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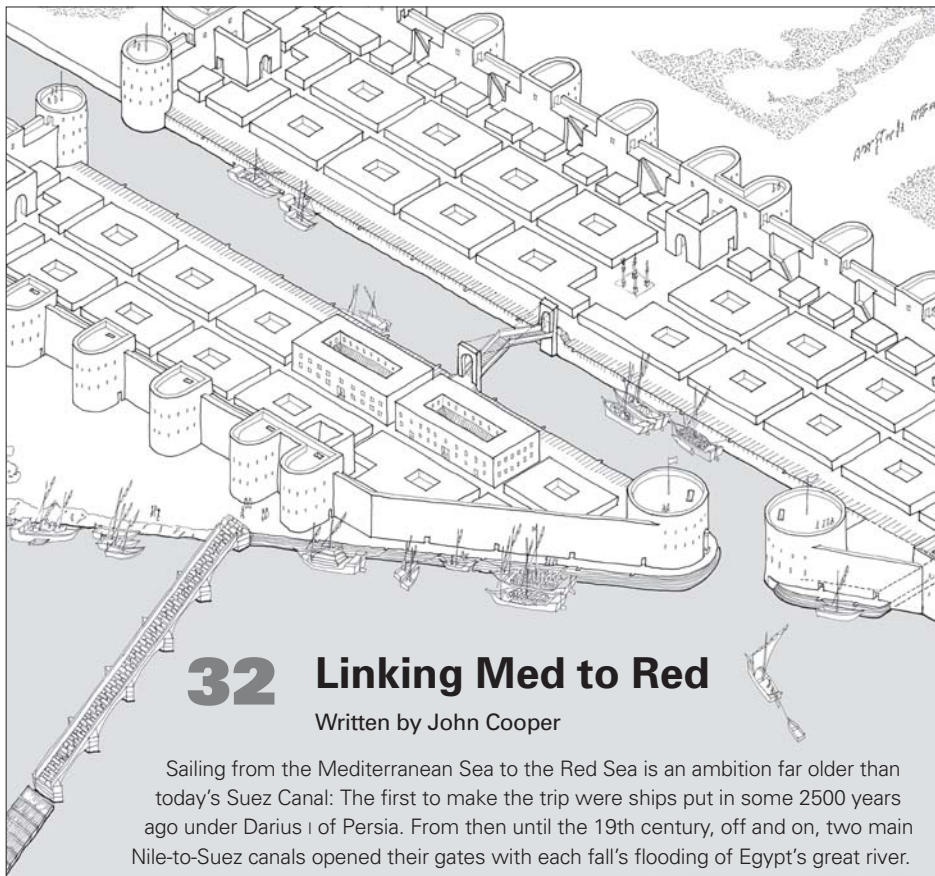
A Heritage Takes Wing



20 A Heritage Takes Wing

Written by Meera Subramanian / Photographed by Tariq Dajani

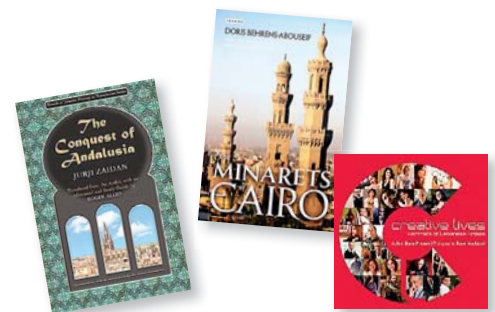
In late 2010, the United Nations recognized falconry as an Intangible Cultural Heritage, and last year, raptor devotees flocked to the International Falconry Festival to celebrate their artful sport—and indeed, their obsession.



32 Linking Med to Red

Written by John Cooper

Sailing from the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea is an ambition far older than today's Suez Canal: The first to make the trip were ships put in some 2500 years ago under Darius I of Persia. From then until the 19th century, off and on, two main Nile-to-Suez canals opened their gates with each fall's flooding of Egypt's great river.



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A Heritage Takes Wing

Written by Meera Subramanian • Photographed by Tariq Dajani



A human, a bird and an open sky. What once was a matter of subsistence—or royal indulgence—has become a worldwide sport and art.



