

# ANCIENT ART OF FALCONRY IN KAZAKHSTAN

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Due to the paucity of books on falconry in Kazakhstan (USSR) characteristics of this ancient art are not well known or described /1-3/. Scattered information is contained in several magazine articles /4-13/. These articles express many contradictory facts and extraordinary incidents pertaining to predatory birds. The authenticity of these accounts may be explained by misunderstanding of stories passed from one generation of hunters to another. The main reason for this mistranslation was because the majority of authors were not falconers and didn't speak the native Kazakh language. The present paper gives a short story about falconry in Kazakhstan.

The use of predatory birds is one of the most ancient types of hunting which is widely spread in the republic of Kazakhstan. Currently this type of hunting has diminished to a select few individuals who plan to restore this art to the native land. Apparently it goes back to the time when a man started to domesticate various animals as his helpers in getting food. One of the ancient Kazakh legends states that falconry had been a widely spread occupation throughout all the regions inhabited by these people long before the adoption of Mohammedanism. According to that legend in VI A.D. Mohammed – the founder of Islam, on seeing for the first time hunting with predatory birds in Kazakhstan, ordered several hunting birds to be sent to Islamic leaders in Arabia where the occupation wasn't known but all requirements were available to teach falconry. However they misunderstood his orders and cooked the birds. More birds were obtained and subsequently this kind of hunting became widespread in Arabic countries.

It is not by chance that people living on the territory of modern Central Asia and Kazakhstan are founders of this hunt. The region was inhabited by nomadic tribes who possessed herds of domestic animals that moved from place to place for pasture and water. The boundless steppes, deserts and mountains contained suitable pastures for these animals. They lived under ideal conditions for domesticating wild predatory birds. Due to the Kazakh's natural keenness of observation and watching a variety and great numbers of raptors he considered the possibility of using them for obtaining food and fur.

Today falconry in Kazakhstan has remained only in a few places. For the vast region of Kazakhstan (2,717,300 km<sup>2</sup>) the number of falconers has been reduced to less than ten. The remaining falconers are middle aged to old (ages 50-80). We believe that one of the most picturesque traditions of Kazakhs may disappear altogether with invaluable property related to falconry as well as centuries old experience inherent with the last of the falconers if this tradition is not continued. It's not possible to train young people without tutorship from falconers who have hunted with raptors even if written sources are available. Ironically this type of hunting was fairly widespread at the beginning of XX century until the 1950's when people became disinterested for various reasons.

Hunters use predatory birds of different species. The golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos* L.) has been considered to be the main bird. It is according to the Kazakh name of the golden eagle that a hunter with a predatory bird is called "burcutchi" i.e. a falconer. They use trained eagles mainly to catch red foxes and hares. Sometimes they hunt for Persian gazelles, saigas and

roes. With the help of a large trained eagle they have caught wolves. As we see the main targets for falconry are animals that inhabit open landscapes with low sparse vegetation. The hunting is carried out with the aid of a good horse capable of great endurance and often with a Kazakh wolfhound called “tazy”. As a rule hunting begins in October-November and through winter months. In preparation for the main hunting season training of hunting birds is concentrated during September.

Besides a golden eagle several species of falcons are also used. An arctic falcon (*Falco rusticolus* L.) is regarded as an unsurpassed hunter which is capable of catching any flying game bird. A well trained arctic falcon can demand the highest price if sold. As an example rich people would marry one of their daughters to a man who owned such a bird. In the 1980's members of the royal family from Saudi Arabia paid \$120,000 for an arctic falcon /14/. Falcons (*Falco peregrinus* Tunstall, *F. pelegrinoides* Temminck) are used to hunt for geese and ducks and on rare occasions, other birds. Saker falcons (*Falco cherrug* Gray) are used to hunt ring necked pheasants, partridges and hares. A well trained peregrine falcon can help harvest up to fifteen geese and ducks during one flight which is similar to the damage a wolf could do among a flock of untended sheep. With a special trained saker falcon and a “tazy” even Persian gazelles and saigas are hunted. The bird seizes the ungulate by the head preventing it from running until the hunting dog catches up with the animal. Small species of falcons are also domesticated for catching sparrows. The Columbia falcon (*Falco columbarius* L.) is also used to hunt for quail. A lesser kestrel (*Falco naumanni* Fleisher) has been used to teach novice falconers who are acquiring skills of falconry. A trained goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis* L.) is a good catcher of pheasants, partridges, geese, ducks, hares and even bustards. Quails are caught with a sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus* L.) The following hunting birds are included in the Red Data Book of the USSR as rare species: arctic falcon, peregrine falcon, saker falcon, temminck falcon and golden eagle /15/.

