spent cycling and walking the local fields and coastline with binoculars, gradually narrowing his crosshairs over the bullet head and scythe wings of the peregrine falcon. He was hunting the hunters, and between its procedural detail and the detective’s growing obsession with an elusive serial killer, it’s not hard to see why *The Peregrine* has also been likened to a crime saga.

It is widely accepted that Baker’s obsession was borne not strictly out of wanting to merely observe the falcons but to be the falcons.

“I watched him with longing, as though he were reflecting down to me his brilliant unregarded vision of the land beyond the hill,” Baker reports with almost transcendental headiness during one sighting. “I became aware of my own weight, as though I had been floating upon water and was now beached and dry and clothed and inglorious.”

Elsewhere, the sensation starts to coagulate: “I shut my eyes and tried to crystallise my will into the light-

drenched prism of the hawk's mind. Warm and firm-footed in long grass smelling of the sun, I sank into the skin and blood and bones of the hawk... Like the hawk, I heard and hated the sound of man, that faceless horror of stony places... I felt the same strange yearning to be gone."

The transformation heats up even further in the following extract: "I found myself crouching over the kill, like a mantling hawk. My eyes turned quickly about, alert for the walking heads of men. Unconsciously I was imitating the movements of a hawk, as in some primitive ritual; the hunter becoming the thing he hunts. I looked into the wood. In a lair of shadow the peregrine was crouching, watching me, gripping the neck of a dead branch. We live, in these days in the open, the same ecstatic fearful life. We shun men. We hate their suddenly uplifted arms, the insanity of their flailing gestures, their erratic scissoring gait, their aimless stumbling ways, the tombstone whiteness of their faces."

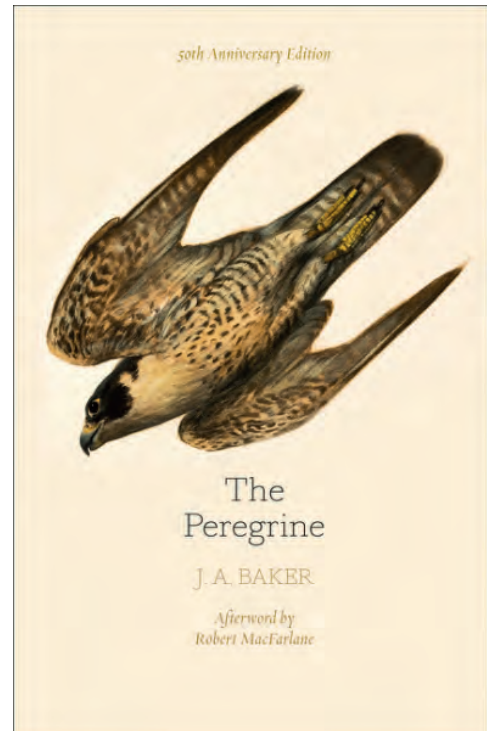
Note that Baker's raptor is "gripping the neck" of a dead object, and his use of words like "tombstone" and "scissoring" in reference to man. This suggests someone with a dark and difficult relationship with their own corporeal and spiritual existence.

These glimpses seem to erupt helplessly and forcefully throughout Baker's text, all of them hinting at a man who wished to disintegrate into the falcons' dimension. Peregrines not only have eyesight far beyond our comprehension, but their aerial mastery and record-breaking speeds make them universally exalted far beyond the world of falconry. They were everything he was not and, thus, totemic.

"You cannot know what freedom means until you have seen a peregrine loosed into the warm spring sky to roam at will through all the far provinces of light," he sighs enviously at one point. Find me a longwinger who cannot relate to this.

This thickening broth of dark vicariousness and Herzogian grail-hunting, coupled with the time-stopping energies of its language, are for many

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The 50th anniversary edition is published by William Collins, RRP: €14.99



the voodoo of *The Peregrine*.

Galway poet Sharon Blackie feels it "reflects that mysterious tension between kinship and otherness when we think of our relationship with animals. The peregrine is so profoundly 'other' to him, and yet he identifies so strongly with it he almost becomes it."

When I contacted Booker-winning author John Banville about Baker, he chimed with Blackie's assertion about the book's alchemical powers, saying, "The philosopher Thomas Nagel famously asserted that we cannot know what it is like to be a bat. *The Peregrine* refutes him: we come as close as humanly possible to the experience of what it is to be a winged creature seemingly utterly unlike us and yet, in Baker's pages, entirely knowable, though only on its own terms."

Crime writer and literary blogger Declan Burke is struck by the intensity with which Baker maps out "every last nuance of his landscapes". Baker went as far as to study RAF and Luftwaffe aerial maps to ensure a falcon's-eye perspective of his home range but he also understood that landscapes emitted frequencies and energies that must also make it into any depiction. One unlikely reference that has emerged in readings

of his correspondence is a love for J. M. Synge's *The Aran Islands*, saying that "it was Aran that cradled his [Synge's] lovely, cadenced phraseology" and "for me, they [the Aran Islands] will be a point of pilgrimage in my journeying through the countries of the mind".

Poets have lauded the woozy, kinetic style Baker evolved during his endless nights condensing and refining his field notes into book shape. The Dublin laureate Dermot Bolger notes the language's ability to be "sensuously and sinuously lyrical about nature while being simultaneously unflinchingly in the cruel realities that underpin the peregrine's world".

This lyricism and its discarding of "the usual comforting pastoral" is something that has inspired *H Is For Hawk* author (and IAF Presidential Award recipient) Helen Macdonald. However, she also attests to finding it an unnerving reading experience. "Baker writes like an angel," she told me, "but always the angel of death. No community and little human warmth exist in its pages. Baker wrote it as if he were the last man on earth and the peregrines he watched airborne revenants, lost and losing souls."

