

Irish
Hawking
Club
Journal
2020



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POLICY & 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.



President's Report

2020 has been an extraordinary year so far. We all ended our season in the early months of the year not knowing what we had looming in front of us; Coronavirus taking hold and affecting us all. No major issues affected hawking for pleasure, but it has been devastating to our members who make their livings from birds of prey, entertaining the public that come largely from tourism which has now almost ground to a halt. I hope those who have suffered in this way will recover in the not so distant future, but I fear we are not out of the woods yet, with a second wave of the virus taking hold again in the major European countries that had recovered from the beginning of the outbreak.

I hope those who have moulted hawks and falcons have had a successful one and are gearing up for a new season. Also, I see members taking up fresh hawks and falcons to begin their careers in the hunting field; an exciting time and I wish them all success. We are fortunate to be involved in a sport which is practiced on the whole as a solitary one. Again this might not affect us too badly, even if we may be restricted from holding field meetings, we can still get out on our own and hawk as normal but consideration must be taken towards landowners and stewards who might not want you on their land while the virus is at large. Permission is sometimes hard won but simple to lose never to return.

I was fortunate to be able to attend the Micro Hawk Meet down in Sneem recently in late August, organised by Don Ryan, which was a great success considering the circumstances. Grant Haggard and Con Taylor were meant to be attending for the weekend along with their merlins, both are highly experienced in this branch of falconry, but paperwork was painfully slow as the staff at Animal Health in Bristol are working from home, and this meant their trip was cancelled. Nevertheless, Robert Hutchinson, Aodhan Brown and Don Ryan provided some spectacular sport to entertain the small field of spectators. Andi Chewing brought along some younger members and non members from Dingle who seemed thrilled to be able to attend, and the older falconers were delighted that we had a younger generation taking an interest in the sport. Good food and drink in the evenings followed, along with salmon and trout fishing that was available from the lodge for those who wanted to try their luck. If you have not been to

this meeting, I suggest you should attend at the first available opportunity. There is something there for everyone and it's a superb way to start the season. Plans are in place for future breeding and supply of merlins to club members that are interested in flying them, furthering Project Rowland, and hopefully bringing an end to the need to outsource merlins from over the water.

I am involved with my local pack of Harriers, and due to a substantial claim being submitted in Co. Tipperary, it came as a shock to all who hunt on horseback to hear that no insurance company would be covering hunting in Ireland this season, or point to points and fun rides. As these are the two main fundraisers, it became clear that without insurance there would be no funds raised and certainly no hunting. The Irish Harriers Association and the Irish Masters of Foxhounds collectively, after a lot of hard work and negotiations managed to secure a deal with underwriters in the UK, when it was touch and go if any hunting would take place at all this year.

You may be asking yourself what has this got to do with falconry? We probably all take for granted the land we hunt over, probably the same land that your local hunt covers perhaps twice a year, or that the lads in the local gun club go out to for a shot on a Sunday morning. All this is nowadays won or lost depending on insurance. If you have not renewed your policy this year, please do. It is a basic requirement for anyone attending an Irish Hawking Club field meet to have their own public liability cover. Details can be obtained from our Club Treasurer Anya or any other committee member.

We have bred a tiercel peregrine this year, and imprinted him. At 50 days of age I decided to tame hack him, a new experience for me. At first I was cautious feeding him up and letting him go in the garden where he was raised, to come and go as he pleased, but modern technology in the form of GPS telemetry eased the worry as I was able to see where he was and how far he was travelling. I had two lengthy track downs, with one recovery, the second of which resulted in him being unwilling to recall in new surroundings. But he then took delight in racing me home where he came into the lure as if his life depended on it.

After a month of freedom, I have tethered him and am now in the process of training him to recall to the lure away from home, before I start to hunt and train him for waiting on flights. I hear Martin Brereton is doing the same thing with a goshawk, maybe he could write a piece about that for the next Journal.

I hope to meet many of you out in the hunting

field over the coming season if the current climate allows it. I will do my very best to attend as many of the planned field meetings as I can; long, short and broad winged. In the meantime, I hope you and all your extended families stay healthy and get through these difficult times to come.

Happy Hawking,

Keith Barker



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Welcome

The end of the 2019-2020 season saw the world arriving into difficult times due to the Covid 19 crisis. As editor, I was busy rounding up the seasons' tales of field and sky, while hoping all the while that the season to come will afford us the same freedoms. The Annual Wild Take, which is so deeply entwined in the origin and history of our sport, was understandably cancelled this year due to the Covid 19 lockdown. I therefore felt it deserved to be celebrated as the main theme of this year's Journal. Falconer's experiences of the wild take process and the ensuing raising and training of these hawks makes for some inspirational reading.

Shortly before this journal was ready to print, the tragic news broke of the unexpected death of our club member Bruce Wilkie. It seemed only right to delay the journal production to allow for the inclusion of the tributes written by his friends and fellow falconers. The remaining pages are filled with tales of falconers, hawks and dogs in beautiful wild, remote places, that will strike chords in the hearts of novice and experienced falconers alike.

The annual journal has for many years documented our collective stories, which go on to form the historical record of the Irish Hawking Club. I'd like to think it is a tradition which will continue on in this digital age. However, as editor I can only compile and edit these stories, they need to be written by you, the membership. Without your willingness to send me the tales of your experiences, there would be no journal. So, a sincere thank you to the contributors, and I hope members that have not yet written tales of their falconry adventures consider doing so for future editions.

Producing this journal for professional printing using InDesign was a huge learning curve for me, which was for the most part self taught using online tutorials. However, I'd like to thank my good (non falconer) friend Mel Haughton, who is a graphic designer and very familiar with the software and working with images, who helped me with some tricky parts. I'd also like to thank Don Ryan for his contributions, advice and proofreading help, and Hilary White and Aaron Leavy for organising the cover image and design.

Yours in Sport,

Darry Reed

Irish Hawking Club Editor



Cover Art:

Image of painting by Liam O'Broin

Cover Design by Aaron Leavy



The Irish Wild Take

Intro by Don Ryan

The custom of taking raptor chicks from a nest for the purpose of falconry which is commonly known as Wild Take has been an essential part of our sport since it was first practiced on this island. Unlike in many parts of Europe, it has remained an unbroken tradition in Ireland throughout that prolonged period. The reason we still have Wild Take today is due to it being passionately fought for by past members of the IHC to maintain access to falcons and hawks for the sole purpose to engage in the practice of falconry. Anyone applying for a Wild Take licence should be aware of this fact and respect it. It is not there for any other purpose.

Wild Take is not about getting a free hawk. In truth, it's far easier and financially more sound to place an order with a breeder and collect it at an agreed date. Nor is it something you need to do to fulfil yourself as a falconer - just like you never have to make your own musical instrument to be a great musician. The real treasure of Wild Take is the fantastic opportunity you are given to experience and explore the amazing world of hawks and falcons in their natural habitat - a unique and extraordinary practice that we are very privileged to avail of. Having said that, we are no more privileged than an angler licensed to fish for salmon or the shooter permitted to raise their gun to a woodcock or the spandex clad cyclist choking up country roads on a Sunday morning. So yes, we are fortunate but we have a right just the same as any other sport or tradition and we must be prepared to fight for those rights just as past Irish falconers have.

The term 'Wild Take' is unfortunate as it's a misnomer. 'Wild' conjures up something outside our civilised society. In reality, there is more civilised order in the 'wild' than our developed society will ever understand. Likewise, 'take' sounds like something has been stolen. A more accurate term may be 'Nature's Foster'. 'Nature' because they are part of our natural world and 'foster' because we become a substitute parent. By fostering, we improve their chance of survival but they are never truly ours.

Every falconer should be aware of the importance of Wild Take in Ireland and not jeopardise the practice in any way. We hold it in trust for the next generation just as it was held in trust for us. Early in 2020, we witnessed the outcry from the general public, conservationists, and falconers when licences were issued for Wild Take peregrines in the UK. What enraged each group most was the prospect that they could be taken to languish in pens, never to be flown and bred for profit. Where breeding plays an important role in the future of our sport and it is critical we breed from wild native stock, we need to be careful how this is portrayed. Openly touting and advertising 'Irish wild take' progeny on national and overseas social media sites is irresponsible as it gives the impression that Irish hawks are being taken only to breed for profit. This was not what was intended when Ireland's Wild Take licencing system was hard fought for and is still being hard fought today.

We also need to be honest with ourselves that we have the time and access to land to properly fly a Wild Take hawk. None of the native species available to falconers in Ireland are weekend hawks. They need and deserve to be flown several days a week. If you are not in a position to offer this, then please leave it until a time when you can.

For those that have the time and land to fly a wild take, it is a very special adventure and I encourage every falconer to experience it at least once in their life. The following stories of club members Wild Takes highlight how special the practice is.



Image:
Peregrine
on Rocks
by David
Rampling

Tommy Byrne Sparrowhawk 1996

The following article tells the story of a female Sparrowhawk named 'Alice' which was taken under licence by Tommy Byrne in June 1996. Beautifully written, the author describes the highs and lows of a wild taken Sparrowhawk and its absurd ability to affect his life so intensely. The context is interesting as it reveals two snapshots of time that span a ten year period. The first article appeared in the 1996 Journal and describes the actual take of the hawk and its development through their first season together; the beginning of a relationship that overflows with anticipation and aspiration for the journey ahead. The second more poignant article written ten years later appeared in the 2006 Journal and looks back through the lens of hindsight to give an honest portrayal of their adventures; reflecting the thrilling, passionate and humbling moments with all the tears of joy and sorrow that only another falconer can truly understand.

This moving tale of a sparrowhawk fostered from nature to form a symbiotic relationship, highlights the importance of why this practice is so much more than just taking something from the wild. Tommy Byrne and Alice the Spar hold the coveted title to be the only falconer and hawk ever awarded the 'Rowland Eustace Perpetual Trophy'. The trophy is a charismatic resin cast of a moody Spar commissioned by Rowland Eustace, sculpted by Derek Watson and presented to Tommy and Alice by Diana-Durman Walters after a field meet in Slane, Co. Meath in October 1996.

Part One: Alice – The Ragged Hawk by Tommy Byrne, reprinted from the Irish Hawking Club Journal, 1996

It was a typical sparrowhawk's nest, three quarters way up in the larch tree near a path in the woods. The female slipped out quietly as I was halfway up. Of the three white balls of fluff in the nest, judging by their outsize feet, one was male and two were females.

Decisions, Decisions... The biggest one was a female; probably ten days old, the feathers were just starting to show. The smallest was a tiny female, probably six days old. Two days between when each egg is laid, usually accounts for the size difference between chicks. In theory, the smaller should be more aggressive, having to compete with its larger nest mates for its fair share.



As I wanted a female to imprint, I chose the larger of the two. The smaller bird was too young because after reducing her weight for training, she could become aggressive, scream all day, mantle her food with a vengeance, breaking her tail in the process. I didn't want that kind of lunatic on my hands. As it happens, that's exactly what I ended up with. Read on:

'Alice', (the name was chosen by a three year old, not me!) was reared in a plastic box next to the cooker in the kitchen. An uneventful two weeks except when she had to defecate; then we had to be quick on our toes, as they do it over the side of the nest. Our little toddler wasn't so quick but she got her own back by upturning the box every so often. When she tried to fly (the bird, not the child!) it was time for her to go out to her aviary, with a branch going into her nest box on the ground to a high perch, where she sat all day. She only came down at feeding times to her board where I placed her chopped quail, with one big piece of meat tied down to stop her getting into the habit of carrying.

Then I waited what felt like ten weeks (but the calendar said three) until she was fully feathered. Her wing feathers grew quick enough but her tail refused to stop growing. Every day I would check only to find blood still in her quills at the top of her tail. Eventually, and I mean eventually, her tail quills turned clear, the last wisps of white down left her head and it was time to jess her up and finally put her on a bow perch.

Weight regulation wasn't as difficult as I'd expected, using a whole food diet of quail, with a day-old-chick or road-kill songbird for variation. Training was quick and straightforward; the use of a creance was more for tradition than necessity. Hunting, or should I say actually catching something was the hard part. All through her training she was obedient at nine and one quarter ounces, flying over the dogs' heads to slam into the fist, mantling aggressively over the food within. But after seeing her put in half-hearted efforts to catch birds, or ignoring them altogether, I knew I had to drop her weight to make her more eager. I had to find her proper hunting weight.

For two days she watched the spaniel and flew everything he put up, finches and pipits galore, until she caught one. I don't know what it was, she wouldn't show me, but it was a great occasion. In the short time I've been flying her she has caught six little brown jobs, five pheasants and two young wood pigeons. Not a great head count but not too bad. However, she breaks her tail on every kill (she has a rook's tail at the moment and looks a mess) and screams like a banshee if I'm in sight. All the bad habits I tried to avoid. This is the first time I've flown a sparrowhawk; I'm really enjoying it and I've had some spectacular flights. Today she's sitting loose in her aviary; ragged, fed and content.

Part Two: Only a Bird by Tommy Byrne, Reprinted from the Irish Hawking Club Journal, 2006

The black cloud is darker today. It's August and the sun is shining but I can feel the weight of a cloud hanging over me as I take her up in my hands. I know she is gone as I hold her weakened body, her feathers perfect and her eyes once so bright and menacing are fading fast as she looks at me.

I have kept birds all my life, birds of all kinds, from Appenzellars to zebra finches, but exactly ten years and ten weeks ago I climbed a spruce tree to select a young sparrowhawk, a couple of ounces of fluff and talons that was to give me more pleasure, pain, fun and adventure than all the other birds put together, and here she was dying in my hands. I gave her a broad base antibiotic knowing it was already too late, as some part of her body was giving up and it could reasonably be put down to old age. I placed her back on her nest ledge already knowing the outcome. I looked in a little while later and she was dead, the musket sitting beside her, doing his high speed laps around the aviary as I went in and lifted her body again.

I really felt miserable, and if someone had walked into my yard today and offered to take the other birds away, the aviaries and freezers, my old weighing scales and my scruffy hawking bag, I think I would gladly have walked away from the lot. Alice was over a decade old. It was obvious this day was drawing near, and I know I let it affect me when I should have been stronger. But the thing is, I really liked the old she-devil and this is probably where I get laughed at, I know for a fact that she liked me. Each day she would come down to me, taking her food from my fingers before flying back up to her nest ledge to consume her meal. Oftentimes she would call from her ledge and fly to the front bars for me to caress her plumage.

Owning and working animals in the field can teach you so much. I grew up with terriers, lurchers and ferrets; I spent more time in a ditch than a disco. I have sat up trees late into the night waiting for badgers to emerge from their setts, crawled out of bed at four in the morning to watch fox cubs play until the vixen returns with food. I've watched stoats hunting and pygmy shrews fight over territories, I witnessed a wild merlin ring up after a winter lark, each trying to outlast the other as the victor, one for its meal and one for its life. But the very best insights into the world around us were, for me, those days in the field with Alice. To see her hunting techniques in action, not just the sparrowhawk's amazing speed and agility of the straightforward snatch and grab flights, but the indirect pre-planned (this pre-planning took all of a second) flights that took her away from the quarry to make the most of the wind or some hedgerow or building or just about anything that could give her an advantage before the lightning fast and fearless strike.

One flight that sticks in my memory was many years ago when out on the hill behind my house. The dog had flushed and re-flushed a pheasant but Alice had only acquired feathers in the strikes as it was an old strong bird and after the second put-in there was no sign of it as the dog searched the area under where Alice had taken stand in a large beech tree. As I was extricating myself from the



undergrowth I heard a blackbird cluck to my left and simultaneously the gentle sound of a hawk bell high up the tree to my right. I looked up to see Alice in a direct glide down to where she had spied the blackbird. This path took her right past my face and just before her wingtip brushed my skin I stared into her eyes, literally stared into her eyes as she came past, visually locked onto her prey. In those seconds she was totally oblivious to me and the rest of the world around her, seeing nothing but her prey and not wavering in her stare even as her yellow eyes passed mine with only inches between. It was not until she had chased, snatched and missed her intended prey that I remembered to breathe again.

My hawking dog is old and deaf now; I have to stamp my boot on the ground to get his attention. His time will come too and I know I will miss him about the place just as sure as I know I will start all over again someday with another dog. Only this week I was offered a pup by a well-bred bitch that I like the look of. She belongs to a friend that I would never have even met if it were not for Alice. The smallest thing can change the direction of a life and I can only wonder where it might have led had that nest been empty all those years ago.

I dug a hole between two recently planted apple trees, their first fruit turning red as I broke through the dry earth. Her plumage is perfect after her moult, a far cry from her early hunting seasons, catching crows, pheasants and magpies and smashing up her tail in the process. I jokingly referred to her as the Raggedy-Hawk in those days as I endlessly impeded and re-impeded rook feathers to repair her tail. I also remember the first time she encountered sheep-fencing. It was stretched tight across the field ready and waiting to slice her up into a four inch square. I put my hands to my face to block out her obvious doom, but as I looked through my fingers I saw her fold back her wings and slip through to catch her prey, I needn't have worried even if I had time to. My heart forever after skipped a beat when she performed this neat little trick.

She really was a tough old girl. I unfolded her feet as I laid her down in the earth. These tiny feet had held fast to a herring gull's neck as the gull's beak had encircled her body. I have seen her turn upside down in full flight trying to snatch at lapwings. I have seen her quickly grasp a swallow in mid-air. She regularly took crows down to earth, crows over twice her weight that took to the skies and thought they were safely away from the little menace.

I unfolded and extended each talon until I came to her damaged right outside toe. I often likened flying a sparrow to sea fishing. Freshwater fly-fishing is like flying a falcon at a single prey, selecting your fly to match the seasons insect hatch, intending your lure for only your

pre-selected trout or salmon and no other, specialised stuff indeed. When I was younger I spent hours throwing a baited line into the sea not knowing what was to come out, and this is what sparrowhawking is to me, you throw in your line, you cast off your Sparrowhawk and after that you really don't know what's going to happen, all hell can break loose and you can forget your specialised pre-planned hunting intentions. I once came home after a day's crow-hawking with three pheasants that needed treatment for shock and a good feed! But Alice did specialise and if she knew more about one prey than any other it was crows, hundreds upon hundreds of rooks fell to her grasp, on the ground or from the air, if she was on form she was nothing short of lethal. Local farmers used to ask me to swing by if it was not too much trouble. She has caught hooded and carrion crows and I have seen her give a raven a slap before wisely turning away.

“exactly ten years and ten weeks ago I climbed a spruce tree to select a young sparrowhawk, a couple of ounces of fluff and talons that was to give me more pleasure, pain, fun and adventure than all the other birds put together, and here she was dying in my hands”

But it was a magpie that cut her tendon. It was my fault and mine alone, as I removed her from yet another magpie to carry on the hunt for more exciting prey. When a sparrow hits its victim the adrenalin rush must be enormous as the only thing that exists is the flight, the capture and the killing of that prey, and only as she plucks her quarry can you see the adrenalin subside and some kind of calm return. This day I rushed things and slid her clenched talons off the magpie's head and along its open beak, and in the process a tendon was severed. It took me three courses of different antibiotics to kill that infection and left her with a useless toe, but as far as I could make out it never affected her catching ability.

There is a very narrow lane near where I live, with a gate to a grassy field that usually holds a flock of sheep and where I got many a flight over the years. On one particular day I came to this gate and off she went after a magpie, (a

quarry she found irresistible). She closed the gap quickly as the magpie sought refuge under the only cover available: a sheep. Now I don't know about you but some flights I can see and remember every detail in slow motion, and this is one of them. The magpie closed the distance between itself and the sheep but knew it was losing ground. Alice was locked on like a heat-seeking missile and the magpie knew he was in trouble. He let out a final squawk as he looked over his shoulder at his approaching doom. If he hadn't taken that look and concentrated on where he was going, he might have succeeded in diving under the sheep as he intended, instead he hit the sheep right in the arse as Alice hit him. It was the combined force of the two birds striking the sheep in such a tender area and the obvious fright causing it to leave the ground all four feet at the same time that made me laugh that day, and causes me to grin every time I pass that particular gate.

Another day, out in the car I passed her to a friend and told him to fly her. We set up a flight at a flock of mixed crows and he rolled the car window down as we approached. His face took on an unusual expression and I asked him was he ok. "My heart is beating out of my chest" was his reply. I knew exactly what he meant as I had experienced it so many times. Nine ounces of calm brown feathers sitting relaxed but alert on your fist, and in a split second of her choosing, she turns into nine ounces of muscle, spit and venom, with a mission that lasts only seconds, knowing absolutely anything could happen as soon as she leaves that glove. I know from the many days out hunting with her, getting her weight and condition just right, that even after all my planning we could still have a blank day or something unforeseeable could go wrong. She was a full imprint and it was not uncommon for her to blame me when things didn't go exactly to plan. Either way it was always exciting. I used to always say that it was these bad days that made the good days so good. But today as I laid her down for the last time and covered her little body with soil, I wonder if it was the good days that makes these bad days so unbearable.

Why do we do it to ourselves? Should we be hard as stone and just use creatures as tools for our enjoyment? The trouble is I could never do that, if I could I know the bad days would be easier but the good ones would not give me such a high. Seeing a bird I reared and trained, learning to fly, learning to use the air and wind, learning to strike and learning and improving with each miss; this is what does it for me, as I feel I am part of all this. I get pleasure watching a falcon rouse in the sky. I get pleasure in seeing a hawk that last week could not stand to be near me now bobbing its head in anticipation of my company. Am I a foolish soft git? Am I being

overly sensitive or sentimental about a bird? Most likely I am. But some things touch some folk more than others and after a decade I find it hard not to be affected.

Alice was just a normal sparrowhawk. They are all beautiful and fearless with an endless capacity to amaze. Ounce for ounce, there is no other falconry bird to rival them for bravery and excitement.

I filled back in the earth and rolled back the grass sod.

It was as if nothing had been touched.



Don Ryan Peregrine Falcon 2013

With Wild Take licences cancelled due to COVID 19, my dream of a grand adventure fishing for salmon and searching for peregrine sites in glorious spring time Kerry was scuppered for 2020. Not that I was guaranteed a licence, but I was optimistic and it pays to have a plan, particularly if you've gone to the effort of applying. My first and only wild take was in 2013 where I took a falcon from a midland quarry but I vowed my next falcon would be from a wilder far-flung location like a sea cliff or mountain site - somewhere isolated, wild and far from the madding crowd.

I received notification on 20th March 2013 which gave me plenty of time to search for nest sites.

I was offered the two sites in Kildare and Kilkenny which I submitted on my application.

The haunt of peregrines can be incredibly wild and beautiful places but can also be gloomy industrial areas like working quarries. Although the abandoned Victoria slate quarry in Windgap, Kilkenny is a stunning location that I hoped would produce. The quarry is situated in a quiet wooded valley with a stream running alongside the woods. The dark face of the quarry is like a natural cliff where a lake has formed at the base. In a cloudless sky, the lake reflected the spring blue sky like a turquoise gemstone.

As the Kilkenny sites were a bit of a trek on a regular basis, I focused more on the surrounding counties to Dublin. Ken Smith had mentioned a site less than 5km (as the crow flies) from the Hill of Allen. It's known locally as Boston Hill and is a working quarry. On my first visit, I got permission but couldn't find an eyrie.

The usual method of locating an active site is to exploit the falcons territorial instincts by clapping your hands hoping the falcons will show themselves. If they're in the area, they may lift from their ledge circling and screaming in the sky above. Another indicator is to look for the whitewash of mutes down the face of the cliff.

As time crunched on into the second week of May 2013, I had permission for three sites. The Windgap quarry in Kilkenny (which didn't appear active), a small quarry in Wicklow and the Boston Hill quarry in Kildare. I placed all my hope on the site in Wicklow as access and climbing were straightforward and I had seen both parents on the two occasions I visited.

On the 20th of May, I checked the Wicklow site and found only two chicks in the nest. The licence requires three. I decided to take a look

at the Boston Hill site but I wasn't optimistic as I only made one visit before and hadn't seen any falcons. I was in luck on this occasion as I met one of the workmen on site and he told me where the nest site was. I could just about make it out from the base of the quarry face but couldn't see what was inside. When I made my way around the top, I got a bird's eye view right into the eyrie. Lady luck was with me that day as there were four chicks perched on a shelf in a pocket of the quarry face. I was quite surprised at how well advanced in age the chicks were compared to the two chicks at the Wicklow site.

I returned home to email the Department with my written permission and told them I intended to take a chick three days later on the 24th of May.

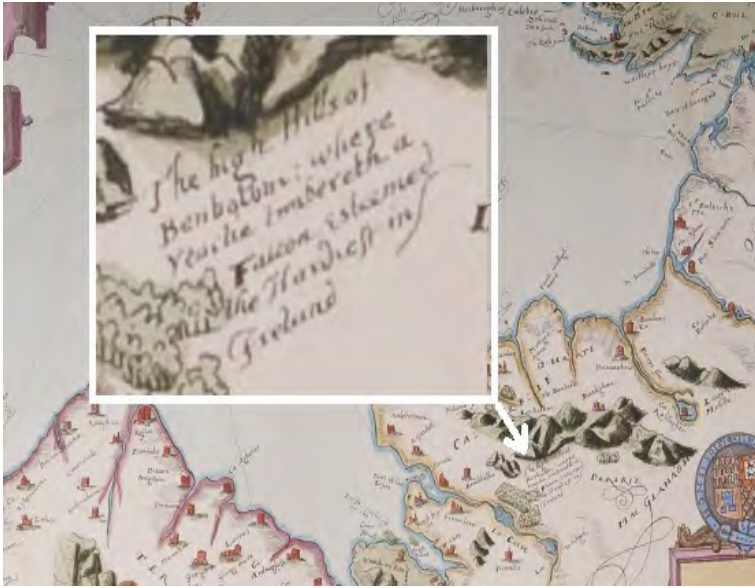


Boston Hill eyrie (left)

A day later, I got a phone call from the Regional District Conservation Officer asking would it be alright for Department climbers to make the climb. I said I had arranged a cherry picker but if they preferred to make the climb, I had no objection. Although I'm not a rock climber and the nest site wasn't too far down from the top, the face of the quarry looked unstable and there was an overhang of rock above the nest site that would make it difficult to climb over. I didn't cancel the cherry picker but placed it on standby if it was needed.



