

50th Edition for the 2017 Sparrowhawk Festival of El Haouaria

A festival for the bird lovers to support!

Falconry, an ancestral tradition in Tunisia

The Tunisian Cap Bon Peninsula is known as a major pathway for migratory birds travelling between Europe, Africa and Asia. The passage of different species of birds and hawks commonly occurs from El Haouaria, at the tip of the peninsula, towards the island of Sicily.

The falconry consists in catching, breeding and training of two sorts of bird of prey, namely the sparrowhawk for quail hunting and the hawk " borni " or the pilgrim for partridge hunting. "The falcon is a migratory bird. It spends the winter in South Africa then flies to Europe when the weather is warmer. El Haouaria is on the migration circuit of the bird. When the weather is not suitable for migration, the bird nest in El Haouaria," Hedi Ben Fraj, president of the Falconers' Association, explained. "During that time, we have licence for catching the bird using traps made of nets with a passerine serving as bait. The birds are only borrowed to hunt with during the season of hunting quail. They are trained for a month; then after the hunting season is over the birds are released."

El Haouaria counts some 150 breeders of sparrowhawks and 8 breeders of hawks " borni ", an endangered species. The training and use of birds of prey to hunt is an ancient tradition that came under the influence of many civilisations and

cultures. It is a deep-rooted practice in the Cap Bon Peninsula in far north-eastern Tunisia. There, falconers use specific tools, techniques, methods and skills. An Arab influence can be seen in the adoption of names of hawks and falconry expressions. Its origins go back to the antique time as shown in certain mosaics exposed at [the Bardo Museum](#). The region of El Haouaria is indeed rich in [Carthaginian and Roman vestiges](#). The most spectacular are the Latomies of El Haouaria.

Unlike in United Arab Emirates where it is the prince privilege, in El Haouaria and generally in Tunisia, falconry is a popular and leisure only activity. Neither petrol lords nor descendants of the European knights of the Middle Ages, the falconers of El Haouaria in the Cap Bon are indeed, simple farmers who for centuries, have passed on their know-how in training birds of prey, from fathers to sons. "Hunting with falcons is part of the cultural heritage. We inherited this from our great-grandfathers. The belief is that we inherited this from the Ottoman empire as we share similar hunting methods with the Turks," said Ben Fraj.

Ben Fraj emphasised that falconry is a delicate art that is to be learnt under the guidance of a good falconer. He pointed out that sparrowhawks are precious birds that need to be treated carefully and preserved for future generations : "Not everyone can train the bird. We make sure they have a mentor to help them learn. We cannot accept that a person who has no prior knowledge or training acquires a licence to catch a falcon for hunting."

The Sparrowhawk Festival of El Haouaria in Tunisia

Since Tunisian independence, falconry has been celebrated through a number of festivals. Organised each year at the end of the spring hunting season, the Sparrowhawk Festival in El

Haouaria reflects the attachment of the locals to their heritage. The 50th Sparrowhawk Festival will start on April 16th, 2017 at El Haouaria (Ras Adar), under the theme "Falconry, an authentic cultural and environmental heritage". The festival, which began in 1967, attracts tourists from all over the world, especially those who want to discover the art of traditional falconry in addition to enjoying the cultural heritage of El Haouaria.

"The festival promotes ecological tourism as it showcases the sparrowhawk as well as the caves and other bird populations in the area. You can find the bird in the whole region and even in every house. It is that steeped in our culture," said Mohamed Ayad, vice-president of the festival. Through the demonstrations and hunting scenes, the visitors will delight in the hunting art of birds of prey, which distinguishes the best falconers of the village.

With a lot of kindness, the falconers greet foreign visitors and give them the tour of the property, showing them portraits of the various birds of prey hung on the walls and explaining to them the complicated roads followed every year by the birds, guided by a mysterious but exact sense of orientation.

Rare are those which stay in El Haouaria or which return faithfully to the village to find their masters of the previous year. Nevertheless, there are certain exceptions : in the 1830s, explain our falconers, Sheik Ali Bennar, an inhabitant of El Haouaria, kept its sparrowhawk during 30 years and someone else, quite recently, more than 20 years ".

According to the event commentator Amel Djait : "the falconers have to dedicate a lot of time to these birds and display treasures of psychology to turn them into hunting animals, in only a few weeks. The sparrowhawk, for example, is a very intelligent animal which becomes a hunter at the age of six months. All the work of the trainer consists in discovering its temperament and in finding the rules of training which

will adapt themselves best to its personality. Usually falconers manage to keep their birds of prey, through affection and hunger. The best hunters are indeed the birds of prey which eat a lot, digest fast and are always hungry, that's what urges them, ceaselessly, to look for prey."

In addition to the Sparrowhawk Festival in El Haouaria, there was the Hunting Festival in Kelibia but shortly after the Tunisian revolution, the organisation that held the festival was abandoned. However, hunting and heritage lovers have since launched a new youth society, the Association for the Preservation of Birds of Prey in Kelibia.