Some stories have no beginnings. But sitting around a fire in a spacious landscape with radiant stars overhead, next to a man with a gyrfalcon on his fist, I get a sense of a beginning. The bird is exquisite, otherworldly, glowing in the light of the fire. When I am offered the chance to hold it, I do not say no. We slip the thickly padded, finely embroidered cuff from his hand to mine. I stroke the bird's feathers with the backs of my fingers. Its weight is, somehow, just right: light enough not to be a burden, heavy enough to convey the substance of what rests on my wrist.

I am in the desert of the Ramah Wildlife Refuge outside Al Ain in the United Arab Emirates, close to the border of Oman. In the darkness of the dunes are foxes and owls and, if the conservation efforts are working, hares and houbara bustards. It is the first day of the International Falconry Festival, a gathering that will bring hundreds of people from dozens of nations to this sandy spot to celebrate the world's growing recognition of their artful sport—indeed, their obsession.

Late in 2010, at a meeting in Nairobi, UNESCO announced that it would inscribe falconry onto the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). The room, filled with expectant falconers, broke out in cheers so long and loud that a recess had to be called. Abu Dhabi had spearheaded the effort that led to this announcement, submitting the application on behalf of 11 disparate nations: the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Morocco, Belgium, France, Spain, the Czech Republic, Mongolia and Korea. It was the largest and most internationally diverse application UNESCO ICH had ever received.

The traditional practice of falconry involves keeping falcons and other birds of prey and training them to hunt their quarry in cooperation with humans. Whether considered an art, a sport or a means of sustenance, this symbiotic relationship between human and wild raptor long predates the written word. There is much speculation about its precise origins, but evidence suggests falconry developed on the steppes of Central Asia or in Persia at least 4000 years ago. There appears to be a representation of a falconer holding up dead prey on an incense burner found at Tell Chuera, in northeastern Syria, that dates back to 2500 BCE.

Perhaps because of its antiquity, but also because of its broad geographical spread, the art of falconry is diverse. The term “to hawk” applies to the flying of a spectrum of raptors, birds defined by their powerful talons and beaks, which they use to hunt live prey. (See “Who’s Who Aloft” at www.saudiaramcoworld.com.) They can be as small as the 120-gram (4 oz) American kestrel or as monumental as the golden eagle, with its wingspan of two and a half meters (nearly 8’). Arabs favor saker and peregrine falcons, as well as gyrfalcons from the Arctic. Mongolians hunt with golden eagles and the Dutch with goshawks. Harris hawks, a South American species, have recently come into fashion in Britain. Falconers hunt crows and hares, foxes and wolves, pheasants and houbara bustards. They travel on foot or horseback, by camel or by sports utility vehicle (SUV). They may bring along a hunting dog or not, and may travel alone or with a party.

But there is also universality. The accoutrements of falconry have remained virtually unchanged for centuries, if not millennia. Leather jesses that wind around the bird’s legs allow a person to tightly hold the flighty creature. A thick leather glove or a padded cuff protects the hawker’s arm. A leather hood not much larger than a golf ball slips over the bird’s head and eyes to keep it calm—a simple method learned by European Crusaders in the Middle East that replaced the crueler practice of temporarily sewing the bird’s eyelids shut. There is the falconer’s bag, slung across a shoulder: It contains a lure, something fashioned out of feathers that, when swung at the end of a short line, attracts the bird back to the fist. Some fresh meat serves the same purpose. In the last 20 years, falconers have begun using tiny telemetry units attached to the bird’s back feathers to track down wayward individuals, a luxury unavailable to those who flew birds during the last few thousand years.

