

# Irish Hawking Club Journal 2013



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



S.O'Byrne



# IRISH HAWKING CLUB

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## IRISH HAWKING CLUB

### POLICY AND OBJECTIVES STATEMENTS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



# Editorial

It is with great pleasure I present the 2013 Journal after much of the now-usual delays that come with this job. It would not have been possible without the support of Director Don Ryan and the rest of the Committee, who have helped in the mucky job of haranguing people to put pen to paper so that an actual publication could be produced at all.

A quick glance through this collection shows that 2013 was a good year for the Irish Hawking Club. The new Committee is building on the great work done by the previous administration. Each time a new group step forward to carry out the important work of running a sporting club, it is right that we always acknowledge the efforts of the outgoing officers, some of whom, such as Malcolm Edgar, set new levels in committee standards.

Fieldmeets galore took place, with the IHC astringers showing that their Gosses are world-class, arriving to the field in impeccable condition and flying with formidable vigour. With the announcement that the IAF will stage its prestigious AGM here in 2016, we look to what Kerry had to offer a group of hawkers and also reveal that this year we will host an international Snipe-Hawking meet to showcase our expertise with this wily quarry. The inaugural World Falconry Day was marked in November with a celebration on the Hill Of Tara, and the IHC continues its commitment to conservation by backing the Barn Owl nest-box scheme. Further afield, James Knight samples the Northumberland Crow Falcons and we get a look into the Falconry stronghold of Pakistan. And there's lots more besides, including a trip down memory lane with the late, great Ronald Stevens.

Hilary White  
IHC Journal Editor

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

Material is subject to scrutiny by the committee.

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

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

## Cover Image

### "At Rest"

by  
Shay O'Byrne  
[seamusobyrne.com](http://seamusobyrne.com)

Manipulated by  
Aaron Leavy

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

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# President's Report

Mick Docherty

**S**ince taking on the role of president in 2013 it has been a busy time for the Club. We took on a lot of tasks and achieved success with many, from presenting Eoghan Ryan's report on the wild take, to our celebration of World Falconry Day on November 16th.

2013 was a great year for fieldmeets, Peregrines on Snipe over raised bogs, Goshawks on Pheasant in some of the most beautiful Irish estates to a couple of cracking weekends flying Harris Hawks at Rabbit in the beautiful scenic Co Donegal. We displayed at several game fairs, and had a Club BBQ at Tommy Byrne's in Carlow ("Tommyfest")

We also dipped into the idea of monthly Falconers meetings. The first two held at Cabana Cafe at the kind hosting of Ivan Torr were well received. The passion in our small community was visible from the off. These monthly meets are a great idea and should be kept going as it's a great way for a committee to mix with and hear the real issues affecting falconers in Ireland and relating and representing these issues at Department level.

We are the main representative body for Falconry on this land, whether you are a member of the IHC or not! We all have some pressing issues ahead of us with ever-changing legislation and must as a community put aside any historical arguments and stand and work together to address what's ahead.

I am optimistic however, as we do have a few who work hard at staying on top of it. Also, the support we received from the IAF and national agencies on our wild take submission was fantastic.

2014 will be another active year. Using the knowledge learned from last year will help us to make improvements on our events.

There's the International Fieldmeet being held over five days in October, the Club's attendance at the International Centre for Birds of Prey Festival in the UK to preparing for the IAF conference to be held here in 2016 (which is a huge undertaking and I'm looking forward to working alongside as many members as possible to help with the running of this event).

A couple of the things I was asked to write about in this report are who I am and my aspirations as Pres-

ident. I have been involved with the IHC for around 16 years now, being a committee member a few years. I flew my first Hawk (a male Kestrel) for two years before getting involved with the Harris Hawk. I've also taken in and flown several Sparrowhawks along the way. For the last 12 years I have had the same Hawk, a female Harris Hawk called Ruby, taken at 16 weeks old. I now have taken on a one-year-old female Spar this year and had a fantastic few weeks in the field before deciding to put her away for the moult. Needless to say, I'm really looking forward to taking her up again.

I am an upfront type of person – what you see is what you get. My philosophy is to just get the job done and don't spend too much time talking about doing the job. It might not suit everyone, but I am who I am and anyone who knows me will (I'm sure) agree!

My aspirations as President are that when I finish my tenure in 2016 the IHC will be in a position to be heard where needed; that it will regain the good name it had when I joined; will have a healthy bank balance for the new committee to follow on from the groundwork that we will have laid; that the international relations that are developing are pursued; that the next committee keep on top of the legislators.

Another thing we have been working on is our relationship with the greater public. I feel that this is something we all have to foster in this modern age of technology. We might need their support in the near future.

None of this will be possible unless YOU, the membership, step up and take a position on the Committee. Yes, it can be a thankless job but it can also be very rewarding at times. Remember the long history of your Club, one of the oldest in the world. I for one am not willing to let those that went before me down.

**I**'d like to thank the previous committee for their work and I look forward to working with the new committee members who stepped up at our AGM in February. Well done to all of you lads. I'm not one for back-patting, nor do I need mine patted. In my eyes, it's about commitment and teamwork to get the job done.

Onwards and Upwards

Mick Docherty, IHC President



# News and Updates

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

## IRISH HAWKING CLUB TO HOST 2016 IAFAGM

### THE International Association of Falconry and Conservation of Birds of Prey has voted in favour of Ireland hosting its AGM in 2016

The decision follows a presentation at the 2013 IAF AGM in Valkenswaard, Holland by IAF delegate Hilary White. In the presentation, put together by Hilary and Club Director Don Ryan, the facilities, game and accessibility of Ireland was proposed as an ideal location to host the IAF's biggest annual meeting. At the time of writing, Sneem in Co Kerry has been chosen as the provisional location, a location selected for its hotel facilities, hunting land and stunning scenery.

Following the Powerpoint presentation, IAF President Adrian Lombard thanked Hilary for the presentation and declared that IAF was fully behind the proposal, pending a selection on the particular year. 2016 was then decided as the best for this to occur.

This will be the largest falconry event ever held in Ireland, and a chance for us to show off the calibre of our falconry, which is as good as anything being done anywhere in the world.

At the IHC AGM in February it was decided to establish a special subcommittee to oversee the

organising of this large event, which will see falconers from across the globe visiting us here. It will be an incredible experience for the whole falconry community here, and volunteers will be needed to help with a huge range of duties, everything from transport organisation to hunting co-ordination, weathering management and gala dinner preparations.

Anyone interested in assisting is urged to contact the Committee.

## DEPARTMENT NEWS

### THE new IHC Committee met with the National Parks and Wildlife Services on 20th March, 2014.

The Committee were informed by the Department that they expect to publish their findings on their review of the 'practice of taking young raptors from the wild within the scope of Article 9 of the Birds Directive' as well as their review of pen-size regulations in the 3rd quarter of 2014. On the matter of ID rings for captive-bred birds, the Committee were told that the Department intend to issue stainless steel ID rings as well as the alloy version for captive-bred birds as they were receiving complaints that the numbers were wearing off the alloy rings.

The Department also informed the Committee they intend to put the 1976 Wildlife Act out for

public consultation later this year. They expect it will take a number of years for this to be complete.

## FESTIVAL OF FALCONRY 2014

### THE 2014 International Festival of Falconry has been announced as taking place in Abu Dhabi this year from the 7th to 14th of December.

It will be held under the kind Patronage of His Highness, Sheikh Khalifa Bin Zayed Al Nahayan, President of the United Arab Emirates. The Emirates Falconers' Club will host the huge event, which is set to bring falconers from all across the planet together for this special occasion.

At the IAF AGM in Doha, Qatar earlier this year, Dr Nick Fox gave an outline of plans for the festival, and it sounds very ambitious.

The IHC has taken part in the past three International Festivals of Falconry, and for such a small country, we always make a mark through the quality of our display, our artwork and our ambassadors. We fully intend to be there again this year, with the Committee to decide on representatives to travel to the event.

Not all plans are confirmed yet, but for more details, see [falconryfestival.com](http://falconryfestival.com)

## IRISH HAWKING CLUB ON FACEBOOK



THE IHC have two separate Facebook entities. One is what's known as a page and the other one is a group.

A page is like a website for a company or club. It is meant to be viewed by the general public to keep them updated and informed on current developments in the club and falconry related matters throughout the world. People can also comment on the page and add photos.

The IHC page can be found on [facebook.com/irishhawkingclub](https://www.facebook.com/irishhawkingclub). When you go to this page, click the 'like' button and you will be updated whenever a new post is added. The page is monitored by the administrator so material unsuitable for public viewing will be removed immediately.

A group is more like a forum where you have to be added. Only current paid-up club members are permitted. After the annual renewal date, any members who do not renew their membership will be removed and any new members will be added.

To be added to the group, you must go to [facebook.com/groups/irishhawkingclub](https://www.facebook.com/groups/irishhawkingclub) and click 'join group'. A request is then sent to the administrator who will add you once your current membership is confirmed. The group has proved very popular with current members and has led to numerous events and meets been organised. It is also a great place for beginners to gain contacts, ask questions and generally see what is going on in the world of falconry.

If anyone has any questions or suggestions regarding the Facebook or website sites, please feel free to contact me at [don@irishhawkingclub.ie](mailto:don@irishhawkingclub.ie)



## A Thank You

The Irish Hawking Club wishes to express its huge gratitude to Honorary Member June Jordan, who kindly donated several falconry books belonging to her late husband Graham to the Club.

The contribution is very much appreciated and the Club fully recognises the gifts' sentimental value.

**John R. Moore**  
Irish Wildlife and Sporting Artist

Commissions Welcome  
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### **Tankardstown Falconry Experiences** Slane, Co Meath

Located in Tankardstown, in the heart of the Boyne Valley, we have exclusive access to hundreds of acres of well-stocked parkland. As shooting is prohibited, this is a wonderful opportunity to fly your hawk in safety.

To book a day out for you and your party, please contact Karl Lawlor **Tel: 087 2535094**

### **ADVERTISING**

Any members wishing to place an ad in the Journal must contact Editor Hilary White on [hylwhite@gmail.com](mailto:hylwhite@gmail.com)

For Newsletters, contact a committee member





# Director's Address

Don Ryan, Co Dublin

**T**welve months on with a lot of air under the club's wings, I think it's timely to take this opportunity to thank my fellow committee and club members for their vote of confidence and support over this challenging period.

I've been very fortunate to work with a great committee that really have the Club's best interest at heart and their ever vigilance to the Club's well-being is unflinching. This is no less than what was done by those that went before and it is important that this will always be the case.

On a personal level, trying to juggle the role of Director of the Irish Hawking Club with my family life, job, falconry and too many animals has certainly been no easy task. However, there's no questioning the rewards it has offered me in the opportunity to meet some of the most passionate and interesting people that I've ever been fortunate to meet – not to mention the fact that I've witnessed some of the finest falconry.

**I**n my short time as Director, I have become aware that we are more than a Club; we are an organisation, a representative body, the first and last line of defence for the sport of falconry in this country and a soldier in the worldwide battle for its existence and acceptance.

There's no doubt the old ways of life are under threat. We are evolving into a world that is disengaged from wildlife. Nature and its creatures are now something we see on television or online on com-

puter. We are permitted to know about it and watch it but not interfere with it. We employ public servants for that purpose. The meat producers have made sure we are dis-

tanced and made irresponsible from the death of any animal for our consumption. Many young folk today wouldn't believe the neatly packaged breaded chicken breasts with a variety of flavours that line the supermarket shelves once belonged to a living, feathered bird. They probably wouldn't eat it if they knew. We are constantly told the advancement of mankind has negated the need for such a barbaric practice as hunting. It belongs firmly in the past with all its practitioners.

It's not easy to be immune from such propaganda. In fact we shouldn't be - we need to constantly look inwards and be the moral guardian of what we do. Unless we have truly examined our sport within our own hearts and souls and are at peace with what we do, then we are in no position to defend it, let alone practice it. It is an unfair burden of conscience when you consider it is our passion and sport and we shouldn't have to face a moral battle each time we go out.

The best we can hope for is a renaissance to the simpler ways of life. The current course of mankind's advancement, where it has its advantages, doesn't provide all the solutions. I'm reminded of T.S. Eliot's quote, "Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"

In an ideal world, we should all hunt and forage for our food items like every other living creature. This would make us directly responsible on the impacts our actions have on the world. I'm sure it would be a

great deal less than what's been done at the moment by the mass producers and governments. But this type of thinking would require a greater level of thought than what the well-meaning but misguided armchair conservationists and anti-hunting groups are prepared to do.

Anyway, enough on that dark discourse; my intention was only to raise the concern of disconnection from our food sources whilst highlighting the ever increasing challenges we face. We just need to be sensitive to those that don't understand what hunting is really about. We have a duty to uphold the true sportsmanship of the art of Falconry that has been handed down by those who've gone before and whose names echo through the hallowed halls of this Club. We are honour bound to keep it safe for the next generation.

**O**n a lighter note, and getting back to what's important about our Club, if we have half as good a time this coming season as the year just past, I believe we'll be doing very well. I know the incoming committee will work equally as hard to this end as the outgoing.

And once again I'd like to remind you all to please try and support the Club by attending any of the forthcoming events – whether it's a field meet or attendance at a game fair or some other Club event. We need you and I know if you take the time, you will enjoy it.

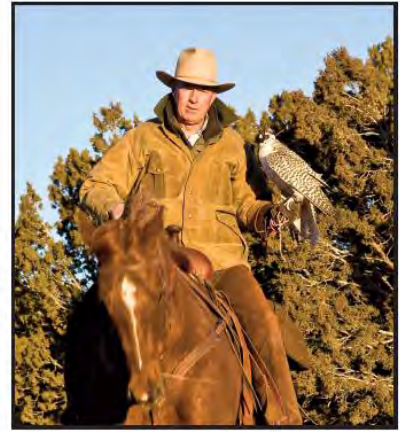
Finally, I'd like to offer a sincere thanks to all those who contributed to the production of this journal and in particular to Hilary White who has dedicated many years to its creation. He has asked me to remind you that he can't do it without your support. The journal is an important barometer to the health of this Club. They are the history books for future falconers. Please keep this in mind for the coming season.

Yours in sport, Don



# Obituary

## IHC Honorary Life Member Frank Bond 1943-2013



It is with great sadness that I inform the IHC membership of the death of its most recent Honorary Member, Frank Bond.

At the 2013 AGM, under a proposal from myself, Frank Bond was admitted as an honorary member to the Irish Hawking Club by the Committee and members. My argument was very simple: only a tiny handful of people around the planet had given as much to world Falconry as Frank has.

Along with three fellow co-founders of The Peregrine Fund in 1974, Frank applied his intelligence and drive to privately raise money to bring one of the most iconic species on earth back from the brink of extinction in the US to its current non-endangered status. That success and the subsequent work by the Peregrine Fund with a range of international raptor projects has meant that falconers can forever hold their heads high as rigorous conservationists.

Through this work with the Peregrine Fund and more recently his leadership in IAF, Frank has presided over a particularly proud era where Falconry was making itself known on a global level for all the right reasons. With IAF, his talent as a lawyer and politician oversaw the inscription of Falconry as a UNESCO-recognised entity, while also making the association a UN-recognised NGO and representing Falconry at the highest level of government officialdom around the world, usually at his own expense.

As a sportsman, he hunted his Gyrs and Gyr-hybrids at the highest level from his home in New Mexico. Quarter horses were also a great passion of his.

As I said at the time: the 'honour' in making him a member was to be ours – that we could call him a

member of our organisation. When I last spoke to him at the IAF AGM in Holland last June, he was very excited at the prospect of visiting Ireland for the meeting in 2016. Below is the reply I received from Frank after informing him of his acceptance as an Honorary Member.

*Dear Hilary,*

*This is quite a surprise and such a great honour from the Committee of the Irish Hawking Club. To be given the title of Honorary Member gives me great pleasure. I do not know if I deserve such recognition but I accept it with gratitude from a national falconry club and a group of falconers that I esteem highly. Most importantly I am thankful for your friendship.*

*I take this moment to honour and recognize the IHC for its strong, aggressive and biologically founded presentation you have made to national authorities to maintain the harvest of wild peregrines. Your approach should be replicated by other clubs across Europe.*

*I hope this note finds you well and that you are starting a great hawking season.*

*Thank you, my dear friend.*

*Frank Bond*

He passed away at on Christmas Day at the age of 70 after months of illness. To his family and fellow NAFA members, we offer our sincere condolences.

Hilary White, Co Dublin



# Events Roundup

Don Ryan

The Committee would like to thank the members for their support at the Club's many appearances at various events throughout the country in 2013. We could not have done it without your help and we've no doubt the image of the Club's presence has been strengthened with the general public as well as many other kindred organisations. We firmly believe all those that made the effort to attend thoroughly enjoyed themselves too.

Every event had its own unique charm and it would be hard for any particular event to stand out above the others.