Macdonald here unearths something that underlies the very DNA of *The Peregrine* – if it is a beautiful book then it is, as Yeats put it, a terrible beauty, one filled with brilliantly crimson blood, glistening corpses and extinction threats (Baker references the "filthy, insidious pollen of farm chemicals" such as DDT that were ravaging peregrine numbers at the time).

For Tim Dee, the brilliant UK nature writer, there is arguably a Cold War subtext there too. In *The Running Sky*, Dee neatly sums up the "iron-cold sadistic brutality" and "weirdness" of *The Peregrine* as being "nature writing's Goya" (the Spanish artist's Black Paintings do indeed work off a similar palette of disillusionment and dizzying violence). In *Four Fields*, Dee discusses the book as "a toxic account of a sick and self-hating man" chasing a dwindling species in a world on the brink of oblivion. It was his favourite

bird book during his schoolboy years, presumably for the very reason that its bleak seismic vibrations rhymed so keenly with the natural history classroom narrative of the day – pollution and extinction.

While peregrine numbers have returned with gusto, the wider unease *The Peregrine* feeds off is certainly being felt again today as the environment at large remains under peril and the embers of nuclear threat begin to glow again, giving its anniversary an eerie resonance. Leaving aside its gothic hues and the many questions over the authenticity of Baker's notes – some passages are transparently fantastic – *The Peregrine* is a gift for all time. It has rendered this most exquisite of animals with a suitably exquisite colour scheme. It still shocks and astounds with its trippy linguistic vortices, despite its age. And vitally, whether watching your own charge pull out of a crackling teardrop or viewing dutiful adults through binoculars down at a local wild eyrie, this small body of tightly-wound text will infect the very way you behold the ballet before your eyes.

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Wild Take Project: Irish Hawking Survey & Database

Natasha Murphy, Co. Clare

The wild harvest of raptors has a long history in Ireland. The remains of goshawks have been found in Mount Sandel, Coleraine (c. 7000 BC), Dalkey Island, Dublin (c. 2000 BC) and Newgrange, Boyne Valley (c. 3000 BC). Although it is unclear if these hawks were used for falconry or for religious reasons, the wild harvest of these raptors extends far back into our history. The Irish text *Betha Colman Maic Luachain* ('The Life of St Colman Maic Luachain') gives the earliest definitive evidence for falconry being practised in Ireland. This text was written in the seventh century and the book describes the King of Tara as having "da seabhac selga" (two hunting hawks).

The Normans had fully established themselves and the sport of falconry in the country by the 12th century, again using wild harvested birds. It is at this time that Ireland became the dream destination for those trapping or taking raptors in Europe. Gerald Of Wales (born c. 1146, died c. 1223) stated in his account of Ireland, *Topographie Hibernae*, that "Ireland has none but the best breeds of falcons", and "this country provides in greater numbers than any other, hawks, falcons and sparrowhawks."

I believe it's time that Irish data and Irish falconers inform Irish wild take. This wild take project aims to dispel the myths surrounding the Irish wild take, to aid falconers in overcoming obstacles to taking birds from the wild, to monitor wild take and to finally establish a scientific basis for wild take in Ireland.

Within Gerald's lifetime, a market emerged for Irish raptors and, in 1386, during the reign of Richard II, a proclamation was made at Drogheda, Co. Louth, condemning the export of wild raptors from Ireland.

This demand for wild-taken Irish raptors would continue for centuries, with falcons from Cape Clear, Co. Cork, and Horn Head, Co. Donegal, coveted by Elizabethan falconers. Irish goshawks were harvested legally by the Earl of Thomond at Bunratty Castle, Clare, from 1615 onwards. Today, the wild take of raptors in Ireland continues along this legally binding line that The Earl of Thomond took back in the 17th century. Under licence from the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), Irish falconers have the privilege of legally taking raptors from the wild for falconry use. Three species are typically taken – peregrine, sparrowhawk and kestrel – though the NPWS has no official stance on applications to take other species, such as merlin or buzzard.

Here is where the concern over the fitness and sustainability of our wild take begins. Even in the 16th century it was known that there was a need to monitor raptors and the harvest of them. For example, the fact that an inventory of goshawk nests in Kerry and Limerick was composed in 16th-century Ireland shows that past generations cared about an informed wild take. In modern times, there is

a scarcity of such information. With lack of information comes difficulty in decision-making, bias, subjectivity and, unfortunately, ignorance. At present, the majority of the studies and information informing Irish wild take are not Irish, or even European. There is only so far we can get depending on literature reviews and research conducted in other countries.

The principle goal of the Irish Hawking Survey is to address this scarcity of knowledge. We are dependent on work carried out in the US, Africa and the Middle East. These countries are not directly comparable to Ireland – for instance, we are restricted here to eyass birds that are not to be returned to the wild by law. I believe it's time that Irish data and Irish falconers inform Irish wild take. This wild take project aims to dispel the myths surrounding the Irish wild take, to aid falconers in overcoming obstacles to taking birds from the wild, to monitor wild take and to finally establish a scientific basis for wild take in Ireland.

The survey itself is available at www.irishhawkingsurvey.info/#survey and is split into two sections: wild take applications prior to 2017, and wild take applications in 2017. Anyone

.....
Previous page
and below: Hilary
White's wild take
spar Sarah Green.
Photos: Hilary
White





Irish eyass
sparrowhawks.
Photo: Don Ryan

who has applied for a wild take licence in Ireland, successful or not, can get involved by taking the survey and sharing their invaluable data. It takes information on licences applied for, success in fulfilling those licences and the current status of birds taken from the wild, and can be completed on the website or downloaded and submitted by email or post. If your wild take bird died in captivity, your data is particularly valuable as it is important to document risks to our captive birds (e.g. electrocution, collision with fences, etc.) and their lifespans (i.e. to establish if captive raptors live longer than wild birds). The aim here is to answer common questions and oust concerns about the use of wild raptors by falconers, the fates of these birds in captivity and the impacts of the harvest on our wild raptor populations.