Lady Broderick (left)



Above: By the 17th Century, Falcon Eyries were well documented as we can see from Bartlett's map of NW Ulster drawn in 1602-3. Bartlett notes; "The high hills of Benbolbin where yearlie limbereth a falcon esteemed the hardiest in Ireland"

“The high hills of Benbolbin where yearlie limbereth a falcon esteemed the hardiest in Ireland”

On the day of the take, I was joined by Ken Smith and Shay O' Byrne. The two NPWS (National Parks and Wildlife) rangers intending to make the climb appeared a short while later. They were able to drive around to the top above the eyrie and their plan was to use the jeep as an anchor to tie off the ropes to enable them to climb down. This didn't work out too well as after a couple of failed attempts, the rangers admitted defeat declaring it was too dangerous. I phoned the cherry picker driver and it arrived on site a short while later.

When we finally got the truck mount cherry picker in place after removing boulders at the base, I went up with the driver and one of the rangers. We put the four chicks carefully in a basket and brought them down to examine. There were two tiercels and two falcons and all were suffering badly from frounce.

As my licence was for a female, I asked Ken Smith, Ireland's longest established falcon breeder which one he'd choose, hoping he'd have some insight into what constitutes a good hawk at that young age. Ken advised me to pick the falcon with the worst case of frounce as we'd be able to treat it and it would give her a better chance of survival rather than leaving her in

the nest. It was the right choice. Ken gave me tablets for the frounce and it cleared up in two to three weeks. I often wonder if the remaining chicks survived.

I wanted to give her an Irish name so I chose the name Gobnait. Coincidentally, only a few weeks later, I packed her up along with all the dogs and fishing rods and went down to Sneem for a week's fishing. While I was there, a notice in one of the shops with the name 'Gobnait ni Bhruadhair' caught my eye. So I looked into the matter further. It's a remarkable story of a titled English woman by the name of Lady Broderick that gave up everything to fight for Irish justice and freedom. She even gave up her name and title. I was so moved by her story that I felt I had to give it back to her. So that's how my Wild Take falcon came to be called Lady Broderick.

I'd like to say she's the greatest gamehawk that ever tore up an Irish sky but I'd be lying. In her seven seasons flying, she's only ever caught one wild prey which was a common snipe in her first season. It's not that she can't fly high or lacks a desire to kill, it's just that she doesn't give herself the opportunity. She will not position herself overhead when I present a point despite my many attempts at employing the usual traditional and modern techniques.

They say one of the signs of madness or stupidity is to keep doing the same thing over and over and expect a different result. I've wanted her to be a gamehawk and have possibly ignored many signs to the contrary suggesting she didn't have those qualities. Primarily due to the belief that I somehow messed up her training in the early years. I'm now coming round to believe she may be better suited as a pursuit hawk. Lady Broderick was taken from a lowland quarry site. The likelihood is her parents never needed to fly high, unlike those that come from the lofty eyries of mountains and sea cliffs. Which brings us back to why I had plans to fill my next wild take licence in the wild remote heights of County Kerry. Perhaps there's a good reason why the traditional high eyries were greatly prized back in the 17th Century. Despite all the modern advances and access to knowledge at our fingertips, we seem to have lost a great deal in the techniques of observation.

And that's the tale of my first and only wild take falcon. But it's not just a story of me taking a falcon from the wild; there was a whole adventure before I got to that point and it's still ongoing.

This coming season I intend to swap her red hood for a green hood and give the crows some restless dreams.



Keith Barker Peregrine Falcon 2011

On the 5 May 2011 I received a brown envelope with the Government harp embossed on the front cover. I will always remember the date as it was my birthday, and on opening the letter I was pleased to find that I had been successful in the peregrine draw after five unsuccessful years of trying.

All my designated nest sites in Co. Waterford had been blocked at the time by my ranger so I had to travel to Co. Cork where I found a few active eyries. After making a few enquiries with several landowners, I managed to secure permission from the Department and most importantly the owner of the land.

On the day of the take I was joined by my avian vet Maurice Nicholson, my neighbour and experienced climber Philip and Eva the NPWS ranger. The ranger made it perfectly clear at the site that she was totally against wild take and insisted that my climber take a photo of the clutch of youngsters to confirm there were three eyasses in the nest. I picked a female, I called her Eva after the ranger, she was just a downy with just a few pins emerging from her tail, I food imprinted her and once hard penned flew her to the kite every day in various locations with a view to catching a few pheasants with her when the game season opened in November.

Eva was the first falcon I had ever flown, she was

super loyal and super fit. When my son was born in early October five weeks premature, falconry had to be put on hold until we could get Harry out of the baby care unit and home with us. November came and went and so did the hunting season. The following summer I bought an F1 tiercel with a view to making a foundation for a peregrine breeding programme. As the license was granted for falconry and captive breeding my idea was to maybe fly a falcon later when family commitments were not as demanding.

I waited patiently until 2018 for Eva to lay her first egg. She was inseminated with semen from the F1 tiercel and produced three tiercels. I kept one for myself that I imprinted, 'Jurgen', Grant Haggard took another and the third went to a friend of Eric Witkowski in Poland.

In 2019 she produced four youngsters; three tiercels and her first daughter 'Faith', who I again imprinted and flew every day for the season. She caught rook, pheasant and stooped snipe left, right and centre but failed to catch one! As I write, it is the first week in April 2020 and I am waiting for Eva to lay her second egg. I am saying my prayers for another sister to 'Faith' who I might try my hand at crow hawking.



Jurgen (left)

Faith & Jurgen (above)

Eva (right)





Maurice Nicholson Peregrine Falcon 2018

I was lucky enough to get a wild take licence for a peregrine back in 2018. I was particularly pleased as, though it was my second wild take licence, my previous success in the draw had been over twenty years before. Fulfilling the licence was a great, though sometimes tiring, endeavour as the sites that I hoped to take from along the rocky Waterford coastline proved not to have bred successfully. Even so, that part of the journey was wonderful, as tramping some of the high sea cliffs in spring was exhilarating and rewarding just on its own. Eventually, when I found a suitable eyrie over the border in Co. Cork and had all the signed permissions and papers acquired, I could relax. I kept a close eye on the site and it was pure joy to discover that it held three young eyasses.

The taking day was a great experience too as Keith Barker, Don Ryan and my brother Martin from the USA accompanied the climber and myself to the site. There were three tiercels in the nest so I made my choice and brought him home in triumph. Harry, as I subsequently called him, has come on to become a snipe-hawk, accounting for three snipe in the last two weeks of his second season.

The wild take is something very special, and its memory is something that stays with you forever. We must do all that we can to preserve it for the future generations of Irish falconers.



Sparrowhawk Anon

Over the years I have frequently been asked by non-falconer/non-hunters, "What is it about falconry that interests you?", and I usually answer them with the same story. About ten years ago I had a sparrowhawk wild take licence and arranged with a falconer friend who also had one to meet the ranger and take the two eyasses on the same afternoon. My friend climbed the tree and I stayed on the ground talking to the ranger. I got the easy part! Anyway, we were a few days early so it was hard to distinguish males from females, but the ranger insisted we take them that day, so we crèche-reared them with one that another friend had taken. One ended up being a musket and, since I hadn't done any of the hard work, I volunteered to have him.

He was a handy little musket, with just a touch of imprinting that meant he made that little mewling noise when you passed by a tree and hadn't seen him, which was very handy, and he took quarry all through September and October, often flying twice a day. Come the end of October I decided to hack him back, as work and family commitments took up too much of the declining daylight hours and it was no longer possible to fly him daily. In my back garden is a Neolithic standing stone, about 3m high, with a good view of the valley and the surrounding fields and woods. He was not the first sparrowhawk I had hacked back and I did as before and started to give him his daily day-old-chick on top of the stone. After a few days of this I cut his jesses and left him off. Each evening I put a day old chick on top of the stone and he came in for six days, then stopped. I often wondered if a sparrowhawk hacked back in this way would survive the winter.

The following September, almost a full year later, I was shooting rabbits in the big field across the road when a wild musket landed on the fence post, just a metre away from me, and looked straight at me, head on its side. I just knew this had to be my musket and if I had had a day-old-chick with me I swear I could have picked him up. Anyway, we stood looking at each other for an age and then he flew up into a high hawthorn bush. I started walking back down towards the house and when I looked back, he had gone. Very few things bring a tear to my eye, but I confess that moment did.

I think I saw him again once, during that, his second winter; a mature musket in bright livery ambushed a goldfinch from the bird-table. I wished him good luck, there are plenty of goldfinches here and they cost me a fortune in wild-bird seed anyway.

"What is it about falconry that interests me?" -the thread that connects you to a wild hawk is so easily broken, that when you don't break it, the reward is so great it is almost spiritual.



Trevor Roche Peregrine Falcon 2017

Photo of my wild take, Jinx . He was one of four tiercels at the same site from Co. Louth. This eyrie was unknown to me but a fisherman told me about it, hence the name Jinx!

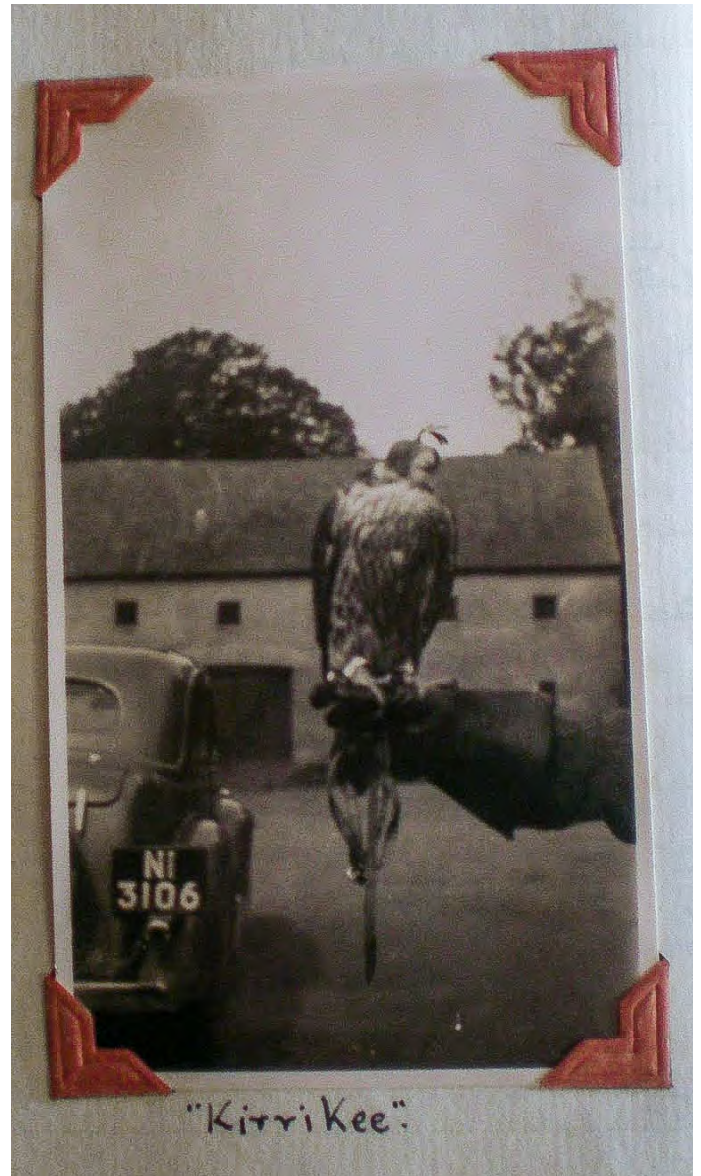




William Mac Dougald, Irish falconer and past member in of the IHC, scaling a tree in search of a Merlin nest, circa 1930's

An extract from a diary belonging to Ned Bayly of Ballyarthur House, Co. Wicklow, and a photo of his wild take peregrine 'KirriKee'.

Wild Take was the only method available to obtain a hawk in 1940.



Falcon "Kiriikee."

1940.

Got from Nest, from the North
Prison, Glenmalur, on the morning of
June 9th. ~~in the morning.~~ at
1^o'clock. Delivered at College at
11.-15. in the morning of Monday
10th. Put out in back house
that day and was out at
back till 6th. July. She was
very wild and was caught after
* the others; they were caught up
on the 29th, but were put
out at back on Monday 3rd.
She was absent a few times,
and am nearly certain killed
for herself. I could not
watch her much. She was
fairly alive.

Got a wire on July
12th. saying she was coming by
evening train. Arrived in by

The Sneem Meet 2019

Ger Grant

The excitement had been building for a while in anticipation of travelling to Sneem for our IHC meet. It has become my favourite place to go for not only the exceptional location we hunt rabbits in, but also for the friendly local people, exceptional hospitality at the Sneem Hotel and the awe inspiring landscape. Every county in Ireland has its beauty spots, but this part of the world has something special. I can't explain it, but I think it's in the aforementioned package, one that inspires and makes you feel great!

On this occasion I decided to invite my Dad (a non falconer) to come along for the few days as it's a place I thought he would appreciate, it would give us a chance to catch up and it would also allow him to see some falconry. With easy access to the hunting grounds, he could come and go as he pleased which was essential because of his knackered knees which have high mileage. Falconry is not something he'd ever witnessed before except to see me handling my birds at home, heading off for weekends with my jeep full of animals and leaving family behind. I got the impression he didn't get it!

Away I headed on the Thursday evening once I got my work and family life in order. It's a 3.5hr journey of mostly good roads, but is always more tiring in the dark. I arrived just after 9pm to find everyone in high spirits. I settled down for the evening in the hotel bar for one or two sociable tipples with everyone and eventually headed off to bed early enough to ensure a good start to my first days hunting.

Derrynane sand dunes are just outside Caherdaniel village, a place surrounded by outstanding natural beauty. I'm no wordsmith and struggle to write about this kind of thing but Daniel O'Connell (Daniel O'Connell, often referred to as The Liberator or The Emancipator, was an Irish political leader in the first half of the 19th century) wrote about his home, whose back garden we were about to hunt in, and he sums it up perfectly in this piece: "This is the wildest and most stupendous scenery of nature - and I enjoy residence here with the most exquisite relish... I am in truth fascinated by this spot: and did not my duty call me elsewhere, I should bury myself alive here." - Daniel O'Connell, 22 October 1829. As a side note Daniel was a keen hunting man himself and kept a pack of beagles for hunting hare. I also found out through some research on his family that his uncle, also called Daniel, joined the military in France and was appointed Master of Falconry for a period of time. He later

became a Colonel in the French and British Military, at different points in time.

The forecast was good with 25kmh wind but it was definitely a stiffer wind than forecast. Any hawk was going to have to be in great condition this day if it was to bag any game! In attendance were Jamsie King, Andi Chewing, Damien Jacob, Bob Walton, Gary and Sinead Timbrell, Bill Hammond, Noel Grant and myself. Three female Harris Hawks and one male.

The days hunting didn't disappoint, the slips were slow to start but we found a sweet spot where everyone had loads of quality slips. Damien was late arriving with his Imprint Female, he stepped into the slipping order about half way through the day, his first slip saw his hawk bag a rabbit after a great flight. That hawk went on to bag two more during the afternoon. Jamsie's male was to also bag a rabbit, his flying and acrobatics used to catch its prey made the most exciting pursuits of the day for me. That bird's determination is second to none, grappling with the rabbit as it puts in, rabbit jinking and avoiding the talons, hawk putting in again and again, it seems like the rabbits skin is too tough to penetrate for his talons as the hawk constantly snatches at it, eventually getting a hold of it by the head and it's all over! Andi's female is a sister to my hawk, was crèche reared and used for hawk walks, but her hunting instinct was too strong for that job so Andi took her on as a hunting hawk, pursuing what she was designed for. This bird only had one rabbit before this meet so everyone in attendance wanted this girl to bag another before the day was out. She had flown strongly all day but wasn't getting a break, but eventually she found her rabbit and bound to the head like a seasoned pro. Andi was beaming from ear to ear which was the making of her day. The following two days that same hawk caught partridge! My own hawk was a little underweight, while she flew well, she ran out of steam in the afternoon so I fed her up hoping for a better following day.

The next day the weather was favourable, and we were joined by Michael Quinn, Darry Reed and our new friends from Quebec, falconers Joanie and Anne. The slips were slow to come but eventually we all had plenty of them. This day was my day, my girls second slip was a very powerful 60-80m dash finishing with a head bind, no messing, she wanted it badly, so much so I had difficulty trading her off. Her next slip was shorter, maybe 25m and she just got hold of it as it made the burrow, being pulled in half



a metre or so. All I could see was a ball of feathers, couldn't make out what was what, I carefully placed my ungloved hand in under the bird trying not to get footed and I found what I thought was a rabbit leg and started to pull, but embarrassingly I quickly realised it was the hawk's complete tail I was pulling! I quickly let go in horror, tried again for the real leg and got both out thankfully! All the other hawks flew really well but had no luck in bagging a rabbit. Damien's ferret laid up, so while he waited for it to reappear from its 16ft deep adventure, he passed his hawk over to Darry to fly for the rest of the day. I'm pretty sure I saw her enjoying the experience.

Needless to say the social aspects of the meet were also great, meeting friends old and new, celebrating world falconry day that night in the local bar/ restaurant where wonderful food was had, drink was drunk and stories shared of the day's events.

A sincere thank you to all that organise it, and to those who come from near and far to partake in the meet, it's a very special event in the clubs calendar!

Oh, and by the way... I think my Dad has a better understanding of the obsession of falconry now!

“I want the calm and quiet of my loved native hills – the bracing air purified as it comes over the world of waters, the cheerful exercise, the majestic scenery of these awful mountains... Oh! These are the scenes to revive all forces of natural strength – to give new energy to the human mind and raise the thoughts above the grovelling strife of individual interests. Do not tear me from this spot until I have enjoyed some of its renovating effects.”

– Daniel O’Connell



Firsts

Andi Chewning

This season was filled with a lot of firsts for me; 'my' first bird, her first kill, our first field meet and many more; and as exciting as all of those things were the thing that sticks with me the most - as a total outsider coming in - is the incredible feeling of unity I get at the Irish Hawking Club gatherings. For those that don't know me, a little about my history is that I have lived in eight different countries over the world in the last ten years. Home has been where I lay my head at night more than where I come from for the better part of my life. Across all of that though I have found both not for- and for-profit clubs and organizations in almost all of these places, and I have always been an active part of the clubs and organizations I joined. All around the world people congregate to share their passion for something. Whether it's orchestral music, board games, agriculture, rock-climbing, skydiving, education, yachting, or hunting. people like to get together and share that 'thing' that makes them tick with other people. So there has always been a club to join, or an event to go to in every country. It has always been fun, there has always been a person or three who I really connected with about something, and always a gathering to look forward to. Falconry seems to be no different, and also like some of the more niche sports - eg. skydiving - it has a very familial air to it where no matter where you go or where you're from, you, as a falconer, are part of the family in whichever club you find yourself amongst. And - for me - that feeling was never so strongly felt as at my first field meet.

I was a bit late to the gathering scene this year and didn't get to meet any other club members or make it to any field meets or club events until mid-November when I finally got to slip away for the Sneem meet. With my hawk and gear in the car, I was eager to hunt the next day and to see what a field meet was like. I was admittedly nervous. I had total faith in my hawk, I worked with her daily and hunted with her as much as I could, but I was nervous of the kind of people I would encounter, having only really seen a broader spectrum of falconers (aside from those I trained with) through the likes of Facebook pages and forums, which are as often as not more full of venom, prejudice, and clique than help and *real* guidance; I wasn't nervous of the mechanics of the field meet, I was nervous



of judgement and preclusion.

After checking-in at the hotel and getting settled in I ventured down to the hotel bar (all good stories start at the bar don't they?) and was blessed to see a familiar face among the folk. I went and said hello, ordered a drink and waited, still wondering what to expect. Is this to be a mild affair, with two or three drinks, an early bed, and very serious sport the next day? Was this going to be cliquey and would I end up a wallflower? Those of you that do know me will know it's very hard to sequester me away to the sidelines for long! Would there be any other women here? Fortunately I didn't have to wait long until I started getting answers. The person that I knew soon introduced me to other club members, and they were just as open and welcoming as the best folk in the best clubs I have been a member of. I was immediately invited back to their apartment for a community dinner, no questions asked and no expectations of me either. Thus the night began to flow. It wasn't long then until I found myself smiling and laughing and trading bird-based stories with many other like-minded folk, and feeling all the worries and anxieties that had been on my mind start to fade away. Then the dinner, the main was Connemara lamb, and I don't remember what else - aside from a very good Brie brought by another guest - and heaping portions of thankfulness and community and a sense of familiarity and welcome in a room packed with strangers. And I do mean packed, we had to borrow chairs from the other part of the apartment and sit three together on an overstuffed lounge chair to all try and fit around the table! And at the end of it all, we took a moment to appreciate that there were nine different countries represented among the fourteen people packed in around the table. We were from all across the globe, and we were all equals and all family.

The next morning brought me to meet yet

more 'family' I didn't know I had with my first ever outing. I was unabashedly the newbie and - probably to at least some people's annoyance - asked questions like one. But the more experienced 'dirt hawkers' soon took me under their own wings and showed me the way. I had a blast. My hawk had a blast too (if I'm to put words into her beak) and had many good slips, and near misses. She seemed to learn through watching the other hawks and her attitude - to me - changed through the day as more and more birds caught, fed-up, and were put away; and she seemed to become more determined until near mid-afternoon she finally connected and took one for herself. Cheers and congratulations were given by all. The others had seen both my and her frustration build over missed quarry and seemed to hold a collective breath for us. I remember it clearly, because it was so different to what I was expecting. It wasn't competitive to the point of asininity like other sports I've participated in. It was filled with comradery and support. Pride in each individual's hawk and discussion on training methodology and efficacy to be sure, but a collective appreciation of a good flight or instantaneous recall regardless of who's hawk it was or if it was a successful flight. We were all there to enjoy the purest part of falconry - the magic of a hawk in flight after natural quarry - and miraculously to me we didn't let the human aspect of it taint the experience.

Given that this was my first ever meet, and one which offered a wide variety of prey and opportunity for many different birds to hunt, I chose to go out and watch the *accipiters* fly the next day. I was new and eager to see the true hawks hunt and - if I could - try my bird on some feathered quarry (she's always had a very strong interest in feather and had almost bound to ducks a couple of times, so I thought if there was opportunity and

time at the end of the day to let her try). The day was such a huge learning experience for me, talking with keepers of *accipiters*, learning about their psychology as opposed to the *buteo/parabuteos* and *aquilas* I was more familiar with, and it was a lot of fun. Again, as the day before, I found myself taken under the wing of the more experienced falconers and rather than be shunned for my inexperience and naiveté I was welcomed and guided and made to feel a part of it, rather than the outsider I felt 30 hours before.

So, with all the multitude of things to write about, from the importance falconry has played in my life, to 'A Day In The Boots of a Full-Time Falconer', to a step-by-step of my hawk's best take, this is what I wanted to share. The feeling of easy familiarity, welcomeness, and family that to me plays an integral role in The IHC. Even though the jubilee of watching my Harris hawk take her first fur and her first feather will always stay with me (as my squeals of delight and pride will pierce the memory of those present at the latter) the warmth and welcome, the support and guidance I received on my first night and first day at my first field meet is what I will cherish long after my bird draws her last breath and even until I take my own. Thank you to those of you who included me, helped me, guided and chastised me; you know who you are and I am grateful.



Tango

Stephen Power

The small male Harris has just finished his second season. I'm delighted with how well he has done on rabbits this season. He's built great confidence and has taken many in fine style, rabbits bolted by ferrets, from following on and on the lamp. 37 kills with 28 of those being rabbits!

It wasn't an easy start with my permission lacking rabbits in big numbers, so every bolt took a lot of effort to arrange and I got so frustrated by him getting kicked off big rabbits as he tried to get to grips with them at speed! I stuck it out for weeks on end, hunting almost daily with him either lamping or ferreting. I even built a DIY drag lure to try to get him taking longer, faster slips with better footing and more confidence. Then he just 'clicked' into Full Predator mode, like a Turbo version of his former self! Bagging rabbit after rabbit regardless of heavy thorny cover and taking on long slip at rabbits 150 m+. With fast jinking flights, he grabbed all but the luckiest rabbits by the head, binding to them with perfect two feet head holds, curling the rabbits up on the spot no matter how big they were!

An absolute transformation compared to his first season. I'm so glad that I stuck with him to finally see a small but brave, super fit and conditioned Harris in all his might! Truth be told I was so frustrated at the start that I wanted to swap him for a male gos to gain that extra speed and aggression for hunting that most goshawks I'd seen in action had. But in the end he won me over by displaying 95% of that speed and aggression for hunting, but with the added 95% easier to live with and easier to fly in a variety of styles that comes with the small but mighty Harris hawk.

So don't give up on that hawk that's not going 100% just yet they might be just ready to click!