The Club celebrated the inaugural 'World Falconry Day' in the homelands of the ancestral High Kings of Ireland at the Hill of Tara in Co. Meath on Saturday, November 16th.

It is documented that the Kings of Ireland also engaged in falconry over 1000 years ago so it was a

fitting location for the celebration in this golden era of this ancient art, where the common person can also engage in the sport of kings.

Before leaving, a toast and a wish were made for a safe season in the form of a set of falconry jesses, bell and hood tied to a Rag Tree that grows on the hill.

From Tara, the members and guests moved on to a nearby location to feast on venison stew braised with chili and chocolate and mulled wine before entering the hunting fields to be treated to a showcase of Irish falconry with broadwings, shortwings and longwings. We'd like to thank all our members and guests for making this a very special day and hope to further build on the success in 2014.

The Club also made its first appearance at the National Game Fair in Borris in Co Carlow where we were very well received by the visitors and hosts. The members that attended thoroughly enjoyed this two-day fair and the appreci-

ation of our presence by the enthusiastic audience made it all worthwhile.

Birr Game Fair was once again another great success with plenty of activities at the IHC stand including the 'Falconer's Triathlon Challenge' which was rightfully won by our President's daughter Ruth Docherty.

The standard of skill in the competition was very impressive especially in the Skill (Jess making) and Dexterity (knot making) trials with very little difference between the contestants. This left the competition hinging on the Telemetry Test speed trial. Despite her young age, Ruth, our prettiest contestant by far, put in a blinding performance to pip the others fair and square which left runner-up Stephen Devlin very disappointed as he thought he had it 'in the bag'.

Ruth took home our 'Best of Birr' hamper which was very kindly donated by the many stall holders at the fair.

## SOCIAL & PUBLIC EVENTS

### June

Shanes Castle Game Fair, Co. Antrim  
Blessington, Co. Wicklow,

### July

Sneem family festival, Co. Kerry,  
Kilmuckridge, Co. Wexford  
Tommyfest BBQ in Carlow

### August

National Country Fair at Borris, Co. Carlow  
International Horse Trials, Camphire,  
Co. Waterford.

The Great Game Fair, Birr, Co. Offaly

### September

Enniskerry Victorian Field day,  
Co. Wicklow

### November

St Hubert's day celebrations at Abbeylax,  
Co. Laois

World Falconry Day, Slane, Co. Meath

## FIELDMEETS

### October

Rabbit Field Meet, Co Donegal

### November

Harris Hawk Field Meet for pheasants, Co Meath  
Goshawk Field Meet for pheasants, Co Meath  
Longwing Field Meet for snipe, Co Kerry

### December

Goshawk Field Meet for pheasants at Ballinkeeel,  
Co Wexford

Longwing Field for snipe in Moate, Co Westmeath

### January

Longwing Field for snipe in Killimor, Co Galway  
Goshawk Field Meet for pheasants at Killruddery,  
Co Wicklow

Broadwing field meet for rabbits in Downings, Co Donegal

Goshawk field meet for pheasants and partridge,  
Ballynatray, Co Cork

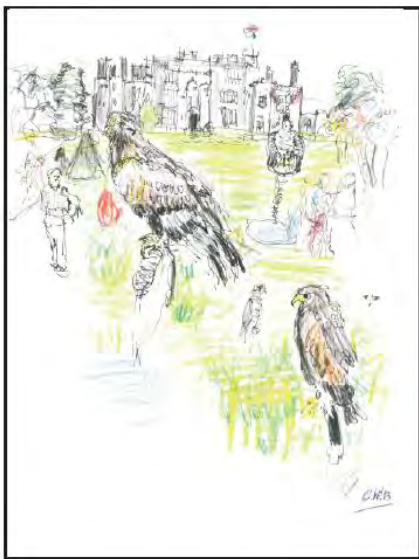
### February

Rabbit field meet at Moylough, Co Galway



A big thanks has to go to Richard Edgar from Kilkeel, Co Down who once again supplied us with our first prize of a magnificent drinks hamper. The hamper was won by a young man who wished to forego his prize for the chance of going hunting with the Club. A very noble act and very encouraging to see our young folk with a healthy interest in field sports. We are expecting to raffle the drinks hamper again at a later stage.

If anyone happened to wonder what the peculiar looking gentleman with a sketch pad in hand, was drawing at our stand, we can tell you his name was Chris Ward and he does many freelance illustrations for postcards and other event media and newspaper advertising. The drawing he was working on at the IHC stand can now be revealed below:



On a more sombre note, two of the member's favourite birds of prey, Casper the Barn Owl and Eddie the Golden Eagle will no longer be making any further public appearances for the Club.

Eddie went missing in October from Co Carlow and is believed to be either escaped or stolen. Eddie was a great character and the public loved him. His regal stature at our displays awed anyone lucky enough to behold him. Despite the windy conditions at his last appearance for the Club at the Enniskerry Victorian Field day, Club member Hugh Wilkinson managed to get two incredible pictures of this stunning raptor. We'd like to take this opportunity to thank Jim George for loaning Eddie to us over the years so the public could witness such a marvellous creature. We will hold on to the belief that Eddie is now soaring high and free with his kin over the hills of Donegal or perched as sentinel on rugged peaks over the magical lakes of Killarney.

Casper the Barn Owl sadly passed away suddenly in January this year and it's believed the stormy weather played a large part in his demise. Casper had to be the public's favourite and was loved by all. It was clear to see Casper enjoyed all the attention he received and we daren't hazard a guess at the many smiles he put on children's faces by them seeing him happily jumping onto their fist. He was so comfortable around people you could often see him

fall asleep as he sat on their fist. In memory of Casper, we would like to name our nest box conservation project after this happy-go-lucky owl (see Page 46).

Both birds will be sadly missed.

The variety of field meets this year in all branches of the sport has been welcomed by the members and is a great format for beginners to decide which discipline suits their lifestyle and hunting ground before obtaining a bird. Field meets are also great social occasions and are fountains of knowledge for both experienced and new falconers. The information that can be learned from seeing different falconers' methods and ways far exceeds anything that can be found in books.

The Committee is determined to have more of the same in the 2014/2015 season







# Falconry Heaven In The Royal County

Don Ryan, Co Dublin

It's no coincidence the Irish Kings of old chose to set up their kingdom in this region of central Ireland.

This is not a landscape of extremes and rugged beauty but rather a more homely and gentle countryside. The rich pastures and soft rolling hills are more favourable to eking out an existence than the aesthetic mountain wildernesses of the northern and southern coastal counties.

Throw a majestic river and some fine broadleaf woodlands into the pot and now you have the essential ingredients that Kings and their noble lords sought to enable them to pursue the royal sports of fishing and hunting.

Such pastimes have captivated and entertained ancient and modern Kings for generations. Not to mention idle commoners like myself. From chronicles of 7th Century Irish life, we are told the High Kings did possess 'two hunting hawks' so it's safe to assume they did partake in falconry. It's also very likely that it was the noble Goshawk they hunted on these very same grounds over 1300 years ago.

Indeed long before the reign of the High Kings, farming communities and civilisations as early as 3-4000 BC were drawn to this prosperous region of the Boyne valley. Whether falconry was actually practiced here as far back as this period is up for conjecture but we do know Goshawk remains were uncovered in human settlements in this area dating back to 2000 BC.

It's in this same region that Newgrange chambers, a sophisticated monument to the winter solstice, pre-dating the Pyramids and being one of the oldest structures in the world, stands as testament to the incredible knowledge and understanding of the heavens and earth our ancestors possessed.

Some believe this structure is a symbolic recreation of the womb of Mother Earth. As you pass an eye over the fertile lands that are so favourable to the practices of farming, hunting, fishing and falconry, you begin to understand why.

It's no wonder this county in Ireland is known as The Royal County.

It's also no wonder that 25 years ago, Karl Lawlor, an experienced and accomplished falconer was drawn to this area and leaving the bustle of the city; moved lock, stock, barrel and birds to this falconer's heaven.

We spoke over the phone in early January when he invited myself and Neal Carroll, secretary of the Irish Hawking Club, to go a-hawking on lands he had gained permission. These kept lands where pheasants roam freely are safe from organized and rough shooters with the grounds being regularly worked by dogs to keep the pheasants fit and sharp.

We were only too delighted to oblige this kind invitation and on a Saturday in January, we

boxed up hawks and dogs and left Dublin city to travel the hour's journey to a small village outside Slane.

The day was brisk with overcast skies as we arrived at the carpark of a small pub and shop at the village crossroads. We'd no concern of rain as the sky was more silver than grey and the ground was reasonably dry considering the wet winter we had.

In need of a brew to kick the day off, Karl brought us into the grocery shop where we were ushered through to the pub by the landlady. She left us to make our introductions and engage in conversation returning soon after with 3 mugs of tea. Having swapped stories about the season to date and the whereabouts and careers of other acquaintance falconers we'd lost contact with, our empty mugs reminded us of our purpose and we became eager to get out in the field. Karl sought to pay for our tea, but the charge was waived and with the hospitality of our gracious landlady noted, we thanked her and departed.

Back on the road, we followed Karl to the modern architect designed farmhouse of Hugo Townsend. Hugo is the landowner whose land we would be flying on and although he wasn't present at our arrival, he had left word he would join us later.

Our hunting grounds were visible as they rose gently at the back of the house and the sur-



rounding view was a very welcoming sight. The large rich green acreage and golden stubble fields checkered the landscape divided by the stitchwork of narrow hedgerows and stained with small broadleaf groves. There wasn't an offensive conifer plantation to be seen for miles.

As we prepared the birds; Karl's neat springer spaniel bitches Sally and Lizzie took the opportunity to introduce themselves to my cocker spaniel Finch and Neal's German shorthaired pointer Kea. When meeting new dogs, spaniel bitches can often have an amusingly stern manner about them and our dogs were firmly but politely told they were only there on a day pass and not to be getting too familiar with the place.

With the ground rules set, it was agreed that my bird Finn, a 3rd season intermewed German/Finnish male Goshawk flying at 11lb 9 1/2oz was first to be slipped. And it didn't take long to find that slip. As we moved away from the farmhouse working up along the boundary hedge, an opening appeared with another border perpendicular to the one we hunted. My cocker went straight for this border and ejected a fine cock pheasant that left cover crowing in protest. Finn was off in an instant to give chase.

Realising he had a hawk hot on his tail, the pheasant made straight for the nearest cover; 100 yards on in a broadleaf copse. I trailed a bit further behind with my slower, half walking, half running, clown pace as I held on to my falconry vest pockets to ensure nothing fell out.

I wasn't expecting any issues finding the bird as I thought it would be a simple case that he either caught the pheasant or not. If he was successful, he would be sitting proudly on his catch and if not, which is more often the case as the season wears on and the quarry become stronger, he would be sitting on a low branch sulking. As I couldn't hear his tail bell; often an indication that a bird is at ground level, I took out my telemetry receiver.

I use the Fintracker classic receiver as its lightness and neat size make it very suitable to pop into the vest. I pair this with a tail mount Marshall scout transmitter and also take the more reliable but bigger Marshall stealth receiver in the vehicle for back up.

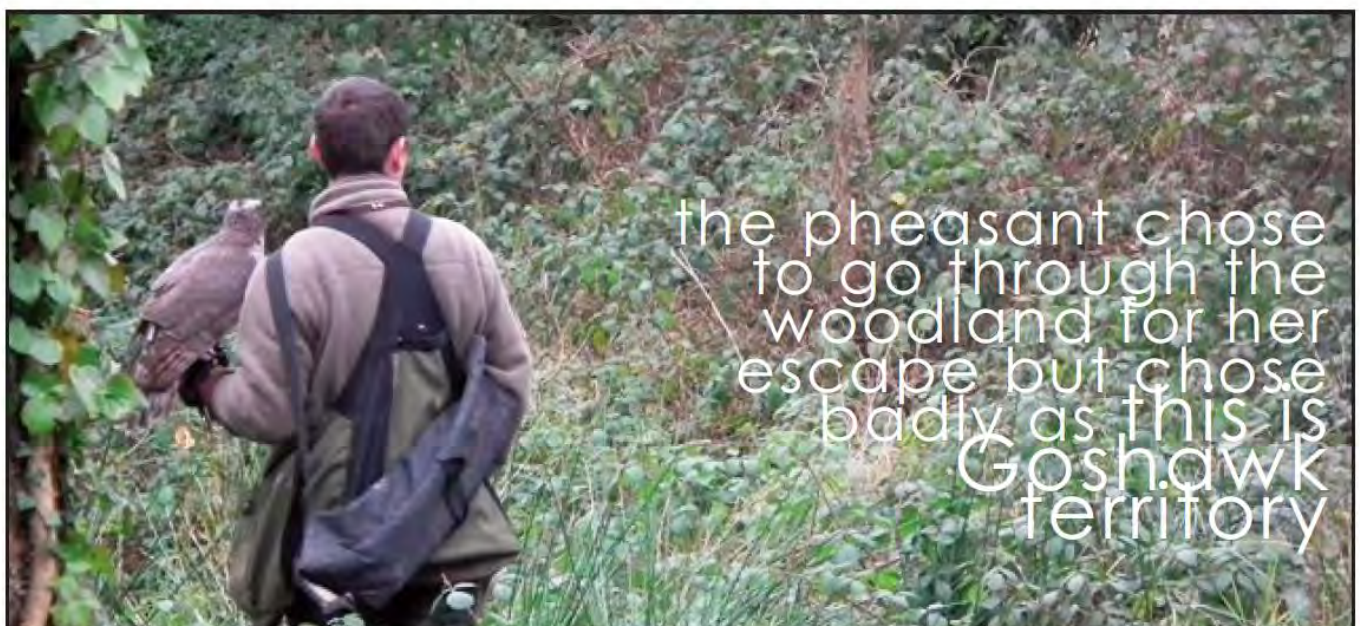
The reading from the tracker indicated I should be seeing him on the nearest tree but I couldn't see him, nor could I hear his tail bell. I hoped he may be on the ground with the pheasant

but due to either user error or the receiver playing up, I failed to pinpoint him.

'Shake your tail you little git' I cried under my breath as I got flustered at the length of time it was taking to locate him. I asked Karl as he arrived could I borrow his Marshall receiver but no sooner had I spoke when Neal marked him jumping from a lower to higher branch on a tree above some heavy growth on the far side of the copse. As he came down to the lure I cursed the receiver swearing I'd be swapping it for the larger Marshall model at future meets.

If the truth be known, I was very relieved to find him safe. For a few anxious moments I feared the worst as one often does when flying on unfamiliar ground. The threat of hidden barbed wire fences is always a real danger. There are times when the receiver leads you to their location and when you can't see them or hear any bells, the beep of the receiver is barely audible with the increasing beat of your heart as you expect the worst.

With Finn back on the fist and my tension subsiding, I noticed pheasant feathers on both his talons. I smiled – so the little scrapper was in a tussle in the undergrowth after all. He roused, shook himself and





made indications that I should stop grinning at him and catch up with the others, which I duly did.

As we were to cross a large open stubble field, Karl pointed out there was often a pheasant to be found in the middle and we should put up Tory, his hybrid falcon. The open field would provide an excellent view of the aerial event if we did manage a flush.

Tory, a female eyass Gyr-Saker was given her name from an adventure she had earlier in August of the previous year, where it appears she got a last minute holiday deal and decided to head north to Tory Island. This is a small island 9 miles off the Donegal coast. From where she first departed, it's a distance of 200 miles as the falcon flies.

With the help of telemetry and Bird Watch Ireland, she was picked up two weeks later none the worse for wear, although Karl did note her flights were of

a lower pitch since her escapade.

With her smart blue hood removed, this driftwood coloured falcon was soon commanding the grey skies above. Tory is a very striking bird and it's no wonder she caught the attention of bird watchers.

Her crisp wing beats carried her effortlessly over the surrounding fields and it became clear how easily this falcon could end up on distant shores.

Unfortunately we were denied an aerial display as despite our concerted efforts to serve up a pheasant they just weren't to be found – not out in the middle of the field anyway. Most likely they heard the approach of our excited voices discussing important hawking matters and made for the nearest ditches and kept running. Slightly disappointed but not perturbed as Karl knew there would be further opportunities that day, he promptly called Tory down to the lure to allow Neal work the

approaching boundaries.

At this point we were joined by the landowner Hugo with his son Oliver and their little schnauser yorkie cross, Poppy. The arrival of a strange dog unfamiliar with hawks is always a fear with falconers but these fears were unfounded. Poppy behaved impeccably throughout the day. In fact she barely batted an eyelid and gave no indication whether she was impressed or indignant at our activities. Shane Finney, a fellow falconer and our photographer for the day also arrived just in time for Neal's first slip.

Neal's Imprint Finnish-Russian Goshawk, Squirt, is an attractive male of good proportion with an appealing stature and calm manner. Now in his second season, he has accounted for several head of pheasant and rabbit and looked to be up to the task again this day.