Working alongside the Irish Hawking Survey, the Irish Hawking Database will offer a route for falconers to participate in raptor monitoring, and to indirectly pass down fieldcraft and nest location skills to other falconers. By providing information on nests located by falconers during the wild take process, the database taps into the skills of falconers to generate new data on the breeding success of raptors, adding to the scientific basis of wild take in Ireland and supporting the conservation of our native raptors. If you have been able to continue watching the nest or eyrie where you obtained your wild take bird, your information on the success of the nest post-take is particularly valuable – some studies have found that nestlings left in nests where their siblings were harvested had higher survival rates than nestlings from unharvested nests. Additionally, the database provides an opportunity to contact falconers about

the nests they have located in the past and encourage communication in passing on fieldcraft in nest location, especially to younger falconers.

Anyone who has successfully located a nest in the past five years can contribute to this database. Nest records can be submitted online at www.irishhawkingsurvey.info/#records. Downloadable nest record forms are also available to be sent by email or post.

Together, the Irish Hawking Survey and Irish Hawking Database offer powerful new tools to improve the process of wild take in Ireland. The data generated will have an immediate, positive, tangible impact on falconry in Ireland through facilitating wild take and lowering a crucial barrier to falconers, and the long-term benefit is likely to be even greater. Data gathered by the survey and database can be used to inform and support future discussion with the NPWS on the development of wild take in Ireland in a sustainable manner for future generations of falconers.

For further information on the Irish Hawking Survey and Irish Hawking Database, or to ask a question, visit www.irishhawkingsurvey.info or email irishhawkingsurvey@gmail.com or phone 0871010891.

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Public Views of Falconry and the Humpty Dumpty Dilemma

Should we care what the general public thinks about falconry? Arguably we should. Recent experience has shown that the UK public is poorly informed about hunting with hounds – the ‘fox hunting’ debate has held several consecutive UK governments to ransom, and is certainly party political. In the US, the public outcry about the shooting of Cecil the Lion in Africa not only alienated the hunter in question but also caused several airlines to reform their policy on carrying hunting trophies.

One principle underlying the formation of attitudes and views is that of association: a person may form an attitude towards the unfamiliar if they associate it with something familiar. As falconers we are proud that falconry is the hunting of wild quarry with a trained hawk, but do the public at large make an association between falconry and ‘hunting’ as they perceive it in the context of fox hunting?

When I was growing up in the 1950s and 60s many households had a pet canary or budgerigar in a cage in the living room. Nowadays you rarely see one as a household pet, and the incarceration of cage birds is generally thought to be ‘cruel’. A chief RSPCA officer has told me that the most common complaint from people who have seen falconry birds is that they believe it to be cruel to tether them by the legs. Do the public therefore make an association between the cruel practice (as they see it) of keeping birds in captivity, and falconry as we know it?

Circus animals have been defined as those “trained to perform tricks and manoeuvres”. There is meant to be a saying that if you want to train



Dr Mike Nicholls, England



an elephant to stand on one leg, you hit the other three! Whether this is an urban myth I don't know, but certainly some people believe that compelling wild animals to perform circus tricks is not only humiliating but cruel. At the time of writing, a proposal has been presented to the Welsh Assembly to ban wild animals performing in circuses and this includes birds of prey in flying demonstrations. Do the general public associate the training of falconry birds with performing circuses animals, and how would they vote or lobby their political representatives?

With these questions in mind, in 2011 Helen Macdonald and I surveyed public views of and attitudes towards falconry, using an online questionnaire (in English) circulated on social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.). Our aims were:

- to examine the general public's views of falconry;
- to detect any negative images of, and associations with, falconry that might be exploited by an anti-falconry lobby;
- to suggest strategies to maintain public support for the continuation of falconry in the 21st century and beyond.

After eliminating respondents who declared first-hand experience in falconry, we were left with around 300, mainly from the UK (70%) and USA (20%), preponderantly female (61%), mainly aged 35-60, and mostly (77%) living in city, urban and suburban regions. This is not a random sample of the public at large, but is an indicative sample of those interested enough to complete a questionnaire about 'falconry'. Full details of our results are given elsewhere (Nicholls, 2015), but a