I'd like to add that I could never have been successful on rabbits if it wasn't for the help others have given me. That's why I like to help others, as I know how hard it can be to get everything going well in the beginning. I am forever grateful to those that took the time to get me going.





As we walk along the Bog

Joanie Lamoureux

Falconry in Quebec, Canada, has only been legal since 2008. Therefore the history and knowledge surrounding the practice of falconry is pretty recent in our part of the country. Rabbit, hare and squirrel are the main fur prey to be found, even though squirrels aren't legal to hunt yet. Grey partridge, ptarmigan, sharp-tailed, ruffed and spruce grouse are amongst the upland game available. Starlings, red-winged blackbirds, doves, crows, pigeons and sparrows are found almost all year round in most fields surrounding towns. Migratory species include many types of duck and geese and of course Wilson's snipe and American woodcock. In September 2018, Quebec obtained wild take licences on four species of birds of prey which are red tailed hawks, merlins, Cooper's hawks and northern goshawks. It is quite new but I think this may change our way of practicing falconry considerably. Our trip to Ireland was mostly motivated by an inner desire to bring knowledge to our local falconry association about the hawking of snipe and woodcock as I think there is great potential for falconers here to hunt those species.

The common snipe (*gallinago gallinago*) found in Ireland, is much the same as our Wilson's snipe except for a few different markings. Each year around August, resident

Irish snipe are joined by migrant snipe from northern continental Europe and Iceland. They will only return to their breeding ground in spring. Each year, following their migration, falconers and hunters are entering bogs looking for them. Our snipe also migrate and our hunting seasons is much the same.

Our first day hawking snipe took place in the valley of Glencar, Co. Kerry, surrounded by the Macgillicuddy's Reeks and the snowy peak of Carrauntoohil. We walked the boggy wet and spongy ground all day; we were told it is the best place to find snipe at this time of the year. As we were in mid-November the temperature was quite cold and the wind seemed to be whispering a last farewell to autumn.

After a full evening of flying falcons at snipe it was time for most falconers to head back for the day. It had been a good day, multiple flushes and great flights but no snipe in the bag. The sun was slowly starting to disappear behind the mountains as the yellow-eyed hawks were taken out of their giant hoods; it was time to fly Irish sparrowhawks.

As we were walking the field with two Irish red setters in front of us, I could not help but think that we were walking the same path as so many did before us. The sparrowhawks were not slipped from the fist or a tree, like all *accipiters* are in Canada, they were thrown from the hand, like a dart, in a longstanding technique that has



been practiced for thousands of years. As we walked, the falconer made sure the spar was cast in the right position inside the palm of his hand. Two yellow eyes with dark feathers were the only thing you could see poking out. The hawk was still, keen and ready to kill. The sun was setting and we had about forty five minutes to have a flight. But the dogs knew what they were doing and within ten minutes we had a strong point. We moved forward and positioned ourselves rapidly as the snipe is no fool and has many maneuvers to avoid predators. The command was given and the dogs flushed the snipe but it knew what to do and skillfully evaded the spar, landing a few hundred meters farther away. The falconer called his hawk back with his lure and he cast it again in the palm of his hand. It was almost night and a blue fog was now covering the bog as we decided to go and try for a reflush. Both spars we were flying were named Hawkeen which means 'small hawk'. At first what I thought was a lack of inspiration, is in fact probably the best name you could give a wild Irish spar. They don't have names because they don't need them.

We were walking in a line, silently, waiting for the elusive snipe to make a mistake. I decided to place myself far to the left, as I'd learned that snipe tend to run on the ground to avoid being detected and I was thinking our snipe was maybe far from where it had landed a few minutes previously. As I was deep in my thoughts, it flushed again but both falconer and hawk were ready. The spar took to the air with the agility they are known for. At first, it seemed the snipe had tricked us again but the Irish spar won't be fooled twice and in a moment of pure *accipiter* boldness, it turned on itself, catching the snipe backward in mid-air. The bog floor shook as echoes of joy and celebration resonated across the valley, the spar was silently plucking the snipe, nature had followed its course and we were lucky enough to witness a glimpse of it.

After a week of observing amazing flights, snipe hawking with talented falconers in Ireland, I'm convinced that this practice should be developed in our province. Snipe are an amazing, challenging species to hunt. As I'm writing these lines, I've already started to scout some territories for snipe and woodcock. Woodcock are also a great quarry and in good numbers here. Considering Quebec is mostly covered by dense forest, I'm thinking that flying *accipiters* is probably our best option at hawking snipe. And now that we have wild take licences for Cooper's hawks and northern goshawks, I think the best is yet to come.



Remembering Bruce P Wilkie

1963-2020

The Irish Hawking Club is deeply saddened to announce the death of one of our members Mr. Bruce P. Wilkie



Obituary by Kevin Marron

Bruce's sad and sudden death came as a shock to everyone who knew him. Bruce was born in England to an Irish mother and a Scottish father, his father being a gamekeeper meant the family had to move around a lot in Bruce's youth. Having spent some time on the Hardwick estate in Derbyshire, England, the family then moved to Ireland where they spent time on many estates such as Adare Manor, Limerick, Rathvilly Co. Carlow and Ardee Co. Louth before finally settling down at the age of fifteen in his mother's home place of Wolf Hill, The Swan, Co. Laois.

Bruce's lifelong love of nature/wildlife and country pursuits began to blossom at this age and no doubt led to his wealth of knowledge in later years. Bruce's time spent with lurchers, terriers, ferrets, finches, rod and gun stood to him when he eventually turned his hand to falconry. His journey began with broadwings and shortwings and soon progressed on to longwings. Bruce's highflying G/P hybrid instilled in him the thrill of the stoop and to quote Bruce himself, "it makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up". Bruce soon moved onto pure peregrines and after a very successful breeding project undertaken by himself, it is without doubt that he took great delight and pride each time he cast off one of his own tiercels.

On a personal note, his company, his kindred spirit and sense of humour I will miss dearly on the bog. Bruce's observations and field craft were always second to none and only ever added to the day. Bruce's funeral at Wolf Hill on 19 September 2020 was attended by members of IHC who formed a guard of honour with falcons and dogs.

On behalf of the Irish Hawking Club, we would like to send our deepest condolences to Bruce's family.

Go n-eiri an bothar leat!

Kevin Marron



Keith Barker

I first met Bruce Wilkie at the Glenmalure Lodge Hotel in Co. Wicklow in 2007 when he was attending an Irish Hawking Club fieldmeet at Ballinacor, flying with the broadwing section. I did not get to see him fly his hawk as I was in the goshawk group, but my first impression of Bruce was he had an uncanny resemblance to the actor Sean Bean, a rough chiseled appearance with that rasping Co. Offaly/ Co. Laois accent to go with it. He seemed to be a competent falconer and all round hunter in general, not surprising really as he was the son of a gamekeeper who probably passed on his love of country life over to his son Bruce.

Later Bruce got into flying longwings, and I met him at the International Snipe Meet in Athlone, Ireland in 2015. Bruce was flying his Gyr Peregrine, a real high mounting hawk, and one falconer commented that if the hawk belonged to him he would travel the length and breadth of the country to fly ducks with it. Bruce waited until the very last in the slipping order before taking his turn to fly his hawk, making sure that all falconers who had travelled from abroad had flown before him, a real courteous gesture coming from a gentleman in the field.

Later Bruce got into breeding his own line of Irish peregrines from wild taken stock by natural pairing. He was good at it, producing quality hawks for Irish falconers, and he also offered assistance to those who wanted wild taken eyasses parent reared if they were taken as downies, putting them under his own pair to be fostered. He didn't own a fancy incubator, some of his peregrine eggs were hatched under bantams then put back with parent birds.

The peregrine that he flew last year was a real prospect, a high mounting, loyal tiercel. I asked him this summer for a youngster from that pairing for next year, but I guess that is not going to happen now. I will miss Bruce on the snipe hawking meets, as I'm sure we all will. Not only the hawking, but the chat and banter and the advice to anyone who was looking for it, whether they asked for it or not, but by no way in an imposing manner.

God bless Bruce_.

Keith Barker, Co. Waterford



“His life always seemed to be alive with interests which he pursued quietly without fanfare or ego. His passions were more than theoretical, he was happiest in the field, a keen falconer and gifted falcon breeder. “

-Robert Hutchinson

Images by
Kevin Marron



Robert Hutchinson

I was deeply shocked when I heard of Bruce's death, one of my trusted 'phone a friends' now gone in his mid- 50's. To me, he was a quiet man with an unquiet soul, stirred by a deep passion for field sports and a love of nature. His life always seemed to be alive with interests which he pursued quietly without fanfare or ego. His passions were more than theoretical, he was happiest in the field, a keen falconer and gifted falcon breeder. Bruce's character was open and generous. In conversation, keen to learn, always asking questions and listening respectfully to the replies. He had a mischievous sense of humour which I am proud to boast I was a target.

I trusted him, and during August I called him and asked his advice on a sensitive topic. His orderly mind kicked in offering suggestions, then he requested some time to think about it but called me back almost immediately with his answer. I had no need to discuss the matter further.

In our last conversation a few days before his death, his supple mind was on display talking freely on working terriers, bees, breeding genetics, hobbies (the falcons) and more. One of his last comments on this last phone call were "I'm really grateful two of my tiercels I bred this season are going to falconers who are going to fly them really hard (Eric & Grant)... really delighted". His voice conveyed a sense of deep satisfaction; you can accurately fix a man's character against such a comment, you need no more and it's against that line I will always remember Bruce 'the quiet man with an unquiet soul'.

R.I.P.

Robert Hutchinson

Eoghan Ryan

I met Bruce on regular occasions down through the years at the midlands fieldmeets, typically out on the bog with his falcons and setter and have fond memories of chatting to him. I recall evenings in the pub or hotel and if he wasn't there with his (new) girlfriend, you might find him opportunistically chatting up some local women with a pint in hand. I got to know him better in recent years. In 2017, I was finally successful in the peregrine wild take licensing lottery. I had a number of sites identified in counties Wicklow, Kildare and Laois and in the end, I went with the Co. Laois site as it was a disused quarry whose owners had a relaxed attitude to wild take



Image by Kevin Maron

and insurances. I wasn't interested in an imprint - I wanted a parent reared - and Bruce kindly offered and allowed me to put the downy falcon in with his three captive bred peregrines and their parents. Within half an hour or less of taking the bird, I was in Bruce's yard. As I gently placed my downy falcon onto the nesting ledge through a hatch, Bruce was in the house where he had the cctv footage relayed to a tv screen in his bedroom and kept talking to me via the mobile, reassuringly, while keeping an eye on the behaviour of the parents and siblings, hoping they would accept it. I was on the ready to retrieve my falcon in an instant, if required. Thankfully, it all worked out and a few months later in mid-August I retrieved my beautiful hard panned falcon, while Bruce's elderly mother entertained three of my boys with tea and biscuits.

I have fond memories of Bruce and recall encountering him and Kevin Marron near my own stomping grounds at Lacken, one evening last year while they both began the early training of young falcons. Over this past spring and summer, we

spoke regularly on the phone – about falconry, breeding hens (I had a Pekin hen beneath a bush under the kitchen window with 18 eggs and sought his advice); rearing pigeons (I called him about his trap door set up, which allowed his birds come and go as they pleased – he followed up with photos and videos); and beekeeping (I was trying to get back into beekeeping and he talked about the merits of his Buckfast bees). I liked Bruce. He was a straight talker, but this was balanced with a genuine sincerity and positivity. I will miss Bruce.

Eoghan Ryan

Tom Ahearne

My friend Bruce.. I met Bruce about ten or eleven years ago through a mutual friend (Mark Hayes) . He struck me as a man of few words, but when asked he certainly gave his opinion on whatever topic was being discussed. I would not see him too often at first because I was flying pursuit with a pere-saker and that wasn't his thing, until he decided to tag along one day and he seemed to enjoy it more than he expected.

I went up to meet him one day when he was flying Skud to the kite with Mark. He put the kite up to roughly 2000 feet, then unhooded Skud, who gave a rouse and then took off at about a 45 degree angle until barely visible, then turned and returned over us at about the height of the kite. He began to circle us at that height, then Bruce pulled out the garnished lure and Skud dropped like a rocket. I knew there and then where he got his name and I was hooked straight away and set about getting a peregrine. As time went on I would find myself contacting Bruce more frequently to get his opinion on how to train my falcon to climb and hold position. He was always willing to help and give his opinion but always ended with "that is what I would do but you do it whatever way works best for you". He would never force his way on anybody, and he would go out to the field or onto the bog and watch me get it wrong time after time and never interfere until asked. Bruce was always determined to breed and fly his own Irish peregrines. He wanted to see Irish bred birds flown in Ireland and I am delighted to say that he achieved that. He was a good friend and mentor and will be missed by me and others.

R.I.P

Tom Ahearne, Co. Waterford.

Mike Nicholls

I first came to Ireland in 2006 just after a lengthy period in hospital. Walking the bogs at an informal snipe-hawking meet was part

of my rehabilitation! It was then that I added catching an Irish snipe with a peregrine to my 'bucket list' and several local falconers took me under their wing and helped me achieve this. One of these was Bruce and I'm pleased to report that, although it took until 2016 Bruce was there when I caught my first snipe with 'Bodmin', my tiercel peregrine. Throughout these ten years of trying, all the lads including Bruce were patient with my health condition and encouraged me to keep at it, for which I'm eternally grateful.

Bruce and I shared other interests, especially breeding birds including finch/canary hybrids as well as falcons, and we corresponded, he shared his wisdom, books and information and most of all good humour.

Bruce was a kind and considerate friend and his passing is a great loss to falconry and beyond. I understand he was also a bit of a ladies' man. So I like to think as well as looking down on his mates flying their falcons, he's also chatting up the angels!

Rest in Peace Bruce

Mike Nicholls

Tommy Byrne

It is not every day that you bump into someone that has so many interests in common that you stay firm friends for over two decades. So it was with Bruce. We first met in the late nineties when I was flying a variety of hawks at rabbits, pheasants and pigeon. At the time Bruce was shooting over black Labradors, not the heavy show type but smaller more workable dogs. What I remember was that Bruce expected his retrievers to not only point on locating a bird, but they would hunt down and kill foxes which Bruce, being a poultry keeper, rated as essential.

Bruce was an outdoors man and he lived to hunt and fish. When we first met, he was not long back from a visit to Australia where he fished and attended a hunt on feral pigs, known locally as razorbacks, with a hotch-potch collection of hounds. These pig hunts were rough and not for the faint of heart, but that would suit Bruce just fine and I can just picture him in the thick of it. With such a love for hunting, he looked forward to getting out as the pheasant season approached, when he would be out with his black labrador at his heel, kicking up pheasants across County Laois or the beet fields of Carlow. We were discussing work once and I asked if he was working the next day. He looked at me as if I were a crazy lunatic and said, "No. sure isn't it the first day of the pheasant season!" In all the years

I have known him he never missed an opening day on pheasants.

Bruce was a man of many interests and held strong opinions on every subject that he was familiar with. We held long discussions on dogs, the best breeds to use to create the best lurcher or which qualities produced the best terrier for a particular job. He had his opinions and I had mine and on more than one occasion we would agree to disagree. It was not that one of us was wrong but trying to change Bruce's mind on something that he had his mind set on was like moving a mountain with your bare hands.

One of the many things we had in common was keeping finches and canaries. Since my teens I had bred different breeds of canaries, especially loving the Irish fancy; a small and sleek little bird with a beautiful song and a joy to have around. Many years were spent crossing different breeds of canaries with goldfinches to produce mules, not just an attractive hybrid but a bird that would sing its heart out all day long. To the purist a goldfinch mule must sing the proper goldfinch song in all its glory, not a mixed-up song with some canary notes and some goldfinch phrases thrown in. To achieve this end most mule breeders were happy just to put the young male in a cage next to a male goldfinch so he could learn his song, but not Bruce. When Bruce did something, he did it right. He not only bred some of the most beautiful goldfinch mules I have seen, using not only the different breeds of singing roller canaries, but used the new-coloured mosaic canaries, variegated and silver varieties to enhance the colour of the off-spring. When it came time to teach them to sing Bruce really pulled out all the stops. He emptied his shed of every male canary so not one canary note would be heard, leaving only goldfinches for the young mules to learn from. But this alone was not enough for Bruce, he made a CD of a goldfinch singing its heart out and played it on loop at full volume from sunrise to sunset for weeks, so that every goldfinch mule in his shed was the equivalent of an avian Pavarotti.

It was his interest in falconry that drew us together as mates. Back in the nineties I was hunting most days with Sparrowhawk and Black Sparrowhawk on pheasants and crows, and on winter nights was out with Harris' hawks catching pigeons and rabbits on the lamp. The first large hawk that Bruce flew was a female Harris' hawk that had not seen very much flying and was passed to him because she was unsociable and did not like to fly with other hawks. If you were in the field with a hawk on your fist you had to keep your eyes open for his bird or she might take your hawk right off the glove. So, when I was out with Bruce we took turns and I kept my hawk in the car while we flew his. I have seen good Harris hawks and some mediocre ones. Bruce had such

determination in the hunting field that he turned that hawk into a rabbit catching machine. He was out in the field with her every chance he got, so much so that there was not a rabbit safe in the county. He learned from his hawk and she learned from him and they became a lethal hunting team. I watched them hunt a field of long grass in late summer, Bruce walking at a pace that allowed his hawk to fly forward to the trees ahead and hold a position where she could strike if a rabbit was to explode from the grass and make a break for the ditch. By the time he walked one small field they had two rabbits ready for the pot.

One day Bruce had got a call about an injured hawk that one of his friends had found. Suspecting the usual sparrowhawk or kestrel he went around to collect it and to his surprise he found a male hobby. The tiny falcon had somehow broken a wing and after initial first-aid, he hopped up on Bruce's glove and within minutes was eating some pigeon breast. After a visit to the vet to pin the wing, luckily it was a clean break and could be operated on, the Hobby recovered quite well and was able to fly, not perfectly and definitely not well enough to make the tough six week journey back to Africa, but well enough. As Bruce said "He kinda flies with a limp". After the little hobby's recovery, we put him into a breeding aviary with my female and we produced what we believe was the only young hobby ever bred in captivity in Ireland.

Bruce enjoyed flying and hunting hawks but as the years passed it was the falcons that absorbed his attention. As the Labrador retrievers aged, they were replaced with English setters, dogs we refer to as gun dogs today but were originally bred for use with falcons. It was the peregrine falcon that he wanted to fly and being Bruce, not just any peregrine falcon, but pure Irish peregrine falcons.

He trained them well and flew them hard on snipe on the midland bogs and when they reached breeding age, he was ready and had everything organized so these birds would have whatever was needed to optimize their chances of breeding.

Living in the next county, most of our conversations were held by phone and hours would pass as he weighed up aviary design and construction materials, which gravel would be best for nest ledges and which camera system to use. For Bruce just putting a pair together and hoping just was not enough. The meticulous care and attention he had when breeding small birds showed through in his falcon breeding, he had the cameras set up in such a way that when he was at home in the cottage he could keep a close eye on the pairs and make sure everything was going to plan.

Bruce really was a man of the field and absolutely loved the outdoors. I called in one day last year and after drinking the compulsory

mug of tea he showed me his latest venture at the end of the garden. He had recently set up two beehives and had started producing his own "Wolf Hill Honey". Wolf Hill being the area he lived in, where legend has it the last wolf in Ireland was killed in 1786. I always had a passing interest in bee-keeping but listening to Bruce that day explaining the hive construction and set-up, why he preferred the more placid Buckfast variety of bee and just listening to his enthusiasm while he explained exactly what was going on in his little garden in Laois had me captivated.

My eldest daughter, now a grown adult, lately reminded me of when she was a child, playing in the garden with Bruce's son of the same age. She had started to train her own kestrel and was using a full-size hawking glove to handle the little falcon. On Bruce's next visit he gifted her a tiny single-skin falconry glove to fit her small hand.

Bruce was not a man to engage in the rat race. He worked hard on construction and road building, and if ever there was someone that worked to live instead of living to work, it was Bruce. He dropped by one day driving a banger of a car and I asked where his own was. "Ah, I ran into a cow" was his reply. He had been travelling to work early one foggy morning, driving along at a steady pace when out of the mist a herd of cows, unaccompanied by anyone, crossed

the road. He hit the cow as he hit the brakes and the heavy beast rolled right over the car, crushing it before landing on the road behind. The cow apparently walked away without a scratch, but Bruce's car was a complete right off. He was very lucky to survive the encounter.

When work was finished Bruce liked to play. Good times were had after a day's rabbiting or attending the falconers fair in England. Having a few drinks with friends discussing the merits of hawks and falcons flown were happy days. Around many a campfire he would encourage the musical instruments to be picked up and would always join in with a song.

Not a man to keep 'pets', his animals were an important aspect to his life. His dogs had to work, his poultry had to lay, his canaries had to sing, and his falcons had to fly.

We said goodbye to Bruce on a hilltop churchyard in County Laois, on an evening in mid-September, the first cool breeze of Autumn giving a sense of the season ahead. Many gathered as the wind bent the tops of the pines as the evening closed in. In honour of a hunting man and the life he lived, friends brought their wild-eyed hawks and carried hooded falcons on the fist, dogs of many breeds walked to heel as we walked up the hill to say our last goodbyes to a life that had touched many. He will be sorely missed by family and friends.



Image by
Kevin
Marron



The Oldest Hawking Club

Don Ryan

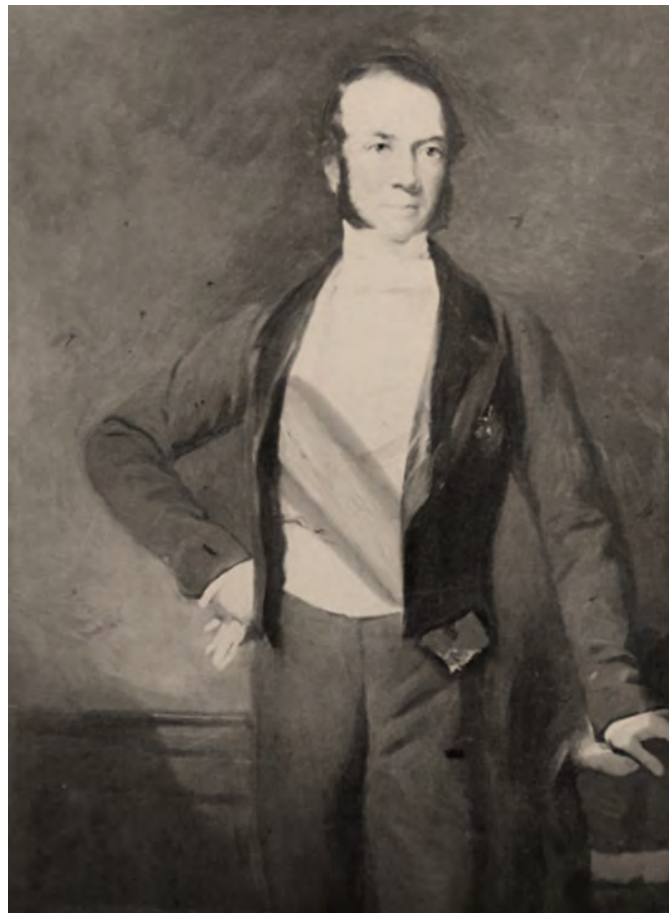


This year marks the 160th Anniversary of an Irish Hawking Club that was established at 1pm on Monday, August 20th, 1860, in the rooms of the Dublin Natural History Society at 212 Great Brunswick Street (now Pearse Street), Dublin.

For many years, it was generally believed the Club was established in 1870. This information came from the discovery of a note found in an exercise book belonging to Lieutenant Colonel Emilius Charles Delme Radcliffe (1833-1907). Radcliffe was a falconer and member of the 88th Connaught Rangers. He also wrote a short book on falconry, entitled, '*Falconry: Notes on the Falconidae used in India in Falconry*' first published in 1871. Delme's exercise book was in the possession of Captain Humphrey Drummond (1922-2009) of Megginch Castle, author of '*Falconry for You*'. This information got passed on to John Morris but somewhere along the way it was misinterpreted with the date of the meeting out by 10 years.

Thanks to information coming to light in 2019, the records have now been amended and the correct date has been firmly established.

Little is known today of this period in our club but what we do know is that the club was not established on an impulse. Plans were well in advance as we learn from newspaper articles as early as March



1860. Further examination of newspaper articles from this era reveal a very healthy practice in all branches of our sport in every corner of the country. So it's really no surprise that a Hawking Club was formed especially as the Maharajah Duleep Singh had pledged £50 towards its foundation.

The formation of the club was widely advertised in many publications of the day, including, The Irish Times, Dublin Evening Mail, The Evening Freeman and The Field. The articles were clearly detailed to reveal the names of those present which included a number of influential figures including Lord Talbot de Malahide, the Earl of Howth, E.P. Casey, Major Power, Dr Leech, C. O'Keefe, J.H. Loftie and R.J. Montgomery. We are also told who was appointed secretary on the day with the annual subscription set at £2.

What has also come to light is that the Zoological Gardens in the Phoenix Park were the main location where the club hawks were kept during that era.

Although we currently have no detailed information on the club members of the 1860

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IRISH HAWKING CLUB.

A meeting of persons interested in the revival of this noble and ancient sport was held yesterday, in the rooms of the Dublin Natural History Society, 212, Great Brunswick-street, for the purpose of establishing a hawking club in Ireland. On the motion of Major Power, seconded by Dr. Leech, the chair was taken by

LORD TALBOT DE MALAHIDE.