As we reached the boundaries





of a narrow wood, his German pointer bumped a hen pheasant from heavy cover and this handsome Gos left Neal's glove in pursuit. Unfortunately she went back to thick cover after a short flight and Squirt took stand in a nearby beech tree.

He was no sooner back on Neal's fist when Finch was on scent in the same wood close by.

Another hen broke cover and the scrapper Finn was off the glove again. The pheasant chose to go through the woodland for her escape but she chose badly as this is Goshawk territory. This time the track down was more accurate. Finch got there first, pinpointing their location on the leafy floor with his tell-tale yelp that he got too close. I let Finn pluck at his prize for a few moments before trading him back on the glove with some prepared meat.

We continued on to another grove of trees and undergrowth that held the promise of more quarry. Karl's spaniels engaged the heavier cover on one side while Neal's pointer worked the other. The heavier cover was thick in parts but the spaniels negotiated it readily and soon put up a fine cock pheasant that signalled the game of chase was on again.

Squirt covered ground fast and Neal's trackdown proved a long flight with a curious twist at the end. He had left the fist after a cock pheasant but was found sitting on a hen. This can often happen when a pheasant seeks the most appealing cover. Naturally other pheasants will also have found this cover appealing and may be hanging around believing themselves safe. When the hawk arrives its attention is fixed on the first pheasant it can see.

Karl joked that maybe our small males weren't up to the task of a cock pheasant so we eagerly pressed on in our efforts to prove him wrong.

At this stage we were barely out an hour but the quantity and quality of pheasants we encountered was impressive by any standards. It was a very encouraging sight after a season where reports from all over the country were complaining of a serious lack of pheasants.

As we arrived at another broadleaf wood, we contrived a plan that I stay on the outside while Karl and Neal would beat through and hopefully flush out a pheasant to allow a photo opportunity for Shane and Hugo who stood ready with cameras in hand. They were keen to get a shot of a hawk in pursuit over open ground.

With no shortage of quarry on offer, this bountiful haven allows for this type of photo opportunity that one can let several slips pass till the right one comes along.

As we lined up with the beating team and the photographers got into position behind me, we began the hunt. Much to Finn's frustration, I refused a number of slips due to incorrect positioning and then what appeared to be the perfect flush occurred. A fine hen emerged from the wood only yards from us and looked like she would take off across the field. I slipped Finn only to find the hen turned and went straight ahead denying the waiting paparazzi any opportunity of a picture. Finn wasn't to be denied though and he was tracked a few hundred yards down on top of his reward.

I was due at a field meet further south in the country the following day, so I allowed Finn to feed up and called an end to his day's sport.

As Neal wasn't under the same obligation, both he and Squirt were prepared to carry on and we returned to the wood where the hen had left cover.

After a short hunt, a pheasant erupted very close to where the

last bird flushed and Squirt rose up sharply knocking her but failing to get hold. The hen careered off to the right and sought to leave the safety of the wood. She never made it that far. Neal added a second pheasant to the back pocket of his vest and decided to feed up Squirt.

With light still left in the sky, we looked to Karl and Tory to see pheasants taken from a loftier position and in a different style to the focused pursuit mode of our goshawks.

Moving away from the woodland, we made for the more open ground of two very large stubble fields.

Once un-hooded, Tory's keenness to leave the fist was evident and she cut through the skies with a determined pace scanning all below.

After a few moments, it became clear the pheasants knew battle tactics had changed. They knew the infantry had been stood down allowing the air-corps to engage and the wily pheasant changed evasive manoeuvres accordingly. No longer did they break in groups hoping for the element of diversion or hold firm prepared to outrun the enemy if they were discovered. Now they were running like hell up the trenches and breaking when the enemy were out of position.

We had to hope they would hold tight until their nerves gave way and in a panic make a break for it. Eventually that's exactly what a hen did. She broke from the approaching hedgerow just as Tory made her turn and faced away. A shout from Karl snapped her attention to the pheasant's fleeting retreat and she turned sharply. She had some ground to cover as the pheasant flew strongly towards the nearest cover making Tory lose pitch but she still managed an impressive stoop hitting the hen but failing to get



hold. Tory rose up and stooped again but the cunning pheasant had made the safety of cover. For exercise, Karl left Tory in the sky for a further 20 minutes as we made our way back to the vehicles and she landed on the lure like a butterfly once Karl put it out.

**F**alconry fieldmeets can be very slow affairs with delays encountered at every turn. There are a number of factors to these delays. One of them is the number of hawks flying on the day.

Another would be the layout of the ground and whether it's easy to get around.

As Goshawks regularly pursue their quarry out of sight, there can be a lot of waiting for the remaining field members as the falconer tracks down their hawk. For safety reasons to ensure the hawks don't come into contact with each other, no other hawk can be flown during this period until it's established the hawk is safely secured.

The waiting has to be accepted as part and parcel of these hawking fieldmeets. It's best to look on them as social events where one can chat and engage during these periods. More often than not the falconer put themselves under great pressure to get their bird back as quickly as possible to avoid delay to the waiting party. Often one sees the falconer with hawk safely on the fist returning to the group sweating profusely with the odd scratch and their clothing askew and muddy as they anxiously sought to retrieve their hawk. I know from field meet photographs that I regularly appear like this anyway.

What makes a field meet special is the quality and quantity of game. It can be very disheartening for the falconer and hunting party to have a long wait to find game and then a further wait once the hawk is slipped. This type of affair leads to mistakes being made. Hawks are slipped out of turn, dogs become wayward and even the falconer gets irritable.

Fortunately this was one of those special field meets. We had good company. We had good banter. We had game in abundance. We had ground that was easily negotiated with an impressive array of open fields and cover. The dogs enjoyed it; our birds loved it and the falconers left with the euphoric feeling that all was right with the world and that falconry was the finest sport on God's green earth.

We never did catch that cock pheasant on this memorable meet but we made a promise to Karl that we would return sooner rather than later to prove it can be done and also why there's a very good reason the noble Goshawk has been held in high esteem in the Royal county for well over a thousand years.

## **“BALLYNATRAY ESTATE 2013”**

*On the Blackwaters serpent flanks,  
Beneath arched ribs of oaken branches,  
Flashing spaniels scour the banks,  
Crashing brambles, until the pheasant flushes.*

*Goshawk's cobra head is moving,  
To dropping leaf and flickering wren,  
Coiled, intense and now exploding,  
Dog's frantic nose has found a hen.*

*Whirring wings devouring distance,  
Through a thousand years they go,  
Streaming comets over stubble  
To fate, only the old Gods know.*

James Knight, Co Mayo

## **Review a book**

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

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

**[hylwhite@gmail.com](mailto:hylwhite@gmail.com)**



Fieldmeet Report

## Two-Day Goshawk Meet Ballynatray Estate, Co Waterford

Keith Barker, Co Waterford



Members of the Irish Hawking Club attended a two-day Goshawk fieldmeet on Thursday the 24th and Friday 25th of January 2013 held at the Ballynatray estate in Co Waterford by kind permission from Henry-Gwyn Jones and Martin O'Riordan.

The first day was held in perfect conditions; a good hard frost greeting us all with not a puff of wind, it was an ideal start to the proceedings for the austringers (James Knight, Neal Carroll, Eric Witkowski, Don Ryan and myself, and guest John Duggan) and our intermewed hawks.

The standard was high and the pheasants were fit having been driven over guns since mid October. They took some catching.

James knight's intermewed female was first to score with an impressive pursuit of a hen bird flushed by a FTCH English springer spaniel handled by Matt Fitzgerald, one of the estate's regular members of the beating team. It was a good start as we worked our way through a mature horseshoe-shaped mature oak wood.

The pheasants came nice and steady as we pressed on. Neal's intermewed male took a cock bird on his first slip much to the delight of Robert Walton and Aodhan Brown who had travelled down to spectate for the day.

My intermewed male Barrabas also killed a cock bird on his first slip, taking the pheasant down the wood in heavy laurels.

Then the fun really began!

We were guided out of the wood and along the banks of the River Blackwater. The river bank was a blanket of dead bracken and briars, and the river to our left was filling with the tide to around 700yds wide to the opposite bank at Ardsallagh. We were aware of the dangers of a hawk going across the water, especially retrieving a hawk from that distance.

When the time came for Neal's next slip, a cock pheasant was flushed. Neal, in all his eagerness to give his hawk the best possible chance, released his hawk on the sound of the flush. The pheasant saw the hawk on its way and turned across the water. They say a pheasant only flaps its wings for seven seconds then glides to cover – well this one did not! The hawk put in an incredible effort, but the pheasant was seen to touch the water with his wings around three quarters of the way across and somehow made the bank at the other side with the goshawk crashing in just behind him. I must thank John Duggan who volunteered to drive Neal the six- or seven-mile round trip to retrieve this hawk and thus giving up seeing any more hawking that afternoon.

More unsuccessful but spectacular flights followed from an adjoining wood flown across a field of winter wheat and into the horseshoe wood we had been through earlier in the day.

Eric Witkowski's intermewed female flew very strong over his impressive although still relatively young Irish Red Setter Rocky and

was very unlucky not to kill on the day.

Then for me disaster struck. I slipped my hawk after a cock bird again flushed by Matt Fitzgerald's spaniel. The pheasant turned tail and headed down the wood and over the gamekeeper's head. The hawk was in a perfect position and early into the flight he went up to pull him, but for some reason he changed his mind and continued to track him below with roars of encouragement from the field. I pulled the radio telemetry receiver from its holster to find the flight had not gone very far. I thought he had him down but found the hawk at the base of stock fencing upside down and unconscious after what was obviously a serious crash. My heart sank but thankfully he came to after a while although he was still a little groggy for a few days after.

At this point it was agreed to call the proceedings to a halt and retire to the vehicles. The estate staff made us very welcome and considering this was the first time a falconry fieldmeet had been held in the estate's history we agreed it had gone down quite well. We all were looking forward to day two the following day.

Eric had brought his excellent tiercel peregrine with him who has been making a name for himself lately as a great snipe hawk and asked could I find a snipe or two for him on the way back to his lodgings. The hawking party parked at Camphire Bridge at the River Bride while I telephoned the landowner Mr Murphy to ask to hawk his bog below his house. We were under



no circumstances to start proceedings until he got there and was putting his hat and coat on as soon as the telephone went down. The crowd of spectators gathered at the gate as Rocky waited patiently for his run across the bog.

The lead was slipped and in no time at all the red dog had found his snipe and was standing motionless out on point in no man's land. Eric un-hooded his hawk, which took a quick rouse and mute then leapt off the fist to make his ascent with all of us gazing repeatedly first up high then down at the dog. The hawk drifted off over the river, and even though he was only a few hundred yards away he was still in the next parish as the river is the boundary. He came over us, but Eric waited patiently. The hawk drifted out once more to gain more height, all the while Rocky posed like a bronze statue. Finally Eric waved his glove and the peregrine came overhead to the tip of the killing cone. He then called the flush and the dog rooted the snipe out. The hawk came down vertically with a teardrop stoop, corkscrewing three quarters of the way down to clip the snipe. The target hit the ground, the hawk came over to the put in and at the last second the Snipe shot away dumping into the base of a line of old oak trees and thicker cover a short distance away to escape.

A spectacular flight and a good

end to the day's hawking.

Later in the evening after a wash and brush up we all met at the Lismore House Hotel along with the gamekeeper and his wife for a steak dinner and some liquid refreshments. The food, drink, and conversation was excellent, and we all left looking forward to the second day of action.

Drawing the curtains on the morning of day two, it did not look good. Rain lashed against the window with high winds. The only thing that cheered me up at this point was opening the box that Barrabas was in and seeing that he was still alive.

We drove through the impressive wooden electronic entrance gates at Ballynatray once more to be met by the estate staff for a second time. The forecast was bad for the day. Some of the group had hawks sheltering under umbrellas to keep the plumage as dry as possible, the lads all had a quick slip each in the first section of the wood without success and every hawk that was slipped came back soaked.

The rain came down in buckets as we flushed Pheasants as we went along. Eric's female took a good hen out of the wood across the corner of a cover crop across a lane and into the next wood where

she was found feeding up. The best effort and kill of the day.

The more we cracked on, the wetter it got, but the lads all had good slips and at around 1pm we decided enough was enough and we called it a day.

Some of us came back to my house at Camphire to be treated to Mrs Barker's beef stew and roasted butternut squash, pots of tea and coffee before heading back to our respective corners of the country in the still-driving rain.

I would like to thank the staff at Ballynatray for making us most welcome at this prestigious and beautiful venue; Matt Fitzgerald, Owen Lowry and Patsy McCarthy of the Cork Field Trial Association for their impressive dog handling, and also James Knight who sponsored the event making it a bit lighter on everyone's pocket. We have already been invited back here in 2014 for more of the same.

*Video footage of the first day's hawking shot by members of the Rathcormac Gun Club can be viewed at the YouTube website search engine under "Goshawk hunting in Ireland".*

*Images by kind permission of Colman Howard of the Rathcormac Gun Club and Aodhan Brown of the Irish Hawking Club.*



they say a pheasant only flaps its wings for seven seconds then glides to cover – well this one did not!





# IHC International Snipe-Hawking Meet October 2014



The Irish Hawking Club are delighted to extend an open International invite to all Falconers (affiliated to their national or regional club) to come and fly their Falcons on the world-renowned Irish raised bogs in pursuit of the most evasive of all wading birds, the Common Snipe (*Gallinago gallinago*)

The invite is open to Falconers and their Falcons and Dogs on the understanding that all are well behaved and act appropriately and accordingly in the keeping of the true sport of Falconry. Trained Pointers and Setters will be available for use during the meet.

The field meet is to be held over five days in October on several thousand acres of raised bogs throughout the midlands of Ireland. Both experienced and beginning Snipe Hawkers are welcome. This is an opportunity to witness this incredible and most intricate branch of Falconry and learn from some of the world's greatest Snipe Hawkers.

**When:** Monday 27th October to Friday 31st October, 2014

**Where:** The Midlands of Ireland

**Cost:** There is no charge for spectating or flying a Falcon at this meet. Budget Accommodation with suitable weathering areas will be announced nearer the time. Places will be limited so it is advised to inquire early. Preference will be given to Falconers affiliated to a national or regional hawking club

**To book a place at this fieldmeet or for further information, please contact Don Ryan at [don@irishhawkingclub.ie](mailto:don@irishhawkingclub.ie).**

**Tel : 00353 (0) 857117863**





*(Editor's note – ahead of the 2016 meet, this gives a flavour of what Kerry can offer as a venue)*

**W**e have been urged to put pen to paper or finger to the keyboard if any of us have a get together for a hawking day or two and submit it to our editor.

In February 2012, three austringers were asked to come to the Kingdom of Kerry by Don Ryan. Over dinner one evening, Don had been telling us about his Co Kerry hideaway where the Ryan family had been enjoying summer breaks for decades. The accommodation was a little Spartan but ideally situated for a sporting break on the banks of a fabulous salmon river not far from the sea with sporting rights over 30,000 acres of hill, bog and estuary. The quarry would be totally wild game with no pheasants released in the area, a few ducks, snipe, hares. It sounded like a real challenge and a date was set to go hawking for a few days.

We all met on a mid-November Thursday morning, myself, James Knight, Don and the following day by Eric Witkowski. The hawks were put out to weather while we got a feel of the old granite-built lodge, wooden floors, ancient bathtub with the trademark rusty stain below the dripping tap, an old stone smoke stained fireplace, ageing chesterfield sofa adorned with Don's three cocker spaniels –

a real bachelor pad!

Don showed us the salmon pool, four strides from the front door and the rope bridge over the river to the far bank from which we gazed into the peaty water for perhaps a view of the elusive silver fish. Back in the lodge, we flicked over the pages of the visitors book, reading entries going back donkeys' years of great times had, the height of the water, the numerous salmon and sea trout taken and the types of fly that were most successful. We were eager to get a feel of the ground and decided to have a quick walk out. In the short time we were scouting we found a few woodcock, pheasant, and mallard later in the afternoon. Barabbas, my charge, had one slip at a woodcock but was easily beaten.

Don and James had slips on pheasant and duck and it became clear to us just how wild and wily the pheasants were – absolute rockets and well aware of dogs and whistles approaching. No game was taken in the short time we were out before returning to the lodge. I set my mink trap by the weathering area just before dark, baited with a sea bass head, then off to the pub just a short walk into the village for the evening for a few pints and a good meal.

Friday morning, after a home cooked breakfast, we crossed the shaky rope bridge to the far bank of the river. Opposite the old

## Fieldmeet Report **Come To The Kingdom**

Keith Barker, Co Waterford

cemetery, to where Don had assured us we would find a hare for James's intermewed female Gos Baby Doll. We found one after a short walk through the light moorland cover. The hare ran up the hill with the hawk in a commanding position as they disappeared over a crest. We were sure there would be hare on the menu for dinner later but alas we will never know what happened at the end of the unsuccessful flight. A spectacular view of the hillside and cascading waterfall in the distance.