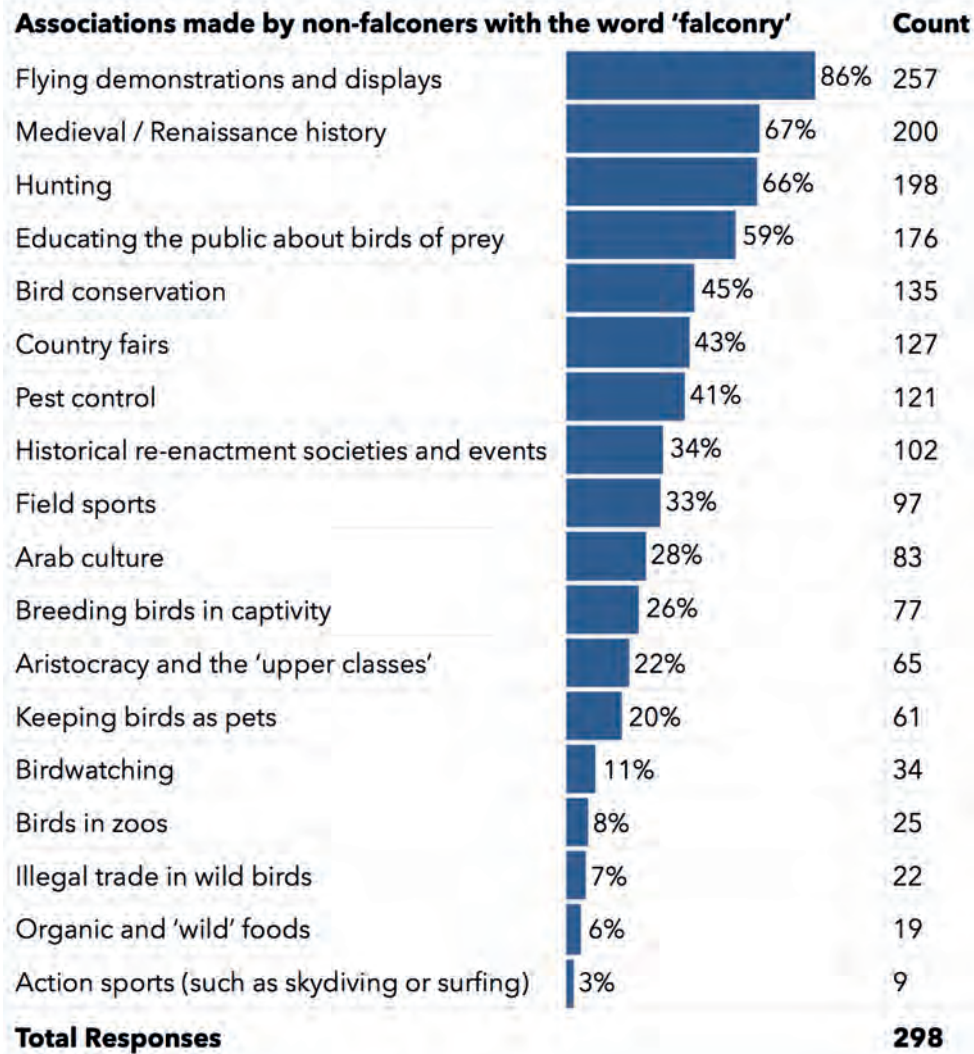


Figure 1: Respondents were asked what they associated the word 'falconry' with.

synopsis is given here.

In interpreting the results, though, what must be remembered is the so-called 'Humpty Dumpty dilemma'. In *Through the Looking Glass* (Lewis Carroll, 1872) Humpty Dumpty says, "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean – nothing more, nothing less." Just because falconers use the word 'falconry' in a particular way ("Falconry is the sport of taking wild quarry in its natural state and habitat by means of trained hawks" – this definition taken from the BFC Code of Conduct) it doesn't necessarily mean that the general public use it in the same way.

This is what we found in our survey, and a majority of respondents associate the word 'falconry' with falconry centres, other captive bird of prey

collections and flying demonstrations (Figure 1). This wasn't altogether unexpected, as in addition to film, television and video, most respondents declared that their information or experience of 'falconry' came from such centres and demonstrations (Figure 2).

Few associated it with 'hunting' ('hawking' as we would mean it) and those that did seemed to be describing wild hawks hunting for prey. Further, our respondents didn't particularly associate falconry with other field sports and were emphatic that it wasn't like fox hunting or shooting. Nor did they associate it with the incarceration of wild birds; rather they accepted that it was a means by which captive birds of prey could exhibit 'natural behaviour'. Although views were divided over whether performing animals were

acceptable in a modern world, flying demonstrations weren't particularly associated with circuses.

Generally then, the non-falconers in our survey regarded 'falconry' as benign, not associated with 'blood sports' nor other 'cruel' practices. They gain most of their insight into what they believe it to be through the medium of film or from 'falconry displays'. This is a strong base to build upon, but we mustn't be complacent. Can we be sure that positive images of falconry are perpetuated through so-called falconry centres and moving images in the public domain?

Although virtually all bird of prey centres declare education as part of their mission and *raison d'être*, there is little information on the quality of the educational message they convey. The survey of the welfare and conservation value of bird of prey centres and flying displays completed by Dr Ruth Cromie (Cromie and Nicholls, 1994) is now sadly 22 years out of date! Despite this, some general findings are worth reporting here as I feel that, in some respects, things haven't changed much. When considering the educational value of bird of prey demonstrations (and in this we included roving demonstrations at game and country fairs), Ruth found that the results fell into two main groups.

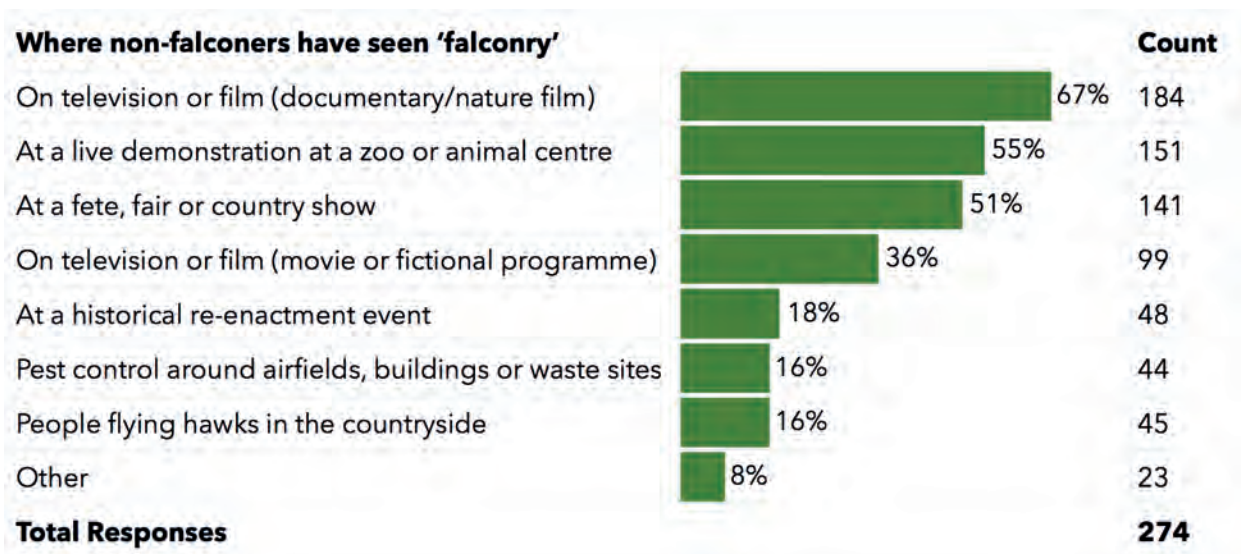
One group contained many that were good, a few that were excellent and a