Two hundred people have already shown up at the desert camp,

and hundreds more will attend the simultaneous conference and public festival at Al-Jahili Fort later in the week. All have brought their singular obsession. They have traveled great distances, from Scotland, South Africa, Japan or Peru, to be welcomed by our Emirati hosts. Except for a few Brits, however, they have had to leave their own birds at home, due to regulations, expense and quarantine requirements—but they have brought snapshots and cell phones with raptor ringtones. Some will have a chance to hold or even fly birds that are on loan from Emirati zoos, private owners and conservation centers; dozens of them sit placidly on low perches hammered into the sand in an open-sided tent that serves as a mews. A smaller tent holds six eagles, and in another is a further variety of falcons. Another 30 tents are set up for humans to sleep in, and still others are for birds and people both. For the next seven days, I will not hear side conversations about movies or family back home or idle conversations about the weather. There is nothing here but stories of falcons and hawking; bird pedigree and weight by the gram or the ounce; the hunts that went right and the ones that didn’t. A raptor, when hunting, has a sole purpose and attention. The people who fly them are not so different.

It is appropriate that we are in Al Ain. This is where the UAE’s founding father, the late Shaykh Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan, came of age and found his identity. It is here that the man, beloved by his countrymen, came to adore falcons. The last international falconry festival that was held in the UAE was at his behest, in 1976, and it was a call to arms to save the practice that linked the quickly modernizing young nation with its Bedouin past. Once, nomadic herdsman would trap passing falcons with camelhair nooses as the birds migrated from their breeding grounds in Central Asia to the hospitable climes of Africa. They would train the birds to hunt to supplement the meager desert diet, and also to catch the prized houbara bustard, a large, ground-dwelling bird with elaborate breeding plumage whose meat, according to folklore, has special restorative powers for men.



At the festival’s opening ceremony, falconers from more than a dozen nations donned their own native “plumage” to represent their homeland traditions.





Before a rapt crowd, a dark-phase gyrfalcon takes flight from his handler's cuff. "The UNESCO designation has given us a lot more respect," says Bruce Padbury of the South African Falconers Association.

are born wild and trapped, some legally, many not.

The movement of birds of prey is not new. They travel on their own epic migration routes, and once they were exchanged as fancy gifts between noblemen or members of grand hunting entourages. Marco Polo wrote of Kublai Khan that the Mongolian ruler "takes with him full 10,000 falconers and some 500 gyrfalcons, besides peregrines, sakers, and other hawks in great numbers." In the late 14th century, when the Ottoman sultan Beyazit captured the son of Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, he turned down an offered ransom of 200,000 gold ducats but accepted instead a dozen white gyrfalcons and a jeweled gauntlet, paid for by Carl VI of France.

The Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, arguably the best-known falconer of all time, was the author of the classic tome *Ars Venandi cum Avibus* (*The Art of Hunting with Birds*), completed in 1241 and still in print. But much of Frederick's inspiration apparently came from other treatises already in existence, many of them from the Arab world: *Kitab Dawari Al-Tayr* (*Book of the Birds of Prey*), by al-Ghitrif ibn Qudama al-Ghassani, master of the hunt for the Umayyad caliphs, dates to 780 CE. Frederick's work was also informed by other, earlier Arab manuscripts, including those by Muhammad ibn Abdullah al-Bayzar and an Arab falconer known in the West as "Moamyn." There is a story that Frederick's passion was so all-consuming that once, besieging Palermo, he left his headquarters

After a season, the Bedouin would release their birds to resume their migratory path.

But Middle Eastern falconry, like falconry everywhere in the world, has changed. With the advent of guns, hunting with a bird became somewhat anachronistic. The sustenance part of the equation fell away, and the debate about art versus sport intensified. The big business of birds now involves great sums of money that change hands as birds are traded around the world for prices that are often comparable to those of automobiles: Some birds can be had for a modest \$1000 or so, while others might cost a hundred times that. Some are born in legal captive-breeding facilities that have the feel of small factories and that might tinker with genetic hybrids; others

Outside the restored Al-Jahili Fort, falconry organizations set up national displays, including this traditional Central Asian yurt from Kyrgyzstan.