We then went to lands bordering the estuary with Barabbas first slip. Feather, my Hungarian Vizsla bitch, took a line out across the bog and came to point. I got as close as I could up to a deep drain with fencing on the other side. I did not know what to expect to flush, perhaps a hare or a snipe. When I sent her in to get it up, a cock bird rocketed away with Barabbas locked on to him in no time at all after a 30-40 yard slip. They raced across open ground towards a rundown derelict farm, both going over tall trees together. He was tracked with telemetry and picked up from a low branch and heavy cover beneath him, but no kill.

Later, we were met by Eric, bringing his Polish inter-mewed female Gos and a very promising Irish tiercel Peregrine.

Don's Intermewed male 50/50 (half-Finnish, half-German) Gos



bred by myself was the first to score by killing a majestic cock bird. Close inspection found the pheasant a well-muscled bird, spurs like daggers and no keel bone to be felt, just round as a barrel.

Barabbas took two more slips in the afternoon at pheasants. On his second, a pheasant was bumped some distance away by Eric's Irish red setter Rocky. He was up against it, in a short while forcing the pheasant into heavy cover where he had it down. He was fed up on this one, a good bursting crop of pheasant and rabbit.

Later, Erik's setter again came on point in the corner of a heavy rush bed. A pheasant flushed and headed up the hill with the hawk underneath and looking like she would pull it. The pair shot past Don who had fed his hawk up and was walking back to meet us with shouts of encouragement. A great flight but we again came away empty handed. These wild pheasants take some catching.

Earlier in the afternoon, Eric put his Tiercel Peregrine up over the young setter. He climbed to an impressive pitch while the dog held his point. On command, while the hawk was in position, the dog went in to flush and up popped a snipe. A perfect stoop came but the snipe dumped into a patch of rushes and evaded capture.

We went to town that evening for a good meal and pints, then early to bed and up early the following morning to find the river in flood after heavy overnight rain.

**O**n Saturday, Barabbas was a little high in weight due to his feed up the evening before. I decided to wait until afternoon before flying him

and the others hawked the estuary and land bordering.

We hunted a hill by the sea in fine drizzle, Eric's female taking on a melanistic cock bird down hill and across two cow pastures towards rough scrub but she came away empty handed. We eventually ran out of ground up the hill and worked our way back to the vehicles. By a holiday cottage, Don's spaniels rooted out a fine towering cock pheasant from one of the borders, his Gos taking him on down the lane and out of sight. James and Eric boxed their hawks and the three of us went in search of Don who was still tracking in deep cover but no kill. Again, the wild pheasants had flown like bullets. We decide to take a break.

Don cooked lunch back at the lodge, some dish I daren't pronounce but it had chicken and peppers and was delicious. Later, we hawked on the banks and bog land around the river that was in flood after the overnight rain. Eric flew his Peregrine in high winds with no luck, before James flew a cock that flushed unsighted and made an impressive effort, crashing into cover below the farm together but missing out on a hot feed up.

With light fading, I was next up, taking some time to find my slip, a cock bird. After a long hunt from three or four dogs, the pheasant flushed. Barabbas was with it all the way. He went up to pull him but the pheasant increased his height to get out of the hawk's way. The flight curled around towards the river and went well out of view.

With James accompanying me, we came to the swollen river with the signal still on FAR 300yds+ ahead. I passed James my electrical apparatus and took the plunge

with the light fading. The water was chilled and a shock to the plums. I tracked on to the other side and located my hawk in the corner of the heavy cover where he had killed the day before. He skimmed the fist in the almost dark then came down on the second attempt. I had visions of picking him up the following morning. Walking back to the truck in the dark and pouring rain, I said to myself that it was the flight of my season so far, even though he did not catch it.

We went to the town in the evening after we had dried off for a good meal and more Guinness. Eric left for home with myself, Don and James staying overnight.

**O**n Sunday morning, we woke to a wet start, packed up hawks, dogs and equipment and headed for home. Checking the mink trap revealed a caught female. Once home, I received a telephone call from a delighted Eric who on that morning had taken his first snipe of the season with his Peregrine. It had been great for all of us to hawk some untamed country with truly wild quarry.



*Over windswept bogs  
by forest seams,  
Through driving rain and  
swollen streams,  
The anxious flights the days  
were fraught with,  
They hunted for pleasure and  
they caught it  
by Don Ryan*





Fieldmeet Report  
**Ballinkeele Shortwing Meet  
2013**

Keith Barker, Co Waterford

Members of the Irish Hawking Club shortwing section met at Ballinkeele House shoot in early December by kind permission of the Ballinkeele shooting syndicate. There was a perfect start to the day's proceedings with high pressure, low winds and a warm welcome by the syndicate members and their families on arrival.

Austringers attending were myself, Martin McGeehan, Eoghan Ryan, Robert Walton, John Duggan, and Don Ryan. All the hawks were intermewed birds, except Robert's who was flying an eyass male and John an eyass female.

We were guided by the Chairman of the shoot, Henry Cowper, along by the grand entrance to the hall with an entourage of spectators. Most of the hawks were unsettled at first with the attention they were getting from the spectators who had obviously not been in the company of hunting hawks before.

Robert bravely stepped up to take the first slip with his hawk promptly taking stand for a while. A hawk that usually recalls like a boomerang was clearly having an off day until the field was asked to retire to a reasonable distance when the hawk was recovered without much fuss.

We moved on to the wood by the grand house with the spectators positioned this time in a better vantage point for the hawks to become more settled, a cock pheasant was flushed for my hawk by Don Ryan's cocker spaniel Finch. The hawk and pheasant cleared the wood and over the courtyard, with the spectators getting a grandstand view of the flight back to the release pen but no kill.

We moved along to a field of winter kale cover crop and were shown plenty of pheasants here with Martin McGeehan's male Sioux flying a hen out of one corner back to heavy cover but coming away empty handed. John Duggan slipped his female into a burst of birds erupting from one corner. The hawk picked a pheasant that did not fly very far before bailing out into heavy cover, and was soon was recovered.

Eoghan Ryan was called over next, flying his intermewed male Frankie. Again, Don's cocker provided an energetic hen whose flight path came across the field parallel to all the spectators. The pheasant gained altitude, with the hawk matching her speed beneath her in a perfect position. A view like this is seldom seen by the austringer and is always thrilling to witness - a side-on

view of an accipiter flat out, totally focused on his target above. The hen rocketed over a shelter belt of trees, but the hawk cut through below with no slackening of pace until the pair disappeared from view.

Eoghan was gone for some time. We were expecting good news when the telephone rang but the pheasant had escaped and we were still waiting for a kill.

I took the next slip with Barrabas from the edge of the kale field. The pheasant flushed on the far side of a double ditch. The pair had just got going over a larch plantation when she bailed into the high branches. She re-flushed back to where she came from and bailed into the first bank of cover where a rat hunt took place. Not the best of slips.

From here we retired for refreshments - tea coffee and rum punch provided by our hosts in a converted barn I guess they use for lunch breaks on the shoot days. We could have stayed there all afternoon, especially if the weather was inclement but the day just seemed to get better so we ventured out again and were shown a long thin strip of woodland with tillage ground at either side. The slips came steady for the remainder of the afternoon and great sport was



shown. The pheasants were fit, some of them exiting the wood at tree-top height flushed by spaniels. Once a hawk was recovered, a quick phone call was made and the next hawk was made ready to slip.

We changed our strategy late in the afternoon by taking a pointer into the wood where two quick points and flushes were produced. Martin's hawk produced a spectacular bind after flying his hen across the bordering field heading for a wood. The pheasant towered to clear some tall beeches when the hawk struck with a textbook aerial bind, much to the pleasure of the on-lookers.

Eoghan's male again flew like a bullet from a point not long after but again came away empty-handed.

Don's male took a hen bird into a broadleaf plantation. Accompanied by Eoghan Ryan and a couple of cockers, he followed and on arrival the hunted pheasant was re-flushed and taken to reward the hawk on what was an impressive effort from the team.

Although a little inexperienced in the pheasant de-

partment, the two eyass Goshawks flown by Robert Walton and John Duggan made an excellent account of themselves in obedience and hunting drive. I am sure we will be reading more of this pair over the seasons to come with more air time. Not one of the hawks presented on the day was seen to pull off any slip, showing an excellent standard to our discipline. The shoot can also be commended for not only allowing the Club on their magnificent venue but also providing some real testing game birds who proved to be just that bit better than most of the hawks flown on the day.

I am sure all who were involved with the day at Ballinkee House would agree we had a great day's sport, one conducted in a sporting manner, and the Club members who attended represented their club in a positive way, opening perhaps a fantastic venue for future Club fieldmeets.

## **TELEMETRY**

**IHC strongly recommends the use of radio telemetry by all members when flying their birds of prey.**

**Not to do so, especially in the case of non-native species and hybrids, could jeopardise the good will that exists between the responsible falconers in IHC, with the other non-government organisations concerned with conservation and wildlife and with the wildlife authorities themselves.**

the hen rocketed over a shelter belt of trees, but the hawk cut through below with no slackening of pace until the pair disappeared from view





## Falconry In Pakistan

Kamran K Yousafzai,  
Pakistan

The geography of Pakistan is highly favourable for falconry, stretching from Hindu Kush Himalayan ranges to desert areas. A century-old relationship exists between falconers and the migratory birds. Pakistan is known for providing migration routes to both falconry birds and their prey during winter far from their breeding grounds, allowing for an environment of sustainable falconry. Pakistan has a very rich culture of falconry all over its map, from flying of Sparrowhawks, Goshawks, Shikra, Red-Headed Merlin, Peregrine, Saker and many other species. Different species of birds of prey are tamed and used in accordance to the game and topography found at the homeland. Pakistan is also a landmark of century-old art depicting chasing hawk and stooping falcons.

Generations have adopted the  
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art from their ancestors as a family tradition and it is preserved today. The Pakistani falconers are committed to their tradition, beliefs and history. The art has been learnt through generations and with knowledge sharing. Falconry history appears in royal courts of the Mughal kings, descendants of Genghis Khan and Kublai Khan, who were keen falconers. In 1674AD, Khushal Khan Khattak, a warrior and the poet, was an expert falconer. He wrote a book, Baaznama, on the art of falconry, which covers different aspects of falconry from trapping, taming and herbal medication. Allama Mohammad Iqbal, Pakistan's national poet, used hawks and falcons extensively in his poetry to symbolise the courage of self-respect, prestige, purity of soul, perseverance and self-control. As a symbol, falconry plays a prominent role in the lives of many and its pictures, images

and paintings can be seen on house-tops, walls, trucks, buses and rickshaws. Songs and poetry on falconry life are often heard within the community.

Falconry has also played an important diplomatic role in Pakistan of building friendly relations with other nations. As His Highness Sheikh Mohammad Bin Zayed Al Nayhan (may Allah be pleased with him), father to falconers, has enjoyed his falconry days on hunting grounds of Pakistan. This gave the Sheikh great honour in the region and is he highly regarded and is always praised by people of Pakistan. His falconry has helped the people of Pakistan in formation of different educational institutions, hospitals, roads, airports, and by providing jobs which support better living for many families.

There are nearly 1800 families



carrying the art from generation to generation in Pakistan. The art has been preserved and practiced as a family heritage for many generations. A falconer devotes his life to falconry, which becomes a part of his everyday life, and birds are always highly valued.

Goshawks, also known as 'baaz' in the local language, are the most popular bird of prey in the region. Hawking with Goshawks, has remained a valuable sport even today, and passage Goshawks are trapped and tamed in an ancient way. Goshawks, Sakers, Peregrines and Sparrowhawks mainly migrate to the region through the valleys to lower areas of Pakistan from September to October. Every year, early in hunting season, birds are mainly trapped in the valleys of Chitral, Dir and Gilgit along with other districts throughout Pakistan. As the weather changes, Goshawks migrate to Pakistan. Male juveniles usually arrive first followed by female juveniles and later adults. The juveniles migrate into the region in large numbers every year and are also preferred for use in Pakistan falconry while having less negative effects on the wild breeding population.

Trapping birds of prey is a skill and an enjoyable moment which is

the main factor for falconry. Pakistan falconry depends on trapping and flying passage birds. There is also the good humour of trapping. Falconers trap their birds which are then exchanged between the community according to the species and land requirements. It is a calm and devoted skill, and falconers use different methods of trapping which have been inherited from their forefathers through familiarity with the permanent migration routes and flying areas of these birds. Some falconers trap these birds of prey while waiting hidden on mountain cliffs and with a partridge tied on the top of some rocks. Other use dugaza, a traditional net on one side and a prey waiting on other side. Pigeons with a harness and decoying other small birds of prey using a feather ball are some other ways of trapping.

Pakistan falconers prefer juvenile Goshawks and are very obsessive in taking birds for the hawking. Their choice depends on structure and colours of the bird in keeping with past experience of flying. They are very conscious in taking a passage Goshawk of its history and the area in which it was trapped. They have different beliefs in choosing a hawk as a companion – if a Goshawk is trapped in a populated area, preying on crows or other easy

prey, it is considered to be not a swift flyer as the Goshawk trapped in an area where it has been preying on fast partridges, pigeons or other game birds.

Another consideration is the colours and different shades of juvenile Goshawks. A light-shaded juvenile is considered to be a calmer bird and known for building a strong bond with the falconer. Dark-shaded is considered being the swiftest in flying but is often hard to handle. Reddish birds are thought to be the best choice, having the right qualities for flying. But in the end, what is most important is finding a good hawking companion with a broad chest, strong shoulders, short tail and long legs. A soft-feathered bird which is heavy is always performs better and will be a brave bird for falconry.

Successful falconry depends on how the falconer tames his bird and how aware he is of his bird. A falconer is measured on his handling of his bird and flying on wild quarry without any defects. After examining the bird thoroughly the Goshawk is bought and is fitted with traditional bells, fixed jesses and a colourful leash. Manning a passage Goshawk begins in different ways. Feeding is done early in the taming process by offering meat to the hooded bird until it is full. Walking

Allama Mohammad Iqbal, Pakistan's national poet, used hawks and falcons extensively in his poetry to symbolise the courage of self-respect, prestige, purity of soul, perseverance and self-control





with bird and touching of hand on chest and feathers is done constantly for three days and nights with the hooded bird. On the third day, tiny holes are made in the front of the hood, allowing it to see slightly. As the days pass, the holes are made larger in the hood letting the bird see more widely as it adjusts to its surroundings while walked in crowded areas and introducing pointer dogs. The hood is removed com-

pletely after eight days.

During feeding, the bird is called to again and again, helping it to bond with his falconer and surroundings. At the same time bird is brought to its flying weight and its appetite is built up. Goshawks are always handled in crowded areas, and prey is offered to attract the bird when it is nearly tamed and shows no fear from humans or surroundings. Falcon-

ers also get the new bird used to plucking prey feathers before starting eating. Stomach enzymes are important to help gain its appetite. If the bird is responding well then it is untied from jesses and presented with quarry in the evening and allowed to kill. After the success of the kill, next the bird is taken to fields along with the other trained birds which help the new Goshawk by gaining confidence in seeing other



trained hawks. Great care is taken with the first slip and the hawk is fed up after its first kill. Falconers always approach the bird on a kill slowly from the front, making a pattering sound to make the bird aware of falconer coming nearer. At night, he is always offered lukewarm water after a successful day of hunting. Passage birds need waking and walking – this is the philosophy of manning from centuries ago in Pakistan. For a falconer, every word is spoken by a Goshawk through its behaviour and eyes. Every successful flight of a new Goshawk is celebrated within the community. Special sweets are cooked at night, with the emphasis not on the number of kills but how well the Goshawk has flown.

As an archer performs well with proper balance and aim, the same is with Goshawks. Throwing and releasing towards the quarry is important to give the hawk momentum. It is thrown after the quarry giving the bird extra force and speed.

Pointers complete the team of Pakistan Falconry. It is all about the bond of a Falconer, a hawk and a dog. A hawking dog that knows his hard job well is considered superior to any other hunting dogs. A good dog brings you success and a dull dog of the field will always bring disappointment to the team. Losing continuous quarry disappoints the Goshawk most. Pakistan falconers use local pointer breeds as they are thought to be strong and brave in cover and adjustable to the environment.