few that were pretty good or OK. To be 'good' or 'excellent', we asked ourselves whether the prevailing message was conveying a sense of wonder about birds of prey and of privilege to be sharing the world with them – think of the sort of message conveyed by one of David Attenborough's excellent documentaries.

Another and sadly numerically equal group we classed as 'poor', or worse: some arguably did more harm than good! The messages conveyed by these either were inaccurate, or they trivialised, humiliated or patronised the birds, and seemed to be more about how clever the handlers (I hesitate to call them 'falconers') were in dominating a wild animal. What made things worse was that there was a strong correlation between the quality of the educational message conveyed and the level of welfare and husbandry. Thus poor centres and displays, as well as providing low-quality education, also conveyed a 'hidden message' that birds of prey were there to be used and dominated, and weren't worth taking care with their welfare and husbandry – so why bother to conserve them?

As I say, this survey is now 22 years old, but I'm not sure that things have changed much. Although no more formal work has been done on monitoring the 'falconry' message in public flying demonstrations, I have mischievously kept a log of classic

Figure 2.



quotes that I have heard over the years.

Some of these are just inaccurate or misleading:

“Barn owls evolved on beaches...” – presumably an attempt to explain their sandy brown body colour!

“We are asking for donations of honey to feed our honey buzzard” – totally misleading and funny if it wasn’t so sad.

“David Attenborough and Gerald Durrell are meeting today to decide on the scientific name of this new species.” This was referring to a burrowing owl x little owl hybrid and was particularly interesting, as at time of this announcement Gerald Durrell was dead!

Some sensationalised the bird of prey’s capabilities, possibly to inflate the ego of the handler:

“The talons of the European eagle owl can crush a wolf’s skull.”

“This ferug’ could take out any other hawk here.”

Sadly, rather than celebrate birds of prey, some handlers seem to need to humiliate their charge, possibly again to inflate their own importance:

“This Harris’ hawk is educationally sub-normal”, “...is afraid of heights”, “... should have an ASBO.”

What seems incredible is that accurate facts and information are readily available on the internet and also in books. Why then do these presenters need to fabricate, sensationalise or even lie?

What is most sad though is that thousands of members of the public witness what they believe to be ‘falconry’ (remember Humpty Dumpty’s dilemma) at such demonstrations. Couple this with the large numbers of ‘falconers’ who take birds of prey into schools to entertain children. It’s accepted that most people’s attitudes and values are indelibly fixed by the time they leave primary school.

In the UK we have many good or even excellent individuals and centres which set the benchmark of best practice, and a few do this on a global stage. But there also seems to be a subgroup who aren’t doing falconry any favours in presenting inaccurate, misleading or poor-quality flying or

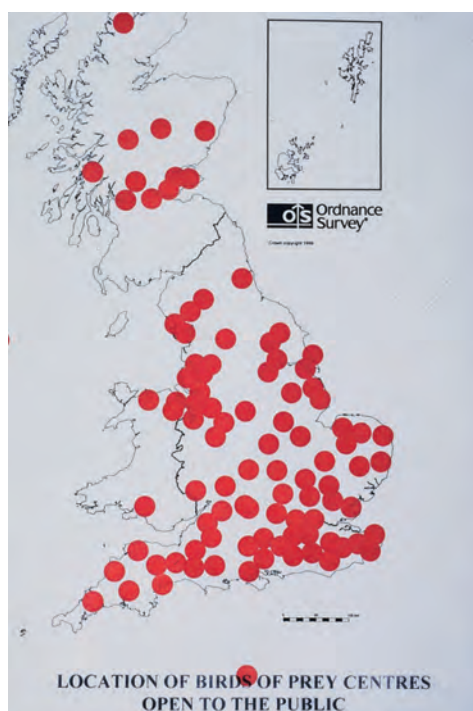


Figure 3:
Distribution
of bird of prey
centres in
mainland Great
Britain (from
Cromie and
Nicholls, 1994)

static demonstrations. At the 2016 Falconry Fair in the UK I watched a flying display performed by a young woman stooping a merlin to the lure. I can only describe it as breathtaking! But, as good as it was, it wasn’t falconry.

The 1994 survey mapped the locations of bird of prey centres open to the public on the UK mainland and these are shown in Figure 3. Although out of date, this nevertheless shows the broad geographical distribution: undoubtedly all major conurbations have ready access to bird of prey centres. Coupled with this are the hundreds of flying demonstrations at country fairs, village fêtes and historical visitor attractions. Millions of people can, if they fancy a day out, watch a flying demonstration or static display close to home. Yet there is neither regulation nor legislation controlling the quality of bird of prey centres or public demonstrations. Nor is there any regulatory framework which controls who can call themselves educators in informal public education settings.

Take for example ‘falconry have-a-go days’. The message here is that falconry is something anyone can have a go at, and the term ‘have a go’ itself implies something which can be picked up

frivolously and not with conviction.