Bakyt Karnakbayev (Kazakhstan)
Golden Eagle



Sher Mohammed (Iran)
Peregrine Falcon



Steve Duffy (USA)
Gyrfalcon



Manuel Maier (Uruguay)
Aplonado Falcon



Haddi El Mennouni (Morocco)
Gyrfalcon



Yusuf Ali Al Hamadi (UAE)
Gyrfalcon



Ali Mohammad bin Thajib Al-Hamadi (UAE)
Gyrfalcon



Hmida Ben Fraj (Tunisia)
Sparrowhawk



Wudi (China)
White-Eyed Shikra



Joseph Hiebler (Austria)
Golden Eagle

camp to go hawking. In his absence, troops from the city sallied out, attacked his camp, slaughtered his soldiers and carried off his field treasury.

Birds of prey have this sort of effect on people. I am not immune. I have watched wild birds hunt in wild places, and I have seen them stoop on prey from the top of the Empire State Building in New York City, but I have yet to witness a falcon hunt with the aid of a human. On the second morning of the festival, I sling my leg over the hump of a camel and she lifts me into the early morning fog of the desert as light breaks the horizon. The mist is filled with a cacophony of camel roars, the sounds falling somewhere between burps and bellows.

Once everyone is loaded up, we lumber off, 30 of us on camels, three on horseback, and one female gyr-peregrine hybrid, hooded, sitting in front of Saed Ateq al-Mansori on his camel. I sat next to al-Mansori at the fireside last night, talking to him with the help of

the younger Mubarak Sultan al-Mansori—no relation to the elder in spite of the shared name or the fact that the younger teased that the elder was his grandfather. Saed Ateq al-Mansori is “the boss of the Emirates’ falcons,” Mubarak had said. Indeed, the elder al-Mansori has the look one likes on a leader: an untroubled equanimity radiates from his bronzed face, lined by a life in the desert. From Madinat Zayed, in the western part of the country, he’s hunted with falcons since he was a boy. He remembers the simple life that we are reenacting as we head deeper into the desert, the illusion of a timelessly ancient hunt broken only by the towering metal fortress of barbed wire that encloses the 35-square-kilometer (8650-acre) reserve. The barrier keeps local camels out, allowing ashen green saltbush, bright emerald shrubs and even a few trees to grow impossibly in the sand. We veer into the rolling dunes, the camels riding the sands. There is not a combustion engine to be heard. Everywhere there are tracks, memories imprinted in the sand revealing the movements of lizards, snakes, hares and houbara.

After an hour there is a sudden commotion. Al-Mansori has spotted a hare and instantly slipped the hood off the falcon, who rises from the camel in pursuit. She flies low, and we see the hare—which is large, easily equal to the bird in size and likely heavier—tear in and out of sight as it drops through the dunes. We lose sight of both bird and hare, and then, in the magical mist that refuses to burn off, there suddenly appears a gazelle, leaping, bounding, bolting away as the falcon pursues it, hare forgotten. But the gazelle escapes, and the falcon lands on the peak of a dune a few hundred meters away.

Everything stops. We breathe again. Al-Mansori dismounts from his camel and calls out to the bird as he sifts through his leather hunting bag, but he seems to have forgotten his lure. The bird shows no interest in al-Mansori’s call, nor in his cuff, tossed to the sand as a makeshift incentive to return. We all dismount and



Left: For essential protection from sharp talons, a falconer can cover hand and forearm with something as simple as a leather glove or as elaborate as this embroidered cuff. Lower: Arab falconers gather in one of the festival's tents to talk about birds.



stretch. Five minutes go by. And then a flock of pigeons appears out of nowhere. The falcon comes back to life, unfurling its great wings, in pursuit again. First we lose sight of the pigeons. Then the falcon, too, vanishes.

Maybe she'll come back, though it's unlikely. The bird is wild once again.... Then the spell of lost centuries is broken as someone makes a cell-phone call and we go on, knowing that the satellite telemetry attached to the bird will bring us to her. Al-Mansori leads the way, singing a song.

Twenty minutes later there is news. Not only has our bird been located, but she is eating a houbara she caught! Houbara: prize of

I wanted to hear more, but Mubarak Sultan al-Mansori had leaned over to show us photos on his smartphone, and the thread of the conversation was lost in the blue glow of the screen.

