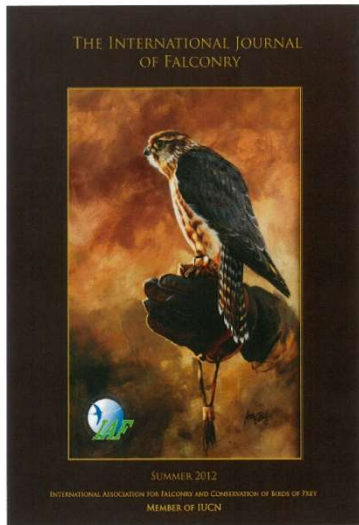


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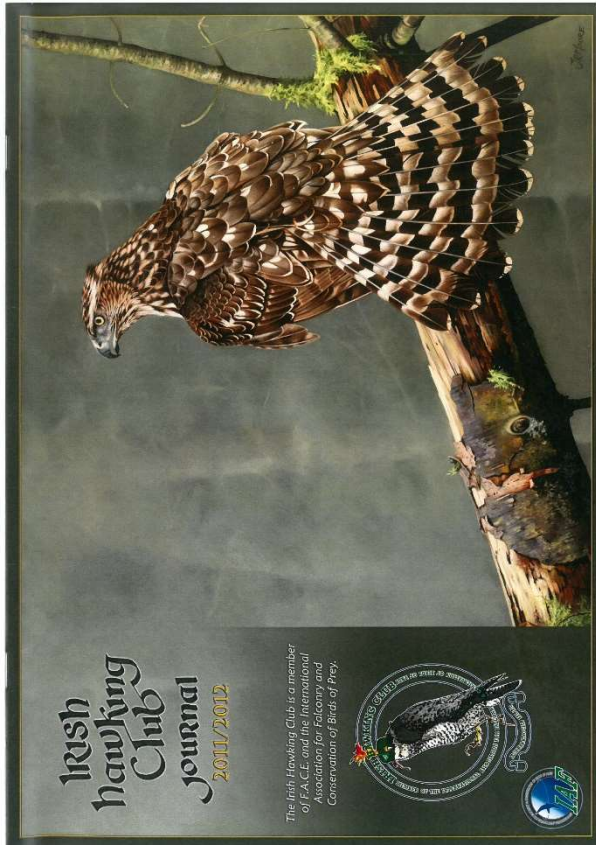


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**EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE**

**PRESIDENT/DEPARTMENT LIAISON**  
 Eoghan Ryan  
 Co Dublin  
 087 2395302  
[eoghanryan500@gmail.com](mailto:eoghanryan500@gmail.com)

**DIRECTOR**  
 Vacant

**HON SECRETARY**  
 Neal Carroll  
 Co Dublin  
 087 2495113  
[icc228@hotmail.com](mailto:icc228@hotmail.com)

**HON TREASURER**  
 Malcolm Edgar  
 22 Irvington Park,  
 Kilkeel, Co Down, BT34 4LX;  
 (+44) 02841763431 (NI)  
[mjedg@btopenworld.com](mailto:mjedg@btopenworld.com)

**FIELDMEET CO-ORDINATOR**  
 Terry Turkington  
 Co Antrim  
 02890 623936/07742 798588 (NI)  
[terryturk@hotmail.com](mailto:terryturk@hotmail.com)

**COMMITTEE MEMBER**  
 Mick Docherty  
 Co Dublin  
 01 2946971 / 086 7229542  
[mickshawk@yahoo.ie](mailto:mickshawk@yahoo.ie)

**COMMITTEE MEMBER**  
 Fintan Phelan  
 Co Kildare  
[phelanmotors@gmail.com](mailto:phelanmotors@gmail.com)

**EDITORIAL**

**JOURNAL EDITOR**  
 Hilary White  
 085 1340476  
[hylwhite@gmail.com](mailto:hylwhite@gmail.com)

**NEWSLETTER EDITOR**  
 Sean Woods  
 Co Antrim  
[seanmartinwoods@yahoo.com](mailto:seanmartinwoods@yahoo.com)

**COVER DESIGN**  
 Aaron Leavy  
 087-9194425  
[aaronleavy@hotmail.com](mailto:aaronleavy@hotmail.com)

**IAF DELEGATE**  
 Hilary White

**HONORARY VICE PRESIDENTS**  
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**IRISH HAWKING CLUB**

**POLICY AND OBJECTIVES STATEMENTS**

The Irish Hawking Club is dedicated to the sport and practice of falconry and to the conservation and dissemination of knowledge of birds of prey. Membership is open to those who support or practice the pursuit of Falconry to the highest standards and traditions. Objectives of the Club are;