Mr. Montgomery explained the meeting was only a preliminary one for the purpose of establishing a club for the revival of the sport. The immediate object was to appoint a secretary and committee to carry out the necessary arrangements, receive subscriptions and the names of members. His Highness Prince Duleep Singh had promised, if the society were established, to subscribe £50 towards the purchase of hawks. One of his falconers offered to supply the club with six hawks for £50. To establish the club it would require £120 towards the purchase and feeding of the hawks, and the subscription proposed for each member of the club was £2 a year. Already several gentlemen of position and distinction had given their names, and it was to be hoped, when the club was established, the number of members would be increased.

The following committee was elected for the purpose of carrying out the necessary arrangements for the establishing of the club:—Lord Talbot de Malahide, the Earl of Howth, E. P. Casey, Esq., J. H. Loftie, Esq., C. O'Keefe, Esq., J. Leech, Esq.; and R. J. Montgomery, Esq. was elected honorary secretary.

The meeting then separated.

period, enough data exists for future students to investigate the matter further. I strongly suspect information still survives given the status of some of the high ranking members.

I also believe that C. O' Keefe, advertised as present at the meeting in 1860 may actually be Yelverton O' Keefe who was noted as performing falconry displays at the Phoenix Park as early as 1840. With the current lack of any other tales of members of that period, it seems appropriate to publish the following article by Charles Hawkins Fisher that mentions this Irish falconer.

It is reproduced from Country Life Illustrated, April, 1901 (see overleaf).



Images:
The Earl of Howth (above)
Lord Talbot de Malahide (left)
The Irish Times, August 1860 (above)
Maharajah Duleep Singh (right)



THE IRISH HAWKING CLUB.

A meeting for the purpose of establishing a hawking club in Dublin was held at one o'clock on Monday, at 212, Great Brunswick-street—Lord Talbot de Malahide in the chair. Mr. R. J. Montgomery stated that the present meeting was of a preliminary nature, and had originated in an offer made by Prince Dulceep Sing to Mr. Corballis, to give £50 towards the establishment of a hawking club in this city. One of his highness's falconers had also offered to supply the club, if established, with six falcons for £60 a year. All that they could do at present would be to nominate a working committee, and to appoint a secretary and a treasurer to receive subscriptions, on the understanding that if the effort to establish the club did not succeed the subscriptions would be returned. Including the sum promised by the Maharajah, it would require at least £120 to establish a hawking club. The following noblemen and gentlemen were then appointed a committee:—The Earl of Howth, Lord Talbot de Malahide, J. P. Casey, J. H. Lofty, C. O'Keeffe, J. Leach, and R. J. Montgomery. The last-named gentleman was nominated honorary secretary and treasurer. Some subscriptions were handed in, and the proceedings terminated.

Dublin Evening Mail, August 1860 (above)

Country Life Illustrated, April 1901 (right)

Falconers in Phoenix Park circa 1860 (below)





FALCONRY

A Wonderful Hawk.

MANY years ago I had the satisfaction (as I thought) of purchasing of John Pells, the Duke of St. Albans' falconer, a peregrine falcon of Irish origin, which had the reputation of being one of the best rook hawks he had ever possessed or seen. This hawk was called Wonderful, from several extraordinary things that she did or that had happened to her, and also in memory of a falcon that Pells had trained and lost. With much ado I purchased her from a reluctant seller; and I think I gave more for her than I have ever given for any other peregrine. Probably she was worth it, for she was more devoted to rooks than any other falcon I ever saw, and never ceased to try for them so long as there was one within sight of her keen vision. In Norfolk I have seen the contents of three or four near rookeries disturbed by her at the same time, ringing and climbing about high in air, in the usual intense fright of rooks disturbed by a falcon. When I have been near enough to hear it, I have been surprised at the noise of their countless wings in this strenuous motion; and I am almost certain that a good deal of it is produced by the occasional clashing of their wing ends. I could relate many strange actions of hawks, which would make a long story, but that I really think some of them would be deemed incredible.

To return to Wonderful. She was quite the most savage trained hawk I have ever seen. For instance, I have seen her, probably enraged at being disappointed of her prey, attack a team of four horses at plough, which she did with the utmost fury and determination, striking of course at their heads and ears. They were so frightened that the ploughman and his boy could at first do little or nothing with them, save to prevent them from breaking away altogether. They at last got away, plough and all, but most luckily were arrested by the plough sticking in a bank. Just then, with good fortune, my falconer and I came up, and we each got a horse by the head, the ploughboy sticking well to his, which, luckily, was the quietest. On another occasion this hawk, possibly because she did not get the lure offered fast enough, left us and advanced single-handed to attack a man carrying a little girl on his shoulder dressed in a red cloak; and it seemed to us that Wonderful had never stooped at even a pigeon with greater impetuosity. Run as we could, we could not get near enough; and, but that the man was carrying a hoe and used it lustily, turning round and round with great agility, I am convinced she would have fastened her claws in the poor child's face.

She gave me the only real fright I have ever had from any hawk. This is how it happened. She had just caught and killed a magpie, and on my going to take her up, she showed me what Pells had said was her worst trick. As I was stooping down to her she glanced up with so evil a look that I recoiled, knowing what to expect, and held my hands before my face. None too soon! For she was there too, coming at me like a savage dog, and holding on to my gloves so fiercely as to strike the talons right through the thick doeskin and into my hand. There was no time to mince matters, so I violently shook her off; though (so quick is thought) I remember to this day not only all the circumstances of this encounter, but also my fear that if ever I recovered her again I should find her minus a black nail or claw. I had possessed myself of the dead magpie, and supposed it was all right with the hawk; but no sooner had she got again on the wing than she came at me "hammer and tongs," in the same determined way that she had charged the little girl in the red cloak, and the four horses before mentioned, always striking at my face. So determined was she that, as I had then taken off my gloves, I really became afraid of her—which probably made her worse, and she began to utter savage screams. I am ashamed to say that she compelled me to take refuge behind the trunk of an oak tree; which did not profit me much, for when she could not get at my face she began to strike at the back of my neck. All this went on for some time, till I luckily recollected that I had a dead

pigeon in my pocket, which I flung out to her, and this time, having let her eat about half of it before I went to her, I caught her by the legs when she was coming again at my face.

What eventually became of Wonderful I know not. The last I heard of her was the following. A young farmer in Wiltshire had shot a hawk of mine, and sent it to be stuffed—a thing I have made a practice of preventing if possible. Having visited a bird-stuffer's shop where I heard a lost hawk of mine was, I claimed the bird and took possession of it, much to his disgust, paid the price he demanded for the work done, and obtained the name and address of the young farmer who had sent her to be stuffed. I went to see him. He seemed to feel much hurt at my depriving him of his stuffed hawk, to which, however, as he could not fail to see, he had no title whatever, when the happy idea occurred to me: "By Jove! I will make him a present of Wonderful." For she had become by this time perfectly unbearable and most dangerous. So I packed her up in a large lined hamper, with hood, leash, jesses, swivel, and ail, and sent her off to the hawk slayer.

I learned afterwards (for I never heard from him, which I was rather curious to do) that he was from home at the time of Wonderful's arrival at his village, and that he was a breeder and exhibitor of prize poultry, which he was therefore accustomed to send about in poultry hampers. He was a bachelor, and, as I have said, from home; so his housekeeper proceeded to put the hamper (which unluckily was also a poultry hamper), with the hawk and all in it, on the kitchen table, and to sever the strings and ties, with the object of having a view of the supposed prize poultry the contents of the basket. In an evil hour for her. For Wonderful, who could do almost anything, had previously got rid of her hood, and the moment there was light enough to see how to do it, she flew at the unfortunate woman's head, seized her by the scalp (with probably six or eight long sharp talons driven well home), and, hanging on like grim death, beat her on the sides of the face with her wings. Frightened almost to death, never having even seen what came out of the basket, the woman ran out into the village street, where, it is said, she fell down in a fit, supposing the very worst of her aggressor. The hawk let go just as some people came running up, and soared away in unwonted freedom. The event, I am assured, is still remembered in the village. The reason given at first for assigning to this falcon the name of Wonderful was that she bore a strange likeness in appearance and disposition to a falcon belonging to Mr. Yelverton O'Keefe, in whose employ John Pells once was. One of the incidents of this hawk's life I will relate.

Mr. O'Keefe was then rook-hawking on the well-known Curragh of Kildare—now the camp of that name, but then only a fine piece of open ground, and very suitable for rook-hawking. He lived not far off, and his hawks were kept, when airing or weathering, on a row of blocks on a lawn in front of his windows. One day they came back from hawking without a favourite falcon they had been obliged to "leave out." Pells, who was very superstitious, always objected on the occasion of losing a hawk to take up her block (why, I know not), nor would he ever allow a hawk to be weighed. So, in spite of Mr. O'Keefe's repeated orders, there was the empty block left on the lawn, alongside the occupied ones. Mr. O'Keefe became used to seeing it, and after a time made no more fuss about it. A whole month passed, and Pells, coming for orders, and looking out on the lawn, saw all the ten blocks occupied, each by its hawk. So did Mr. O'Keefe on doing the same. Pells dashed out of the room, crying "Count the hawks, sir," which being done, there were found to be ten, and not the nine there had been for so long, for the stray had come home of her own accord, and, being offered the lure, was easily taken up and fastened once more with swivel and leash, and then christened by the name of Wonderful.

C. HAWKINS FISHER.

FALCONRY.

SIR,—I think it is only fair upon you, who have devoted a column to falconry, that falconers should send you their contributions more frequently. I also consider that by so doing an interest will be kept alive for a noble and manly sport, which is certainly on the increase; and, besides this, I feel assured that such communications will induce sportsmen to preserve eyries for their brother sportsmen, for all true British sportsmen should be liberal-minded men, and as sportsmen they must admire a bird so pre-eminently British, and one which we have been truly told is "the type of strength, courage, speed, and beauty." Begging you will accept my very humble endeavours to give you an account of what has been going on in the hawking world during the season, I shall proceed.

Mr B., who lives in a wooded country, cannot keep falcons, and therefore has short-winged hawks instead. His mature female goshawk Vampire has killed, since Christmas to the end of March, 47 rabbits, 1 pheasant, 1 coot, and innumerable water-hens. Mr B. has lately trained a female sparrow-hawk, which I have no doubt is now showing excellent sport.

Mr John Pella, who flies his hawks along with those of a well-known falconer in Norfolk, has just begun rook-hawking with his usual fine "cadge of hawks," but I regret to learn that he finds the quarry scarce at present. At this period of the year rooks, like herons, are flown at on "the passage," and consequently can always be found in the neighbourhood of a rookery. Mr P. expects great sport with his famous falcon The Duchess, now four years old.

Your correspondent "Merlin," with his old tiercel Comet (an excellent bird) and a young falcon, does not appear to have been doing much, owing, no doubt, to a bad hawking country in which he is living at present.

No news from Mr A. of the 58th Regiment, nor from Mr K. of the Rifle Brigade!

Capt. S. has a first-class eyes falcon of last year, called Hydra, with whom he has killed (notwithstanding a stormy winter, which often stopped sport) 75 rooks, 5 magpies, and 5 grouse. On three occasions this excellent hawk killed three rooks in one evening—in fact, so good was the sport that several appointments were made, and the meets well attended by ladies and gentlemen. The Maharajah, an old goshawk belonging to the same gentleman, has also sustained its reputation, though no game-book has been kept, as the hawk has not been regularly flown. His Highness works admirably with a pack of rabbit beagles; I am told that his "footing properties" are as perfect as the fists of Heenan or Sayers, and are duly respected by the little hounds, which take care not to press too near.

I have heard nothing concerning Capt. F.; and "Peregrine," who is so well able to answer for himself, has given no account of his sport with Black Cloud.

Capt. B., with whom Mr J. Barr (falconer to the Maharajah Duleep Singh) is staying, is having very good rook-hawking. Mr J. Barr visited Ireland previously to going to Capt. B.; whilst there he had excellent sport, killing in twenty-seven weeks 104 rooks and 192 magpies. One of his best magpie-hawks was a wild caught tiercel, taken on the Curragh in a plover-net.

Mr L. is having good sport on the borders of Tipperary. He has seven peregrines, three merlins (which, by the by, he moulted last year), and a female haggard sparrow-hawk, which was caught in a net, and he has trained and intends it for landrails, which are plentiful in Ireland.

A hawking association has been established in Dublin, which promises well, and will be handled and worked honestly by good sportsmen.

I am glad to report that Mr Gourley Steele, of Edinburgh, the celebrated artist, commenced painting hawking subjects last year, with such success that it is to be hoped he will continue it, not only for the cause of falconry, but for the sake of art, it being quite a new field; and his "Master Falconer" proves what he can produce. This picture will be in London for exhibition in May.

I hope before long to be able to give you a letter from Major R. upon his Indian hawking, as well as some notes upon hawks and hawking from my own diary.

GOSHAWK.

SPORT WITH THE HAWKS.

THE following is a list of quarry taken with the hawks of his Highness the Maharajah Duleep Sing, from the 1st of May, 1859, to the 1st of May, 1860, in Scotland, Ireland, and England.

	Head.
With Peregrines in Scotland, from the 1st of May to the 1st of September: Herons 2, grouse 63, rooks 37, snipe 2, pewits 19, rails 7, woodpigeons 2, rabbits 2, ring-ouzel 1	135
With Peregrines in Ireland, from the 1st of September to the 20th of March: Rooks 104, magpies 192, golden plover 1, kestrel 1, starlings 2, larks 1, grouse 2, blackbirds 8, partridges 3	314
With Peregrines in Yorkshire, from the 20th of March to the 1st of May: Rooks 31, blackbirds 8, small bird 1	40
Sparrowhawks in Italy, May, 1859 (in twenty days): Quail 227, small birds 14	241
With Merlins in Scotland: Small birds 28, pewit 1	29
Total	759

The Field
May 5th 1860

FALCONRY AT BALDOYLE.

From time to time during the past few years, repeated efforts have been made to revive in this country the old historic sport of hawking, once so famous, and now all but become obsolete in these countries. The old sport of falconry derives much of its interest from the fact of being so closely associated with the poetry and social history of the past, when it constituted a principal feature in the field pastimes of the united kingdom, especially in England. Voluminous treatises have been written descriptive of the sport, and numerous rules have been drawn up for its pursuit, but what gives it additional interest is the fact of its being connected in legendary lore with circumstances not one whit less tragic than that recorded in the far-famed ballad of "Chevy Chase." That the sport of hawking should ever have grown into disuse is one of the clearest illustrations which can be given of the old adage that "Time works wonders," and when we consider the amount of importance attached in times gone by to "Ye merrie sports of falconrie," we know of no habit, custom, or pursuit at present existing amongst us that may not give place and be forgotten, and become as if it were not. His Highness the Maharajah of Lahore, at present on a visit in this country, is passionately attached to the sport of hawking, and has brought with him a number of admirably trained falcons and tiercels. These birds were placed by his Highness for some time in the Zoological Gardens, and were repeatedly tried in the Phoenix Park, under the skilful management of his Highness's falconer, Mr. Barr. In accordance with an application made by Mr. R. J. Montgomery, of the Zoological Gardens, his Highness consented to permit the birds to be exercised on Friday in the fields adjoining the Howth Junction, on the Drogheda Railway. A large number of ladies and gentlemen availed themselves of the opportunity, and proceeded from town by the one o'clock train in order to witness the sport. The day was bright and the weather fine—admirably suited for the amusement, which, however, was materially marred by the fact of the quaries sent up for pursuit by the hawks being pigeons merely—birds so far overmatched by the powerful and highly-trained birds of prey, that they afforded but little sport, the quarry in each instance, after a short flight, falling under the talons of the falcon. There were two exceptions to this—one in the case of a blue Irish pigeon, and the other a white bird, also of Irish breed. The blue pigeon displayed wondrous strength of wing, and after a long and exciting chase succeeded in getting away safely from his pursuer by taking refuge in a house. The white pigeon, after rising to a vast height, was struck at last by the falcon sent after him. The hawk, after pouncing on his prey, bore him in his talons several fields off and killed him. As we understand that a hawking club is about being established in Dublin, it would render the sport much more popular if the quaries put up as prey for the falcons were of a class of bird better matched in strength of wing with birds of the hawk species. Tame pigeons, which, perhaps, never flew a mile in their lives, have fearful odds against them when pursued by trained falcons, especially such powerful and highly-bred hawks as those exhibited yesterday. The sports terminated shortly after four o'clock, when the numerous spectators returned to town by the afternoon train.—*Freeman*.

Ballycroy Fieldmeet November 2019

Keith Barker



Having caught the snipe-hawking bug last season I promised myself that this year that I would try to attend as many field meetings as I could, as most of my snipe-hawking is done on grass pastures with a little on the fringes of the mountain in Co. Waterford. Ballycroy came up on the meet card. I had read about last year's meet in Eoghan Ryan's article in the journal, and it sounded good so I went ahead and booked one of the four spaces available.

I decided to break up my journey with an overnight stay with some of my falconry friends James and Debbie Knight in Clonbur, Co. Galway. James had been telling me about the new renovations going on at Ireland's School of Falconry at Ashford Castle. This would be a great opportunity to catch up with good friends, look at the new housing for the hawks and falcons and run two of my pointers beneath the stunning vista of Mount Gable just behind the Knight's house.

The accommodation for the birds at the falconry school was just fabulous, attention to detail was evident in the design; husbandry,

accessibility for the general public, manicured gravel courtyard, spacious aviaries containing hawks and falcons in tip top condition... a breath of fresh air and a great advertisement for falconry in general.

We headed out to Mount Gable with James and his son Jacob to be met by the shepherd gathering sheep. We ran the dogs over a high plateau where last November we found enough snipe to hold a mini meet for three falcons, but this year we only found a handful. Maybe the sheepdog had disturbed the ground earlier or it was the phase of the moon where the snipe were on the green fields. The pointers enjoyed themselves quartering over and back through the ankle deep heather, we enjoyed the views over Loch Mask and Loch Corrib, then made our way back down ready for an evening meal in Burkes bar Clonbur.

Friday morning I said my goodbyes to the Knights then headed north for Co. Mayo and Ballycroy. Google maps guided me to the blue lodge. Last turn right off the tar road onto a gravel track, about two miles or so of such head turning scenery that I could have easily run the

truck into the drain at the side of the road. Like a mini Wyoming, white grass for miles and miles all around you, flat as a pancake, a long wingers paradise.

I got out of my vehicle at the lodge and took in the views; clear blue sky, very light wind- perfect conditions for hawking snipe with peregrines. Don Ryan was first to arrive, followed by Eric Witkowski. We put the falcons out to weather, gathering water from the peaty coloured river for bathwater, as there was no running water or electricity at the lodge and no toilet. The place was spartan, there were two single beds in one room and plenty of sofas to rest if we wanted to stay, but bed and breakfast had been arranged in the nearby village after the hawking. We made tea and coffee and lit a fire to warm the place up, the sweet smell of burning turf drifting over the weathering lawn.

Our host Sibylle arrived along with her river ghillie John who had read about falconry but had never seen it practiced, and wanted to tag along. It is always handy to have an extra pair of hands to look after cades and hold pointers and setters on leads that are not being run while falconers deal with their birds without worrying.

We set out across the blanket bog with three setters and an English pointer. In no time, Don had a point from Libby that looked really good. Don had a good flight and we cracked on with my pointer but it soon became evident that there was a lack of snipe. We covered lots of ground, walking increasingly further away from the lodge without getting a point, so it was decided to turn back and take another section of bog into the slight breeze alongside the road. We eventually found a point for my tiercel who waited on at a decent pitch, but while he was out of position the snipe flushed to one side and the set up was spoiled so I called him down.

Eric lofted his high flying tiercel bred by Matt Gage and flew on spec to try to hold some game down if we came across it, rather than bumping it. We eventually got a point and Eric's tiercel connected. Eric was elated at the outcome, as we had walked almost to exhaustion. By the time we got back to the lodge the light was fading, so we decided to just exercise the three falcons and feed up for the following day.

We returned to Cafferkey's bar in the village of Ballycroy where we had reserved three rooms for bed and breakfast. They were well appointed rooms with en suite facilities, and I could have dropped into that bed the moment I saw it! I was sure my legs were going to give in, we had walked so far in the afternoon. The shower was a belter, and when we hit the high stool for a pre dinner pint of porter, the three of us looked like we had been boiled in hot water like lobsters, faces beaming red! A short car journey into Mulranny for a bite to eat, then back to Cafferkey's

for two more pints, then off to bed for an early start the following day.

Day two we were met with wind and heavy showers, as we headed to the blue lodge early. Out in the open, the wind was strong, but as the forecast was to improve, so I made the decision to take the cadge with my tiercel and falcon, as did Eric. Don was the first to fly, a great ringing mount to position and multiple stoops at his snipe but no cigar.

I flew next with my tiercel, over a good strong point from Don's red and white setter. As we moved in to call the flush, the dog crept up and set again, so we moved in again to call and the dog moved up a second time. When the target eventually flushed, the tiercel was out of position and stood no chance so I called him down.

Eric tried his tiercel but he decided it was too early for him so he called him in when the point flushed prematurely. Another point was quickly found, so I unhooded and prepared my falcon but as I raised her on my fist the snipe flushed. I decided to fly on spec, and soon we found another solid point. Things were getting really good game wise, up she went to a reasonable waiting on position. Eric called the flush when she was just upwind of his dog, the snipe went down wind with herself striking at him multiple times into the distance but no feed up for her.

“We called the flush and the hawk folded up heading earthwards”

Eric stole the show next with a high mount from histiercel and smack down of his snipe with clinical precision, he really is the one on form at the moment and Eric's dedication to the sport shows in his success rate.

While Eric was feeding up we were hit with a brutal hail storm. The landscape offers no comfort or shelter, you can see the storm coming across the plain, and the best you can do is just turn your back and wait for the storm to pass. When it did, Libby was on point again. Don walked over to her with tiercel peregrine on high, another great effort but the snipe won the contest. The tiercel remounted so we said to carry on, and myself and Eric watched from afar,

the dog quartering her ground taking in a huge swathe of bog with every turn, and eventually a second point was found resulting in a double stoop but yet again without success.

As Don was working his way back to us I ran my English pointer, we were struggling again to finish the last couple of birds. We eventually had three dogs running and found another point, my tiercel waited on well, and I thought this one is the one. We called the flush and the hawk folded up heading earthwards, a short flight, then the snipe bailed, the hawk remounted and commanded position, the snipe dumped a second time so we cracked on, with the hawk going up a third time. We found a setter on point again, the hawk came over as we called the flush, but it flushed too far in front of the dog for the hawk to make any real threat so I called him down.

On the walk back to the lodge Eric flew his young imprint female who is still in training but making great progress. Also Don flew his female 'Lady Broderick' who although was at a reasonable pitch of 400 feet still needs to learn that the reward is where the falconer and dog are, but I am sure she will have worked this out by the time this report goes to press.

An action packed second day, after the grueler we had on day one. I would never imagine we could have had such a day just 24 hrs later on the neighbouring beat, but I guess that's hawking for you. The evening was exactly the same as day one, shower, pint, drive to Mulranny, back to Cafferkey's for two pints then bed.

The venue at the blue lodge is total wilderness, a falconer's paradise. The landscape is simply spectacular, but landscape does not make a field meeting. We could have benefitted from more snipe on day one but yet we found plenty for three falconers on day two.

I would love to go back again next year. I doubt we will get weather like we had and frown to think what a bad weather day would be like there. The accommodation at Cafferkey's bar was first class with two night accomodation with hearty breakfasts for 70 euros.



David White (1938-2019)

The IHC wishes to pay its condolences following the death of David White in late December last year.

As father to Hilary, David accompanied him to many early fieldmeets, AGMs, game fairs and club dinners. He was very popular with members, many of whom he hosted over the years at his home in Clonskeagh.

Coming from a rural background himself, David was a great supporter of the Irish Hawking Club, field sports, and the natural world in general, and made every effort to help his son pursue his interest in falconry. When Hilary began doing committee work, David was a constant source of advice given his long years sitting on the committees of sporting clubs he was affiliated to.

May he rest in peace.

The IHC Committee

Gertrude Eustace (1928-2020)

The Club would like to mark the passing of Gertrude Eustace, who passed away peacefully at the end of October in her 92nd year.

As wife of Rowland, Gertrude was a constant presence of support and fellowship during his decades of involvement in IHC offices. Countless members were welcomed into their home in Co Dublin down the years by her. There, they would be met by a warm and generous host, and easy conversationalist.

Gertrude shared with Rowland an innate love of the natural world, and visitors to their home would always marvel at the bounty of life she cultivated in their back garden. And given her husband was prone to, shall we say, the odd "crackpot idea" involving animals and insects, she was also a woman of endless patience!

To children Jennifer, Eric, Michelle, Andrew, Hilary, Alison and Sarah, her many beloved grandchildren and great-grandchildren, we extend our sympathies, and hope that she and Rowland are reunited in the next life after their brief time apart in this one.