Every hawking companion dog is a player in the field and given great care and honour within the

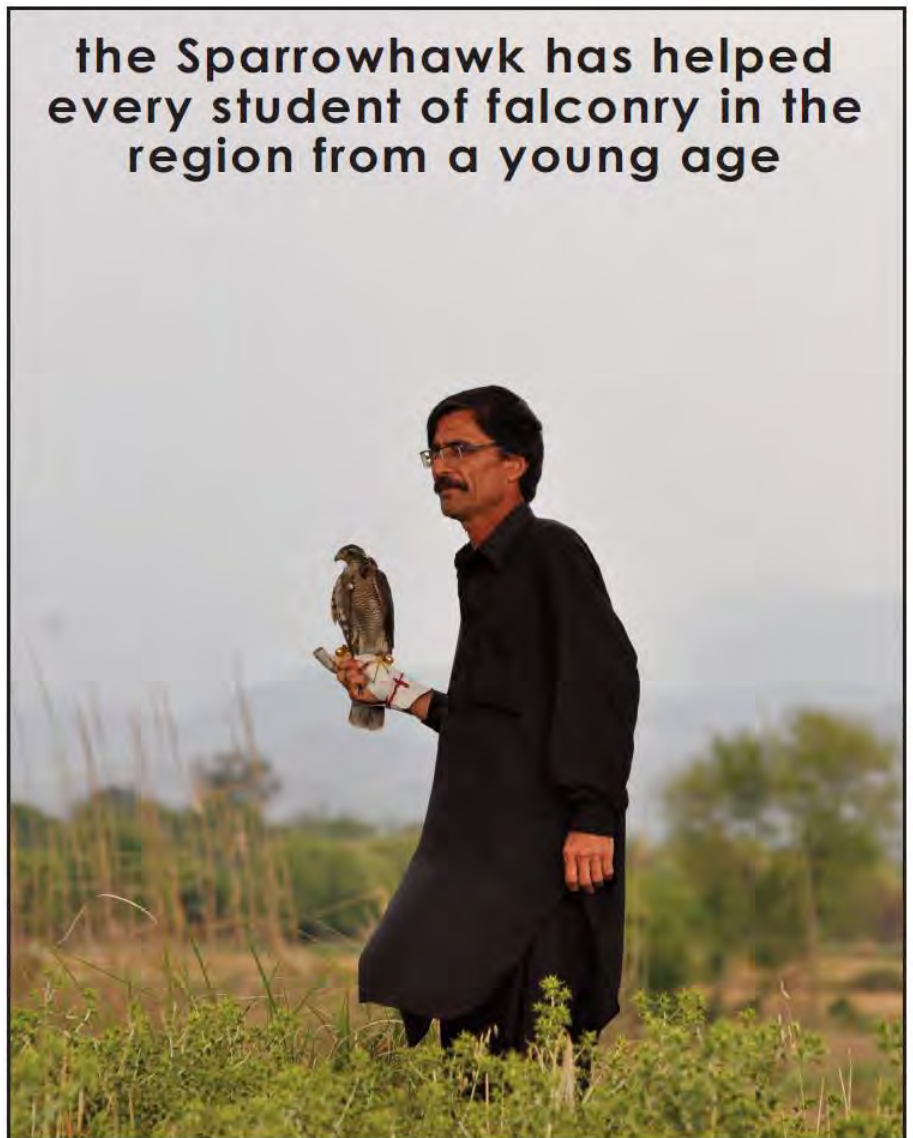
community. Breeds are selected from the parents' hunting skills. Goshawks are more easily adjustable with the light-colour dogs than the darker. They bond with their dogs as companions and follow as one team.

Hunting parties are arranged throughout the season. Falconers hunt together on each other's hunting grounds to experience the life which they love the most. They have words for every flight and chase, and enjoy the shouting, poetry and good gossip. Pakistan falconers have a very strong relation. They are great friends who always care for each other. Falconry builds a very strong bond between them which is like any blood relation.

**P**akistan is one of the leading countries manufacturing falconry equipment. But these goods are mainly exported to other countries and are not often found in the display centres or markets for local falconers. We make most of our equipment and are experts in their handcrafts. Goshawks are fitted with leg bells, jesses, a neck bell, and a long hanging strip. Hoods are used in the manning process. A stick is also important in the field, usually an Acacia Koa tree stick which has been popular because of its weight, strength and elasticity.

Pakistan falconers are also experts in traditional herbal medication for hawks, although

## **the Sparrowhawk has helped every student of falconry in the region from a young age**





# what makes Pakistan falconry especially sustainable is that at the end of the season hawks are sometimes released back to their wild breeding grounds

modern treatments are more effective. Some of these techniques are very useful. Most falconers use crushed mustard seeds popped down the hawk's throat with lukewarm water. The bird will vomit out everything at once and will empty its stomach and crop. This is used to remove old rotten meat which has not been digested by a bird of prey

Enzyming helps the bird to clean its stomach of fats, and builds appetite for meat even when the bird is high in weight. It is done both during the season and re-claiming. The most common method is to mix butter with sugar and cardamom into small balls

which are then refrigerated. Two or three balls are popped down the throat of the hawk followed by lukewarm water. This is done in the morning on a sunny day. Salt is added for falcons and washed and soaked meat is often given.

We moult our birds with great expertise in temperature-controlled mud rooms built with proper traditional perches. Herbal medication is used for moulting by making a vitamins solution from butter, honey bee larvae and other herbs which helps the bird complete a moult for the next season.

The Sparrowhawk has helped every student of falconry in the region from a young age. As sparrowhawks are more often found in the

fields along with Shikras and Turmati (Red-Headed Merlin), young falconers can be seen trapping, taming and flying Sparrowhawks out in the fields, learning different steps to falconry while also being helped by elders. Part of this involves learning about preservation and game management so that game birds are sure to come back for the next season to the same hunting ground. We have great awareness of gamebirds' breeding and habitat,

and have re-established the population in different areas for falconry.

What makes Pakistan falconry especially sustainable is that at the end of the season (February to April) hawks are

sometimes released back to their wild breeding grounds. Extraordinary birds are moulted and taken very good care of to fly in the next season. Pakistan Falconers take juveniles which are usually kept for four or five years and are always released back.

**W**e devote our lives to falconry, using expertise from down the centuries, practicing this ancient art in the traditional way. It is not a business of convenience or expediency to us but rather it is a deep love gifted by Almighty Allah. How a hawk flies in the sky reveals the nobility, wisdom and skill of the falconer. The atmosphere is addictive and a way of life always.





# The Northumberland Crow Falcons

James Knight, Co Mayo



I have started this article so many times and just not known where to begin. The problem is this; it was a trip of a lifetime, a dream come true, pick any cliché you like. As such, I would really like to do it justice. But I can't, and the emails requesting journal contributions are getting more and more urgent. It's time now that I just write something, anything! So here are a few random snapshots of the trip. With a memory like mine, details of dates and times disappear but the experiences are burnt onto the hard drive, never to be deleted.

It all started with an email from Don, our esteemed Director. 'Hi folks, Nick Fox has kindly offered an invitation for two falconers...' Now, a bit of background is needed: When you understand that, firstly, I have all of Nick Fox's books, videos and DVD's, (I could even tell you the names of some of his falcons and his horse). Secondly, I have flown falcons and hawks myself at corvids for nearly 20 years. Thirdly, that my working life started many moons ago as a horse-riding instructor. Perhaps you are getting the picture of how I reacted on reading Don's email. I remember jealously reading our past president Liam O'Broin's account of his trip to the Northumberland

Crow Falcons some years ago, even though his trip ended with a trip to the hospital casualty! Beginning to sound a little obsessed? Surely now you can realise how excited I was at the prospect of this invitation. I emailed back to Don wondering how many others would want to go and silently chanting 'please, please let my name be picked out of the hat!'

As it happened, I was the only one who replied, it seems there aren't many falconers in Ireland that ride, and so Don decided to come as well and follow in the vehicle. After a lot of internet travel research we came up with a plan. We would both fly out from Dublin to Newcastle, very early on the Thursday morning, the day of the hawking meet. Don needed to fly back on Friday night and I was going to stay for the last mounted meet of the season on the Sunday and come home Monday morning. The flights were Ryanair's cheap ones and it saved hours and hours of driving and sitting on a seasick inducing ferry. The only downside was hiring a car but when else was I going to get this opportunity?

First off, the thing that most impressed me about the whole trip was the invitation

itself. There are lots of famous or privileged falconers practising wonderful falconry, with the best grouse moors, pheasant ground, partridge hawking etc. How many of them send out an open invitation to a club for a couple of members to come and share their falconry? How many of us would be happy to have two complete strangers joining us on our precious hunting trips? Not only that, Nick and his wife, Barbro, put us up in their farmhouse and cooked us meals. It would be very easy for the Northumberland Crow Falcons to carry on enjoying their own falconry themselves, without the hassle of guests and all that they entail, but they don't and I think that is a wonderful thing.

On a similar note, the trip wouldn't have happened at all if it wasn't for Don and, without his company it wouldn't have been the same. As we all know, Don has proved incredibly generous with his time this past year and I, for one, have no idea how he does it. Surely he can't really have a job, a family, a pack of dogs and a cadge full of hawks! I wish I had half his energy.

## The Landscape

The landscape is open grassland, wet, rough, tussocks



and rushes with occasional bright green swathes of sheep grazed grass on the drier ground. It is folded into a series of ridges, like waves from the ocean, sweeping up from the south to crash into Scotland. On the highest and steepest ridge runs Hadrian's wall, a vein of incredible Roman history, still there stamped onto the landscape. Blocks of forestry sit on the horizon well away into the distance. Grey stone walls try and impose some sort of order onto the swaying sea of grasses, a scattering of ancient farmsteads grow from the land itself. Most of the view is sky, wide and windswept. It is like stand-

ing in an almighty vaulted cathedral when all you see is the walls and ceiling above you, the floor just a thin veneer, plenty of room for clouds and stars and falcons.

#### **The Perfect Picture**

The mounted field of about a dozen is on one side of a steep gully with a boggy stream down the middle. We crossed it earlier. On that occasion, one horse refused so the rider dismounted to lead it across. It took some persuasion but finally decided to leap across and land on her ankle! She was straight back on, but this time she had decided to go the long way round! I am feel-

ing pretty pleased with myself having cantered carefully down the slope and crossed the stream safely. And then I see Nick on Buckskin cantering down that same steep slope, reins in one hand, falcon in the other, it is a perfect picture, and it isn't lost on Theresa, who had hired me my horse. 'He is a remarkable man you know,' she said. She went on about nasty falls, a broken hip or pelvis or something. I wasn't listening, I was watching. All the photos in the books don't convey it, not even the videos. It's only really when you have done it yourself that the difficulty becomes apparent.

There are so many details hidden in the horse, falcon, and rider mix. These are hungry, keen falcons sitting hooded on the glove. Despite the movement of the rider, the feel of the wind beckoning them to the chase or the rush of air during the canter to get into position, they cannot open their wings or fidget. These are not the privileged game-hawks driven onto autumn stubbles in the back of a four wheel drive, to be held aloft in the fine, high-pressure weather of the lowlands, then to rouse and mount into the sky at their leisure while their quarry waits hidden

below. These are fit, aggressive falcons, on a hair-trigger, ready to launch into a desperate chase dictated by their incredible quarry. And yet they sit calmly on the glove, while the wind buffets them and Nick canters down a slope, one handed, that many would struggle to walk up!

#### **A Rat Hunt**

It is getting towards the end of our first day and a crow has been marked down beside a bush. A stream runs through a little gully, a stony farm track crosses it in a wide shallow ford. (A couple of hours previously we had crossed

it at walk and Mary's horse did an almighty cat-leap into the air, spooking over a submerged fertilizer sack, she got launched in the air, one arm flying up like a rodeo rider. All in a day's work for Mary, but I gripped the saddle a little harder as I peered down into the rushing water at the waving plastic). The ground and track of the other side was much steeper and halfway up was a large hawthorn bush, not far away, on a wall, was the crow. Nick had come back to the field and conveyed the plan. The horses must stay together at first, either with him or well back. Nick



was going to call the falcon over before we flushed the crow and he didn't want the falcon waiting on over the wrong horses. With a parting 'if you are coming with me then stay close' he was gone. In nearly any other situation in life, given that choice, I would have stayed back safely with the group, but, I looked at Mary and went with her. The three of us cantered through the ford, clattering stones and splashing water. We kept tight together up the track, (I was just trying to stay on and not mess up). Nick was looking for the dark silhouette of the Peregrine/Saker. She is coming. I stare into the maze of twigs. Is the crow still there? I don't know. I don't know. Just then, it hops from one branch to another. Yes! Nick is gone again, cantering up the slope towards the bush. Mary and I follow, the horses plunging upwards. It gets steeper and steeper until I just abandon the reins and grab two handfuls of the horse's thick mane as we leap up onto level ground. Only it's not level – we have popped up onto the edge of an old quarry! I hastily moved away from the rocky cliff face, counting my blessings. The crow has gone back down to some bushes by the stream. Mary is there, somehow, cantering back through the stream yelling like a Navaho. The crow holds its nerve and lures the falcon into diving into the bush before it jumps out and away to safety.

While riding home, Nick recounts flights where the falcon and her quarry have rung up into the sky before them. The field simply sat on their stationary horses and watched an epic aerial battle ascend to the heavens. Of course that sounds great, but I loved our little rat hunt, using the horses to tear from one place to another to flush the crow. Our crow got

away, but it didn't matter. We all did our bit. I think the years of running from bush to bush on a bog beside a landfill site in Co Mayo has made me really, really appreciate the horse!

### **Hospitality**

The days began with hawking breakfasts of bacon, sausage, pudding and Nick walking round the table with a sizzling frying pan dishing out eggs. It all gets washed down with talk of the weather, who is coming that day, falcon weights and jokes and tales about what happened at this meet last year. Then comes the defining moment: someone has to eat the last sausage! Luckily, guests aren't pressed too hard, after all we are already stuffed to the gills, it's normally one of the Spanish falconers that gets bullied into it and is just too polite to refuse. We watch with relief as it disappears and then we are all up, carrying our plates to the kitchen and putting them on the floor. As the dog licks the plates clean everybody disappears and there is a hush of seriousness. The whole day depends on no-one forgetting anything and there is so much to be forgotten: falcons, food, pole-lures, gloves, telemetry receiver, batteries, transmitters, walkie-talkies (were they charged up?), binoculars, maps, coats, jackets, ties. The list just goes on and on and that's without adding three horses and all their tack!

I scuttle up to my room and get changed into all the necessary riding gear of shirt, tie, hacking jacket, jodhpurs. There is a dress code for mounted followers. No doubt there are those who would find that elitist and snobby. It is not. Everybody dresses up for weddings, funerals, dinners, football matches, nightclubs etc. We

all dress up for different things, wearing a tie to get into a restaurant would irk me, but I happily put one on to ride out with the Northumberland Crow Falcons. It gives a sense of occasion, history and respect. It doesn't change the ground which will still be as treacherous, the wind as cold, the rain as wet. So I like the dress code, if you are not convinced then go down to Thomond Park and try telling all the Munster rugby supporters they can't dress up in red!

Half way through the afternoon is time for a break and with it comes the pleasure of jumping off, stretching the legs and sharing a flask of tea. We talk of the flights we had and where we are going and who is flying later. Tins of cake and some amazing flapjacks are all eaten without a hint of guilt. Then there is the inevitable shared holding of horses while we take it in turns to go and hide behind a wall. Hoping we can get back on our horse without making too much of a spectacle of ourselves, then we are off again covering the ground searching for crows

At the end of the day, the vehicles pull in to the yard and the unpacking begins. Tired horses are stabled and fed, remaining rations given to falcons, all the muddy equipment is unloaded. Logs are brought in, the fire lit and the kettle put on. People crash in to comfortable chairs and relax. I am sure there has been many a late night after supper. Don enthusiastically took on a new role as ambassador to the Irish whiskey industry but being made of weaker stuff I sloped off to bed exhausted.

### **The Falcons**

The mews was a very noisy place inhabited by vocal imprints, mostly female Pere-





it would be easy for the Northumberland Crow Falcons to enjoy their own falconry themselves, without the hassle of guests and all they entail, but they don't and that is a wonderful thing





grine\ Sakers. I'm sure it would be quite a shock for a falconer from the pages of the old classic texts! Nearly all of the falcons were very dark which happens to be my preference so, to me, they were gorgeous. One in particular, a male Gyr/Peregrine, was a stunner and gave us some great flights. One of the aspects that stood out for me was the distance some of the falcons covered. One flight went out across a valley, over a river, to an isolated sheep feeder with a couple of bushes next to it. There was no way to get there, and no way to watch it, without binoculars. We lined up, leaning against the vehicles and gave each other running commentaries on what the tiny dots were

doing. The falcon worked really hard on her own, flushing and chasing, but had little to no chance without help. I remember wondering how we'd get her back? One of the falconers jumped in to the field and back she came, sailing across the valley to the pole lure.

Looking back on this trip, there are so many memories that it feels as if I was there for much longer than I was. So much was crammed into four days. When I flew back, Don insisted on picking me up from the airport and dropping me to the station for my train to Galway (more evidence of his generosity). We chatted about the trip and how much we had en-

joyed it. We came back enthused and inspired. On the train, I got out my now signed copy of 'Classical Falconry' and everything just leapt out from the pages.