The evolution of falconry since ancient times has progressed from obtaining meat to a kind of national art demanding outstanding sporting proficiency. Such an occupation is not a whimsical amusement. It demands great responsibility and lifetime devotion to the sport. Falconry is a very serious affair. Not every Kazakh can be occupied with it because the business requires exceptional knowledge of the biology of hunting birds and long hours of training. The main criterion is a close bond to the birds and treating them as if they are members of a family. In ancient times a nursing mother might give part of her milk to a golden eagle's chicks despite the fact her own child could not have enough food. This is one reason the occupation is maintained only in individual families being passed from one generation to the next, usually from father to son. During great tribal holidays the leaders would organize competitions in which hunters exhibited sporting proficiency of their birds. There they received critical evaluation by fellow countrymen of the falconry proficiency. In case a bird didn't catch prey it was regarded as a shame to a hunter which was remembered for a long time. Due to the expense of feeding several predatory birds, poor families are not able to afford falconry. The labour intensive training requires a lot of time, patience and persistence. Successful hunters were able to sell or exchange foxes and other valuable fur bearing animals harvested by the use of hunting birds for sheep and cattle.

There are more than 1500 words associated with falconry in the Kazakh language /2/. The majority of these words are contained in historical manuscripts. Many special terms are connected with equipment necessary to keep hunting birds. Every piece of equipment has been made in the process of keeping and training predatory birds. Every item for falconry has its purpose and special name. The main pieces of equipment are as follows:-

‘Biyalay’ – a leather mitten and arm guard which is usually sewn for the right hand and serves as a safeguard from the birds claws while perched on the arm of the owner. It is made

of well tanned leather of several animals (elk, noble deer, roe, badger, mountain goat or cow). The inside is lined with felt.

‘Ayak bau’ – boots of different size which are fastened on the birds feet and help provide captivity on an arm, support or perch. They are made of tanned cattle leather. The boots are lined with soft felt to prevent rubbing against the birds legs.

‘Tomaga’ – a small leather cap put on a birds head which covers the eyes. It ensures protection from visual irritants and calms the falcon and eagle. Design of the ‘tomaga’ is based on the size and form of the head and it is constructed from soft leather. Many of these are decorated with embroidery and ornaments which accounts for this item as being one of the most expensive.

‘Tugir’ – a support for a bird to perch on in the yard or an open air cage. It’s made of a curved tree trunk. The top of the support is covered with felt. A ring is fastened on it to which the leg of the bird is tied. There exists many forms of such support.

‘Baldak’ – a wooden arm rest in the form of a crutch used to support an arm with a bird while riding a horse during falconry. The arm is much less tired when compared to an unsupported arm. The top part of the support has two branches and is covered with leather. The forearm with a perching bird rests on it. The base is fastened to the saddle by means of leather laces. The ‘baldak’ is usually made of a trunk of a small hardwood tree or in some cases a horn of a mountain goat.

‘Zhem ayak’ – a wooden basin for feeding birds. There are many variations in construction of this item.

‘Zhem kalta’ – a small sack (25 x 30cm) used to attract a flying bird back to the arm. It’s made of felt covered with fabric. A small piece of meat is put inside.

‘Ayak kap’ – special ‘gloves’ to protect claws from biting during the hunt when a predator grasps the prey. It is made of thick leather.

‘Zhez tuyak’ – copper claws which replace the broken claws of the bird.

‘Syuzu’ – cloth strips to tie tail feathers in a particular way to prevent a bird flying to high altitudes. They are used during training sessions.