The IHC Committee



Moonlight Lugnaquilla, oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm



A Lonely Impulse of Delight, acrylic on canvas, 20 x 20 cm

Shay O'Byrne - awarded the Hanley Energy Prize for Landscape
at last year's Royal Hibernian Academy Annual Exhibition for Moonlight Lugnaquilla

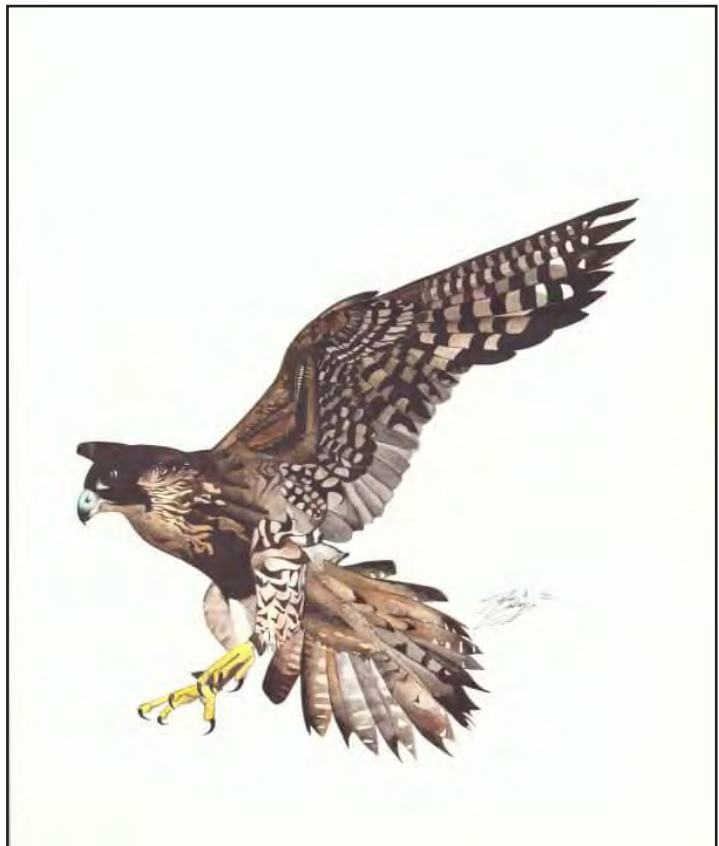
Paintings for Sale 086 2093415 / seamusobyrne.com

Declan Cairney - Artist

Ashbourne, Co. Meath

declancairney2000@gmail.com

Open to commissions



Return to Falconry

Darry Reed

I began last autumn finding myself with increasingly more time to think about and pursue the things I love, outside of my young family and my work. The whirlwind years of pregnancies, babies, studying for my midwifery degree which included months of full time shift work were beginning to give way to a good life work balance. Part time hours of my choosing, consisting mainly of night shifts, and the youngest children moving on into the school years, was leaving me with some time to find myself again.

I had reconnected with the IHC and attended a couple of fieldmeets in the 2018-19 season. There were still some people who I knew from years back but the vast majority of members I still did not know. I looked at the IHC fieldmeet dates for the 2019-20 season and penned a few into my diary. Attending meets where I knew nobody was still a somewhat daunting prospect.

I began the Season by attending the Camphire Horse Trials static display and bbq social meet, and took up the host Keith Barker's offer to members to camp in his garden, which is a short walk from the show grounds. Camphire followed two weeks of family camping. Though I had enjoyed it, the prospect of a child free falconry adventure had me giddy with excitement. I was also quite nervous though, as I knew none of the members at all that were going to this meet.

When I arrived, I was met by Keith who showed me where I could pitch my tent. I pitched my rainbow bell tent and Jamesie King came over and introduced himself and



before long I was having a beer in the garden with Jamesie, Liam Mc Kibbon, Mick Quinn and Ger O'Neill who were all so funny and friendly that my nerves quickly dissolved. Ger Grant arrived shortly after and pitched a much more modest little dome tent, which like a tardis, slept four that night! Keith gave me a tour of his mews and the sight of the hawks and falcons again stoked the fire of the falconer and hunter I once had been. I then met Lisa Barker who it turns out I had plenty in common with. Don Ryan arrived and we enjoyed a fine feast before venturing down the dirt track under the trees to the fairground where there was music and a bar. I had a fantastic night chatting and laughing with everybody and decided to return at a somewhat sane hour with the Barkers and Don Ryan, as if I left it later I didn't fancy my chances finding my way back up that track in the dark! It had been years since I'd been out late socialising and though I was feeling fairly ropery the next morning I managed to give a decent account of myself at the Static Display. Liam let me handle his barn owl and I spent some time helping man the stand and chatting to members of the public.

The end of October took me to the Edenderry fieldmeet. It was very well attended and I was spoiled for choice as a spectator. I spent the first





Camped in Keith's garden, Ger O'Neil's gos weathering (left)
 At the Camphire Display with Liam Mc Kibbon's barn owl (top left)
 Fury (above & below)



day with the Harris' hawks on rabbits and the second with the goshawks on pheasant, opting to miss the longwings on this occasion. Two sunny crisp days spent seeing great flights, and this time knowing a good few falconers there and making yet more new friends. I also attended the AGM where I unexpectedly landed myself as the club's new editor.

A couple of weeks later I attended the Sneem Fieldmeet. As I had missed the longwings at the Edenderry meet, I spent the first day watching the falcons on snipe. It was a beautiful cold clear day with blue skies and sunshine, and breathtaking scenery. It was another well attended meet with some overseas members flying falcons. There were some spectacular stoops but no falcon brought a snipe to the bag. Although I didn't personally witness it, as I had just left for the hotel, there was an epic final flight of the day. However, I saw the dozens of replays of the footage of Aodhan Brown's legendary spar being thrown at a snipe flushed by the pointers as dusk was falling, and catching it!

The highlight of that day for me though, was Keith Barker offering me a fresh, parent reared goshawk. Apparently he considered me worthy of the task, and he wanted to give me a leg up with getting started up again in falconry seeing as I had stepped up and volunteered for the editor's job! This fairly lit a fire under me and I could think of little else from then on.

The following day I joined the Harris' hawkers at Derrynane, and again we were spoiled with the weather. At some point Damien Jacob's ferret lay up and he asked if I wanted to fly his female imprint Harris, Cleo. I had years previously, among other hawks, flown a female Harris hawk, and it was the first time in over a decade I had slipped a hawk at rabbits and to say I enjoyed the feeling is an understatement. Standing over the warren, ferret underground... the suspense, the primal predatory feeling that you and the hawk share. That's what falconry is about for me. She had a few good flights but did not connect unfortunately. After her first miss, I was unsure if she would recall to me, but I gave a call and whistle, unsure of what she was used to, and after slight hesitation, she did fly back. It was a real treat. The two nights socialising down in Sneem and back at the hotel were immense fun. Sneem is a mecca for falconers, and I can now see why, and greatly look forward to returning.

Once home, I set about starting to build my new mews as quickly as I could, having only recently dismantled all the pigeon lofts that had given me my avian fix in my years tied to the homestead. A couple of weeks later, I collected the goshawk, which I named Fury. He fed from the fist on the second day but his initial manning

was challenging. He'd come out of the pen at 2lb and needed weight off, but would only man happily as long as food was involved. Once the food or tiring was finished, he bated incessantly, never settling. So after a few days, in a bid to keep his training positive, I decided against extended manning sessions. I just picked him up each day, made him work for his food and then left him alone, and the manning came along gradually throughout his training. It took time to get him down to a responsive weight, and his training was quite slow but eventually, after four weeks he was flying free. By this time it was early January, a hard time to enter a young hawk. He was given easy slips at corvids, but they are an agile cunning quarry and he lacked experience, so although he tried hard, he only connected with a couple of very easy slips.

I ended the season attending the first ever Dingle Fieldmeet at the end of February, hosted by Andi Chewning, who I'd befriended at Sneem. I'd hoped to slip the gos at some rabbits, but there was a stiff wind both days and I'd had a track down at home the week previous after he gave me the run around in high wind, so I decided against it.

The weather certainly didn't improve in March and it began with weeks of relentless high winds and driving rain, and then when the country was suddenly plunged into lockdown and the kids were all home from school, I decided to leave him off to moult. So Fury's first season was very short, without much real success, but it felt great to have falconry part of my everyday life again, and I'm hoping he finds

his groove this season.

It was a glorious six months, September 2019 to March 2020, before the end of the falconry season coincided with the start of the Covid 19 lockdown and the strange new times we've landed into. But it also coincided with something else.

During the 2019-20 winter, in addition to my return to falconry, I'd also completed a beekeeping course. The sad passing of Rowland Eustace had me thinking a lot of my time as a young apprentice falconer with him, and the one thing I regretted was being too scared to also learn beekeeping from him when he'd taken me to his hives. I'd been badly stung by wasps as a child after my brothers threw stones at a nest and had a visceral fear of buzzy things. But I felt it a missed opportunity, and bees are so very interesting. So in his honour I set about trying to overcome my fear and March 2020 brought not only the Covid 19 lockdown, but the arrival of my first nuc of bees. As the hawk has been moulting I've enjoyed a hugely successful first season of beekeeping, and not only overcome my fear, but positively fallen in love with beekeeping. The first nuc grew into a booming colony I harvested 15kg of honey from and split into three to rear more queens. I've now got four colonies ready to bunker down overwinter while the falconry season takes its turn. I've noticed a considerable overlap between falconers and beekeepers and wonder what the similar appeal is. Wild winged things with sharp pointy bits!

The more I've got back to my love of fieldsports over the last two years, the more I've felt a return to my original self. The years I gave over to having my children and training as a midwife were dreams coming to life. But they were in sharp contrast to before, when I'd worked part time as a veterinary nurse and spent all my spare time surrounded by hawks, dogs, ferrets, poultry and horses. After a decade away from my interests, surrounded by domesticity, the wild me felt very much like my wings had been clipped. Life's seasons change though, and a whole new phase of my life is opening up, filled with wild things and open spaces.

The world is creeping back to a different sort of normality, the children are finally back in school after the endless lockdown holidays, my mornings are free and the hawking season is upon us once more. I sincerely hope enough normality returns to allow us to meet once more for fieldmeets; kindred folk with hawks and dogs.



My honey all jarred and labelled (right)

Flying Damien Jacob's Cleo at Sneem (previous page)

My beehives (below right)



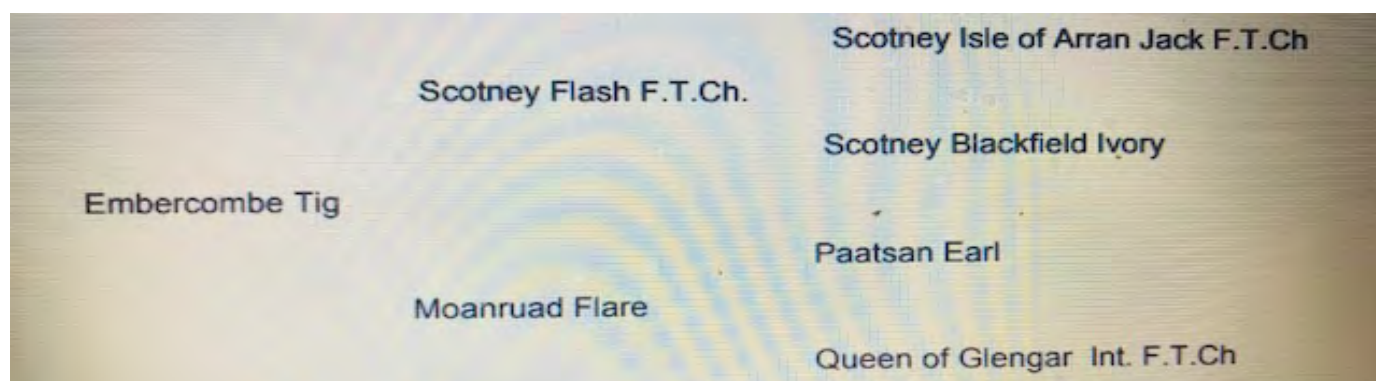
Five Decades of Working Dogs

Robert Hutchinson

I've never begun an article with more misgiving. If I call it an article it's only because I don't know what else to call it. Let me explain why. In contrast, a few years back I gave a talk at The Irish Snipe Conservation Conference, an event organised by The Irish Hawking Club entitled "We Are One". In that presentation I attempted to show the interdependence and relationship between the protection of snipe and their habitat, the sport of falconry and the preservation of the working pointer & setter breeds. Knowing the audience would be a mixed bunch of field sports enthusiasts and conservationists, many with more expertise than me, I decided to do my research. The presentation was laden with facts I had gathered from multiple sources from the worlds of science and natural history, with robust data to support my position should I be challenged. In stark contrast, in this article, I have attempted to do nothing of the kind. I have not researched, nor referenced others, nor even dwelt on the subject matter reworking my thoughts. Instead I invited a few friends from Ireland to send me their 'best' picture of their dogs in the field to which I would apply a fresh eye, looking deeply into the image like a watchmaker would when looking into the workings of a watch. I would focus my concentration by posing the question "What's strongly occurring to me when I look at this picture from a thought or emotional viewpoint?", then apply two simple rules:

Rule number one; I would not speak outside my own experience and knowledge based on... dedicating much of my life and energy to sporting dogs; English pointers and setters, Border terriers, Scottish deerhounds, private pack of hounds - mostly Griffon Vendeens and working Irish Wheaten's. At the peak I had over fifty working dogs in my kennels. I am well read on the topic, with a library stocked with hundreds of books. Over the years I have made a point of travelling thousands of miles to converse with experts in the field. I have my expert 'mentors' who I lean into when times are tough. I like to think I am principled; believing money is by far the most corrupting factor in our sport, and I have not made a cent out of my dogs or falcons, instead gifting to 'kind and hardworking homes'. I live in exile for my sport; I never returned to the country of my birth because of the hunting ban. I have moved home twice solely to improve my hunting prospects. My passion has cost me countless relationships and millions in lost income; an executive search agent nearly passed out when I told him I was turning down a 450K job opportunity "what, what, what because.... you want to fly a bird!". From October to February I calculate that I devote circa 70% of daylight hours to working and maintaining my dogs and falcons. I have risked my life on more than a few occasions - digging terriers out of deep trenches, climbing down cliff faces, and dropping into vertical bog holes to rescue hounds. Twice I have passed out with exhaustion after a 'hard week' in the field. So, what's the problem drawing down a thousand words from five decades of experience? The answer? Rule number two.

Rule number two; not a single sentence would appear unless I knew it to be absolutely accurate and true. Now here's the rub: this process of self- enquiry confirmed this cruel reality; I know a lot, I've experienced a lot in the last fifty years but understand so very, very little. What follows each picture is a brief commentary capturing my thoughts and strong emotions closed off with my 'sentence of truth'.



Pedigree form: Alchemy and the importance of friendship

This is treasure. There are millions of pedigree forms in existence but looking at this one puts you directly in touch with two of the greats - and for many present-day Game Hawkers who work English pointers it's where it all begins. It displays the breeding lines of Queenie (Moanruad Flare), see Falcon Gentle for her in action. Bred by John Nash and owned by Stephen Frank. We all know Steve.

John was a great friend of Steve until his tragic and untimely death; he was killed by a "Widow's Branch", an Irish term for a falling tree, whilst out beating on a shoot. Years after his death, I visited John's home and Dorothy, his wife, passed me a box of Christmas cards from Steve to John to look at whilst she went to make a fresh pot of tea. Steve's cards were consistently brief in content and structure... Line one - I apologise for not getting back to you for 6 months... or 8 months... or 11 months... Line 2 - I've been busy with falconry... Lines 3 and 4 - Penetrating commentary and gratitude about how John's advice had been received and applied. Lines 3 and 4 were so dense with wisdom you could write a 200-page book on each sentence. I was moved to tears.

Dedicating your life to what you are committed to isn't enough if you really want to leave behind a legacy - no matter how talented you are; it's too lonely, too punishing and, as time goes on, you get cosy and complacent, starting to believe you know a lot more than you really do. To continue to develop, you need a trusted friend who has the capacity to recharge your passion and challenge you. You need someone waiting backstage to support you when you stumble, confused. But trust comes first - and this bank account of trust is serviced by two things; respect for that someone who is 'better' than you, and there was no single better man at this game than John Nash, a winner of over 40 field trials and a huge influence in the Pointer/Setter world. You also need the absence of an ego resulting in an openness to foster such a relationship, Steve was a gentleman; just before he died, I asked Steve, "What do you consider your greatest achievement in a lifetime dedicated to falconry?". His response: "I never fell out with a close friend, even when they flew better falcons or dogs than me".

Be careful who you listen to.



Aodhan's Cocker: "The eye doesn't lie"

There are a number of transitions a dog makes from puppyhood to it being properly 'entered'; a wonderful term from the world of hunting hounds. By transition I mean the process of letting go in order to move on to the next stage of development. A transition always begins with an ending. A working dog makes many transitions in its short life - end of puppyhood, to being taken out for the first time to be trained, to tasting the sweet scent of quarry, to the first kill over him, to retirement, to the ultimate end. For me, the most important transition is when your relationship settles into a trusting, rewarding routine characterised by the dog working for you and not for himself.

Some dogs never make the transition. When it occurs, particularly in dogs that are performing technically well in the field, you start to beat the odds and it gives the relationship a kind of magical power against the challenges of catching wild quarry. It always shows in the eye of the dog when it looks at its owner. Aodhan's wonderful working Cocker has no off button when it comes to pleasing his owner, whether

its tirelessly crashing through gorse bushes and blackthorn thickets, pushing out woodcock for his spar, or serving quarry for merlins. How do you build that relationship? I once watched Capt Fanshaw, without fuss, call in twenty plus foxhounds off an active railway line from two fields away just before the train arrived. I asked him, "How do you do that?". "Hounds love to be softly spoken to in the kennel" was the response.

Win over your dog's heart.

Kevin's Pointer Daisey: Importance of truth in the age of ignorance

I blame social media for providing the platform for what could represent the biggest threat to our sport - ignorance. Yeats' poem, 'The Second Coming', captures my concern perfectly:

"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned

The best lack all conviction, whilst the worst

Are full of passionate intensity".

I have lost count on the number of times I have viewed a Facebook post of a video depicting a dog displaying A-Z of faults including, boring into the wind, passing over quarry, not covering the ground, unsteady on the point, not flushing on command, not sticking with creeping quarry and often topped with equally misinformed, inaccurate commentary from the handler and tailed in the comments section with a statement, "Great dog work, Bill, Harry, Mike". There may be comfort in ignorance but it's not great dog work; it's misleading and



potentially damaging to those who don't know any better and to future generations to say it is. Of course, you could point out constructively the ignorance, but doing so would likely open you up to attack from every ignorant husband/wife/ex girlfriend/ex boyfriend, mates, ex mates etc so no one bothers. Untruths and ignorance take root and replace truth. I don't buy the 'to each their own' or 'the owner thinks it's great dog work, so it is' school of thought. He may well be delighted with his dog and happy with it's performance, and he may even kill lots of quarry over his dog. But the truth is there is a standard of what 'great' dog work looks like, based on a formula proven in the field for centuries, and the very painful truth is few dogs reach this standard. And the risk? Over time 'I think it's great dog work, so it is' takes root and Bill's, Harry's or Mike's training regimes and standards, roughly equivalent to the formula for competing to win in the local school Egg and Spoon Race, become the norm; replacing the training regime and performance required to win the Olympic 100 metres sprint with the corresponding deterioration of standards.

So, on the topic of greatness, Daisey is a great dog and she consistently does great dog work. She is the best falconry dog I have seen in action. Her intelligence, her uncanny understanding of what her role is and isn't, her consistent technical performance vs what a pointer should do in the field, her sensitivity around the falcon when on quarry, her physical constitution, great stamina and resilience to withstand working four punishing days a week on the bog for four wet months a year without breaking down, makes her a truly great dog. She has it all - a canine maestro - and we owe it to her and other great dogs to put the effort in to understand what great really looks like. Trust me, as I found out when I hunted my pack of hounds hard, for long days, three times a week, in wild country, it's really, really, incredible what they can do in the field. Forget Michael Jordan, forget Muhammad Ali, forget Usain Bolt... a great working dog can go off the scale and their genius is truly awesome and should be celebrated.

Truth is important. Safeguard the legacy of greatness.

“win over your dog's heart”



**Eric's Witkowski Red Setter:
Importance of matching the dog's
temperament with the owner's
character**

Anyone who has watched Eric fly his falcons over his Red Setters cannot but notice how effortless he makes it all appear and, in particular, the emotional self-control he displays when things don't work out as planned; dog not responding to his whistle, falcon out of position when the snipe breaks etc.

What's less obvious is his dog too is unconcerned by these set-backs. Together the team simply moves on purposefully across the bog, confident in their abilities of finding and killing a snipe. It's one of my sporting highlights to have witnessed Eric calling his dog off a hard point because his falcon was pitching too low over the point and was in danger of mugging his quarry, then sending the dog back in to point the same snipe once the falcon had attained a descent pitch. Real class. You can make your sport much more difficult if you select a breed of dog whose character and temperament are at odds with your own. As a rule, if you get on with Setters then Pointers are not for you.

Look inside yourself and select the breed of dog whose character matches your own personality.



Don's Red and White: Breed for work

As with all the Setter breeds, this rare red and white setter is a dog bred for work. Our sport needs the likes of Don and his generous commitment to keeping a rare breed like this working. The Irish red and white preceded the red setter but its popularity declined; it is suggested by the preference in the United States for a solid red dog. An American vet once said about American Kennel Club Irish setters, "They are so dumb they get lost on the edge of their leash". The kennel club's standardisation based on looks has destroyed many working breeds. There are too many to mention but include show terriers, hounds and utility breeds. When dogs are bred for looks, a disaster unfolds.

"Yah", I hear you say, "You can breed 'for work and looks'". But that is as rare in dogs as in humans. I don't believe there is any middle ground on this topic; genetics is quite straightforward - selecting for one trait normally comes at the expense of another. Always breed off your best worker even if you have a better-looking but lesser-working litter

brother or sister. Put the effort in to find mating partners who display the traits you are looking to strengthen in the performance of your line. If the breeding is right, they will come right. And for some reason, in my experience, a bitch seems to pass on their working traits more so than a dog. On the same subject of breeding for looks; the fashion to pay a premium for captive bred 'large' falcons, black falcons, large footed falcons etc does not bode well. I once selected a female Gyr falcon based on her behaviour towards every pigeon that passed over the aviary. The breeder was pleasantly amazed at the criteria on which I based my decision. It's our collective responsibility for future generations to breed only from the best workers; if we don't then we should all feel the collective guilt at the deterioration in performance that will follow. As a footnote, Don tells me that in the 19th century a Mr John Bennett of Grange, Co. Offaly who had hunted over the country for 30 years, believed that the best working red and white setters he had ever shot over belonged to an Irish falconer, Yelverton O'Keefe.

Only breed off your best and select a pup from the best proven working bitch.



So to close, I get small comfort from Pablo Picasso who, upon exiting a viewing of the Lascaux cave paintings, uttered the immortal words, "We have learnt nothing in twelve thousand years". The pictures are more than I could have hoped for, and I'm very grateful to have received them from talented falconers and friends to whom I pay perhaps the greatest accolade... "I breed off all of 'em". If this cruel but motivational exercise of self-enquiry has proved anything, it has confirmed to me the depth and richness of our sport and my only wish would be to be offered another lifetime to truly understand it more.

Slante.

Robert



Sally: Old dogs and cute falcons

For a long time, I troubled myself with the question "what constitutes a truly exceptional falconer?". Every time I came up with a response, I found evidence to confirm it wasn't 100% true.

Then I landed on the following: A great falconer's game-hawk's performance continues to improve over their whole lifetime. 'Game-hawks', because anyone can get lucky and secure a falcon that naturally performs to a high standard and 'improves over their whole life time' because so many factors come into play, requiring the falconer to remain alert and fine tune their approach if the falcon's performance isn't going to deteriorate. Talented game-hawks require ongoing attention just like any talented athlete. Just to spotlight one specific area; exceptional game-hawks are exceptionally clever when it comes to taking quarry - they love killing and one of the biggest risks is they lower their pitch to increase their success rate. When matched with an exceptional dog that is consistently honest on the point, this risk is magnified. Sally is such a pointer and, by choice, I would be careful restricting the number of days working her with my best tiercel who, when teamed up with younger dogs crashing across the bog, understands all the advantages of climbing to a higher pitch to command the uncertainty and the operatic chaos of what's going on below.

Stay alert.

Dirt Hawking in Dingle

Andi Chewning

The first annual Dingle Fieldmeet was held the last weekend in January 2020. The flagship meet for the Dingle Peninsula was well met with about 15 members hunting with their hawks and nearly a dozen spectators, both members and non-members alike, as well as the landowners.

Milltown House, on the Western edge of Dingle town, was secured as accommodation for a relatively low cost, and it was exclusive to the fieldmeet participants. For this reason, and as the event was taking place well outside of the typical B&B season, the bar was not stocked or 'open' in the traditional sense. The facilities were available to use and as there was no alcohol being sold and no other guests in the house, the area was actively used both nights; much to the chagrin of the unlucky souls who found themselves in the rooms above (sorry!). There was a simple continental breakfast laid out by myself, the fieldmeet host, and paid for by the cap (next year's meet could see a small increase in room cost but with a hot breakfast included). A back-up location in Dingle town - Russell's B&B - was also availed of as backup/overflow accommodation. The weather was remarkably pleasant for late January, if windy in certain places, with some rain drenching a few unfortunate members on the first afternoon, and despite it being well out of season, a fair portion of the town was open for the non-hunters to entertain themselves during the days.

With most people travelling to Dingle on the Friday of the meet there was very little hunting to be had, so the primary hunt day became the



Saturday. That morning the decision was made to separate the goshawks and the Harris' hawks to reduce the chance of bird-on-bird injury. The larger group (Harris' hawks) went to the massive sand dunes at Inch Strand - where they then separated into even smaller groups of 3-4 hawks each. The goshawk fliers went to the closer permission at Ventry. Then for the second day the groups switched, the goshawks went to Inch and the Harris' hawks to Ventry, so that each could get an opportunity to hunt both permissions.