A few hours after the hunt, a large pot sits over a fire behind the younger al-Mansori's tent. He adds spices to the stock: lots of pepper, *za'atar*, lemon, salt. The houbara parts roil in the boil. "Do you want to try?" My desire to know the taste, just once, trumps my general aversion to eating animals threatened with extinction. Mubarak pours a small cup. I take it to my lips and sip too quickly, scalding my tongue, but beneath the pain, I taste a luscious broth.

There is no meat in the cup. Is it really tough and stringy, as I have read? And do I think it has any powers for these young, healthy men? No, none. But the power of the hunt? Oh, yes! "It's not religious, but it's almost religious," Oscar Pack, a falconer from Culver, Oklahoma tells me back at the mews, a prairie falcon on his fist. "It's so moving, watching the bird fly free. Falconry's really specialized bird-watching. You turn it loose and watch it act like it would in nature. You want to think there's love coming from the bird, but it's all coming from us."



Mohammed Ahmad al-Bowardi, president of the Emirates Falconers Club and deputy chairman of the UAE's Federal Environment Agency supported the UNESCO campaign. "Falconry doesn't only mean the practice of hunting, but also the entire scope of a human heritage that goes back a thousand years."

prizes for the Arabian desert hunter. Red meat to make a man's blood strong. The fact that the quarry was hatched in a captive-breeding facility and then stocked within the fenced game reserve is not mentioned. We slowly make our way deeper in, meeting with another small hunting party, led by the younger Mubarak Sultan al-Mansori, with their own falcon—and their own houbara as well.

Mubarak places the houbara carcass in the sand and lifts the falcon's hood for a brief reenactment of the kill. After her short flight, he lures her back onto his fist with more meat and slips the hood back on in one seamless movement, cinching it shut with one leather pull clasped between his finger and thumb and the other between his lips, a gesture as intimate as a kiss. He lifts the houbara up by one wingtip; it's near his chest when the other wingtip just clears the ground. The feathers are magnificent, long around the head and neck, a perfect desert camouflage of buff plumage flecked with black and tipped with a crescent of white. A metal identification ring from the breeding center encircles the tarsus.

We return to camp victorious, but this hunt is an anomaly. In the UAE, houbara are virtually extinct in the wild, and Arab falconers travel far and wide to find them, using specially equipped SUVs that long ago replaced dromedaries. "Life before was simple," Saed Ateq al-Mansori had said last night around the fire. "Now it sometimes seems like a dream. We'd like to bring it back, hunting with camels."

become of the epic oral storytelling of the *Ramayana*, or of Azerbaijani carpet weaving, or the language of the Garifuna? Although there had been discussion among falconers since the mid-1990's about seeking some sort of UNESCO recognition, the 2003 convention, which now lists more than 200 heritage traditions, opened the doors. Abu Dhabi falconers took on coordination of the listing effort, aided by British colleagues, even though Great Britain is not a UNESCO signatory. Part of their motive was a reaction to the increasing restrictions and outright bans on falconers worldwide, including in places like Kenya, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark, where falconers must cross the border to Germany to fly their birds. India allegedly has just a few individuals who are legally allowed to keep birds. New Zealand recently legalized the sport, after a 30-year effort by falconers. The limitations come from an increasing tendency away from hunting and toward conservation, away from captive animals toward wild ones, and amid concerns about species declines. The fact that falconry has often been

In 2002, the UAE became the first nation to issue a falcon passport to ease the legal transport of birds under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). Since then, Saudi Arabia has followed suit.



seen as an elite, even aristocratic sport—remember Kublai Khan?—hasn't helped it, either.

The late Shaykh Zayed Al-Nahyan recognized this more than 30 years ago. Now carrying on the campaign is a man who was like a son to him, Mohammed Ahmad al-Bowardi, president of the Emirates Falconers Club, secretary-general of the Abu Dhabi Executive Council and deputy chairman of the UAE's Federal Environment Agency. "Falconry doesn't only mean the practice of hunting," he says at the festival, "but also the entire collection of a human heritage that goes back a thousand years."