As said, there is neither regulation nor legislation controlling the quality of bird of prey centres, public demonstrations or school visits. It has also been demonstrated that public flying demonstrations fall squarely within the definitions of 'non-domesticated animals' and 'circuses'. In 2006, Ben Bradshaw (then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) in a written statement to the House of Commons wrote, "We intend to introduce a ban, using a regulation made under Clause 12 of the Animal Welfare Bill, on the use of certain non-domesticated species in travelling circuses." Professor Mike Radford was appointed chair of the Circus Working Group, and in his final report (Radford 2009) concluded that "perhaps the most straightforward way of proceeding would be to amend the Zoo Licensing Act so as to bring circuses within its terms so far as is appropriate."

The link between the use of wild animals in circuses and bird of prey demonstrations might not be made. Thus those seeking to ban or regulate circus performances by wild animals may not try to include bird of prey flying displays and performances; it might all just go away! But it is now probably too late for this stance. Through what is described as "mobile animal displays", a recently published Bristol University report (Dorning et al, 2016) has made this link. It describes these as providing "experience" events at a variety of venues, including country fairs, schools etc., and using a range of animals from cockroaches to snakes, and including birds of prey. The report comes out firmly in recommending a UK ban on wild animal performances in circuses and travelling zoos.

Conclusions

We are currently in a strong position. The public at large have a high regard for 'falconry' as they perceive it, and don't particularly regard it as detrimental to birds of prey, either in conservation or welfare terms. Yet there

are now recommendations that, on welfare grounds, the use of wild animals in performances and in 'experience' events is banned. Let's hope that the poor standards of the less responsible practitioners do not jeopardise the future of those whose expertise has done much to promote birds of prey, their conservation and the practice and heritage of falconry.

In a recent discussion, Mark Upton remarked to me, "Although all hawk keepers should work together to protect our rights to keep hawks and fly them, I would always like to keep the distinction between falconry and other forms of hawk-keeping, although related. Falconry is using hawks to hunt quarry and it is falconry that has been inscribed by UNESCO as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Mankind."

Is it time for falconers to claim back the word? Perhaps it is the responsibility of falconers, true falconers, to speak up and inform event organisers of a poor quality demonstration.

The public at the moment can be great allies; let's keep it that way.

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An earlier version of this article appeared in the 2016 edition of *The Falconer*.

The Uncommonly Common, Common Snipe

There is no doubt that snipe-hawking is receiving a lot more attention in recent years than what it has previously experienced in past centuries. In the halcyon age of game-hawking in the 18th and 19th centuries, the habitat for snipe was far more suitable than what it is today. There was less drainage and no offending conifer plantations creeping over the moors and bogs like dry rot. No thorny wire strung across the middle of a bog or the brow of an upland moor that cause you to cringe with the thought of a falcon hitting it. The employment of keepers was also unnecessary to manage and maintain this mysterious will-o'-the-wisp, whose numbers were far greater in past centuries. I've spoken to old farmers in the southwest of Ireland who've assured me that in recent decades, before afforestation, there were thousands of snipe lifting off the sloughs like swarms of bees. The question then arises: why has this abundant and challenging quarry stayed below the falconer's radar for so long ?

There are some that believe (and would be forgiven in doing so) that modern falconers have advanced to such a pinnacle that they can finally catch the uncatchable quarry. The truth is possibly a little more complex. We would do a great disservice to past generations of falconers (and falcons) to believe they were unable to catch snipe. To find evidence of this, we don't have to dig too deep into past falconry literature. There are several instances in Colonel Thomas Thornton's *A Sporting Tour Through the Northern Parts of England*, first published in 1804, of flights at snipe, with one occurrence of a flight lasting 16 minutes! There is also another instance where Thornton's falcon, "at one stroke, cut a snipe in

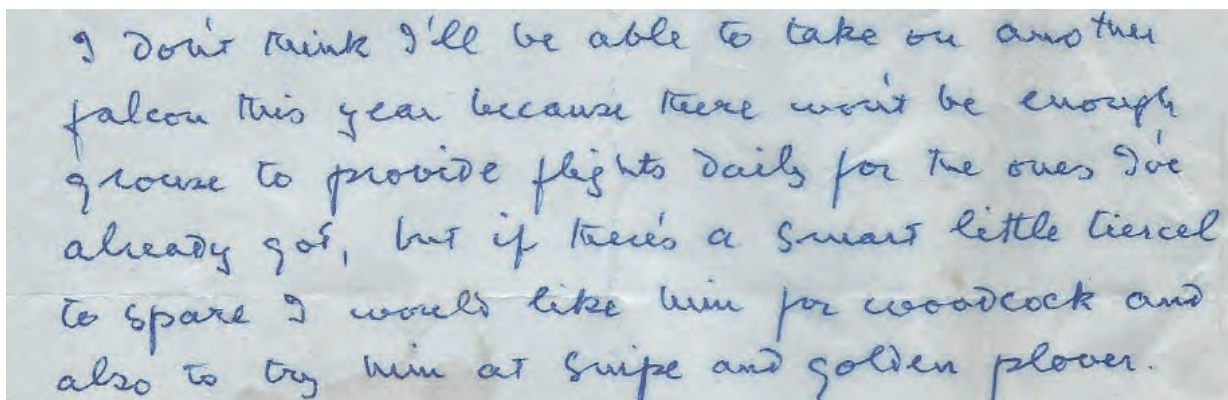
Don Ryan, Dublin

two parts, so that they fell separate". I observed a similar incident last season where a snipe's wing was sliced off in mid-air by a Matthew-Gage-bred tiercel flown by Eric Witkowski. These incidents are two centuries apart and worthy of mention, as they illustrate how some memorable flights can be so vivid and timeless. I wonder how many times in those 200 years has such an event been witnessed?