‘Irggak’ – a swinging support used to train a newly caught bird during the initial period. As a rule it’s a stick tied by both ends between to posts. While perching on it the bird learns to keep its balance. The bird is forced to remain on the swinging perch even when exhausted. One of the purposes of this item is to accustom the bird to the moving arm of a hunter.

‘Tyutik’ – a special tube for pouring liquids, including remedies into the bird. It is usually made of a small branch of wood but a hollow bone of long legged bird may also be used for this item. Both surfaces of the tube are made very smooth to prevent damage to bird tissue during use.

‘Dalbay’ and ‘Shirga’ – artificial targets used to train hunting birds. There are two main types. ‘Flying’ and ‘Running’. The flying target – ‘dalbay’, which is the primary training

target for falcons has two wings of a duck, dove or partridge fastened to a felt framework which is covered with leather or cloth. Several strips of bright fabric, imitating a birds tail, are sewn to one of the ends. On the other end a ring is fastened to which a firm cord is tied. Small pieces of meat are attached to the targets. A 'running' target – 'shirga' is made of a piece of thick animal skin stuffed with straw with a fox tail attached. Golden eagles are trained with this.

Both fledglings and adult birds are trained. Know nests are under constant observation with the observer often living near the raptor habitat from the beginning of egg laying until chicks attempt to fly. During that period biology and habits of predatory birds under natural conditions are being studied by the observer. Falconers know that chicks can become well developed in the parents nest. That is why they endeavour to take chicks just before flight. When fully fledged chicks try to fly in the nest they are frightened off and caught. In the wild the potential hunting birds baited by the use of a live bird (a dove or partridge) or a hare are caught with the help of a net. The falcon and eagle chicks become accustomed to man sooner than adult birds. However the latter are more valuable especially when a fully moulted bird 'tastulek' is located. The adult birds have already acquired hunting habits learned from parents and perfected during the first three years of independent life which is the time period required for the first complete moult. Upon being accustomed to man they can be trained much faster than the chicks.

The first requisite for a hunting bird is to become accustomed to man. To achieve that goal a hunter does not leave the bird during several days and nights. At that initial period the bird is put on a 'irggak' and not allowed to sleep. The hunter strokes the bird's chest and sides. A tired bird gradually stops dashing away from people. To finish training the hunter walks with the bird in overcrowded places including noisy bazaars. Step by step the bird is trained to be fed with meat from the hands of the hunter. Then by tying the bird by the foot with cords of varying lengths the hunter trains it to jump on an arm from a 10 m distance. He attracts the bird with meat.

Feeding is critical for a hunting bird. This is one of the main conditions for successful training and preparing for the hunt. It is very difficult to provide the bird with food similar to what it would obtain in nature. At the same time proper feeding guarantees it's normal development and health. It is very important that the bird achieves a certain weight because training of a hunting bird is based on sense of hunger. Hunters feed birds by hand uttering specific sounds. As a result a conditioned response to the hunter's voice is established. When determining the food allowance the hunter takes into account that the bird is being held in captivity. Muscle strength for captive birds is much less when compared with free living birds. Horse flesh, beef, mutton and various birds are used to feed hunting birds. Meat must be fresh and never salted or spoiled. To force the bird to belch regularly it is given a special diet prepared from felt and pieces of wood. Bone flour and crushed eggshell are added to the chicks food. A golden eagle is usually fed with chopped meat free of fat and tendons which is soaked in water.

Falcons are trained with the aid of a 'dalbay' which is turned on a cord in the air while eagles are trained with a 'shirga' which is dragged on the ground. At the initial period a bird, tied with a long cord and 'wearing' boots, is allowed to reach the target. Then the cord is shortened and omitted. One the boots are maintained. Upon catching the target the bird is called to the hunters arm with a piece of meat and the hunter's voice. After the bird is trained to catch a target the latter is replaced with wounded or partially tied birds (sparrows, doves, quails), hares and foxes. Upon capture of live prey, the training may be considered finished and the bird is ready for a real hunt. A well trained bird can be used for several seasons. After

5 to 7 years such birds are set free because muscle strength of the wings and claws is weakened. Birds set free do not die and are able to live independently for many seasons.

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