There was an organized dinner held in Murphy's Pub, with a raffle in aid of Project Luggar (which raised €150) with artistic and useful prizes purchased and donated from people around the world. These included a hand-made dispatch spike with an antler handle, carved glass pint glasses, hand-painted feathers and pillows, as well as various framed raptor prints, among other things. There was also live music after the raffle. The night went great, and good craic was had by all. The president volunteered to act as a chauffeur to the club, as long as the lifts were before midnight, and everyone found themselves safely conducted back to Milltown House where the gaiety continued well into the early morning.

Sunday was met with more laughs and fun and most people packed up to go home after a leisurely breakfast; but nevertheless, a handful of hunters remained, raring to go. Sunday's weather was remarkable and spring-like, and there were several very good slips, with a few successes as well. The evening saw most of the remaining members go home, with only two left aside from myself. So, to celebrate a well-met meet, show respect for the quarry taken, and appreciation for the hawks who did the hard work; I made rabbit stew. I used local carrots, potatoes, and onions, even a spice blend from the local butcher.



Conor Swindell & Andi Chewning (right)



I added a splash of Irish whiskey and only had to outsource the red-wine and celery. It was delicious, and a perfect end for my first time hosting a fieldmeet.

With the overview of the meet itself out of the way, I want to add a bit more about the hunting itself; the 'excitement' we had; and how one ferret got re-christened 'Dingle.' As a member of the Inch Strand hunting party on the first day, and being in contact with the landowner who was interested in meeting us out on the dunes to see how hunting with a hawk was done, I can only account for the slips and weather where I was. To put it in a simple way, the whole day was a mixed bag. The weather on the beach itself was very, very windy, too much to consider flying the hawks in. However when you got into the huge warrens, the wind was completely blocked by the hillocks and the sun was radiant and warming. That leads to the next issue, the massive warrens!

As a complete novice to fieldmeets, but having organized many social gatherings before this, I figured the greater area to hunt, the better. This is true, to an extent, but what I failed to take into consideration was that in warrens with 30+ meter sand embankments and small ponds in the bottoms, the rabbits have endless opportunities to run around the ferrets and never break the surface. I quickly realized this, but by then it was too late. My hunting party saw a lot of standing around, waiting on rabbits which never bolted, but the sun was warm and the fellowship unbeatable. We did however have some good quality slips leading to a few successful flights. Being protected from the wind as we were, we saw the hawks perform well when the slips did come.

I cannot choose a favorite slip that day, because two stick out in my mind. The first one sticks out so clearly in my mind. It was from a particularly nimble male Harris' hawk who was released a millisecond too late, as he'd seen the rabbit bolt before anyone else had. Nevertheless, he was quickly in the money-making zone; but then the rabbit stopped dead in its tracks and bolted back the way it had come, if to a slightly different angle. The hawk was too close when the rabbit stopped, and he overshot. The hawk, watching everything happen in what can only be described as 'slow motion', quickly pitched straight down in tear-drop form, and dove onto the sand, but alas a miss. Recommitted though, he immediately launched back into the air, but did not get 'airborne' in the traditional sense.



The maneuver was more akin to a vertical summersault of wings and talons as he made just enough height and rocketed towards the rabbit in another attempt. But despite the male's agility and speed (which female Harris' hawk fliers should marvel at) the rabbit, spry and fresh, slipped away and the little hawk was left with tufts of fur it didn't have before, and a new adoring fan: namely me.

The second slip which stands out to me, was a slip by my own hawk, which showcased her personality and her complete and total commitment to the hunt perfectly. Typically, my hawk is talkative, not screamie in the horrendous and stereotypical Harris' hawk way, but quietly grunty and inquisitive, often 'preening' the glasses off my face and chirping to me about something new that enters the field of vision; but not when we are hunting. When we are hunting, as then, she is focused, more focused than I am usually. She is quiet and her body posture says she is ready. She never stops looking around, never puts a foot up when we are out, and always has a grip on the glove that communicates her excitement; as opposed to a lackadaisical perching stance. And, like all Harris' hawks, she is smart - to quote Martin Hollinshead in his book *A Mixed Bag*, "*the truth is that they are a bit too clever for the good of most falconers!*". The same is to be said about my hawk. She knows her job, she knows what the other birds are up to and when it's her turn, and she knows she will be rewarded if she does not give up. So it is, that this particular slip



showcased all of that. The rabbit bolted, slightly below and to our left, I opened my fist and she was away, kicking my hand down in the power of her take-off. Down the bottom-most part of the embankment and across the salt grass and sand. The rabbit jinked to the right just below me and made for a small upwelling of sand and grass. I momentarily lost sight of them both, as my hawk was flying so close to the ground following the rabbit, that she too disappeared behind the mound which was no taller than a meter. They appeared again, only a fraction of a second later and the rabbit sprung left in a more than 90 degree turn which saw it climbing towards a hole in the other side of the bank. My hawk, knowing all too well what was about to happen, cut the corner as the rabbit turned. She recommitted, pumped her wings so that the primaries threw up sand and launched herself forward as if from a slingshot. She touched the rabbit, only just, as it



“but despite the male’s agility and speed (which female Harris’ hawk fliers should marvel at) the rabbit, spry and fresh, slipped away and the little hawk was left with tufts of fur it didn’t have before”

made the entrance of another gargantuan warren.

I don’t remember breathing while my hawk was after the rabbit, and there’s a good chance I didn’t and I was holding my breath in suspense, but whatever the case I drew in a deep breath then and hurtled down the hill after my hawk, whom I had just watch disappear down a dark catacomb of a rabbit hole. When I got to the other side, she had been pulled so far into the hole, that I could not see her, and had to get direction from the rest of the hunting party who were still across at the other side. When I got to her, I nearly trod on her as the only thing peeking out of the hole was a few tips of out-splayed primaries, and her beak. Fearing a broken leg, I ignored the look of impatience on her face (I was not holding up my end of the deal, taking all that time to cross over to her) and ran my hand down her back, feeling for her legs, but being careful not to have her think I was the rabbit and get grabbed myself. The left foot - her bell leg (why I couldn’t hear her when I had gotten close) - was firmly planted in the cool moist sand, no breaks or deformities. Running my hand along the outside of her right leg I found that it was attached to a rabbit. I

Image right:
Clifford Ryan

quickly pulled it out with my hawk, ensuring it was dispatched. I grabbed my glove off the ground where I’d thrown it upon seeing it would be no good down the hole, and picked up both the hawk and rabbit to make our way out of sight so that the others could continue on.

In retrospect, while writing I am thankful for one thing primarily, that is that my hawk is so familiar with my hands and fingers being around her food; and that she is so familiar with my touch that no accidents were had as I blindly felt my way down the hole to her piercingly sharp talons (that said though, no words can express my gratitude and relief at finding her legs intact and without injury).

I wish I could say that was the end of the excitement for the day, but like all stories that are too good to be made up; the first day of the Dingle Fieldmeet also has another chapter; and much like the one I’ve just detailed, this one also centres around a dark hole, a lot of careful feeling about, and a massive amount of sand. I don’t remember the exact order of things and how they happened, but what it comes down to, is a missing ferret. The gentle albino in question is a seasoned ferret, and a fantastic worker, and although the warrens in question were gargantuan, there seemed to be something wrong when he didn’t reappear after twenty minutes down the hole. We waited a little while longer. After about forty minutes of waiting, I told the group that since my hawk had successfully taken a rabbit already, and since it had been my decision to come here for the day, that I would wait with the receiver and keep scanning and looking if they wanted to keep on hunting using the other ferret. After small discussion and with my urging, they agreed





and moved a little way up the set to a new hole. But as the tide was coming in (and it was a full moon high tide on the way in). Everyone was distracted and feeling the crunch of time to get out, for in order to access the dunes without an hour plus of trekking up, down, and back up again, or walking along the beach in extreme winds, we had driven in as close as possible and parked on the beach. But the spring tides are known to wash away the vehicles of those who don't pay the ocean the heed it is due.

So with the winter sun well past its zenith and closer to the horizon than not, we decided to pack it in. But what about the still missing ferret? Nearing two hours underground at this point, it still had not reemerged nor blipped on the receiver. With just about an hour until sunset, thirty minutes until high tide's peak, and at least a fifteen minute walk out, I told the others to go back ahead of us. I'm not one to shirk my duties, nor leave a friend behind to look for his ferret. I sent my hawk back with one of my regular volunteers that had been spectating, and who I knew could safely take her home and put her in her aviary for the night. I sent them with instructions to get another receiver from one of the other falconers, more shovels, and return as quickly as possible. Then only Jamesie King, Anthony Doyle and myself remained. It was at this time

I also phoned ahead to tell the others we were waylaid and to send another receiver back to us when the others got back to Dingle.

Not wanting to waste any of the remaining daylight, we recommenced the search for the four-legged hunting partner. We searched and searched, tapping holes up and down the sand dune calling at each one and waiting. Each of us must have scaled that steep 30 meter mound of sand twenty or more times, each in turn, crouching and calling and scanning. But nothing. The light was rapidly dropping now; maybe twenty minutes until complete darkness. Would anyone get back in time to make a difference?

I walked out to the low dunes covered in reeds and razor-sharp saltgrass, to check if the water had started to recede and that someone could make it back down the beach to us by car. My phone dinged then. A missed call. In the concern over the ferret and the concentration on searching for him I had forgotten that mobile signal is completely blocked down at the bottom of the large dunes. It was from another of the Harris' hawkers, the one I'd asked to borrow an extra receiver from. I wondered if everything was ok and had my volunteer found him? I hoped so because it was now too late if the receiver was still sitting back in Dingle, a half hour drive away. Breath held, I rang him back. I was soon relieved and delighted to find out that I'd only missed his

call by a couple minutes and that he was already down on the beach and looking for which dune to come in at. Hooray! There was a small ember of hope yet.

Now to get back to the others and re-scan the area with the new receiver. Almost immediately it had a signal. 16 feet horizontally into the dune, the maximum depth it could pick up; but it was something. The other receiver, we soon found realised, only sounded to 8 feet, having never been a problem before with warrens nowhere near as deep on the falconer's normal hunting ground. But 16 feet, on the side of a nearly vertical sand dune... well, that was a long dangerous dig, and felt like it may as well have been to China. Quick scanning of nearby areas took us to a spot that showed the ferret at 12 feet below, better, but this particular stretch of sandy hill had no holes anywhere nearby which might give us a better starting point, and it was steeper here too. For me there was never a question of whether or not to dig out the ferret if we found it, but now faced with at least 12 feet of sand between us and one shovel, the possibility of not being able to reach him now became the thing to consider. We decided to start digging at an angle, as close to the 12 foot signal as we could

manage, but at a shallow enough angle to dig. So it began. We took turns digging and clearing sand until the blood pounded in our ears and we were breathing heavily. After nearly an hour of the guys digging non stop and opening out a crater in the sand dune, I took another turn at clearing out some sand. As I was scooping the freshly dug sand away from the hole, a cute little pink snout followed by some very blinky eyes came waddling out through the sand at me. Looking a bit dazzled by the torch light, very tired and quite ready for his dinner and sleep now; thanks. Slightly anti-climactic to have him just meander out the gaping mouth of that massive hole; but the relief was palpable. There are few times I have ever been as thankful for a shower as I was that evening coming back to the B&B to wash the sand and grit out from my hair, ears, eyes, and teeth, but even that is pallid compared to the thankfulness I felt to see the newly christened 'Dingle' alive, healthy, and unharmed after more than five hours underground!

Here's to next year's meet; may it be just as fun, if maybe a tad less 'eventful'!

Images:

Caitlyn King
(below)

Anthony Doyle
& Jamesie King
(right)



The Falcon Trappers of the Tihamah

Maurice Nicholson

Back in 1997 I lived for six months in the Hejaz, the western province of Saudi Arabia that borders the Red Sea. During that time, I got to know some of the local falconers both in Jeddah and in Taif, the mountain town that sits in the cooler air of the Asir mountains inland. I had the opportunity to spend a weekend camping with a group of falcon trappers on the Red Sea coast and I wrote the following piece about the experience in an essay I sent home to my wife. Although most of the falcons used in Arab falconry nowadays are captive bred, still; the trapping of falcons on passage is part of the living heritage of many of the Arab tribes. It has been practiced since time immemorial at various locations along the migratory routes of the falcons as they pass south over the Arabian peninsula each autumn. Some of the well known crossing points from Arabia to Africa are to be found both north and south of the city of Jeddah on the 'Tihamah', the flat lowland plain that lies between the Red Sea and the rocky inland mountains.

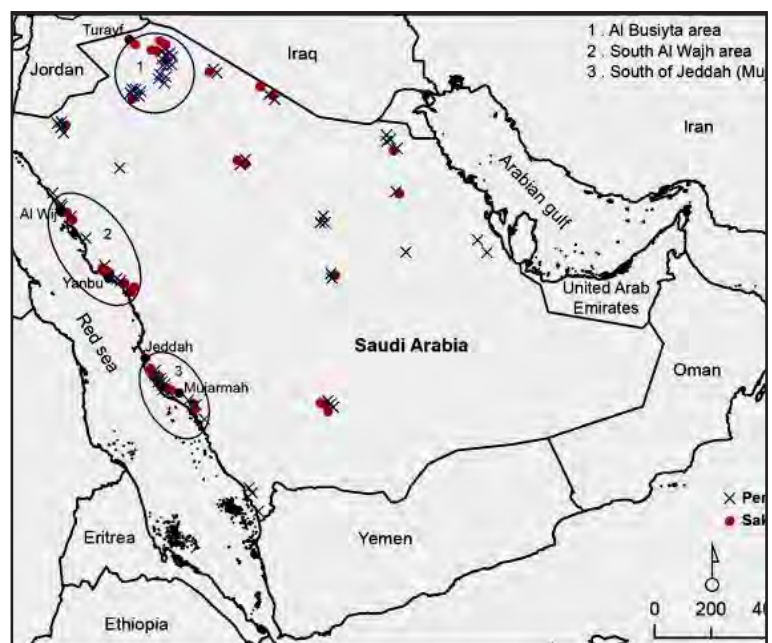
The Tihamah

Wiall al Nammari was standing inside the doorway of my office, his eyes wide and sparkling with excitement as he relayed the news. "Doctor Maurice... it is arranged for this weekend. The general and I are going to visit the falcon trappers and you must come with us. We are going south down the *Tihamah al Asir*". I had met the general just a few nights before when Wiall had turned up at my villa and whisked me off to an open air fish restaurant somewhere on the north-side of Jeddah creek. There, we had picked out the fish we wished to have cooked for us from a series of massive fridges that ran along the inside wall of the open sided restaurant. I had followed Wiall's advice and picked out a nice sized 'Hamoor' and a smaller 'Kanad', both recent denizens of the nearby Red Sea, when the general joined us, steering his bulk past the queue building up behind us. A meaty slab of a hand enveloped mine as Wiall went through the introductions and then the general swept both arms up over his bulging white *dishdasha* and tossed the ends of his *keffiyeh* back over his shoulders. "I heard all about you, Doctor... I must bring my

Shaheen to you soon. Wiall says you have all the best medicines for falcons." "Of course; any time" I answered.

As we sat on the cushioned floor of our booth and ate heartily from our plates of fish, rice and salads, it was there that Wiall first mentioned the *Tihamah*. "You know Doctor... it is the lowland plain between the mountains and the sea. It runs from Aqaba in the north all the way to Yemen... in the south. It runs for over a thousand miles." I knew of the *Tihamah* for I had read all the great books of Arabian exploration. Wilfrid Thesiger's books especially had been a wonderful discovery. Once I had begun to read his '*Arabian Sands*', I had stayed up half the night for the description of his trek across the *Rub al Khali*, the great Empty Quarter, had kept me awake like a gripping thriller. "We know some people down there... they trap the *Shaheen* and the *Hurr*. They camp out near the sea from September to December every year" Wiall continued. *Shaheen* was the Arab name for the peregrine falcon, *Shaheen Bahri* to be more precise to distinguish it from the red naped shaheen and they called the saker falcon the *Hurr*, a strange Arabic word that could sometimes be used to describe the finest examples of other creatures like the Arabian horse as well.

"Good God... trapping wild falcons... I would love to see that" I replied. "Is it faraway?"





"About three hours driving, Doctor." Wiall looked to the general as he wiped his mouth with the back of one hand and then he reached across the floor searching for a paper napkin. The general pursed his lips in consideration and then he nodded his head.

"I'll ask our friends... it will be o.k... Inshallah."

"Inshallah" Wiall echoed.

So when Wiall appeared in my office a few days later with the offer of a trip down the *Tihamah* over the approaching weekend, I jumped at the chance. "It is part of our culture... this falcon trapping, Doctor. For maybe a thousand years our ancestors have done this thing."

"I know, Wiall... I have read all about it."

I had lived in Dubai from 1979 to 1982 and during the migration season each year, I had often parked my jeep on the salt flats on the inner reaches of Dubai creek and watched an old trapper, Suedan at work. He spent most of the day inside a *Choca*, a trapping hide he had dug into a sandbank and roofed with timber and sacking and he had an assortment of decoy birds on lines that he used to attract any passing falcon. Trapping on the *Tihamah* was going to be a bit different, from what I had read.

I was lucky to have Wiall as my contact with the falconry community of the city for his English was excellent. A Saudi national by birth, he worked for Saudia Airlines but he had been educated in Istanbul and Damascus, two of the world's great cities of culture.

Wiall came by my villa on the following Thursday afternoon in his Jeep Wrangler and we set off for the *Tihamah*, calling by the general's house on the east side of the city on our way. I assumed General Mohammed was coming on his own with us but when he came through the big wooden doors to the street, to my surprise I saw that he was carrying a wizened old man in his arms, one arm crooked under his knees and the other around his shoulders. "The general's father is coming with us too" Wiall said to me through the open window so I disembarked and went to greet the old man. I could see straight away that carrying his father about was no great burden for General Mohammed for the old man was very gaunt and feeble. He must have been well in his eighties with a flaky white stubble matting his face and two coal black eyes that seemed sunken into the slits under his deeply furrowed brow. I shook his hand but he seemed distracted and didn't reply to my greeting. The general lifted him into the rear seat as if he was a child and placed the safety belt around him.

As we drove south along the highway, Wiall



told me a bit about the old man's history. He had been chauffeur for King Feisal bin Abdul Aziz for many years and when the king was assassinated back in 1975, the old man hadn't spoken for over six months such was his shock and his depression. General Mohammed had good English too and added in some more details of his father's life, telling us of how he used to drive the king when he went on hawking trips deep into the desert. "It's hard to imagine now, Doctor but my father used to drive across the desert like... Ayrton Senna when the falcon chased a *houbara*. More than once they had accidents... going too fast along the gravel plains. King Feisal... he loved his falcons... he loved his hunting!"

It was strange, I thought to myself. Feisal bin Abdul Aziz was the first Arab that I remember ever putting a face to. I could picture it still... a full page portrait in an old National Geographic back when I was eight or nine years old. Dark gold trimmed robes flowing from his head and shoulders, drooping lower eyelids and a vertical crease running down each cheek giving him a sneer of disdain and cruelty... probably not at all deserved. I looked back over my shoulder at the Arabian Ayrton Senna. The old man's chin had dropped to touch his chest. He seemed to be asleep.

We were driving south along the *Tihamah*, the blinding glare of the Red Sea way off to our right and the Asir Mountains shimmering in the

heat fifty kilometres inland. About an hour south of Jeddah, we suddenly ran into a sandstorm, the first I had come across in Saudi Arabia. It was like driving in a very thick fog and Wiall had his head pressed forward and his eyes peeled as he slowly steered along the white road markings. When the murk suddenly cleared, thunder began to crash all about us and lightning flashes lit up the peaks of the distant Asirs. Then, the first rain I had seen for months fell in a thunderous downpour, turning the road ahead of us into a long shallow pool of moving water but just as suddenly as it had appeared, the rain stopped.

"The *sayl* is a big danger, Doctor when the weather is like this" the general said from behind me.

"What's the *sayl*?" I asked?

"The flash flood that comes from the mountain. After the dry summer, the rain... it just runs down the mountain into the wadis like a... dam bursting. Sometimes many people have drowned. They don't know the *sayl* is coming because the rain often falls far away and high up in the mountains. Then *whoooosh*... it comes... sometimes during the night."

After three hours driving when we were close to *Wadi Lith*, Wiall turned off the highway and we drove across the sands towards the distant

glistening Red Sea. After we crossed a couple of low dunes, a small encampment appeared in the distance and Wiall steered us towards it. As we approached, the men there were working together erecting two open sided tents which, we later discovered, had just been blown down by the storm we had encountered.

A man, tall and spare and well in his seventies moved to greet us, as we disembarked and Wiall made the introductions. Ali bin Mohammed al Otabi was the head man of our hosts. He had been a falconer for King Feisal way back in his youth but in older age he made his living trapping falcons on their annual migration and selling them to the Saudi Royal Family. He had a gentle, crinkling smile of welcome on a face that was weather beaten in a way that could only come from spending long hours in the desert sun. He had been camping on the *Tihamah* since early September with a group of about twenty others in attendance, some of them teenagers. Ali motioned with one hand towards the tents behind him... four larger canopies, open sided to catch whatever breeze that was about and a smaller kitchen-tent off to one side. "Most of our friends here are Ali's family... he has three wives and many, many children" Wiall whispered to me as Ali led us to the largest tent. The occupants rose to their feet and greeted us one by one in line. They were men of the desert but their manners were very formal and ritualised. We sat down with them on the rugs and were straightaway poured little thimbles of *Gawa*, Arabic Cardamom coffee from the spout of an old coffee pot that was blackened by its time in the embers of many a camping fire. The *Gawa* was bitter and invigorating, a foil to the sweet dates that were passed around on a platter. The conversation did not take long to move past the obligatory courtesies of polite interaction and, soon enough, the men were all talking about falcons and trapping. Wiall translated and kept me informed as the conversation swept quickly away from me, just like the sayl in full flow that the general had described earlier.

"Ali has just bought a *Farkh*, a first year *Hurr* from another trapper further south. He paid eighteen thousand riyals for it." I did the calculation; it was about three thousand pounds. "He will sell it to one of the princes. If it is a good size falcon, he will make a nice profit." Ali was very keen to show us his new prize so we followed him around behind the tent to where the falcon sat hooded on a *wakr*, an Arab style falcon perch. He knelt down beside the wooden block and backed the falcon onto his covered wrist. He whispered soft soothing words as he deftly removed the hood, pulling on the releasing braces with his teeth and free hand. We gave our nods of approval as the falcon hitched up its wings and hissed at the

sight before her. He had only begun manning her, Ali explained and that was plain to see for the big female saker still had the wide-eyed terror of a newly captured bird. Behind one of the other tents, two other newly caught falcons perched on *wakrs* in the shade. Both of these were male peregrines in adult plumage, their pale feathered breasts proclaiming better than any passport what their provenance was. These were peregrines of the *Calidus* subspecies and they had flown here from Siberia on their wintering passage to Africa. They were beautiful falcons but because of their smaller size they were less sought after than the bigger females of the species.

As the sun set over the distant sea, we moved back in to eat. Our hosts had slaughtered a sheep in our honour; so we sat around on the rugs in two groups and ate mutton and rice from the two large communal dishes placed on the ground. Ali dropped some choice pieces of the succulent meat onto the dish in front of me, a common practice of the good host in Arabia. One of the teenagers on the rug beside me followed suit but, when I saw that the morsel was a sheep's ear with a considerable piece of fluffy wool still attached, I knew it was a wind-up. None of the youngsters even glanced in my direction but I knew they were just waiting to see if my good manners would force me to eat it. I kept them guessing for a while, picking it up numerous times before finally placing it to one side.

Afterwards, there was more *Gawa* and then *Chai* all accompanied by more talk. I have often thought that the prohibition of alcohol by the Islamic faith is much more than a religious doctrine. It is a survival mechanism. Conversation is such an important feature of





their daily lives that, were it to be attended by the quaffing of alcohol; nothing would ever get done in Arabia.

We had camp beds and sleeping bags laid out in our tent and we headed for bed around midnight. Most of the youngsters stayed up playing cards and their voices drifted out to us as we lay there. Ahmed, the general's father, lay across from me, his mouth hanging open as he fell quickly into a deep sleep. I saw the general hovering nearby and tucking a rug around the old man's shoulders. A cooling breeze rolled in along the salt flats from the sea nearby. I stared out towards it. Somewhere across its depths was the city of Port Sudan but it was too far away to see any glow from its lights. I drifted off with the full moon and the glittering belly of the Milky Way right above my head.

Early in the pre-dawn hours, a cockerel crowed long and repetitiously telling us that a new day was soon to arrive. I had noticed the evening before that Ali kept a large flock of chickens around the camp. Wiall told me they were to keep the scorpion numbers down but I still wasn't sure if he had been pulling my leg. At about five in the morning, Ali called the faithful to prayer with a hoarse and cracked rendition of *Allahu Akbar*... God is Great. As the men and boys all struggled from their places of rest and moved to form two lines together, I realised that I was the only one still resting. I turned over in my sleeping bag, feeling like a long lapsed Catholic and watched through my bleary eyes as they lay out on their faces and prayed together to their God.

For breakfast we had warm milk and rusks as

we sat around the early morning fire and then it was all action. Ali gave the orders and the men and boys were soon jumping up and loading falcons and pigeons into the various wrecks of Land cruisers and Land Rovers that had been parked about. Behind them, the full moon was still hanging in there over the invisible Red Sea and a pale pink glow to the east betrayed the arrival of the dawn on the other side of the distant Asirs. We had to be on the move before the day warmed up and the falcons took to the cooler higher air.