And this is the key to the UNESCO ICH list: Ancient but present. "Falconry fits all three requirements of an intangible cultural heritage," says Katalin Bogay, president of the General Conference of UNESCO. "It is traditional, it is contemporary, and it is living. Falconry doesn't belong in a museum. It is alive." She pauses, then adds, "It's very romantic, actually, falconry as an intangible cultural heritage."

"This is a *tangible* cultural heritage," disagrees Kent Carnie, founder of the Archives of Falconry at the World Center for Birds of Prey in Boise, Idaho, at a later conference panel. For the falconers from places where falconry is limited, the issue is indeed quite tangible. What is more corporeal than the three peregrines, one booted eagle and one Bonelli's eagle that Zahid Mahmood of Pakistan keeps—though he tells me it is against the law for him to do so? "Of course we keep birds," he says. "We cannot leave our traditions. We've had 900 years of falconry on the subcontinent. I learned from my father and my grandfather. We have in our family a 200-year-old falcon hood, a beautiful piece in the Amritsar style of leatherwork." He shows me photos and laments.

"We need to save this art," echoes Sandeep Shetty of Mumbai, another clandestine falconer.

"What the UNESCO designation has given us is a lot more respect with regard to the authorities," says Bruce Padbury of the South African Falconers Association as we sit on the carpeted floor of a traditional goat-hair tent at the desert camp. "In the last few years, some of the conservation authorities had started to put the screws



Used for training and regular practice, a falconer's lure is often composed of feathers bundled to resemble a smaller bird. Traditionally the trainer swings it in circles on a pole or line, inducing a chase and, at last, a catch, above. Use of a remote-control model aircraft to do this, opposite, is another way falconers are taking their sport into the 21st century.

on a little bit. When UNESCO recognized falconry as one of our heritages, they all of a sudden saw that this was not just a little hobby—this has been going on for thousands of years."

In order for a country to be added to the ICH list, it must be a signatory to the UNESCO ICH convention and then create an inventory of its intangible cultural heritage that includes falconry. Pakistan, Austria, Hungary and a handful of other nations are in the process of applying to add falconry for their own nations. Larry Dickerson is the president of the North American Falconry Association. Although the US, like Britain, is not a signatory to the UNESCO ICH convention, he is hopeful. "Without a doubt, the UNESCO designation is the single most important thing to happen to falconry. The US will get a designation. Maybe not in my lifetime, but it will happen."

How to make that happen is part of what brought all these people here. Terry Large, membership chairman of Britain's Hawk Board, advocates getting falconers more into the public eye. "In the European countries, there are increasing limitations on what to hunt," he argues, "but in the UK, we educate people and show our birds. Otherwise, you risk it being too much of an elite thing, and then people don't understand."

I have come to the UAE curious also about women's participation in Arab falconry. I assume it doesn't exist until I sit down next to Hessa al-Falassi, a program presenter with Abu Dhabi television who is there covering the festival. In her late 20's, al-Falassi is the proud owner of a gyr-saker falcon. The elder Saed Ateq al-Mansori is sitting on my other side, and I ask him what he thinks of this young female falconer.

Once a Bedouin falconer's delicacy, houbara bustards, like the one held here by Mubarak Sultan Al-Mansori, are now a vulnerable species. For the festival, UAE conservation authorities allowed a few to be hunted in the traditional manner inside the Ramah Wildlife Refuge.





He smiles and says, “It’s fine that she hawks. It’s been a tradition for a long time, and it is good for a child to learn from both parents. That way, he’ll have the tradition deep inside him.”

During the festival, the International Association of Falconry approves establishment of a women’s working group. Belgian falconer Véronique Blontrock tells me that al-Bowardi personally came and congratulated her and the other women. And then he told them that his own mother was a falconer, stitching the hoods for her birds.