It has occurred to me that I haven't actually written about the details of the falconry. But it is all there in Nick's books and DVDs if you want to find out how it's done, the details and science behind it. Here I have just one caveat: the books are great, well produced, informative, readable, etc. But, and this is the crux of it, it is so much better when you are there, sitting in the saddle.

Thanks to the Northumberland Crow Falcons



there are so many memories that it feels as if I was there for much longer than I was





## Alpine Crows & Herons

Christian Habich, Austria

**H**unting your birds in a high Alpine environment with its long steep slopes, narrow valleys and difficult terrain can be a tough proposition for the passionate falconer. When you live on the beautiful southern slopes of the Alps facing Italy and Slovenia however, you basically face two options: Accept the harsh environment and limited available prey species or simply move somewhere else. A potential third option would be driving to other less challenging hunting grounds, but if you want to hunt your bird daily, doing a 150km+ round trip every day is out of the question – at least for me it is. On the other hand, one can learn from nature and simply 'adapt'.

While boasting a good array and numbers of Red Deer, Roe Deer, Chamois or Fox, most other potential prey species like Black Grouse, Ptarmigan, Alpine Snowshoe Hare or Snipe are heavily protected in my area and all over Austria in general. Also we have zero rabbits.

Some falconers might ask '... you have a healthy natural

population of Golden Eagles, so why not fly a Goldie on Fox and Roe Deer?' The answer is that where I have hunting permission is simply too enclosed, too densely forested, too dangerous and without enough possible flights. 'Crap area for falconry, then' one could say. Well, not if you like mountain sports and to have a regular go at crows, herons and the occasional ducks!

Like in most areas, we have an increasing number of Crows that seem to adapt quite well to the harsh environment. The pressure from wild Alpine Goshawks, Eagles, Eagle Owls and Ravens converts them into a challenging quarry for falconers, one that knows all the tricks of the trade. I have observed a Crow once flying rings around a wild female Gos in mid air over the valley!

The natural choice of bird for this type of hunting and my geographical limitations (obviously) is a tiercel Goshawk. It is a good match and as I found out this year, there exists practically no winged game here that is out of bounds for a good tiercel. I

have tried a falcon once and while it was successful, it is a thrill that I can do without when the bird climbs high in the thermals and you prepare yourself to pick it up in neighboring Italy every time.

Having flown passage Goshawks before with varying degrees of success, I chose a captive bred tiercel from my best friend Roy Lupton in 2008. Picking it up in Kent on my way to the west coast of Ireland, I had slightly mixed feelings about it, when I returned back home to Austria after manning it in Ireland. Somehow this bird totally missed the supreme flying abilities of the passage birds I had before and I knew I was set up for a disappointing first season. While I managed to catch one or the other unsuspecting crow in its first season, several feet of snow at the beginning of December brought the season to an abrupt halt. At least I managed to give the bird a lot of 'airtime' and its flying abilities were improving.

Due to some clover-honey and a quail-only diet, the



bird had finished its moult the week before the 2009 Falconry Festival and was able to start its 'duties' at the end of July. Being so early we managed to 'grow' with the young Crows just like a wild Gos would and the end of the second season saw a mixed bag of Crows and Ducks with success every other day on average over a period of 4 months.

While trying to stalk the occasional duck in the fast flowing mountain river in our valley, I sometimes also saw the odd grey Heron taking off long before I came anywhere close to it. These beasts seem to have an additional eye on every feather! Since I knew that the local government had allowed a certain number of Herons to be harvested due to their increasing pressure onto the indigenous Alpine trout stocks, I hatched the plan to try for a Heron with my tiercel next season.

**D**uring the silly season (aka moulting time) I studied everything I could find about Heron hawking and practically learned the chapters in the falconers' bible of Frederick II by heart. Using the same quail-only diet with some honey again, the bird had finished its moult very early like in the previous season and was ready for action towards the end of July. This time however, I extended the muscle building period by an additional three weeks. Because I'm not a particular fan anymore of high jump-



sometime after the first few successful Crow flights, I spotted a Heron cruising through the valley on the way to my hunting grounds. 'We have to start somewhere,' I thought to myself



ing, I deployed a variation of it and extended the jump to steep uphill flights. Together with a weighted line this helped to improve fitness and confidence in both – bird and falconer immensely. A little tip on this one: if you unclip the weighted line at the bird's last uphill flight, it shoots up the hill like a rocket and it obviously thinks it has 'unreal' flight powers – can't beat that for good for confidence.

At the same time, I started to observe the behaviour of the Herons by walking up the slopes and making use of Swarovski's fine equipment. While I am not experienced enough (yet) to recognise a pattern, I did notice that the Herons usually chose fishing places where they could see danger from a long way coming. I will not elaborate here on the times when I

used to crawl through the high grass on my belly to stalk them for exercise and the occasions when local shooters asked me was I totally nuts...

Sometime after the first few successful Crow flights, I spotted a Heron cruising casually through the valley while I was on the way to my hunting grounds. 'We have to start somewhere,' I thought to myself.

I followed it by car and binoculars and roughly remembered the point where it put in at the river. I parked about 500 yards away and started my approach, crawling on all fours through high grass for an eternity. If my loud heartbeat wouldn't have scared the Heron away, the increasingly nervous Gos certainly would, I thought. I got up for the last

70yds towards the river. Within a second the Heron shot up from a point I had not expected (I forgot that they are not exactly stationary) and without a moment to spare the Tiercel was off the fist in a flash.

While the Heron quickly gained height over the river, the Gos dropped down towards the fast flowing water and was going into overdrive hugging the surface. At first I was convinced the Gos had seen something else or was just not interested, because the gap between the birds opened up very quickly, but then the Gos suddenly performed a 90-degree turn upwards and slingshot himself vertically towards the Heron, attaching himself firmly with a double head grip. Then both birds slowly tumbled down into the fast flowing river. The next 20 seconds



the Gos suddenly did a 90-degree turn upwards and slingshot himself vertically towards the Heron



saw one of the fastest falconer sprints ever, combined with a subsequent deep-water test of Marshall's finest equipment. Up to my lower chest in ice cold water I only just managed to grab the 'package' and waded back to shore. Funnily enough I was quite hot and sweating. My first ever Heron, and as I established later, the first one with a Gos tiercel in our club's 60 year history!

**W**hen I came home that day and after having depleted my mobile's battery informing EVERYBODY, I honestly contemplated to finish the season immediately – it could only go downhill from here I thought. Well, some 40 crows later and after about eight or nine unsuccessful tries, I had bagged a further two Herons with the brave little

Tiercel, both times in similar fashion. The word of mouth among the hunter community in the valley is, that the local fly-fishing club is contemplating an honorary membership for me now!

I have learned a lot about conditioning a Gos beyond the normal prey during this season and also about fieldcraft and stalking, which is normally not on the very top of the priority list for falconers. After three successful seasons, the brave Tiercel is now back at his 'daddy's' in Kent and in with his new girlfriend – the Alpine female passage Gos I flew before him. On paper, at least, their offspring should be something very special. Time will tell.



the local fly-fishing club is contemplating an honorary membership for me now!





Photo by Paul Jackson, Ardee, Co Louth

I recently had the pleasure of viewing an interesting documentary on the life of a pair of wild Sparrowhawks. The DVD is by Dave Culley, who has spent ten years studying these birds, and it is narrated by Chris Packham. Chris is of course is a great admirer of Spars which he claims to be one of his special favourites.

This excellent film immerses us in the life of a pair of these elusive raptors which starts with the male assembling a few twigs as a base for the nest in December. He continues to build even when snow is partly covering the nest. The female eventually joins him about March and begins to help with the nest. The musket has his secrets for attracting her as you will see.

The views are amazing even in these days of camera spying. You will see courtship, mating and strange behaviour as the female joins in nest building and prepares to lay her first egg. It is now springtime and neighbouring birds and animals are also preparing for family life. The Spars do not hunt nearby nesting birds and this ensures a good larder for later in the season when their young have to learn to hunt.

There are remarkable shots of the female going into labour and laying her first of six eggs. I have witnessed this myself through a remote camera when I was breeding Sparrowhawks some years ago, but am sure that it has been rarely seen in the wild.

The feeding of the young is also intriguing. She is so careful to ensure each chick, even the runt, gets a fair share and the youngsters, which are so much more attractive in their white outfits than other breeds, do not squabble. Raptors such as the Barn Owl will gladly eat their siblings if lunch is late.

The scene becomes more chaotic when they reach brancher stage as they chase after the parents, trying to grab food and attempting to kill for themselves. But even then they will share kills without aggression.

Having successfully bred Sparrowhawks over sev-

DVD review

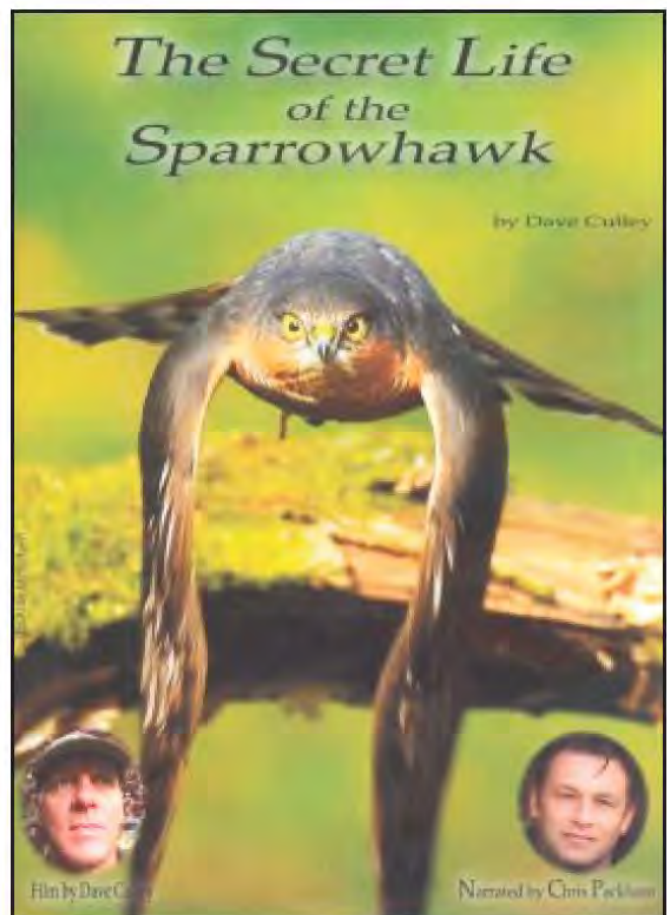
## The Secret Life Of The Sparrowhawk

Rowland Eustace, Co Dublin

eral seasons and observed them through spyhole (resulting in sore eyes) and on camera, I learned so much more about behaviour from this DVD than I thought possible.

I hope that Club members will have a look at this film and that some will be tempted to hone their skills in manning and flying this most versatile and exciting raptor. It can be flown and hunted almost anywhere rural or urban, in any conditions except rain and can tackle quarry from LBJ to magpie (a favourite), rook, woodpigeon and gull. What more could you want?

[www.sparrowhawk-island.co.uk/](http://www.sparrowhawk-island.co.uk/)





# Reeling in the years: The IHC Archives – 1983

Don Ryan, Co Dublin



**D**r George Luke is President having taken over from John Morris at the 1982 AGM elections.

Rowland Eustace stood down as Secretary in 1982 to be replaced by Tom Doyle.

Other Committee appointments were: Derek Watson – Joint Hon Secretary (Northern Ireland); Tony McGraw – assistant secretary to Derek Watson; Liam Ó Broin – Hon Editor; Paul Donoghue – Hon Treasurer; Barry Mason – Committee member; John Morris – Committee member; Roy Alcock – Committee member.

In January 1983, a presentation dinner was held in Sutton Castle Hotel where Herr Rudolph Sauer was made an honorary life member and was presented with an illuminated address in Irish and German. Herr Sauer was noted to be of great help to the IHC with Goshawks in the past.

The 1983 field meet was held in Colooney in Co Sligo in August in Castledargan House courtesy of Barbara Hosie. In total, there were 29 hawk-

ers and beaters with 25 attending dinner. There were six Sparrowhawks, three Peregrines, a Kestrel and an Eagle Owl (bred by Liam Ó Broin) present at the meet.

It is noted in the 1984 journal, that 1983 was historic as it was the first year that licenses were granted for peregrines to be taken for falconry purposes.

The IHC Committee were given a mandate to adopt the principle of establishing regional areas with separate representatives reporting to a National Secretary. It was noted this establishment was at an advanced stage.

The contents of the journal included an article on telemetry by Derek Watson, *A Merlin And An Electronic Bell* by Henry Tyler Swain, *Cord Jesses For Anklets* by Liam Ó Broin, *In Favour Of The Imprinted Sparrowhawk* by John Higgins, a NAFA 20th anniversary fieldmeet report by Robin Haigh and the article we have chosen to feature, *Hawks Of A Lifetime* by Ronald Stevens

## Hawks Of A Lifetime

Ronald Stevens



**I**t has been estimated and is now generally accepted among ornithological pundits that about 90% of young raptors perish after leaving the nest because they lack ability to get their own living. Most falconers of long experience would hardly dispute that approximation when they look back at the number of eyasses they have flown which were indifferent performers.



At the same time they would probably claim that some of their slow starters which might have come to an untimely end in the wild, were saved through care and good feeding to become, if not the equal of their wild congeners, at least sufficiently proficient to fulfil their predatory function for which they were created. Such hawks may well take quarry in a workmanlike manner though lacking the matchless style of the passer or haggard.

The really outstanding hawks of a lifetime could in many cases be counted on the fingers of one hand. Looking back over fifty five years I can recall two hawks which even now give me a thrill to think about them. If I think harder a few more might approach those two sufficiently closely to bear comparison but a peregrine falcon given to me by Gilbert Blaine from the Hebridean island of Islay and a jerkin from Norway stand out from all others in my memory. Both of them I flew on my Longmynd moor in Shropshire where the nature of the terrain made sport hard to achieve even with the best hawks because the moor was interspersed by deep valleys and large areas of nearly chin high bracken. I flew Islay the peregrine in 1938 and 1939 up to the time I got my army call-up. She arrived as a nestling. When taken up after a month's hack she was as wild as a hawk could be and so wild and un-cooperative in her training that I almost

despaired of her. Consequently the season was well advanced by the time when greatly daring, I decided to risk taking her out to fly over the moor. When free for the first time, the first bird she saw was a distant kestrel which she flew brilliantly and finally killed two miles from starting point after a gruelling flight. As recounted in my book *Laggard*, she was agonisingly difficult to take up after that flight on account of her wildness.

However as that season wore on she surrendered her distrust of me and became, without reservation, as tame and as confiding as any hawk I have had. One other falcon had been hacked with Islay and that one's training had been so easy and eventful that she was ready for the moor on August 12th. At first she flew with the same zest as any peregrine would be expected but, like the majority of peregrines that were flown on the Longmynd, she soon became discouraged when her early attempts to catch grouse ended by their putting into bracken and so she gave up further pursuit of them to make way for the incomparable Islay who in the last few weeks acquired the rare habit of killing a brace of grouse out of a sprung covey so that it became quite usual to pick up the first kill and then proceed to take her up on the second..

Owing to the hilly contours of the moor, it was often difficult to find 'Islay' on

her kill and so often was she left out for the night that getting up early to look for her became almost routine and just as often I would return with her on fist in time for breakfast. Those early morning visits to the moor had a magic of their own because of the close understanding established between the hawk and myself in that the place we appointed for our meetings became a tacit rendezvous. Often those dawns were so enshrouded with dense mist that any one would have declared the conditions impossible for retrieving a left out hawk. Yet all I had to do was to pierce all that density with repeated blasts from my referee's whistle and I never had to wait long before hearing the glad sound of her bells as she drew near to land out of the fog at my feet. This happy association led me to rename her in my book 'Aurora' – goddess of the dawn.

The Jerkin which I named Gibbun inspired my writing *The Taming Of Genghis* but that jerkin remained only in fiction whereas Gibbun was startlingly, brilliantly alive. Unlike the peregrine Islay he remained absurdly tame right through hack and seemed to enjoy his subsequent training. He had a marked sense of fun as when he used to play ball which he retrieved like a dog for the fun of having it thrown again. This form of play was so distinctive in a hawk that I could no resist recording it



in my book as applied to the fictitious Genghis. But Gibbun's sense of humour failed to amuse me on the occasion's when he caught grouse only to let them fly away unharmed just as I was about to make in to him.. That was a trick which certainly put a strain on my composure though my annoyance was somewhat mollified when I caught the sparkle of amusement in his eye.