Moving on half a century, we find further evidence in William Brodrick and Henry Salvin's *Falconry in the British Isles*. First published in 1857, they present a chapter on 'Snipe Hawking' and remark that "good sport may be had with this quarry". Gerald Lascelles also states that "snipe are occasionally cut down by a good tiercel" in his writings on 'Falconry' from the Badminton Library edition of *Coursing and Falconry*, first published in 1892. From these 19th-century authors, we learn that the majority of these flights at snipe were carried out before the month of September, which suggests the snipe

.....
Martin Brereton
and Eric
Witkowski





I don't think I'll be able to take on another falcon this year because there won't be enough grouse to provide flights daily for the ones I've already got, but if there's a smart little tiercel to spare I would like him for woodcock and also to try him at snipe and golden plover.

.....
From a letter
written by Ronald
Stevens in 1957

were resident, in moult or juvenile. Whether our sedentary snipe have the same level of fitness as the winter migrants that today's snipe-hawkers hunt in season is open for debate. As Lascelles points out, "they are not easy to kill except in August". We also understand they had a real concern with falcons carrying such a small prey, which is still a serious worry for today's snipe-hawkers, even with telemetry. The fear of a falcon carrying a light quarry to a great distance is understandable, as a hawk taking its kill to the ground runs a serious risk of attracting attention from the ever-vigil ground predators. Knowing where your hawk has landed and getting to it quickly is critical.

There is less written about snipe-hawking by the early to mid-20th-century authors. Gilbert Blaine makes no mention of snipe in relation to game-hawking in his publication *Falconry*; however, he does recognise the immense challenge of the quarry in his chapter on 'Merlin and Lark Hawking'. In *A Falcon in the Field*, Jack Mavrogordato makes no reference to snipe in his discussion on 'Game Hawking' and, surprisingly, it doesn't even earn a comment in his passage on 'Small Game Hawking'. Likewise, Woodford remains silent on the subject in *A Manual for Hawking*.

From the level of writing given over to grouse-hawking by these authors, along with correspondence in 1957 from Ronald Stevens (pictured above), we get some insight into why snipe-hawking may not have been explored with any real passion. After moving to the west of Ireland, Ronald mentions he

may take a small tiercel for woodcock, golden plover and snipe, due to the lack of grouse to fly at. There is no doubt: falconry was the preserve of the privileged in times past. Game-hawking was even more so. Those fortunate enough to practise game-hawking were also fortunate to have access to grouse moors. Unless of course, like Ronald, they moved to Ireland where, after independence, much of the lands of the big estates were broken up and given over to farming. The profession of gamekeeping then became unnecessary and drastically declined and, as a result, so too did grouse.

Like salmon, grouse are an iconic species and a greater trophy than many of the other game species such as partridge, pheasant, duck and, of course, the common snipe. Staying with the analogy of matters piscatorial, snipe can be likened to sea trout. Ounce for ounce, sea trout are a greater fighter than the salmon, more elusive, wary and difficult to catch and, in my opinion, also taste nicer; yet salmon still retain the title of 'King of Fish', the trophy above all others to catch. When the salmon and sea trout are running, there are few anglers that will swap their salmon fly for a sea trout fly. It is the same for moorland that holds both grouse and snipe. Grouse are the king of game birds and this is obvious in all publications on the subject of game-hawking. The authors also agree that the falcon is more suited to grouse than the tiercel, although noting there were exceptions. Few would arrive at the grouse moor with a cadge full of tiercels. However challenging the

twisting and jinking snipe is for the tiercel, it is increasingly more so for the larger falcon.

This evidence would lead us to believe that the difficulty of catching snipe, along with having other species to enjoy the sport of game-hawking, are the primary reasons why snipe-hawking has not been attempted with any serious conviction over the centuries and has remained as an incidental flight rather than a deliberate quarry. Those who could afford to game-hawk could afford to grouse-hawk. Why would anyone expend their energy on such a difficult quarry when other game species that carried greater esteem were readily available? Perhaps the common snipe was just too common!

Within a short period of time after first landing in Ireland, it became apparent to Robert Hutchinson that, due to lack of management, grouse and partridge were in such decline that consistent game-hawking with pointers and setters was virtually impossible. Occasionally finding a grouse or partridge does not make a game hawk. Sadly, in Ireland today, grey partridge have been removed from the Open Seasons Order and the season on red grouse is restricted to the month of September. Similarly to Ronald Stevens, Robert realised that the only opportunity to practise game-hawking in Ireland was to explore the alternative of other game species. Enter the common snipe! The healthy abundance of snipe feeding on the vast open stretches of Irish blanket and raised bogs appeared to Robert to provide the ideal opportunity to examine if the sport of game-hawking with dogs could be preserved in Ireland. The relatively flat terrain of both the upland and lowland bogs are ideal to witness the fast-moving pace of the



pointers and setters and every turn and stoop of the falcon is in clear view. Also, as ground cover is low, it encourages the snipe to stay airborne rather than bale into the nearest bush. With these essential game-hawking ingredients established, the key question that then remained was: could snipe be caught with a consistency that would prevent the hawks becoming despondent and eventually abandoning the quarry?

When Robert invited a handful of UK game-hawkers to Ireland in the early noughties to find this out, no one could have been fully aware of how the course of Irish falconry was about to change. On that first dedicated snipe meet in Ireland, success was achieved to such a degree that it left no doubt to all present that exploring snipe-hawking further was both warranted and inevitable. Watching on eagerly with his brown tiercel peregrine was Irish falconer Martin Brereton. The rest is history. Snipe-hawking in Ireland has gone from strength to strength since that meet and it's encouraging to see more and more falconers seeking to give

.....
Jim Dalton
and Robert
Hutchinson

Snipe-hawking is as much about the escaping flight of the snipe as it is about the pitch of the falcon. It's also about the lasting friendships and memories it forges in those untamed and unkept, beautifully wild places it takes you to. It is no wonder that for a number of dedicated game-hawkers, the common snipe has now become the quarry of choice

it a bash each year.