Nick Fox, world-renowned falconer, stitched his first falcon hood when he was seven. “It was terrible,” he tells me as we sit in the shade of the camel and horse stables during a moment of respite from his festival organizing work. A golden eagle, an eagle owl and a falcon are all sitting silently on perches, observant yet unaffected by the commotion around them. Unlike in places like Mongolia or Pakistan or the Middle East, where there are familial traditions among falconers, European and American falconers are often solo agents, picking up the interest from books or haphazard sources that today include the Internet. “I didn’t meet my first falconer until I was 19,” Fox tells me, when he stumbled upon the man at a country fair in his native England.

Fox sounds wistful when talking of the intimate connection that falconers had with their birds before telemetry and high-tech captive breeding. Through his company, International Wildlife Consultants, he works extensively with Emirati falconers, and he helped with the UNESCO application. “I’m pressing them to put in conservation areas for hunting,” he says. “I know they would only be interested in hunting houbara and hares, but by

Falconspeak

“Half the English language derives from falconry terms!” claims falconer Alan Gates. Well, not quite, perhaps—but here are a few familiar words and phrases that have their roots in falconry.

- **Musket** is the word for a male sparrowhawk, which flies quickly from the hand. The bird was likely the inspiration for the name of the muzzle-loaded infantry gun when it was first invented, since the sparrowhawk was a fast-flying object familiar at the time.
- The **cadger** was the man who carried a wooden rack, called a **cadge**, for falcons to perch on during hunts. Often an older falconer, he’d usually stand off to the side of the action, trying to **cadge** tips by spinning good stories. Perhaps some saw him as merely an old babbler, or **codger**.
- A bird of prey is said to **mantle** when it spreads one wing and then the other over the corresponding outstretched leg, or when it shields freshly captured prey from view by spreading both wings and its tail over it, just as a cloak or veil can **mantle** a person.
- When a hawk takes a deep drink, it is called **bousing**. When a person drinks too deeply, it is called **boozing**.
- As a fool can be **hoodwinked** by a deception, slipping a hood over a falcon’s head also plunges the bird into a more literal darkness.
- The rapid dive of a falcon on its prey—a dive that has been clocked at nearly 400 kilometers an hour (250 mph)—is a **stoop**, like the bending forward of a human figure.
- When the jesses are secure, they are either **under your thumb** or **wrapped around your little finger**: Either way, the bird is fully in your control.



Gyr-peregrine



Saker hybrid



Gyr-saker

airplane pulling a lure at the end of a line. As he guides the plane, his teammate releases a gyrfalcon that, after one quick survey, races immediately after that glimmer of flashing feather in the sky. The falcon flaps its wings furiously, rising and rising to catch up to its quarry. But al-Kutbi is an artist. He toys with the falcon, allowing the bird to nearly reach it and then gunning the engine to pull it just out of reach. He cuts to an angle and the bird flies in a loop-the-loop, drawing gasps from the crowd below, all gazing up into the sky, hands shading eyes—but now there are almost more murmurings about the skill of the pilot than the falcon. No one has seen anything like this before. A plane! To train a bird! Once her talons finally sink into the lure, the gyrfalcon pulls it free from the plane and descends to earth.

As al-Kutbi flies, I speak to another team member, Abdulla Ibrahim al-Mahmoud. The idea of using a plane came up about six years ago in Dubai. “We believe in tradition,” he says, “but we also believe in technology.” He waves his hand around, taking in the six falcons sitting on perches outside their tent, but also the gleaming white SUVs parked in the sand and the plane zipping overhead. “With the plane, we can get the bird to go faster and higher, and teach it to turn very quickly. Then when we hunt, anything we find in front of us, the falcon can get.” Gyr-peregrine hybrids are the best mix, in his consideration. And the best prey? “Houbara! It’s good. A red meat. We go to Jordan, Pakistan, Russia and Turkmenistan to hunt. You follow the track of the animal you’re hunting. If you’re a good hunter, then you don’t leave a single one behind.”

default the areas would allow other species to live as well. And if they wanted to hunt, they’d have to use camels, dogs and their feet. It automatically limits things.”