After his moult, Gibbun underwent a great change psychologically. His juvenile pranks were left behind and in his maturity he became a most determined hunter. When cast off the fist his waiting-on was as regular as clockwork though he did not go very high being intelligent enough to know that there was no need to do so. So many peregrines show a lack of concentration on the falconer and dogs beneath them by drifting away, seemingly carried away by enjoyment in their high flying but Gibbun's attention was always riveted on the hawking party so that he was precisely positioned for the stoop on the flushing of the grouse. Nevertheless his constancy in keeping his eye on the ball so to speak put no limit on his marvellous sight so that when a wandering shepherd on the distant Stiperstones moor flushed grouse, as sometimes happened, Gibbun was away in a burst of speed which demonstrated so thrillingly how only a gyr can fly. The distance over which the hawk sped was too great for

anybody to see the birds pursued and on one such occasion my hawking companion complained exasperatingly, 'What possible hope is there of his catching anything !' And these were times when in sober fact the defeated jerkin did fly back to us, but more often we had to return without him to the moorland cottage where, over cups of tea, someone would shake his head sadly over what could well be the loss of so fine a hawk. Actually, Gibbun was not once left out for the night, for with the distinctive intelligence coupled with a gyr's deep rooted liking for human company he always at such times flew back to the cottage before sundown to take perch on the garden fence. On hearing his call to me, I would take him onto my fist and put him into the mews for the night. No need to feed him for his bulging crop let it be known that his brave effort of the afternoon had been rewarded.

**G**ibbun was easily the best gyr I have had and it was a sad day for me when I heard of his untimely death which was as tragic as it was unnecessary. In my absence he had been thoughtlessly fed on freshly killed pigeon, which was strictly against orders, and as a result he died of frounce.

## JOURNAL CONTENT

Members are being urged to contribute copy in good time in order to ensure fewer delays in the production of the 2014 journal.

Fieldmeet reports are great but what we really need are more opinion pieces, reviews and anecdotes. All falconers develop their own way of doing things so why not tell others what is working for you in any aspect of hawk hunting and keeping – conditioning, fieldcraft, husbandry, equipment, health, food etc.

Don't be shy – your insight could help make a hawk or save its life.

### IMAGES

Hi-Res images only please. always send images seperately, not in among the word document.

Thank you  
hylwhite@gmail.com





# Ronald Stevens & Sheera

Gerard O'Neill and Don Ryan

In his autobiographical classic, *A Life With Birds*, Ronald Stevens described Irish Hawking Club member, Gerard O'Neill as a 'born falconer'. To be lauded by someone as world-renowned as Stevens is no small achievement. Something about Gerard obviously caught his attention.

Towards the latter end of Ronald's life, both he and Gerard corresponded on a regular basis. They discussed many falconry related topics including the qualities and merits of the Sparrowhawk, a favourite choice for many Irish falconers. Ronald thought very highly of the Sparrowhawk and wished he had time over to explore the possibilities of this hearty hawk which he believed to be the 'ideal' bird for Irish falconry. He asked Gerard to write of his falconry experiences with sparrowhawks so he could include it in the book that Ronald was working on that subsequently came to be named *A Life With Birds*. Gerard was happy to oblige and wrote a short story of 'Sheera', a female Spar taken under licence which he duly sent to Ronald.

Ronald replied some time later, informing Gerard that he had sent his final manuscript off to the publishers and that it included Gerard's story along with other anec-

dotes of some of his friends, including Henry Tyler Swain. Henry was a US falconer and good friend of Ronald's that visited his house at Fermoye Lodge in the West of Ireland on many occasions.

Ronald took Gerard into his confidence when he told him he believed the publishers were waiting for him to die before publishing his final book. This did appear to be the case as the book was published some time after Ronald's passing and Gerard was never to receive the

publication of Stevens's last classical work, there was no sign of Gerard's story that the great falconer wished to be included.

Whatever happened in the process, and for whatever reason, I guess we'll never know. What we do know is that Stevens was a loyal IHC member and displayed this loyalty and love in correspondence to Gerard, when he wrote: 'I have been a member of the IHC for many years and I have no wish for any other.' As a mark of respect to the great man's wishes, we now take pleasure in publishing (10 years after Ronald's death) the tales of 'Sheera', an imprint female Sparrowhawk, written by Gerard O'Neil, 'a born falconer'.

## Sheera

I was honoured when asked by Ronald Stevens, a friend for a number of years now, to put on paper my experience with a wonderful Spar.

Ronald and I spent many an hour chatting about and dreaming about what can and could be achieved with a Sparrowhawk. Now is my chance to put on paper all my memories of three hunting seasons with a most powerful bird.



signed copy Ronald had promised him.

There's many a slip twixt the cup and the lip, as they say, and for whatever reason, on



I would like to describe the way this Spar was reared, trained and hunted, which possibly contradicts with many traditional methods.

The female Sparrowhawk was taken as a downy chick and hand reared until it could pull and tear food for itself. During this time a suitable enclosure was constructed to contain the bird until she was well and truly hard-penned. This method results in what I call a semi-imprinted bird, in the best possible condition and somewhat fit before taking her up for manning and training.

Manning and training started once the bird was picked up and training became progressively more difficult as the days went by. Progress was rapid and she was flying free at 8.5oz. At this stage she would come to the glove from almost any distance and when out of sight returned to the lure. Many would disagree with the use of a lure but I found it very successful in retrieving a bird from long distances especially if the bird is inclined to hunt and cover ground for herself. Every day after a period of hunting, the Spar would be brought home by flashing the lure, then returning it to the bag bringing her flying long distances home, knowing that the lure being the completion of the hunting day and a good crop full of food. This training went on for a number of weeks making my Spar extremely fit.

Where we generally went hunting was only a stone's throw from home. This

50 acres of wet land sloped down to the River Shannon and had a good stock of all kinds of wildlife which gave various hunting approaches, from heavy ditches to marshlands and waterways. One thing I discovered was that a hawk would stoop to a lure and eventually wait-on. This then became our first hunting experience. In the marshland, we tried very hard for snipe, flushing the snipe with



Ronald thought very highly of the Spar, this hearty hawk which he believed to be the 'ideal' bird for Irish falconry

a springer spaniel ('Rocky') while the Spar waited-on overhead. Efforts were countless but with no success.

One day while snipe hunting, the dog flushed a waterhen which made hard and fast,

high above the marshland. The Sparrowhawk recognised the prey and immediately gave chase. Not realizing her natural instinct to hunt, I was amazed to see her fly low in a wide arc, seemingly taking no notice of her quarry, until they crossed paths. Suddenly she swooped upwards, binding to her quarry and taking it to the ground. Forgetting myself with the excitement of the chase, which seemed to

last for a long time, I rushed across the marsh only to find my springer coming towards me with waterhen and spar gently held in his mouth. Her first success influenced her and became her set pattern of events for seasons to come.

In Nenagh, Co Tipperary, where I hunted with a falconer friend Tommy Hourigan, we had many a successful hunt because of the help of two good beaters; his son Thomas and my son Niall (who incidentally at the age of ten is flying a fully imprinted Spar). Where was I... oh yes, beating ditches in Nenagh! On this particular outing we flushed a woodpigeon from an ivy covered tree and off went my Spar across a wide open field. It looked like both birds were travelling in the same flight line, equally matched with speed and agility. Halfway across the field, something of less of a chal-

lenge interested Sheera and she made hard and fast back towards the hedgerow. Up rose a screaming magpie only to be driven back in again by the onslaught of the spar. Other occasions, too many to mention, followed but a pattern of





Ronald and I spent many an hour chatting about and dreaming about what can and could be achieved with a Spar

events led this wonderful Spar to take on anything 'big and black'.

In her final hunting year, she was flown at 10.5oz which gave plenty of impact and holding power on what became her fixed quarry. Firstly, before telling you about this particular favourite quarry, I'd like to begin just after taking her up from a good moult.

Manning was very enjoyable after not handling her for many months. Her feather-perfect plumage became more vivid and striking than any of the previous moults – rust brown front and gun-barrel blue black on her back, which many falconers admired. These first few weeks ended in tragedy when one day I had her outdoors on a bow-perch, she happened to break free from constant bating while the next door neighbour mowed his lawn. Luckily enough she left the leash and swivel and flew loose without any fear of being caught up in branches.

Three days of constant searching and no sign of her anywhere. A week to ten days later, a sighting was reported to me of a bird of prey attacking a budgie

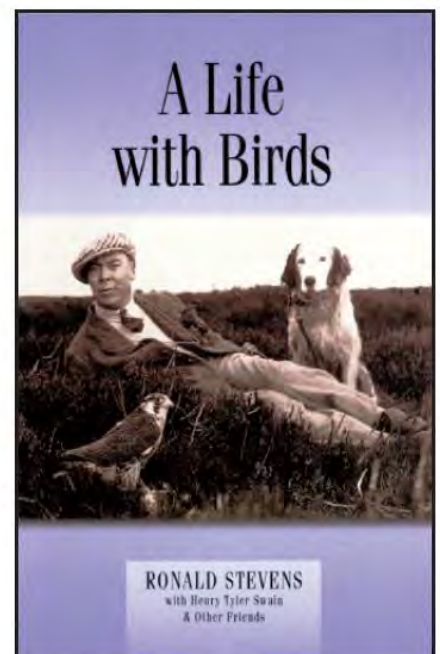
cage. So on with the bag and glove and off with me as fast as possible, armed with a juicy piece of beef. No time was wasted retrieving her for she came to the glove as soon as my call was recognised. The following day, we flushed a hen pheasant and to my surprise, Sheera responded, bringing the pheasant to the ground. On impact, the pheasant broke and rose only to be struck again and driven into a nearby ditch, ending the hunt.

The local rooks, of which there were plenty, often interested her, but I never allowed her to fly them due to the size difference.

As it happened she took one down after a long low flight using as much camouflage and cover as possible, flying through rooks rising in all directions but taking down her marked one before the rook lifted 3ft off the ground. From there on, nothing less would fire her blood but big black rooks. Flights at this quarry were incredible to watch, especially if she missed with her surprise attack. Aerial displays followed, resulting eventually in both birds breaking free in mid-air. Our total bag that year was 24 rooks, some taken off the ground, some while roosting

on trees and others in mid-air. That season was always very memorable to me, not because of the bag size, but because she died of poisoning from the last rook that season.

After writing this short article, which brought back so many unforgettable memories, I feel that Ronald shall get his wish which he so often expressed when we chatted about falconry. That wish was: 'Gerard, fly those wonderful birds of prey and someday you will have a Spar waiting-on for snipe.'





# The Sultan & The Snipe

Jason Deasy, Co Mayo



Having flown Peregrines and large hybrid falcons out of the hood as pursuit hawks, and feeling inspired by some of the Club members, I decided to try my hand at some game hawking.

The first thing I had to do was work out what type of falcon would suit my hunting ground, which comprised mainly of enclosed farmland and bog, and the most numerous game species available were snipe and woodcock. I needed a falcon nimble enough to stoop snipe, but it also needed speed in the chase. Micro falcons! I looked at the Aplomado with its Accipiter-like tail and hunting style, perfect for woodcock but that huge tail might slow it down somewhat for snipe. Then I looked to Barbary falcons but from what I'd heard, our damp climate just didn't suit them. And with my eyes now going square from Googling all manner of forums and sites, my attention was drawn to the Merlin hybrids. Perlins seemed the obvious choice but they were a little on the light side and might not have enough wind penetration for winter hawking in the west of Ireland.

Enter the Gyrlin.

With its size and smarts of the

Gyr and tenacity and chasing ability of the Merlin, this mighty atom might just fit the bill.

I soon found out that choosing which falcon was easier than getting my hands on one! I was back trolling the net until I found the one person still dabbling in these hybrids and got in contact with Pete Gill at Falcon Mews. But having spoken with Pete, whose breeding Merlin had died and his new Merlins not yet producing, my dream of game hawking hung in the balance. Weeks passed and news came that the Merlins had laid two eggs and out of these came one viable chick.

I had my hopes set on a black female, but the one and only Gyrlin chick produced turned out to be the opposite - a tiny white male! I said to myself 'too hell with it,' and sent my deposit. After what seemed like an age, on the 11th of August last year, myself and Mark Barrett met with the courier in Limerick and picked up our tiny blond, blue-footed falcon.

Once home, it was time to get him out, take his wing and tail guards off and stick equipment on. I could see straight away that this little guy had fire in his belly, as he

bit and lashed out with his cartoon blue feet! Once jessed up and given a good soaking with a spray bottle, I put him back in the box to cool off before his training would begin. I decided to name him Sultan after reading about Turkish falconers in the 13th century.

We set up an area in the spare room with the lights dimmed down and we got comfy. I decided to use the Mangola to train him on as it allowed much more freedom and because I would be carrying him for the next week, it made more sense than the glove as it would act as a mobile perch and could be passed over to someone else if needed.

With food in my fingers and the tiny tiercel (*Jack? Gyrlin? Or is it a Jarkin! Editor*) settled, I removed the hood for our first glimpse at one another. I held the hood close as to get it back on with the first sign of bating but the little guy showed no fear or wildness, and with some encouragement he took a few bites of chicken. We continued hood training for the next few hours and he seemed to take it all in his stride, so we moved to the living room where the TV was on and Chillli, my Vizsla, was sprawled on the couch. Hood off again and a few bites



of chicken later and we were all friends, so much so that the tiercel decided he wanted to roost and my feet up on the table looked like an ideal perch! Once there, he began preening and rousing and if I didn't know better I'd have said he was an imprint.

This pretty much set the tone for how our relationship and his training went on in the weeks that followed. I carried him everywhere, and helped tear his food while on the lure and the fist. For lure training, instead of using the creance, I opted for the Arab technique of running a line between two bird blocks and clipped his leash onto it. Then I'd unhood him and toss out the lure, each day getting further away until the day came to set him free. As with every other task I'd set him, he took flight with an unbridled confidence coming to the lure and hopping to the fist for his food like a dream. Now to get him waiting on,

and with the advice I'd received from experienced snipe hawkers we headed up into the hills, casting him off at the top and walking down. Once he'd reached a good pitch I produced the lure and fed him up, each time waiting longer and only rewarding when he was at the correct pitch.

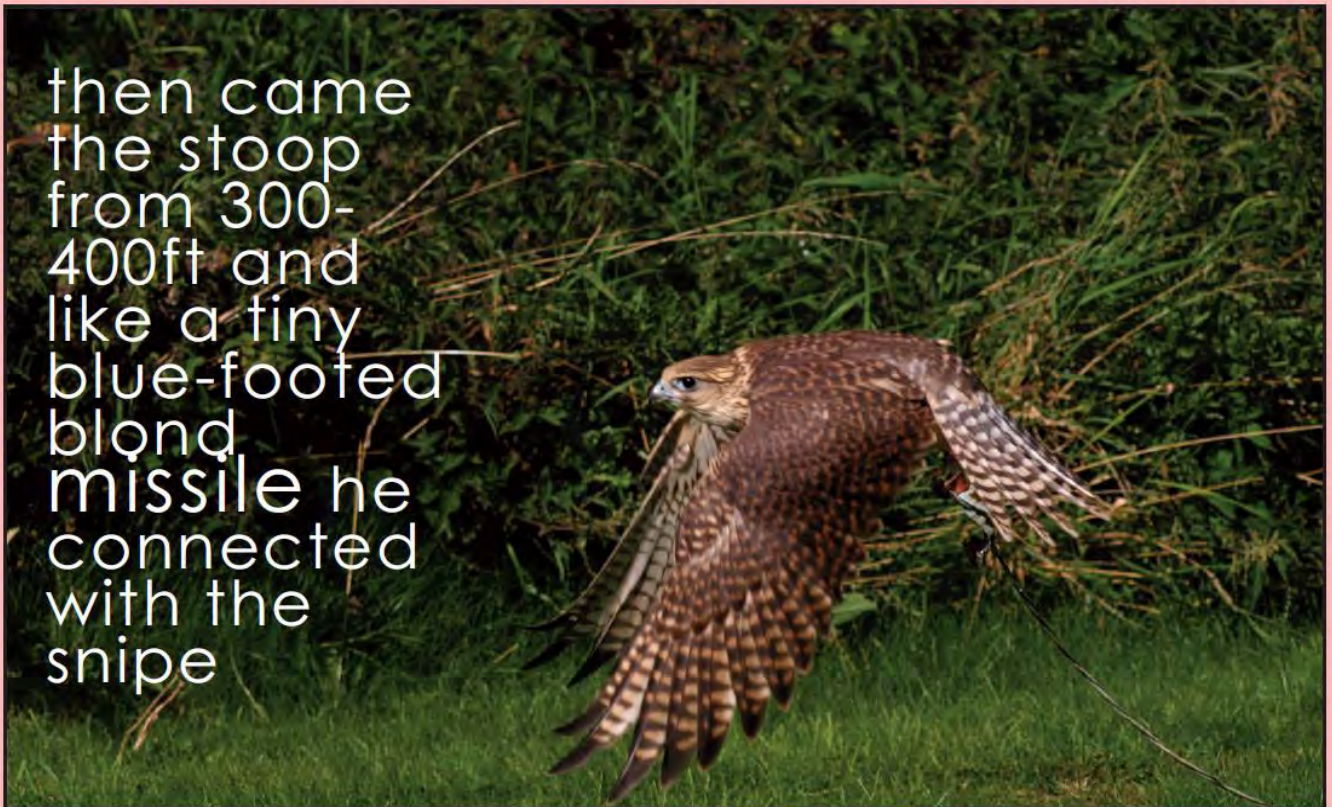
Then it was out onto the bogs, and after some frustrating days of bad weather, false points, bumping jumpy snipe, tail chasing teal, being distracted by corvids and out of position stoops, everything started to come together. It's a good thing too as I was beginning to lose hope of him ever becoming a game hawk.