To represent Falconry throughout Ireland and to foster international co-operation in order to maintain the sport, art and practice of taking quarry in its natural state.

To preserve and encourage Falconry within the context of sustainable and judicious use of wildlife.

To foster good relations and co-operation with all National hunting organisations with like objectives.

To encourage conservation, the ecological and veterinary research of birds of prey and to promote, under scientific guidance, native propagation for Falconry and the rehabilitation of injured birds of prey.

To monitor National laws in order to permit the pursuit and perpetuation of falconry.

To require the observation of all laws and regulations relating to falconry, hunting, conservation and culture with regard to the taking, support, and keeping of birds of prey, the hunting of quarry species and the right of access to land.

To promote and uphold a positive image of falconry with specialist organisations or statutory bodies which regulate or otherwise affect falconry.





## Fieldmeet Report Goshawks at Killeel, 2012

Alan Ferguson, Co Down

The morning of Saturday February 4th was as grey and wet as it was a year previously when the Irish Hawking Club met for its annual field meet and AGM in Killeel, Co. Kildare. However, the rain didn't dampen the spirits of all the hardy souls who met up at 10am at the Killeel Inn on the first day and who were soon re-acquainting themselves with old friends and faces.

After an informal bird of prey display by the IHC for a local arts and crafts group, the assembly was divided up into two groups. The Harris Hawks would go to their chosen area in search of rabbits and the Goshawks to another area for pheasants. It was to this second group that I decided to attach myself.

Having made our way to the high pasturelands overlooking Killeel, IHC President Eoghan Ryan decided upon the slipping order for that day. At this point, I would like to once again extend my sincere gratitude to James Knight who was trusting enough to allow a novice like me to carry his male Goshawk Googy for the day, which meant I was then included in the slipping line-up.

Keith Barker's bird was first to slip, and shortly after beginning to work his dog up a gorse duff, a fine cock pheasant raised vertically up out of the ditch and was only just missed by his young bird Barabbas. Not content with that, Barabbas then gave a heart-pumping

chase for between 700-900m before eventually flying out of our sight.

Followed down the hill by Keith, we found out that the Gos had got its bird A just reward for the amazing pursuit it had put in.

Malcolm Edgar was next to go and the dogs were put into cover to see what they would flush, but Malcolm would have to wait for another chance later. After walking through some cover, a pheasant was put up for James Knight's Gos. However, no contact was made on this occasion. We then met up on the road and continued on.

It was decided that as there were rabbits in the area, Malcolm would have another attempt. After a flush for a rabbit, which I didn't actually see myself, Malcolm's protégé gave chase and, worryingly, headed towards a hill covered with a conifer plantation topped by numerous masts. After a difficult search, the bird was thankfully recovered. Malcolm has instructed me to thank all who helped him retrieve his bird, namely Hilary White (Yes, I do have a useful Ed), Stephen Devlin and Kurtis Brown.

By this stage, everyone was soaked through and it was decided to wrap things up for the day. Having not had a pheasant ourselves, James Knight decided that he and I would try a spot of rook hawking. After diving around the roads in the vicinity, we soon

spied a field which contained plenty of ground-feeding rooks. Once in position, the Gos was let to go and it soon had caught its dinner – a big old rook that was just a little slower than the rest to fly away in time.

Two more slips of rooks were had but only resulted in near misses and enjoyable flights, but James was glad that the Gos had gotten some valuable exercise and a kill.

That night, the AGM was held in the Killeel Inn and afterwards we were treated to slideshows on the International Falconry Festival in Abu Dhabi, and I'm sure I'm not on my own when I say I was only slightly envious of the committee members that were lucky enough to be on that wonderful trip. Something for us all to aspire to.