We headed off with General Mohammed at the wheel, while I sat in the rear with his father, who seemed to be already dozing. We drove north for twenty miles or so, crossing over and back on the *subkha*, the salt flats that stretched away to each horizon. Wiall regaled us with stories of the dangers of the *subkha* once the rains came. Overnight, the flats could become a deceptive quagmire underneath the hard sun-baked crust and many vehicles had been irretrievably lost in the morass over the years.

The number and variety of birds of prey to be seen was astonishing. As we drove along, we were constantly disturbing kestrels, kites, vultures, harriers and sooty falcons from their night-time roosts on the desert floor. The number of trappers from other camps, cruising about as we were in their open topped jeeps, was almost as amazing. Like us, they crossed over and back on the flats, all of them scanning the ground and the skies for the tell-tale outline of a peregrine or a saker falcon for the rest of the birds of prey were of no interest to them.

We spied a sooty falcon perched atop a small

dune so Wiall jumped out and placed a small *Bal Chatri* cage trap on the ground about fifty metres away. In it a live Jerboa, a small hamster like rodent, scrambled around and, no sooner had we driven off, than the little falcon flew straight to the trap but did not become ensnared. Then, a much bigger harrier suddenly appeared and was soon caught in the nooses along the top of the cage. It flew off as we approached dragging the trap along the ground behind it. General Mohammed was an amusing spectacle as he lumbered after it, eliciting a few shouts of encouragement from Wiall and then laughter from us all when he finally dived, belly flop style to the ground and got hold of it. He released the bird straight away from the nooses and it flew rapidly away.

We drove on and, as we crossed the top of the next rise, the lights of a vehicle in the distance were flashing on and off. Wiall and the general burst into a flow of excited Arabic as we came to an abrupt standstill. "They have seen a falcon... now we all must stop and let them try and capture it" Wiall said. He turned to me and began to explain that there was a whole etiquette among the trappers, once a falcon of interest was spied. Whoever first spotted the bird flashed the headlights of his vehicle continuously. All the other trappers would then let him proceed to try and trap it while they followed along behind, judging his every move, praising his skills, decrying each error of judgement and mocking his failures.

"Do they always respect the unwritten rules "I asked?

"Usually, Doctor, though there have been disputes when two trappers see a falcon at the same time and then there is a quarrel about who has the right to that bird. A falcon may be worth twenty thousand or more riyals so you can see why there can be a dispute. Sometimes they go to their Sheikh and he has to decide."

General Mohammed drove us forward and we joined in the line of vehicles forming beyond the ridge and we watched as the spectacle unfolded before us. The flashing vehicle began to move slowly away and I saw the flare of a white wing in the early morning light. A pigeon with a snare harness on its back had been released from the departing vehicle and it took off across the flats. The falcon must have been sitting close by on the ground and in the shadows for we never saw it take to the air but, in seconds, the chase was on as its wing chopping outline cut through the air behind the departing pigeon and General Mohammed slammed the Jeep into gear again. A half mile on, the line of vehicles came to a halt and we watched as the lead vehicle moved forward slowly across the *subkha*. Thirty yards

ahead, the falcon burst from the ground again, now with the pigeon dangling awkwardly from the snares around her toes. With a roar the line of vehicles set off again.

"They will keep after her now, Doctor. She cannot fly far with the pigeon hanging from her feet" General Mohammed said. He was right. A quarter mile on, as the line of vehicles slewed to a halt, the lead trapper jumped suddenly out of his Jeep. He hitched his *dishdasha* up to his waist with one hand to free his legs and, barefooted, began to run ahead, peeling his head cloth off with his other hand and disappeared through the edge of some desert scrub .

When he reappeared just minutes later, he carried the falcon in front of him wrapped in his *kuffiyeh* with the harnessed bloodied pigeon still dangling from her feet and slapping off his *dishdasha* with each step he took. All the vehicles began to pour forth their occupants and they ran like a group of excited school children towards him. We followed along, the general holding his father by one skinny elbow. The falcon was held up in the air in front of us and all the trappers gave their opinions. I looked her over. She was a beauty alright... a pale female *Farkh Shaheen Bahri*, a passage female peregrine of the *Calidus* subspecies that had travelled from the breeding grounds of Siberia. Her wide open eyes glared at us with a mixture of terror and fierce defiance. A hood



was placed over her head and then, as one man held her close to the ground, the trapper rolled her into an *abbah*, a sock like cloth tied around her to prevent her thrashing about and damaging her feathers. With the spectacle over, the trappers dispersed quickly again for there was little time left before the rising temperatures forced the falcons high into the cooler air where they became impossible to trap.

We arrived back at the camp just after nine o'clock and had a second more substantial breakfast with the returning trappers. They would head out again as the heat of the burning sun began to dissipate late in the afternoon. Breakfast was a mixture of homemade bread, Sudanese beans, honey, cream and cheese - all very tasty. Then, we sat around in the shade for the morning drinking chai as visitors came and went and told their trapping stories from the past, many of which Wiall relayed on to me.

At noon, four of Ali's boys came with us and we drove east for an hour right into the foothills of the stony Asirs. Two of the lads had shotguns, both single barrelled and capable of taking only one round. "All privately owned guns are prohibited now in Saudi Arabia... the boys got these from Yemen" Wiall said.

We zigzagged around the bare rocky foothills until the keen eyed lads spotted a covey of Chukhar Partridge by a lone thorn bush. They were out of the Jeep in seconds, raising their guns as they ran barefoot around by my door and the double report of their shots nearly blew my eardrums out. Then they were back in the Jeep in a couple of minutes, grinning like the kids they were, as they showed us the brace of partridge they had killed.

A few minutes later, we turned into a *wadi* with a broad flow of water flowing through it and a flock of Nubian goats drinking at its edge. "You see, Doctor... this is the end of a *sayl*. Yesterday and maybe for many weeks, I guarantee you there was no water here."

A *barasti* hut under a rocky cliff seemed to be the abode of the elderly Bedouin who was tending the goats there and Wiall and General Mohammed spoke to him for some minutes. Getting the news in all rural communities is part of the staple diet and the old man asked question after question about all the activities in the trapping camps below. As we drove away, he stood there by his hut looking after us as if he was memorising everything he had just heard.

In the heat of the afternoon, all the trappers lounged and slept under the open sided tents. Now I understood how they could stay up so late and rise so early for the whole middle part of their day was for rest. We left them just

as they were loading up the jeeps to head out again on the *Tihamah*, as the heat of the day was beginning to wane. In a few hours, we were back on the south edge of Jeddah with a rain storm pelting down on us for the second time in two days.

I have one other memory of that visit to the *Tihamah*. I was dozing on my camp bed during the heat of the afternoon when I awoke to see General Mohammed leading his ancient father, hand in hand across a nearby dune. The wizened old man was like a skinny child beside the burly Mohammed who carried a bucket of water in his free hand and lumbered slowly along beside his shuffling father. He was helping the old man with his ablutions and in the midst of a landscape that was harsh and desolate and unforgiving it was a most unexpected image of tenderness.



Flying Merlins

Nick Wilkinson

***Alauda arvensis*, the skylark. *Falco columbarius*, the merlin. How fortunate are we to have them both. More fortunate than our American cousins. Yes, they have the merlin, but they don't have the skylark. And why are we so fortunate? Because these two adversaries are so well matched that we are able to witness 'Le Haut Vol,' (high ringing flights) the spectacle that has thrilled falconers for centuries. Flights at crane, heron and kite are now but a footnote in history, but flights at skylarks are still possible in this modern age, and achieving high ringing flights to beyond the limits of human vision represents the pinnacle of a select few falconers' careers.**

This branch of the art of falconry is not about numbers. In fact, your season could be very short indeed if it was, when you consider that your lark licence from Natural England will be a maximum of fifteen larks. No, this is all about watching that classic ringing flight with the two combatants fighting for supremacy as they head for the heavens. One of the best merlins of recent years was 'The Frog'. She didn't learn her trade by killing skylarks, but by being rewarded each and every time she brought one down from the heavens. She had won the contest and she was rewarded. If she threw a rising lark, she got no reward. She learned that by winning the contest she was rewarded and that was good enough for her. In her career she only caught six larks, but she was exceptional. She was eventually lost, as so many good merlins are.

The Frog

Grant phoned the other night sounding very excited. If Grant is excited about something you take note. He said I should really get down there and see The Frog, she is exceptional - and bring a very good pair of binoculars.

Con phoned tonight to bring me up to speed. She had just rung another lark up into the heavens, her 13th. It had stayed in view of his binoculars - but only just. It was picking out the flickering of her wings that made him aware she was still climbing. Before she went out of view she started to stoop. Con wasn't sure if she was still after her lark, or merely coming back down. Eventually the lark came into focus in front of her. She put the lark into cover but she didn't catch it. Apparently she has only caught five larks in total so far, and only one after a high ringing flight, but, it doesn't matter -- she gets fed up for



bringing them down and that is her reward. She is a determined and tenacious flying machine and Con is a very proud merlin-man. Con has suggested that we are now breeding merlins that are especially capable of such feats and that has been our intention from the start. I don't think it is just Maggie's offspring (The Frog being one) that are capable of the highest quality flights, I think that Tony's merlin, Jarro, an offspring of Beccy (see below for some of Beccy's history) might also have been a real candidate this year. That flight at Ribblehead, without the intervention of the strong wind and the interference by the wild merlin might have gone up and out of sight with Jarro still working. I think she also is a gifted flying machine. All the breeding pairs we have are selected; none are just any old merlin paired up with another, and only the very best make it into our breeding aviaries.

If The Frog does get to breed they hope to bring over a wild disabled Irish jack to go with her. However, at present Con has the time, good ground, favourable weather, the larks and best of all The Frog, so he will continue. I know we all wish him the best of luck and it is something for all good merlin-men to aspire to.

A week later: Con phoned to say that The Frog was still going well. Not taking on every lark she sees, but at the ones she does she is most determined. He said he had been a bit too kind to her and allowed her weight to go too high, resulting in her messing about. A mistake many of us make, even with many decades

of experience under our belts. Anyway, he brought her weight back into line and she again started to play the game seriously. He has many migrating larks on a patch of ground there, whereas Grant is struggling to find larks in his neck of the woods. I asked Con if he was going to carry on flying and his reply was "Of course".

Another week later Con phoned: The Frog has hopped off. Flown on Wednesday, she flew a lark way up, but set her wings before returning. Con wasn't having that, so fed her a chick leg, hooded her up and flew her again half an hour later. She then flew a lark up into the heavens, just about to go out of bino vision, turned over into a stoop and was so high up that Con lost sight of her. By transmitter, he knew that she was down and not too far off. To cut a long story short, Con eventually lost transmitter contact. He feared the worst, thinking a buzzard might have had her. Thursday, on social media, someone posted a picture of her. She had nearly landed on his hand, then landed on his head, four miles from where Con was searching and four hours previous to Con contacting said person. Con is continuing to search in the new area and downwind, but nothing yet. He has been having incredible flights and says she is exceptional, phenomenal, a great merlin. If he gets her back he will continue flying. You never lose the rubbish ones, always the good ones. It is unusual for good ones to finish a season. We are lucky that we have Maggie, Beccy and Silva in aviaries, but we don't have Nasri, killed by a buzzard, or Casper, probably run over by a car and taken away by the driver, transmitter and all. We can only hope that Con gets lucky and 'The Frog' is found.

(Sadly The Frog was never heard of again)

Beccy; the special one

So how do we make such merlins? A good start is to acquire a merlin that has been bred from good flying merlins. The Frog was bred from Maggie, the best merlin we have ever seen. Maggie was exceptional in every sense of the word. She was flown by an exceptional merlin-man, Richard, on good ground and in a year with mostly favourable weather early in the season. In other hands she might have been an also-ran. Another exceptional merlin was Beccy. Extracts from some emails sent to me by Richard tell her story.

Hi Nick,

Flew bird free tonight, no big deal but part of the job. Tomorrow I will show her some larks and with a bit of luck she will be entered. She also

had her first bath at home today, a real do. I'm convinced a better hawk can be made when the bird bathes at home every day. That's my thoughts anyway.

Many thanks,

Richard

Hi Nick,

Went looking for a lark with Beccy today, found a few. Dog went on point and started on foot patrol. I took the hood off, let her rouse, and edged the dog on. The hunt went on for about fifty yards. Dog on point and me in the right position. Get in! Lark up and she went instantly off the fist. I could not believe it. I have never had a merlin bate at the first lark up. It flew 200 yards and dopped in some rushes with the merlin right behind it. I was praying for her to have caught it. I got there and she was sat on top of the rushes. She had missed. Ah well! I picked her up and went to look for another. I hadn't walked ten yards, before the dog went solid on point, and I knew it was a lark. Get in Todd! Lark gets up, Beccy is on its tail. The lark makes straight for the open sky and so does the merlin, probably up to 100 or more feet. It was too much for the merlin and she pulled off, but what a good effort for a bird that has come straight out of an aviary and only flown free for the first time yesterday. What a good start! I am buzzing.

Many thanks,

Richard

P.S. This is my special bird, hopefully.

Hi Nick,

Went on my local patch last night Nick, plenty of larks. We had some great hunts with the dog, but the larks we put up were very strong, so I left the hood on Beccy, until I could find the perfect slip. This is how it went. Dog's nose goes to the ground. The hunt was on. This tweety was on foot patrol. The hunt seemed to go on forever across the moor before Todd locked up solid. Off comes the hood, Beccy rouses after a couple of minutes. Get in Todd! Up gets the lark. The merlin was on it in a breath, a cracking little flight unfolded, the lark tried to go high, but the merlin was all over it and they flew over a rise and we lost sight. Telemetry out and I found Beccy plucking her prize. She was entered! Real do. Job done!

Many thanks,

Richard



Hi Nick,

A very exciting night. Three larks flown, caught one. The first flight was on a mounting lark, a very fast flight up and down the moor, but the lark made its escape under a cow. Just as the lark made cover (under the cow) an immature peregrine came in from nowhere and very nearly took Beccy out of mid-air. I ran up the moor screaming, anything to take the peregrine's tunnel vision off killing my merlin. Both peregrine and merlin flew out of sight. I was bricking it; there was no signal. I made for a high point on the moor. After half an hour I got a signal. She was on her way back. She flew up the moor and landed on my fist. I can't tell you how I felt. Bloody hell! Thank God for that! They tell me the biggest killer of young merlins in the wild is -- yes you got it -- peregrines. I like peregrines but not tonight.

The other two flights were ringing flights, not very high. Both larks bailed when Beccy was on the edge of her ring. It worked well for one lark, but not for the other, her second lark. I fed up and came home.

Many thanks,

Richard

Over several weeks Beccy perfected her art and many classic ringing flights were seen. An example of one.

Hi Nick,

Had two flights tonight. The second was a flight I will never forget. This is how it went. Todd spun round on point and then started to belly. The longer the hunt went on the more I was convinced it was a lark. Bang! Todd locked up. I was buzzing and the merlin was too. Beccy knows all about a pointing dog. "Get in Todd!" Lark up and headed straight into the clouds with Beccy ringing to one side of her lark. I was watching the merlin through the binoculars for ages, wings pumping all the time until both lark and merlin were in my field of view at the same time. This lark was in trouble. Beccy was chopping at it all the time, with the lark just evading the little stoops. It was dancing in the sky. A massive stoop followed. The flight was over and I set off to find my charge. I tracked the merlin down to an industrial estate, about two miles away from where the flight began. Beccy had taken her lark and she was nicely eating it on a verge of the industrial unit. I watched her eat her lark and offered her a chick. She jumped on my fist and I buzzed all the way back to the motor, all the time looking at my little merlin.

Many thanks,

Richard

Don't think it is easy. First you need the land. Open grass moorland is best (and it needs to be much more open than most people imagine). Then you need to source a good merlin and finally you need the dedication, all the time, seven days a week to bring out

your merlin's full potential. A long spell of bad weather (high winds are especially bad) can damage your prospects for a whole season, but that is beyond our control. If you cannot fill these criteria you are better off leaving the merlins and the art of lark-hawking to others who are able to. I have never flown a merlin. I had access to the best merlins, but not the land. I have seen epic ringing flights and I appreciate the effort involved in procuring that spectacle for my enjoyment. If a job is worth doing, it is worth doing well - or not at all.

Once the larks are fully moulted the season ends for all except those exceptional merlins that come along once in a blue moon. Rarely are merlins flown in their second season. In the first year they seem to have that spring-lamb gene, are full of determination, energy, and will fly larks for the fun of it. During their second season this spark seems to be missing and the merlins mostly fly cunning, knowing they will be fed whatever the outcome. For more insight into the art and information on how to breed merlins read 'Out of the Hood' by Marcus Derbyshire and good luck if you attempt the task.

Maggie; the candle that burned twice as bright

A Maggie flight written by Richard's good friend Chris:

Todd went on point and about fourteen grouse got up. We thought that was it, but Todd kept on a trail, bellied down hard and fast. Then the song of a lark broke the silence, and then the flicker of Maggie's wings pumping towards this singing bird. As she got up to it the lark went vertical and Maggie followed. She pulled out wide and the ringing began. Downwind they headed. Maggie really had to work hard in the wind and the faster they went downwind the

faster they went vertical. In no time I lost sight of the lark and could only just see Maggie in the cotton wool clouds. We waited for her to give up, as this lark was one of those that everyone calls a 'rocket'. Any normal merlin would have pulled off by now, but not Maggie. We watched in amazement, like two excited kids. At last the lark decided enough was enough; it used gravity and its wings to get it back to safety as fast as it could travel. Maggie had the same idea; after all she hadn't worked this hard for nothing! Down, down they went, she gained on it, managed to put a bend into it on the way down, then a big pull up and back into a stoop. Again, down they went and out of sight! We looked at each other and went "Bloody hell. That was some flight!" Off we walked across the moor top. Richard pulled the telemetry out and the signal wasn't directly towards where they dropped. Weird that, we thought, she must be coming back on to the hill. After a while the signal didn't move, so we headed towards it, thinking she must have landed up somewhere. As we got over the brow the signal came from down a gully, so I waited on top while Richard headed towards this signal. He spotted her and pointed at her shouting "She's caught it!" She more than deserved this rocket-fuelled bird. We can only assume she over pressed it down at the last minute and had to tail after it across the bottom open fields. Only she and God will ever know. She was fed up and we headed off that hill with bigger smiles on our faces than last night! That was the best merlin flight I have ever witnessed. This bird is so determined and persistent you just can't imagine that one day it will all end, and she won't do these flights anymore. I'm just glad I'm getting to witness it before it happens.

Chris.

Thoughts from another fine merlin-man.

I think I am getting addicted to merlins... and our afternoon hunts. I can honestly say this has been my most enjoyable season so far... ever! God knows what I am going to do if/when she packs up flying them. The flying... the scenery... the dog work... it's all just brilliant and any other branch of falconry would be inferior by comparison. Sometimes it's a little frustrating when you have had a flight of the quality that I had the other day... you just want to see that 'natural wonder'... again and again. But for sheer quality flying... big flights, or small... they really are amazing little 'falcons of the clouds'.

Multum in Parvo. (Much in little)



On Plover Hill

Don Ryan

On a mild afternoon in early April, I went to the top of Plover Hill because the world was in a muddle. I needed to be somewhere free from the gloom and ill tidings that screamed from every news channel. I couldn't think of a better place than the soothing peak of Plover Hill. The gentle southerly wind purred with spring notes; a breeze full of fond memories and promise; the kind of breeze you wish for when a falcon is on your fist. As I intended to stay a while, I found an upright slab of mottled granite protruding above the low lying heather to use as a backrest to sit against. From up here, the city below appeared still and peaceful, but it wasn't. A fear had descended on all the cities of the world. We were invaded by a sputnik shaped alien object. An illness that set the world in a fluster, disrupted normality and forced restrictions to be introduced to the everyday freedoms we take for granted.

Dark thoughts filled my head, should the worst happen. Concern for my family was foremost on my mind. I pondered if I had lived enough? Have I loved enough? Have I seen and done all the things I hoped I might all those years ago in the misty days of youth? I can't even remember what they were now. I've lived the life of the quintessential idiot; *"full of sound and fury, signifying nothing"*.

It's strange how flicking through your memories, you dwell too long on the painful moments, the regrets of unspoken words, unmentioned feelings, unoffered apologies. Silly arguments with no beginning, no consequence and no end; and invariably, with those who have passed where atonement can't be made - at least, not in this life.

Heather covered Plover Hill sits at the very edge of the Dublin mountains. Behind me to the south, the hills rise gently to greet the neighbouring Wicklow range that form part of the National Park. North of Plover Hill, the landscape drops to a tapestry of green fields with groves of native woods before meeting the monochrome hum of the city below. To the east, the conifer plantations shroud the view of the landscape beyond but a break in the valley reveals the unmistakable outline of Howth Head and Dublin Bay. Two reservoirs where I spent many an evening fishing, lie deep on the floor of the western valley to my left before rising up to the neighbouring peak of Seahan that towers 300 m above me.

I come to the hills each day to run the dogs, but

stay clear of Plover Hill from spring to autumn to allow the upland birds to breed in peace. During the COVID pandemic, people have turned to nature for healing so my usual haunts of local forest trails are populated. For this reason, I broke with routine that afternoon and went to Plover Hill but left the dogs at home. The upland moors have many moods through the seasons. My favourite is winter when the light blue skies frame the rustic shades of the mountain hills. In high summer the hillsides become a wonderful olive green that blossom into the all familiar blooming purple as August arrives. As I write, in spring time, the heather is convalescing. The warm days, low humidity and drying winds from the continent reduce the moisture content, making the heather dry and crisp underfoot - a dangerous time for wildfires.

Plover Hill is unremarkable. There are no discerning features to give it character. No curious structures or megalithic tombs on the summit like the surrounding hills. Apart from the odd piece of granite, it's just a hill a child would draw; a simple symmetrical shape like rising dough. Ordnance maps mark it at 416 m above sea level; shorter than the adjacent peaks that rise to 700 m. They make it difficult to fly in really blustery conditions as the wind is buffeted around by the higher slopes. This becomes obvious when your falcon suddenly changes direction to gain height or your dog begins a new quartering pattern as it gets



over a ridge. On a positive note, when the surrounding hills are covered in mist, Plover Hill is usually clear. You don't get lift on Plover Hill unless the wind is coming directly north, but the lower half of the northern slope is fenced off with a patchwork of fields stitched together with gorse and wire fences making it unsuitable to fly. If plover are on the hill, they are generally on the top north east face and seem to prefer ground with little or no vegetation. Areas that have been burnt within a couple of years are their preferred choice.

Snipe and grouse can be found anywhere on the hill but there is never an abundance of either. One small covey of grouse early in the season, thinning out to a brace as the season progresses is the most you're likely to find. They are wild unmanaged grouse with no keeper to cull a dominant cock, so small coveys and large territories are to be expected. A half dozen snipe is a good number for Plover Hill. Typically, it's one or two but quite often, none. On the base of the east side, there's a marsh that's always wet, even in drought conditions. It holds snipe and a good number of jack snipe from October but is pointless to fly as the vegetation is knee high. Snipe run freely here and if forced to flush, they have somewhere to safely bail.

Plover Hill is not its real name. To be honest, I'm not sure what it is called, as I haven't seen it marked on any map but I'm sure it has a proper name. I call it Plover Hill as a pet name. Before Plover Hill, I called it Grouse Hill and before that, I can't remember if I had a name for it. What I do remember is the flight that gave it its current title; a flight that changed my view on how I wish to continue to fly a falcon.

A soft south-westerly blew over the base of the southern slope of Plover Hill that late December afternoon when my Irish red and white setter, Libby, came on point 300 yards ahead. We left the vehicle only minutes earlier from the layby on the road that runs to the east of the hill. Leaving the road, you're directly on the heather ground that slopes gently down to the valley at the base. On the east side, lies the marsh and at the bottom of the southern slope is low lying patchy heather. This is where Libby found a point. Snipe tend to like this spot for some reason. A lot of the time I don't have to venture up the hill as I find enough snipe on the southern base. It means the day's hawking can be over quite quickly. Other days you can walk all over Plover Hill and find nothing. I had no doubt the point was good when 'The Waif', my third season tiercel took to the air. He was all business that day, leaving the fist promptly. I generally flush when the tiercel is between 300 to 500 ft as this is a killing pitch for hawking snipe. The tiercel lets you know when he feels he's high enough but I always encourage him

to go higher. I don't mess about too long though as wild game doesn't wait around. On these hills, one point may be the only opportunity you get to present game, so I try not to squander it.

He mounted well without drifting too far to get pitch which has always been one of his positive traits. As I came within flushing distance, I checked his position and cursed; a wild tiercel had appeared in the sky beside him. There are wild falcons that nest further south in the breeding season but they don't appear much over the winter months. I call my falcon down when they arrive but they don't usually stay long. With the point still good, I quickly considered my options and decided to flush regardless. A snipe rose, they both stooped and both missed. There was cackling in the sky as I reached for my lure to call him down. I was uncertain which one was mine. One flew higher and I lost sight of the other. I swung the lure but got no response. I kept swinging till half way up the south slope of Plover Hill, I lost sight of him. I checked the GPS to find him 800 ft to the north and 700 ft above me. I put the lure away and urged Libby on to find something, anything!