So what does snipe-hawking bring to the game-hawking table? Well, quite a lot actually. Snipe are the last truly wild quarry to enable the practice of game-hawking with dogs to be carried out from one end of the hunting season to the other. Although they have declined in recent decades, the common snipe are still in relative abundance and, with such a long season (12 Aug to 31 Jan in UK, and 1 Sep to 31 Jan in Ireland), they can truly boast that they 'Maintaine the Faulconer and his Faulcon's flight.' Snipe-hawking also maintains and promotes the use of pointers and setters in game-hawking, which has notably been in decline in recent years and as steadiness, ground control and game scenting abilities are crucial, it elevates the standard and quality to a very high level. If game-hawking were a university degree, snipe-hawking would be the Ph.D. It continually tests the dog, falcon and orchestration skills of the falconer, demanding the utmost concentration and dedication. To be consistently successful at this branch of falconry, a snipe-hawker needs to immerse themselves completely, committing the falcon's flight to one specific species. A tiercel successful on grouse or partridge may fail on snipe, but it is unlikely that a made snipe-hawk will fail on grouse or partridge. As snipe inhabit non-agricultural wetlands and damp habitats, there is generally little or no financial cost in gaining access to hunt these landscapes. This

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Mike Nicholls and
Martin Brereton



allows those not fortunate enough to afford access to grouse moors or other kept grounds the opportunity to enjoy the sport of game-hawking, with the only necessary expense being time. Snipe are also an incredibly sustainable quarry for game-hawking, as very few are caught for the amount of sport they provide. All snipe-hawkers will attest to the many excellent days they've had in the field with empty game bags at feeding-up time. At the IAF meet in Ireland in November 2016, two groups containing over 20 falconers and over 100 spectators experienced excellent sport and camaraderie with a countless number of flights – to a final tally of nine snipe at the end of six full days. Snipe-hawking is as much about the escaping flight of the snipe as it is about the pitch of the falcon. It's also about the lasting friendships and memories it forges in those untamed and unkept, beautifully wild places it takes you to. It is no wonder that for a number of dedicated game-hawkers, the common snipe has now become the quarry of choice.

The scientific name *Gallinago gallinago* does little to capture the charming nature of this enigmatic wader. The term derives from the Latin *gallina* meaning 'hen' and the suffix *-ago*, 'resembling'. Describing a snipe as resembling a hen is akin to describing a diamond as resembling a pane of glass. The original name 'snipe' is believed to be of old Norse origin but, due to the distinctive noise the male makes with its tail feathers in flights of display, it has received many vernacular terms throughout the old world. The bleating sound of a kid goat best describes the humming sound which has now become universally known as 'drumming', and it's not surprising it was formally referred to by the Latin name *capella*, meaning 'the little kid'. Other folk titles have fondly referred to it as 'goat of the air', 'goat of the bogs', 'the little goat of the dusk', 'heather bleater', 'the horse of the air' and one of my favourites, 'the bog bleater'.

Now that snipe-hawking has become established as an achievable although



challenging branch of game-hawking, the falconry community needs to ensure that the common snipe, like most other game species, is afforded a voice.

In the words of the late Irish author John McGahern, “When you’re in danger of losing a thing, it becomes precious and when it’s around us, it’s in tedious abundance and we take it for granted as if we’re going to live forever, which we’re not.”

Although the common snipe is flagged as of Least Concern in the Red List of Birdlife International and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) due to its extremely large range, the local breeding populations of Ireland and the UK have undergone a moderate decline in recent decades, earning it an Amber status on both islands by the RSPB and Birdwatch Ireland. This is primarily due to habitat loss through the drainage and afforestation of moorlands and bogs. It is amply clear, especially to the ever-growing band of snipe-hawkers, that there needs to be an organisation dedicated to monitor this species and the time to take action is now, before the horse has bolted.

For this reason, a falconer-led initiative, under the auspices of the International Association for Falconry’s Biodiversity Working Group, has commenced to form a group known as the Snipe Conservation Alliance.

The Snipe Conservation Alliance is a network of enthusiasts (both scientists and non-scientists) interested in the study, monitoring, management and conservation of the common snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*) and jack snipe (*Lymnocyptes minimus*). The aim of the group is to provide a resource to help understand the ecology, and to ensure the sustainable use and conservation of, the species. As it becomes established, it is intended that the Snipe Conservation Alliance will offer support to any group or person wishing to become actively involved in the welfare, improvement and maintenance of snipe habitat. It will be a partnership process, and the objectives can only be achieved through active engagement with government departments, local communities and landowners who wish to see snipe remain on our bogs and moors on both uplands and lowlands.

The official launch of the Snipe Conservation Alliance will be held in the Midlands of Ireland between 28 and 31 January 2018, and will coincide with a Festival of Snipe. During the festival there will be many opportunities to spectate or engage in snipe-hawking. There will also be field trial demonstrations with the various breeds of pointers and setters by the field trialling community, which is another group that gain incredible and sustainable sport from the common snipe. To close the event there will be a Bog Bleater’s Ball on the last evening, which promises to be a lot of fun. All are welcome to attend.

For more information about the Snipe Conservation Alliance, or to attend the Festival of Snipe, please email snipeconservationalliance@gmail.com.

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Kevin Marron



FESTIVAL OF SNIPE



Painting by John Moore

Snipe Conservation Alliance Launch

Snipe Hawking Field Meet

Field Trial Demonstrations

Series of Talks

Bog Bleater's Ball



A Celebration of Snipe

Date: 28th to 31st January 2018

Location: Shamrock Lodge Hotel, Athlone, Co. Westmeath

For more information on this event, please contact,
snipeconservationalliance@gmail.com

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