Rowland Eustace was also good enough to show us a slideshow from the Festival of Falconry in England some years back. Pints of creamy Guinness and refreshing beers and a lot of hawk talk followed – not a bad way to spend an evening.

Two days saw the assembly split up at 10.30am and go their separate ways. This time the weather was definitely on our side. Dry, clear and with almost no wind, there were reports of heavy rain north in Dundalk and south in Wicklow but we were happy in our little enclave. With these near perfect scenting conditions for the dogs, we began.

The dogs hunted through gorse and ferns in a steep-sided valley near an abandoned quarry and flushed a pheasant for Don Ryan's bird to chase. And chase he did – round the side of the high ridge we were standing on and down into the valley floor below. Once Gos and pheasant flew over a Hawthorn hedgerow, they were lost to our eyes. As Don set off to find it, the remainder waited patiently and took in the views of the surrounding countryside.

A phone call confirmed that Don had found his bird and another one too. This one with a much larger tail! The Gos had connected with the pheasant and was eagerly plucking away on the other side of that ditch.

James Knight was next up and big as his female Gos is, it would

Setting himself up for the flush, Keith gave the go-ahead and out bolted a rabbit. The hawk was slipped and once on the wing, flew low and fast above the ground before flaring up, turning, then dropping down on to the bunny below. It was a good flight and entertained all who watched.

With Don and Keith's birds having been fed up, James decided to have another go. (Maybe, just maybe, that missed pheasant from earlier would still be there!)

As we walked the ground – a mixture of high, dry gorse and fern ridges, grassy hillocks and reedy bogs – I was impressed with the amount and variety of animals it held. I must have counted at least 20 snipe and two or three woodcock, those two foxes, pheasants, rabbits,

With bird slipped, we raced up over the bank to see how it had turned out this time. The pheasant was captured about 3m short of a large garden hedge. We arrived to see her mantling protectively over her hard-earned lunch. What a catch! What was interesting was that both dogs and humans had been all over that spot for James' flush and we had passed very close by, if not over it for Keith's hunt previously. All the while, that brave pheasant sat tight. As soon as our heads turned to watch the rabbit, up the got and went the other way. This one must have been around the block before.

Onlookers gathered around James and his bird to offer congratulations on the flight and take lots of photographs for our newsletters and journals. Our resident artist Shay O'Byrne too,

the pheasant suddenly sprang out and flew past. With bird slipped, we raced up over the bank. The pheasant was captured about 3m short of a large garden hedge. We arrived to see her mantling protectively over her hard-earned catch

have required a different type of bird altogether to tackle the two foxes that were raised in the course of the hunt. He was nearby at the edge of the quarry before the dogs working for him and their job and flushed another pheasant. His big girl put in a good effort but unfortunately this pheasant got lucky and jinked down into some cover and got away. The spot was duly marked in case we would hunt it later.

It was the turn of Keith Barker now, who was hunting away with his dog when Damian from the Killeel Gun Club said that his pointer had just gone firm

and, as I learned, deer. A hunter's dream, and possibly a site for future longwing snipe meals.

We walked along in the hope of flushing something for James and were soon at the place where we marked the pheasant earlier. The dogs rummaging all through the area put out a rabbit which James didn't engage and we thought that the pheasant had wisely made good its escape. As we watched the rabbit picking its way through the undergrowth, the pheasant suddenly sprang out of a fern patch and flew past James and his bird.

look his fair share of photos and I hope it has given him some inspiration and detail for his next masterpiece. I for one will look forward to that.

And that concluded events. We broke up and met a little way down the road with the Harris Hawks for an update and a chat. As they were finishing up for the day also, friendly goodbyes were exchanged and people then headed off home with their wonderful birds to the four corners of the island.



## Literary review 50 Shades of Peregrine Collecting Books on Peregrine Falcons

Eamonn Ryan, Co Dublin

Like many falconry enthusiasts, I've spent a large part of my disposable income over the years on various books on the subject.