I've been in this position hoping to find a second flush many times only to be disappointed, but at 700 ft and climbing, I owed it to him to try. I knew plover occasionally rest on the north east face of the hill, directly in the course we were going but they're notoriously jumpy and rarely hold to a point. I was hoping to find a snipe before we got that far. It was a tough ask for Libby as we were working downwind taking our lead from the falcon overhead. A quarter of an hour later at the top of the hill with Libby working hard, the tiercel high over the northern slope at 1500 ft and me seriously ruffled at not finding anything, I heard the whistle. It was a plover. I scanned the skies frantically but could see nothing so I checked the GPS. He had been out of position as I could see the track back across the sky towards me on the screen. He had dropped his pitch to 1000 ft. Then I heard another whistle but this time it was accompanied by the sizzle of a stooping tiercel. I tracked him down to the north eastern slope where he sat on top of a crock of gold as calm as you please. No panting or frantic tugging at his quarry which lay cleanly dispatched. Soft curved golden feathers clung lightly to the heather either side where they lay. The most beautifully patterned feathers I'd ever seen. I put some in my bag while Libby sniffed gingerly at others. Something special had happened. I was elated for the tiercel as much as myself and I made a big fuss of Libby for playing such a critical role by flushing the plover.

I knew that from this point forward, these were the flights I wanted to experience. He had fulfilled his role as a peregrine, overcoming the arrival of a wild tiercel and going on to take

game in style. He had trusted in me and I in him and we both trusted Libby. Thankfully, it all paid off.

Halfway up the southern slope of Plover Hill when I put the lure away as he reached 700 ft, I ceased engaging in the sport of falconry and began practicing the art of falconry. I stopped being a hunter and became a falconer. Although it must have appeared to anyone looking on that we were all out of control doing our own thing, we were in fact, all working together in an effort to outwit one of the most difficult wild and elusive species known to falconers. We combined our intrinsic skills and worked as a team. Although to be fair, I played the lesser role as orchestrator. My most difficult task was to try to keep up. I have always tried to adopt the same training with falcons as I have with dogs. For me, there are three ways a dog can work. Each way is fine depending on what you want. There are dogs that work for you, dogs that work for themselves and dogs that work with you. For me the latter is my preference, but in order to achieve this, you must be prepared to abandon a strict level of control and encourage their independence. You

have to trust them. They know what they have to do. It's the same with falcons.

With that flight two seasons past, I understand now that just because you know the flights you want to aspire to, it does not necessarily mean you can expect to achieve them every time you go out. The real joy is the anticipation, which typically falls short of reality. He's put plenty of quarry in the bag since that flight but none so spectacular. You have no control of what happens when hunting wild quarry or the style it happens. All you can do is be ready should it arise. Give them the opportunity. Make sure your falcon has enough gas in the tank to allow it to happen and encourage them to dominate the flight. After that, the outcome is in the lap of the gods and you will have no reason to be disappointed. There is always tomorrow or the day after.

Looking back, that afternoon in April, I appreciate he didn't have to catch that plover to make it such a memorable flight- but then I'd be sitting on Grouse Hill, which has a completely different character to Plover Hill!



“Before Plover Hill, I called it Grouse Hill and before that, I can't remember if I had a name for it. What I do remember is the flight that gave it its current title; a flight that changed my view on how I wish to continue to fly a falcon. “



Origins of Irishness

Sandy Peter'Ka, Australia

Sandy is Vice President of the Irish Setter Club of Western Australia and the oracle of all things pertaining to the Madra Rua. We are very grateful to her for sending this informative article on the origins of the Irish Setter from the April edition of Wellred News.

Dublin was known as "the pale" in the 1700s and "beyond the pale" meant beyond Dublin and beyond the reach of law. Out beyond, the Irish became masters of charade and invention through their determination not to be crushed. By the late 1700's, the reputation of Irish setters had grown locally "up from the rough". Their abilities were evident even before their red colour became fixed.

PAGES FROM LORD ROSSMORE'S BOOK "THINGS I CAN TELL" 1912

Recently I read *"The world famous Red & Whites of the Rossmore Family, who owned Red & Whites almost 300 years..."* Please, just tell me how!

The 1st Lord Rossmore was created 4 years before 1800 and died in 1801. Not blood relatives, all future Lords Rossmore came from the Dutch Westenra family and built Rossmore Castle in 1827. The 5th Lord Rossmore was Derrick Westenra who lived from 1853 until 1921.

Derry, as he called himself, loved shooting but in his book *"Things I Can Tell"* (1912) there are no "setter" or "red and white" words to be found. Lots about driven shoots though! He notes dogs were only good on his moor for the first fortnight of the grouse season and that's telling me they were more English than Irish. A dog in Ireland only good for the first fortnight on grouse was likely to get a job at the bottom of the River Shannon!

Derry chats about poaching in Ireland and why landowners are better staying away. He's pretty sure his moor isn't being poached but methinks it was very poached! He travelled often and hosted our Dame Nellie Melba at Rossmore. She hosted Derry in return when he came to Australia.

This 5th Lord Rossmore was fresh and keen when The Kennel Club formed in London 1873. He had every opportunity to get his dogs on a purebred registry. Other people kept, bred and



Image above: Two bird dogs of a happy couple. On the Isle of Arran, Lady Anne Hamilton's suave red pointer and the 3rd Lord Rossmore's lovely red and white setter were painted in "The Rambles of Bob and Duchess" by John Sherriff 1844, the year Anne died. The hint of feathering on Bob's tail and the standing point of Duchess suggests these two dogs may be related. The Rossmore setters changed from crouching to standing on point through the 1800's. Lady Jean Fforde wrote that the Hamilton clan only ever bred pointers, and the Rossmores only ever had setters.

showed the lineage but Derry himself just wasn't interested in dog world stuff.

STAYING GROUNDED

Irishmen who still had a fortunate grip on their ground and a good eye over a gun and dog, keenly worked their Irish setters to a high standard. They were the ones to approach if you came up with a decent red that might be worth a bit of money. Nestled between the grassroots and the upper crust, they managed both to their best advantage.

Ireland's peerage had land and money but they weren't the brains in the Irish setter business. Moors and bogs are hellishly cruel to not-very-fit fellows. These chaps turned up for action only at the tail end of a long process. Lethal tracts of wilderness grew bogtrotters who could hide anything they weren't supposed to have. You needed to love more than just bird shooting, you had to love the dog's talent as well. Good Irish setters don't just help you survive, they teach you how. It becomes a fascination that penetrates your bone marrow.

FAKING IS REAL

In Art Nouveau days, polished wood was popular and shades of auburn haute couture. The value of Irish reds soared and the temptation for people to fake them was strong. This Irish setter below was drawn by German illustrator Friedrich Specht in 1878. He worked for many zoological and veterinary journals, even Charles Darwin sang his praises. I believe a poacher got lucky with this dog! I bet it was shipped sight-unseen!

Around the same time, English setter icon Edward Laverack visited Ireland to buy the famous reds he had heard about. He left disappointed saying Irish setters had degenerated from careless breeding. I'd say it's more likely Laverack was shown dogs only as good as his money ~ which wasn't much! The graphic record proves Irish setters going to America at the same time were fetching huge prices and were absolutely top quality.

When Breed Standards were established in the 1880's, the fashion swung away from designer breeding onto "pure" pedigrees with strains inbred up to their eyeballs. Our buddy Laverack produced an English setter pedigree with 6 generations from only 6 individual dogs. However some decades later a new knowledge of colour inheritance showed his pedigree to be codswallop!

BUSINESS CLASS

The American desire for Irish red setters reached fever pitch. John Nash wrote: *"When the Americans began to demand the whole-reds as against the parti-coloured ones, the Irish Red Setter Club was formed by people, to my mind, who had one eye on the dollar and the other*

Image below: Friedrich Specht in 1878



Image above: Sebastian Vrancx: A cut from a Sebastian Vrancx painting, 1618, displaying 2 Irish red & white setters with falconer.

on the dog". And why not! It doesn't cost a whole lot to breed something, but to breed something selected, tested and rated to a high standard costs plenty.

By the 20th Century the English taste in bird dogs favoured white. George Earl painted a huge 1904 field trial scene in Wales of 90 people with some 60 pointers and setters out to compete. There was just one solitary Irish setter amongst all that lot, looking very much his own man! All Irish setters in those days came from Ireland, they were different and they were rare.

The Dutch stayed in it all the way. Princess Wilhelmina's very Irish Swell made history and likewise the Dutch-bred Castor winning Crufts. He was Ingle Bepler's best ever dog but strangely found himself re-named to Clancarty Rhu as though he was never imported! Dutchman Rembrandt Kirsten was a key energizer bonding European Irish Setter Club Presidents and Henk Ten Klooster's decades of journalism dismantled protocols and published vital information.

GENIE IN A BOTTLE

In their respective books on the breed, both Milner and Ingle Bepler noted how Irish setter litters regularly produced throwbacks. This variability, by current genetic savoir, indicates a big broad bouncy genepool from which the best quality and vigour emerge. If you want the ideal dogs around forever, this kind of pool is your first and best resource.

It's not rocket science stressing a strain to a straight line where all the results look the same. But if it's only about looks, you're only breeding a third of a dog. Adding behavioural traits and genetic soundness is a bit more complex.

The ever-wise Kennel Club in London kept their doors to breed registries open until at

least 1948. Any Class I pedigree dog could be mated to a non-pedigree dog and have its progeny listed as Class II. In the next generation Class II dogs were bred back to Class I and selected progeny could re-enter the Class I registry.

After the World Wars, as a matter of need, this saw what was left of the breeds in Britain, revitalise one another. It also explained how some Irish setters in England became bigger and more coated like English setters, and how breeders not living the sporting life could set about re-designing beauties that just kept getting more and more beautiful ~ to them!

BRITS LOVE IRISH

Our century-long argy bargy about England's showbreeds versus Ireland's fieldbreds is old hat. Now the attraction is convergence, relax and enjoy. Folks are no longer distracted by religion, nationality, or women versus men. The genepool is big enough to satisfy all of us.

The Kennel Club London handles dog issues well, in the early days never hesitating to name the red setter "Irish". Still going strong in 2014 it added text to breed standards saying "*Breeders and judges should at all times be mindful of features which could be detrimental in any way to the health, welfare or soundness of this breed*".

Traditionalists worldwide strive to preserve our breed's authenticity. Myra and her British friends keep an eye on what's happening in show rings and voice strong opinions about nonsensical deviations. There is no war between show and field or between Ireland and England these days.

The Field magazine, founded in London 1853, is "*the premier field sports and country lifestyle magazine with unrivalled expertise in its market*". Recently Irish setters were twice on the front cover, both times the ultra-Irish dogs of Ray O'Dwyer. Every grouse season in Scotland sees sporting estates welcome the arrival of the Irish and their fantastic dogs. Their work on grouse is something special to witness.

Following the 1798 rebellion, the Irish Free State was finally achieved in 1922. Britain dropped its Empire tag after WWII, the Republic of Ireland succeeded in 1948 and in 1973 Ireland re-joined Europe. The more recently formed International Irish Red Setter Club inspires huge support with the old breed thriving in today's world. Happy neighbourhood!

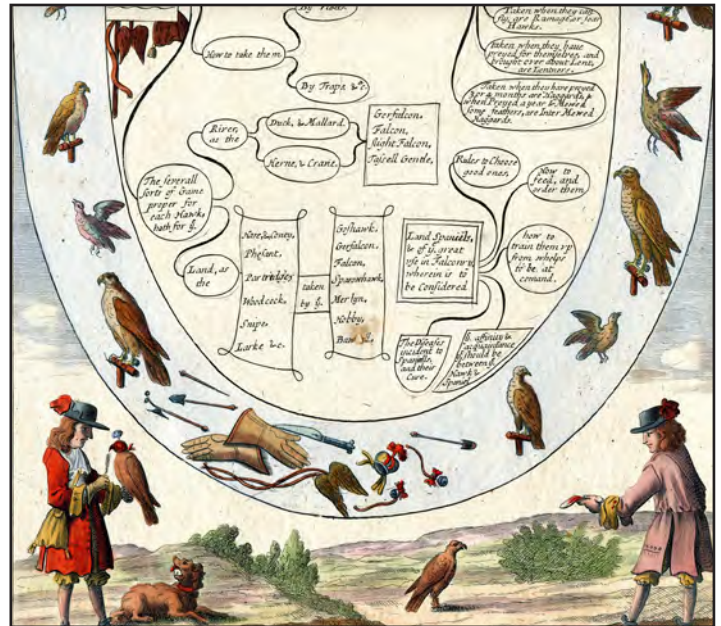


Image above: 1686 image by Blome displaying falconer with Irish red setter.

Image below: A Bassano-style setting spaniel used to net partridge in England, note the characteristic crouch.



CHAPTER X

Mountain Lodge: An Irish grouse moor: The peasantry: The Duke of Connaught: Why his sport was spoiled: Anne Holland: A woman gamekeeper: Trespassers will be—shot: When the season commenced: Irish bulls: Lord Iveagh at Rossmore: A bad headache: Woodcock stories: The double right and left: The late King at Elvedon: "Where did you get that hat?": Jodpores: King Edward's witty remark: His wonderful memory: The brailed pheasants

I HAVE, about ten miles from Rossmore, a grouse moor of nearly 10,000 acres, and, for an Irish moor, it is quite good; indeed I have high hopes that with careful management it will eventually prove as good for sport as the average Scotch moor.

The Irish grouse is somewhat distinct, being a large bird capable of developing great pace on the wing. In many parts of Ireland grouse

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A Grouse Moor

lie ridiculously close, which makes it impossible to drive them successfully, but on my moor they are strong and wild early in the season, and they can only be shot over dogs for a fortnight or so. This wildness renders them all the better for driving, and I have seen many a man, who considers himself a good shot, standing with an empty gun ruefully regarding the departing grouse, of which he had made so dead certain and missed so lamentably.

As a rule Irish moors are thought little of, and they do not appeal to the man who hurries off to Scotland in August; but were it not for that tiresome strip of sea which separates Ireland from England, many sportsmen would doubtless come over to resuscitate our moors, which, with judicious expenditure, would equal any anywhere.

Many an Irish grouse moor is a failure because the peasantry on and around it are not treated tactfully. Certain of them possess grazing rights over the heather of which they are very jealous, but if each be given a small pecuniary interest in looking after the welfare

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A Woman Gamekeeper

charge of her duties that she very nearly got herself into serious trouble.

Rheumatism prevented her getting after trespassers as fast as she wished, so she procured an old police carbine and took to shooting at them, and I was alarmed to learn that she had taken the heel off a man's boot as he ran away. I sent my agent to remonstrate with her, and she related how it happened.

"There was a man on that hill the other day," said she, "and I just ordered him to come off it. He cheeked me, as he knew I couldn't catch him. So I brought out the rifle, and put a ball just in front of his face so that he felt the wind of it. Says he, 'Stop that!' But he knew I meant shooting unless he got off that hill, and so he went away without any more trouble."

Anne Holland doesn't find any use for her rifle now, as her reputation for being ready to shoot deters one and all from trespassing in her locality.

Poaching is bad in Ireland, and it wants a great deal of tact to overcome it, especially in

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Things I can Tell

the mountain moorlands. I have, I hope, managed to get on the right side of the hill men, and there is no poaching on my moor. A few years ago grouse used to be most shamelessly and openly sold in our county town of Monaghan, and an old poacher's wife dared to offer dead grouse publicly for sale in July. Said somebody to her, "I wonder you're not scared to sell these birds before the season commences."

"What's that you're saying?" she retorted. "Before the season commences? Why, when do you think it commences?"

"Well it doesn't commence until the 12th of next month."

"Aha, aha, that's all you know about it," chuckled the poacher's fifth rib. "Why, that's when the grouse season is over," and so it was for the poaching brigade, as the rightful owners were then out.

I started driving on my moor some years ago, for it is certainly the only way to kill down the old cocks. One season the birds had got wary about coming to the butts, and wouldn't

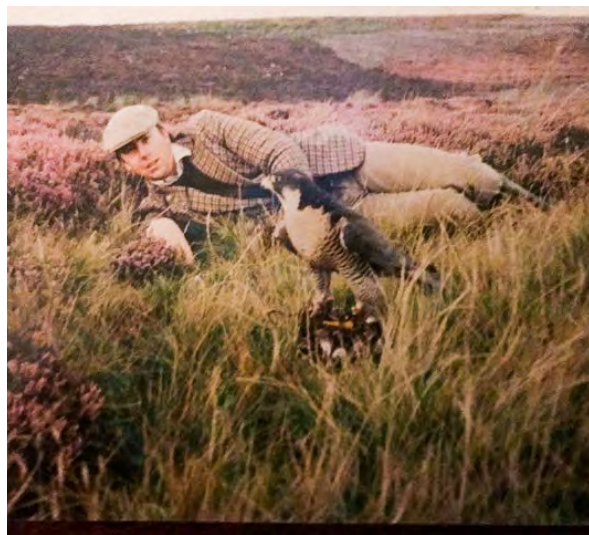
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Reminiscences on Grouse Hawking

Robert Hutchinson

I was asked to put to paper my experiences of grouse hawking which I am happy to do, but I have taken the liberty to lean into two falconer friends who have considerably more practical experience than me in this field. Its over thirty years ago that I befriended a professional falconer by the name of Gary Cope who at the time worked for Lord Ashcombe, flying a team of peregrine tiercels on his Sudeley Castle estate at wild grey partridges. This led to Gary being appointed as a professional falconer to a member of the Saudi Royal Family who, keen to experience grouse hawking, bought two grouse moors in the North of England. To say my first experiences of grouse hawking were 'spoilt' experiences is an understatement. Fabulous accommodation, fine dining, so many grouse that you were constantly jamming on the brakes as you drove across the moor as covey after covey ran in front of the car, a great pub in the evening and all free ...'If Carlsberg did grouse hawking' it would be this.

Gary flew good falcons and one in particular 'Ling' a very tenacious peregrine falcon that could fly down most grouse in level flight if she missed on the stoop.



My trips North with Gary came to an end when I moved to Ireland in 1995, however I arrived with a large peregrine falcon bred by Gary which I flew at grouse in her first and start of her second season. I called her 'Comagi' because she was very tough, taking out any crow that was stupid enough to mob her. Her teammate

was 'Skye', an English pointer who remains to this day my best working pointer. I was keen and fit, most evenings would see me chasing the light running up the hills to the hot spots to get a flight. I killed five grouse, but as a result of a chance conversation with a well-known Irish pointer trials man, I was made aware of just how few grouse there were in Ireland. I decided there and then to stop killing them instead thinking about what sustainable quarry I could turn my attention to. This resulted in me starting up snipe-hawking in Ireland, which given how the sport has developed is the falconry achievement that I am most proud of, and who wouldn't be?



Back to grouse. I befriended one of the world's most passionate grouse experts, a moorland gamekeeper by the name of George Thompson and invited him over to Ireland. He gave a talk on grouse conservation to a packed audience in Finnstown House made up of conservationists, keepers, field trialers and falconers and we then visited a grouse conservation project. Between talks we went deer stalking and pints were taken. I will never forget George's comment to me that we had everything required to create a moor stocked with grouse- good heather, grit, water, but unless the foxes and crows are controlled in large areas (beyond the moors) we were wasting our time. George hosts a three-day falconry grouse field meet on his Spaunton Moor, attended by a number of Irish falconers and has won many awards including the David Bellamy Trophy for conservation. He remains a close friend.

Writing articles like this gets you thinking, and

with this tap on the keyboard I realise it's because of grouse that I got to know two of the great falconers of this century - Stephen Frank and Roger Upton- neither sadly with us anymore. Each is deserving of an article dedicated to them and given their connections with Ireland I will commit to doing so. I was with them at their last meeting in Birichen and sat in the tiny bothy straining to hear every word now engraved in my memory. It was beyond magic.



Author at Stephen Frank's Funeral (above)

Author with Roger Upton (below)



Comparing grouse and snipe, the grouse is a more intelligent game bird capable of out-thinking a falcon and on occasions a dog, which coupled with their deep knowledge of their territory, deliberately seeking out gullies and deep heather, makes them a challenge to kill. Also, because they often break in coveys, which initially confuses the falcon, this increases the challenge. Science confirms that they are faster on the wing than snipe. A snipe is courageous and its pre-programmed zig zags makes them almost impossible to take from a single vertical stoop from above 600 ft. The best kill I witnessed was in excess of 800 ft, but that was a wild tiercel, so it can be done.

I will now pass over to the experts, first up Gus Gough, a keen falconer and game keeper from Caithness, Scotland. I asked him to share his experiences accompanying guest falconers on the moor.

"Never fly an eyass over an inexperienced dog for obvious reasons, but even more so early season when the cock bird will try and get around the dog to pull him away from his chicks. Great to watch an experienced dog work this out, but not so good when your young eyass is now at its best pitch of the season and the dog can't work the grouse out. This can make grown men cry and use ungentlemanly language on the hill.

This relates to the previous tip in that, when the grouse is making the dog work hard to find it, the falconer and anyone else involved in the flight needs to remain calm and let the dog do what it does because your nose will not work it out.

Trust your dog. This comes obviously with time on the hill, but it always makes me laugh when someone new who does not know the dog, or who is a greenhorn to grouse hawking says to you when your dog is locked up solid, "What do you think?" My response is, "If I knew 100% then I would not need a dog". This is said with just a hint of sarcasm from me. I then pause to see their reaction. You can see it in their face - thinking shall I or not? After a couple of seconds of watching their reaction to my comment, I say "I would" and you see the relief of them not having to make a decision.

If the falconer decides that flying a falcon over dogs is for them, then they should make plans to find the dog/breed that suits their needs. Flying over any dog is great, but flying over one's own dog is the icing on the cake. If you rely on other people's dogs all of the time, then this could lead to disharmony; when a flight goes wrong amongst the field when away at your yearly grouse camp, this is not what anyone needs or wants.

Enjoy every second of your time on the hill



with your dogs, hawk and your fellow falconers. It is a very special time in a very special place. And one last thing - remember the poor keeper at the end of your trip. He leads a hard and poorly paid life and a little appreciation goes a long way.

When all of the above come together, grouse hawking can look easy, but behind that there will have been some pain to go through to get to that kind of standard. Newcomers to grouse hawking may well fly great hawks on the low ground, but they are entering another world on the uplands; easier in fact as there is none or very little in the way of checks, but the weather and the winds can take a toll on good high flying low ground game hawk and game hawker.



I have seen it where a lowland game hawk will simply refuse to go up and also just keep landing - almost like a fish out of water in that a totally new environment baffles them."

Next up, Steve Smith, an experienced falconer and a great guy who has had a number of IHC members fly on his moor.

*"With greater mobility and access, the discipline of grouse hawking has become more widely available than ever before. Once the pastime of a privileged few, many people are now able to feel the breeze in their face whilst following a questing dog in search of **lagopus scoticus**.*

With a wide range of species of hawk available, personal preferences can be indulged. But for me, a good sized tiercel peregrine or a smaller peregrine falcon are the hawks of choice; it's all about balance.

Just as the cheetah matches the Thompson's gazelle so does a mid-sized peregrine match the grouse. Large falcons will dominate and kill grouse from low pitches which provides a mediocre reward. Equally, a well-schooled hawk on short heather with a very good dog can become repetitive and too predictable. Believe it or not, grouse hawking can become boring if you have a sufficiently good team on perfect ground

Images:
Covey (above),
and grouse in
flight (below) by
Steve Smith

Steve Smith
(above right)
credit Steve
Smith

Flush (below
right) by Gus
Gough



and are blessed with good weather. Good sport is achieved by mixing up the set ups and keeping the scenario flexible. Once the hawk is made but still forming its technique, wide flushes can be introduced or flushing into the wind if it is not too strong. The grouse will employ many escape mechanisms of their own and is the greatest adversary. He will know every gill, rock pile and rushy bank on his territory. He will recover from a big strike from the hawk waiting until the last minute and escape into the wind.

Much has been written in the textbooks regarding flushing, allowing the dog to find birds, casting off a falcon to pin the grouse and then circumnavigating the point to a position upwind of the dog, creating a pincer movement. The falconer then moves in for the flush, creating a downwind stoop. The whole process is like a ballet carried out with timing and ease. These scenarios are a picture to behold and nice to carry out. However, if you hawk grouse the whole season through, then variety will present itself to dash your well placed plans. The grouse, even in the shortest heather, will either circumnavigate the dog so it is unwinded. This requires great skill and cunning on the part of the pointer and is fun to watch; grouse and dog out-witting each other. Or the grouse will run past the upwind falconer and break away upwind causing the falcon to lose speed stooping into the wind. All these tactics diminish the morale

of a young or inexperienced hawk and I have seen many be broken and fail to chase grouse after too many poorly produced flushes. Better to flush when the falcon is upwind in her circling or wide of the flush so that they learn positional sense. These are the most valuable of lessons and a falcon can be made or marred. Indeed, an experienced low ground hawk can be put off grouse by badly produced flushes.

The prerequisites, then, are a heather clad hill with sufficient stock of grouse for a sustainable harvest, preferably with gentle hillside slopes facing in different directions, but generally south west as this is the prevailing wind for our islands; a reliable team of dogs that are trustworthy (pointers and setters). I like to have



two dogs out as it brings another dimension to the hunting scenario to keep the falcon guessing, and lastly, choice of hawk - my current falcon is home bred and flies at a weight of 1lb 14.5oz which I find perfect for grouse as they take their chance and are not intimidated.

I have had great success with tiercels 1lb 6oz upwards if you can get them. The most grouse I have caught with a single tiercel though weighed 1lb 4.75oz - so there are always exceptions to the rule. With the increasing pressure being put on driven grouse shooting and keeping methods, who knows what the future holds. We hope to maintain our way of

life and be able to pass it on to the following generation."

So to close, I would love to see the day when grouse-hawking could be a feature in the IHC calendar of fieldmeets; its special for many reasons the rich history, the landscape, the challenging quarry, the famous falcons, the dog work, the focus on conservation and most of all the falconers.

Slainte

Robert



Images by Steve Smith



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