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Central Asian falconers impress in Europe

BISHKEK (TCA) — Falconry has always been considered a regal and noble pursuit, and falcons have been thought of as sacred. A falcon soaring high in the sky is considered a sun god and the harbinger of good news. Today good news has come via an English country estate — namely Englefield near Reading, where the first International Falconry Festival took place this summer. Central Asia was represented by hunters from Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. According to Almazbek Akunov, the Kyrgyz falconer, “they opened a window on Europe.” Furthermore, they have all been invited to France to take part in a meeting of the International Federation of Falconry in November 2007.

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A Kazakh falconer leads the parade. Photo courtesy of Falconry Heritage Trust

Kyrgyz falconry heritage neglected by the government

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"Falconry is a game of chance and in many countries today its popularity is growing. This also explains the great interest expressed in all aspects of falconry – its history, its techniques, and the schools that teach its skills – all around the world. However, it is in the wild expanses of Central Asia where the pursuit began, which

tral Asian village) with Central Asian yurts set up on site. Finally, there was a ceremonial parade with all participants marching in national costume, of course there were the birds, but we also had hunters with dogs, horses and camels, which showed the national culture of every country. At the head of the parade were the delegations from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan."

"Delegations from the USA, France, Germany, Belgium, Japan, Brazil, China, South Korea and other coun-

tries which are the biggest in the world. The Kazakhs' success can be explained by the fact that in their country, a lot of attention has been devoted both to the sport and the preservation of its ancient traditions for a long time."

Nick Fox who has already been to Issyk-Kul for a seminar on ecology and was fascinated by the beauty of the Kyrgyz countryside commented: "It is a pity that your enthusiasm for the revival of this national sport is not supported by your Government like your Kazakh



Photo by Irina Bairamukova

then later spread throughout 70 countries," says Dr. Nick Fox, who took part in the recent UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention. "It is very important to understand and better inform people around the world of the importance of falconry as a part of our world cultural legacy."

The latest falconry festival in Englefield — coorganized by the Hawk Board (the patron of falconry in the United Kingdom), and the International Association of Falconry and the Preservation of Birds of Prey — was the first step in this important matter.

"This event is a gathering of hunters from 33 states," said Evgenii Shergalin, an assistant to the vice-president of the festival. "The festival was a splendid opportunity to show spectators elements of each participating nation's heritage and culture. With this in mind there were many extra exhibits and demonstrations organised for visitors. We had displays given by hunters from Spain, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland. There was an Arab village and an aul (a Cen-



tries visited the yurts of the falconers from Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan," relates Almazbek Akunov, one of the representatives from Kyrgyzstan. "In spite of the fact that the Kazakh delegation of 13 hunters was acknowledged as the best, it was noted that the best birds of prey were born in Kyrgyzstan. The falcons from the Kazakh steppes are much smaller than the Kyrgyz mountain falcons,

neighbours."

The Kyrgyz participants in the festival asked for government help to finance their trip to the festival, but to no avail. "The travel expenses, food, and accommodation were paid for by the hosts, however we bought the presents and national costumes, made a documentary film, and transported all our equipment and the yurt with our own money. One of us even sold his last cow to go to



Photo by Irina Bairamukova

the festival!" they sadly relate. "We even asked the Kazakhs, who today have many schools which teach hunting with birds of prey, to write to our Government about the need for Kyrgyzstan to join the World Association. The Turkmen joined 7 years ago and the Kazakhs 6 years ago. Kyrgyzstan has not conducted a single falconry event for over 10 years despite a huge interest in us from abroad."

Nevertheless, the festival was the first exchange of information between hunters from such a wide range of countries. As a reminder of the event a white yurt given by the Kazakhs remained in Great Britain, which can be found in a prominent place in the British Museum.

Upon their return from Great Britain, Almazbek Akunov, Aitbek Sulaimanbekov and Talgarbek Shaibyrov, with the help of their friends from the Ton region, began to prepare for the National Festival of National Hunting and Sports. Many hunters from abroad expressed a wish to take part in the event

and see for themselves how the birds of prey and the taigan hunting dogs live and breed in mountain conditions.

Kazakhstan has invited the Kyrgyz hunters to the autumn Open Hunting Championship, because the Kyrgyz showed they were organized, could put on a good show and demonstrated a high level of expertise with the birds. In England, they even outshone competitors from the Czech Republic and Hungary who are famous for their hunting traditions. But in Kyrgyzstan itself, only one falconry school remains (in the Ton region) where today the Small Grants Programme is working to protect the wild birds, which are suffering from a lack of feeding places.

Asek Radjapov is the most experienced falconer in the village of Bokonbaevo in Issyk-Kul and Ishenbek Kadyrov is proud of the fact that he has the largest falcon in the region. Ulan Karavaev has already raised three falcons: "This is the best part of our work, it's what pleases us enthusiasts the most."