The conservation ethic within falconry is complicated. While excessive hunting and taking birds from the wild to keep in captivity have caused the demise of some species, it is also falconers who helped bring others back from near extinction—notably the peregrine falcon in North America. “We’re up against conservationists who say anti-falconry things even though falconry and falcon-breeding projects have had an unmatched level of success when it comes to conservation and species protection,” Alan Gates, chair of the Campaign for Falconry UK, tells me. “All around the world there are examples of conservation projects that couldn’t have happened without falconers,” he says. “They dismiss falconers”—he waves dismissively—“but it’s everything in our brains that has helped them do so much of their conservation work.”

Yet falconry has changed over time. “Until recently, it was not a sport, but a subsistence enterprise,” says Ken Riddle, an American falconer who has worked in the Middle East for 20 years. “It was a family and social practice. Boys would start learning at five or six years old from their fathers. Now, it has evolved into a labor-intensive activity with the training of captive-bred birds. Now, it’s the sport of the chase.”

We witness this when Khalifa al-Kutbi of the Abu Dhabi Sports Club, black curls escaping from beneath his white *ghutra*, mans the control box of a radio-controlled model



Gyr-peregrine



Gyr-saker

Like so many here, al-Mahmoud learned falconry from his father. “He remembers when falconry didn’t have all the technology. The simple part is what he misses. Me, I don’t miss it, because I grew up with all this. But my parents, they can be sad about it.”

And who knows, really, how many falconers are out there, off the radar of this increasingly organized sport, practicing falconry in the old ways? Who knows how many falconers there are at all? When I asked Larry Dickerson, he makes a wild guess and says 65,000. I heard other people say that the largest number of falconers is in the Middle East. Or China. Or Pakistan. No one knows for sure.

I pose the “art versus sport” question to him, too. He sighs and composes himself before answering in his North Carolina drawl. “If you’re a dedicated falconer, it’s more than a sport. It’s a lifestyle, really,” he begins. “Think about it. You’ve really got to have a genetic imbalance to keep birds. You’re dealing with something that can hurt you if you do something wrong. Retribution can be swift and occasionally violent. You want to call it a sport, okay. You want to call it an art, okay. But it’s more than both of those things.”

There is a moment, away from the group camel rides and the campfires and the plane buzzing circles in the sky, when that something more reveals itself in the amber light. Nick Fox, desert-chapped and windswept, says he needs to fly his bird. It is a daily task that falconers cannot sidestep, a forced and embedded meditation. It’s late in the afternoon, on the edge of camp, and only a few people are watching. As he lifts the hood from the falcon’s head, everything complicated about this practice falls away: the big business of birds, the institutionalized breeding, the dearth of prey species, the campaigns against taking fledglings from wild raptor nests.

All of that vanishes as the bird lifts off his fist. And the memory of what all this festival pageantry is about returns. It is this: Something eternal is at play here. It is composed of three elements: a human, a bird of prey, and an open landscape suitable for flight.

And, oh, the flight these birds are capable of! The raptor has a singular focus on the lure that Fox is whirling round and round. It is a juvenile male bird, and his vision is locked like a missile on the movement of the lure, as his body spins, twists and circles. He is

concentrating on the lure, but we are all concentrating on him, and I wonder what the real lure is? What is the reason we’re all standing here in the sand? Falconry taps into something primordial. It allows a roller-coaster ride while standing with two feet on the ground, neck craning back and forth. It is time alternately suspended and speeded up, as the falcon hovers at the top of his pendulum arc and then tucks his wings and seizes gravity. It is the sound of the wings slicing the air when he comes within a few feet. It is flight imagined for our own earthbound species.

Fox flies the bird for ten numinous minutes, pulling the lure just out of reach over and over until he finally lets the bird catch his quarry. Then he does the bait-and-switch, lifting the bird onto the glove where he holds a fresh piece of meat, and pulling the feathered



lure out from under him. I feel as if I have just witnessed the prayers of a dedicated monk belonging to a religious order I don’t quite understand. The sun continues to sink, and though the day is over, somehow, it feels as if it has just begun. ☉



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Falcon Fever: A Falconer in the Twenty-first Century. Tim Gallagher. 2008, Houghton Mifflin, 978-0-618-80575-4, \$25 hb.



www.falconryfestival.com