



Hunting with Eagles

Written by Matthew Teller // Photos and video by Steve Shelton

High in the mountains of Yamagata province, 320km north of Tokyo, winter can bring as much as four meters of snow.

“That’s an advantage for a falconer,” Hidetoshi Matsubara, 66, tells me, gazing out from Tamugimata village to the snowy peak of Mount Gassan.

An eagle’s prey is small animals like rabbits or squirrels. They can easily run into long grass or under bushes. But snowfall over two meters means all the bushes are covered. There’s no place to hide.



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Tamugimata forms a tight cluster of fifteen houses perched on thickly wooded upland slopes. Up a roughly concreted track, a rickety farmhouse of wood and tile, built 120 years ago for silkworm-rearing, is Matsubara’s home.

Inside, a kettle hisses on a kerosene stove as a huge, tethered bird of prey – a golden eagle/tawny eagle hybrid – adjust its position on a branch propped across one corner of the dim living room. The bird, staring from its perch, stands perhaps 70 centimeters high. When it opens its wings, they reach almost two meters across the room.

“I’ve been sharing my living space with eagles the last 40 years, day and night,” Matsubara says.

This small, wiry man, with a distant fierceness in his clouded eyes, claims he is the last falconer in Japan to follow a traditional hawking lifestyle. He spends eight or nine months of the year, from fall through to the end of spring, training and hunting with big raptors – leaving his wife and son



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Hidetoshi Matsubara, takes the Dutch hood off his golden eagle / tawny eagle hybrid in his Tamugimat. It is a rare bird, some 320km north of Tokyo. Here he has been trained and hunted with his eagles for the past 40 years. He considers himself Japan's last traditional falconer.

Journalist and broadcaster **Matthew Teller** is based in the UK. He writes on the Middle East for international media and makes documentaries for BBC radio. Follow him on Twitter @matthewteller and at his blog www.QuiteAlone.com (<http://www.QuiteAlone.com>).

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Seattle-based multimedia journalist **Steve Shelton** has covered stories in the US, Middle East, Balkans, Central America and Sudan for a wide variety of news publications as well as nonprofits and commercial clients.

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