**T**hen one beautiful sunny morning with no wind, we walked across the bog. The snipe were jumpy so I put the tiercel up and before long the dog was on point. I looked towards the heavens

but there was no sign of the Gyrlin. Minutes passed and Chilli was still holding point, and after some choice language I spotted a tiny figure backed by blue sky. I calmed myself and walked upwind of the dog, the tiercel shadowing me above. With that I flushed and yelled for all I was worth. Then came the stoop from 300-400ft, and like a tiny blue-footed blond missile he connected with the snipe and all our prayers were answered! It took a while to track him down but he had the snipe killed and was happily plucking.

I found myself overcome with joy and once clipped onto the glove, I lay back in the heather and took stock to the sound of the Sultan enjoying his meal as the winter sun shone.

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with the  
snipe





# The Casper Conservation Project

Don Ryan, Co Dublin



**N**amed after one of the Club's most favourite characterful mascots, Casper, who sadly passed away in January this year. The charming enigmatic Barn Owl who stole the hearts of all he met has inspired this project and we hope will encourage all the members to get involved.

The project has been rather slow in taking off with only a small number of Barn Owl and Kestrel boxes being ordered or erected so far. For this reason, we'd like to appeal to members to help out wherever they can in this worthwhile cause. We are still hoping to reach our target of 30 of each type of species box been erected and monitored by 2016 but can't do it without your help.

We'd just like to remind our members that over the past number of decades, the barn owl has seen a serious reduction in their population. It is estimated there may be only 400 to 500 nesting pairs left in Ireland with a decline of over 50% in the past 25 years. If the trend continues, there may be no barn owls left in the next 25 years. The reasons appear to be intensification in agriculture as well as a loss of habitat and also secondary poisoning through ingesting vermin that have been targeted for poison treatment.

The Kestrel, while not suffering as severe a decline as the Barn Owl and still having a healthy population in the west and south of the country, does appear to be suffering a noted decline in the north and east. Again, the reasons for decline are suspected to be the same as the Barn Owl.

As conservationists of birds of prey, we can only do what is in our power to help where we can and this project enables us to make a change.

The boxes are subsidised by the Irish Hawking Club

and any profits made will go back into the Club's conservation fund. They cost €50 for the Barn Owl box and €25 for the Kestrel box. Members can also purchase a box and let the Club committee organise the box to be erected, or if you can't afford one at the moment but know of a suitable area or are available to help out in erecting them, please let us know.

We intend to launch a leaflet with the below information early this year and we have also signed up as a supporting member of the Campaign for Responsible Rodenticide Use (CRRU).

For further information on this project or if you wish to order a nest box, please contact Don Ryan at [don@irishhawkingclub.ie](mailto:don@irishhawkingclub.ie)

## The Amazing Barn Owl: A True Farmer's Friend



**T**he Barn Owl was once a loyal tenant of many farmers and a familiar sight on farmlands throughout the countryside.

Their name originates from the farmyard barn where they frequently lived and were actively encouraged by farmers to take up residence. In fact, special 'owl windows' that allowed access to loft spaces can still be seen in older sheds and barns.

The farmer welcomed this willing worker and the barn



owl paid for their accommodation by carrying out their nightly duties of vermin control. It may surprise you to know that a breeding pair can consume up to 2,000 prey items a year. This effective natural ecosystem service is something the poison manufacturers don't tell you about and why would they ?

There are many natural processes in the world that work to the benefit of mankind, yet so often we don't recognise the value of these processes. Unfortunately this seems to be the case with the barn owl, as sadly somewhere through the exciting advances of technology, we forgot the true value of this enigmatic owl and as a result they've become quite scarce.

So scarce in fact that many young people have never seen one and the older generation strain to remember when they did see one last.



It is estimated there may be only 400 to 500 nesting pairs left in Ireland with a decline of over 50% in the past 25 years. If the trend continues, there may be no barn owls left in the next 25 years !

Their decline is due to a number of factors but two of the main reasons are habitat erosion and poisoning (secondary) which are outlined below,

### Poison

• Although the barn owl is not specifically targeted, they often become victims of poison put down for other purposes. Rats and mice are the main reason poisons are used but as it doesn't instantly kill the vermin, they can carry it some distance before they die. During this period, they are a particular hazard for hunters such as barn owls and other birds of prey like kestrels, buzzards, red kites and eagles as well as other animals like cats and dogs. As the vermin have in-



gested the poison, so too will the creatures that eat them.

### Loss of Habitat

• the replacement of the older style barn for the modern metal clad version with no access allowed for barn owls denies the owls of any suitable nesting location.



• the destruction of hedgerows in favour of modern fencing thereby reducing the cover for food in the form of quarry that the barn owl hunts.

• Removal of old trees that provide suitable nesting.

### So what can we do ?

Well we can't turn back the clock and undo the modern world but what we can do is try to be more aware of the world and the creatures around us.

We can only deal with the issues that are under our control,

### Vermin Control

If you don't already have a farmers' friend and need to do some vermin control, please consider using the other traditional methods like live traps or spring traps. Both these type of traps must be checked daily and the vermin humanely dispatched with the corpses safely disposed of.



If you must use contemporary rodenticides, please must make sure they are used correctly and the carcasses of the vermin safely disposed so no other creature fall foul to the poison.

Rats can travel up to 100m when they have ingested poison, so once this poison has been put down, please make regular checks of the area both during and after treatment.

If you find dead vermin but you haven't put poison down, please assume someone else has and dispose of the carcass so no other creature comes in contact with it. The recommended disposal methods are,

- the vermin can be double bagged and placed in domestic waste (subject to local authority)
- as controlled waste, via (off-farm) landfill or incineration



- by burial on-site, but away from sensitive areas.

When burying carcasses, they should be buried at least 50cm (18in) deep in undisturbed ground. Refill soil should be well compacted and, where possible the turf replaced. Carcasses should never be buried where there is a risk of contamination of water supplies, water courses, rivers or streams

Further guidelines on the effective disposal of vermin can be had by contacting [www.thinkwildlife.org](http://www.thinkwildlife.org)

## Habitat

If you are building or replacing a barn or outbuilding or considering removing a hedgerow, please give a little thought to the habitat and food source of the barn owl.

With the help of man's gentle guidance, hedgerows have formed natural boundaries for hundreds of years and are the home of many songbirds and other living creatures that form the great circle of life including the existence of our amazing friend. Please consider if it really needs to be replaced by modern fencing or if there may be some other alternative.

We can also encourage this amazing owl back to suitable farm and out buildings by erecting a nestbox.

Nestboxes can be of great benefit, especially in areas where there is plenty of food available but a shortage of suitable nesting sites.



They can be erected both inside and outside a barn or outbuilding and also in trees.

Any area where small mammals can be caught is suitable. This can include the fringes of urban areas, as well as farmland and countryside. Barn owls will also hunt around and within buildings but please be aware of the use of poisons in this instance.

If you are considering an area for a nestbox; Please remember that the Barn Owl is not a woodland species but a bird of open country. They will hunt at day and night but usually at first and last light. If you're lucky, they can be seen hunting low to the ground

along the margins where open fields meet woodland edges.

Don't worry if you have none of the above ideal habitat available on your doorstep. Barn owls have been known to travel long distances between hunting grounds and nest sites. Especially if they have a suitable place that protects them from the harsh and wet climate.

Once they have a nestbox they can call home, they are content and feel secure. In fact, it's amazing how much disturbance Barn Owls will tolerate at sites with a suitable nestbox. Almost any tall rural building can become an ideal roosting and nesting site when a nestbox is provided. However, it's best to avoid areas close to motorways and heights below 3metres.

## If you build it, they will come...

It may take time but it really is worth the effort.

Please see below details on one type of nest box that we use that is suitable for indoor and outdoor use.

We use 6" (15cm) wide x 1/4" (10mm) thick, pressure treated timber (fence panel) on a framework of pressure treated 2" (5cm) x 1" (2.5cm) lengths of timber. Exterior plywood can also be used but it is best to treat it with suitable exterior paint.

**Size dimensions are displayed in the diagram (overleaf).**

The location you decide to place the nestbox will determine the fixings required. For mounting on a tree or side of a barn/outbuilding, a 4" X 2" batten may be fixed to the back of the box and then secured with the appropriate screw fixings.

## Tips for Siting Nestboxes

As well as on the side of a barn or outbuilding, other ideal fixing points for this type of nestbox is on a single tree (oak, ash etc) in a field or a large tree in a hedgerow. Ideally close to un-cut grass meadows or borders.

To minimise the risk of road casualties, it should not be placed within 1 km of major roads or motorways.

The height of the box should be approximately 3m - 4m (10 -16 ft). Ensure the entrance hole is not obstructed and the owl has a clear flight path into the box. Ideally the box should face between Northeast



to Southeast. Placing the box near branches will give young owlets extra exercise areas.

There is no need to put any nest material inside the box as pellets from the owls will gradually build up and when trodden down by the birds will provide a suitable 'scrape' for any egg laying.

Avoid placing box above water-filled ditches, which may present a hazard to chicks if they fall from the box.

Barn owls will tolerate a certain amount of regular human activity around the box and will usually sit tight, as long as there is no contact with the box or tree itself. However, any disturbance should be minimised in the first year, when there is the greatest risk of desertion.

### Maintenance

Annual inspection is recommended to ensure box is clean and ready for the new season and should be carried out in the autumn (Sept-Dec). It is best to do this work an hour before dark, so that if an owl is flushed from the box, it will have minimal time in daylight.

### Signs of Occupancy & Monitoring

Pellets and/or whitewash below the box or on the box itself are signs of potential occupancy. Watch for owls flying to and from the box at nightfall or bringing prey

to the box but please keep your distance when watching, as young may be waiting for valuable meals.



Lots of hissing from inside the box is a good indication of breeding activity.

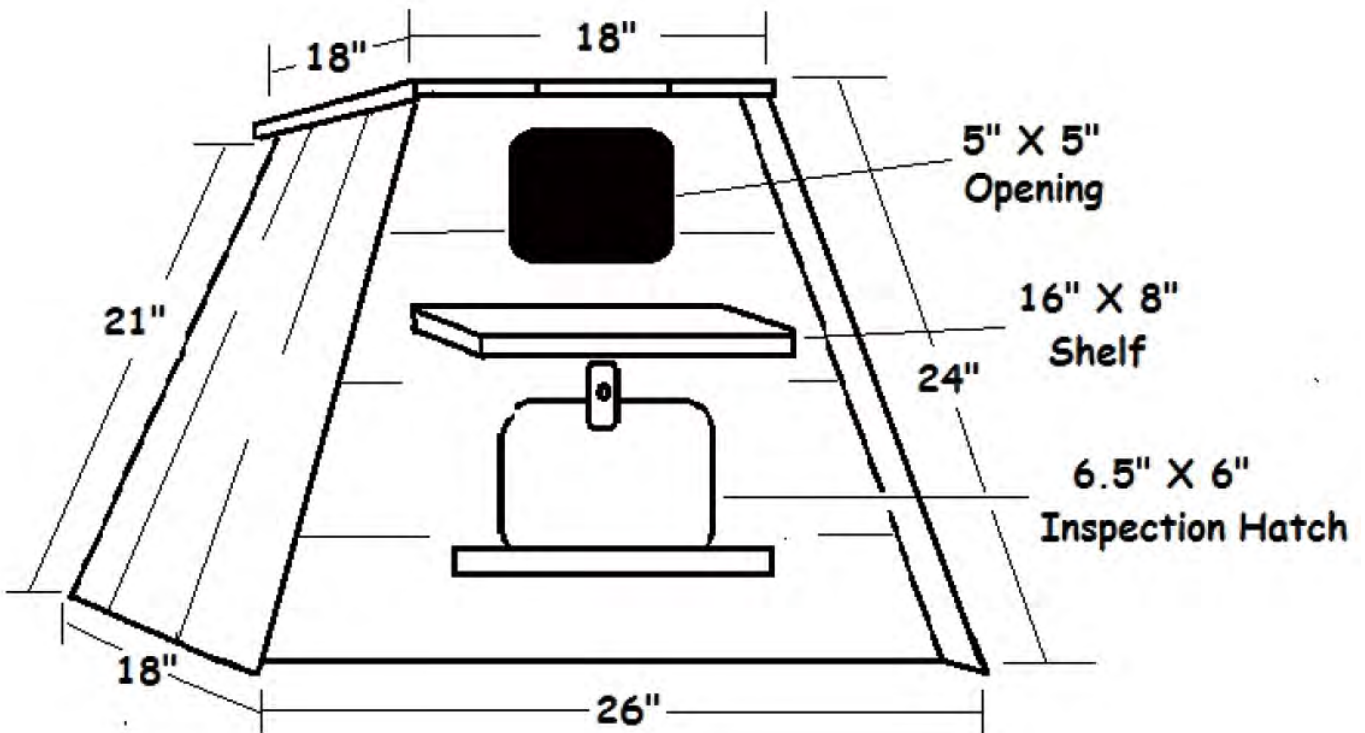
Barn owls will sometimes breed twice in a year, and sometimes even three times. Egg-laying usually begins approximately April to May. Eggs are white and round and barn owls can lay on average 5 or 6 with 2 to 3 days between eggs.

### Safety

Barn owl nestboxes are heavy and awkward to lift up a ladder so please don't try and install one on you own. A minimum of 2 persons is required for a safe installation and all safety precautions must be taken. You are responsible for your own safety and the safety of others around you so please be careful.

If you are successful in attracting barn owls to your nestbox or know of any barn owls in your area, please let us know.

For further info, please contact the IHC at [info@irishhawkingclub.ie](mailto:info@irishhawkingclub.ie). For information on the responsible use of rodenticides, please visit the website [www.thinkwildlife.org](http://www.thinkwildlife.org)





## Obituary

# John Fairclough

1941-2013



What would you like to be remembered for? Well if you are anything like me it's not for being a harmless sort of a guy, a pleasant chappie or even a "nice" person. I want to be remembered for the same reasons as John Fairclough.

A roundup of comments made on falconry forums and emailed messages came up with the words "difficult", "mischief", "larger than life", "confrontational" along with others like "fond memories", "great parties", "guiding light", "passionate falconer", "premier league grouse hawker", "chuckling and round beaming face", "old friend and true falconer", "generosity", "the best grouse hawking I have ever seen".

From the time of Anthony Jack the BFC became John's passion and he gave it his total support. He was a good friend to most, who crossed swords with many at some time, but his controversial nature had little animosity. His friendship and welcome made him a great worker for UK falconry and his hospitality and bonhomie were unsurpassed. John has been a larger than life character, many found him difficult, but with no malice. He gave the BFC unstinting support and direction and did much to encourage people new to falconry and to create the current wealth of opportunity for falconers that exist today.

John was always at his best and always great company, whether in the hawking field in England (several IHC members watched his falcon take a fantastic partridge at Woodhall Spa in 2002) or in Scotland where he was in the first rank of grouse aficionados or even just talking

about his hawking in the Hebrides on his moor near Aberfeldy.

His support of the BFC and falconry generally was immeasurable. He will be remembered with awe and affection by all those young falconers he honed and welcomed and with amusement and affection by all of us who loved him socially, including those of us who caught the sharp edge of his humour.

Thanks for all the good times, John.

John Fairclough passed away on 8th April 2013 after a short illness. The IHC sent a letter of condolence to his family.

Gary Timbrell, Co Cork





# The Falconry Weekend

30th/31st August 2014

Newent, Gloucestershire, UK

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



Join us for a weekend of entertainment in the beautiful grounds of the world renowned **International Centre for Birds of Prey**.

- ◆ Arena demonstrations all day from invited falconers PLUS our own excellent staff and birds
- ◆ Free seminars on related subjects
- ◆ Howard Kirby dog training both days
- ◆ Lure swinging competition
- ◆ Lots of trade stands
- ◆ BBQ and licensed bar.
- ◆ All this and more - includes access to ICBP with over 250 birds on show!



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Tel: 01531 820286/821581  
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Daily entry  
£12 adult  
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We are unable to allow  
visitors to bring dogs  
or birds into the centre