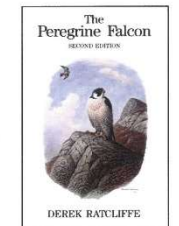
If isn't always possible to spend the sort of time in the field that one would ideally like, so having a decent library of books on birds of prey to dip into is a guilty pleasure by times. It doesn't come close to the excitement of 'getting out there', of course, but it's nice to have a good read to fall back on when more hands-on action isn't an option.

Over time, I've managed to beg, steal or borrow most of the texts that would be familiar to all falconers of a 'certain age', so of course I've trawled through the various older Woodford / Glasier / Mitchell / Mavoragdata-type how-to manuals, along with the more modern-day falconry literature.

But I have a particular thing for peregrines, and I have tried to collect everything I could on these birds especially. I thought it might be interesting to go through some of the stuff that has been written, and maybe recommend one or two as decent reads.

When I first started collecting

falconry and bird-related books, finding anything worthwhile involved trawling through dusty natural history sections at the backs of Dublin bookshops, and many, indeed most of these shops are sadly gone. But of course the internet has opened up possibilities that were unheard of in my earlier days, so it is possible to track down most of the titles mentioned here.

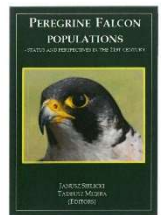


Oddly enough, I don't think there is an out-and-out monograph on training the peregrine specifically, apart from maybe *Gamehawk* by Ray Turner, which is a book that I have to admit I don't have. If anyone

knows differently, let me know! One of the books mentioned in the following piece are a general peregrine-interest rather than falconry-specific, of course.

should probably start with *The Peregrine Falcon* by Derek Ratcliffe, which while not a falconry book, is a monograph in the proper sense and is an extremely comprehensive read. Like most of the Poyser range of publications, it is very well researched and referenced. It covers all of the various areas around wild falcons, with interesting chapters on wild breeding, pair formation, hunting and so on. I would strongly recommend it to anyone with an interest in the finer points of wild peregrine behaviour and ecology, and unlike many of the dryer textbooks, it is written in a readable style for the most part.

Speaking of those science-based textbook type volumes, there are three which actually share the same name, funny enough: *Peregrine Falcon Populations* by Slielicki & Mizera, *Peregrine Falcon Populations* by Cade and various USA peregrine fund authors, and *Peregrine Falcon Populations* by Hickey, which is relatively re-



cent, as far as I know.

I think it's fair enough to say that these are for the real enthusiast (or degree student!) only, as they are relatively dense to read and can be quite heavy on statistics. For something with less of a college-thesis style, I would go to some of the more homely reads of which there are quite a few.

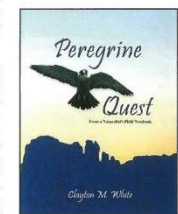
In *Pursuit Of The Peregrine* by Dick Treleven is a really nice book to get hold of, if you get a chance. The author spent a lifetime putting in the hours at various Cornwall coastal eyries and keeping a diary of what he saw. He was also an artist and the book is illustrated with his own very decent sketches and paintings of the falcons that he knew so well. Interestingly, he was an active falconer in his younger days, but apparently he would not keep peregrines, preferring to watch them in the wild only. The book is written with a great affection for his local patch and the peregrines that live there hopefully still:

anyone with an interest in birds generally could enjoy this book.

The same author has another smaller work called *The Private Life Of The Peregrine*, also worth a look. It is a much slighter paperback affair, but is just as good a description of the Cornwall peregrines in their day-to-day life.

Coincidentally, the same part of the world gave rise to yet one more similar volume of observational work called *Dorset Peregrine Watch* by Ed Harwood. It is very similar in approach to the Treleven books, but is not nearly as comprehensive and is based over a much shorter period of time.

Lesser in scale again is *Peregrine Falcons* by Roy Dennis, which is really not much more than a photographic essay.



Moving away from these low-key and very English style works, there are several notable

books out of the USA in recent years. *Peregrine Quest* by Clayton White is typical of the American style, and probably lies between the thesis style of Ratcliffe and the conversational/observational approach of Treleven. White was (and probably still is) an eminent scientist, but the writing is always engaging, and the field notes are fascinating to anyone with more than a passing peregrine fetish like myself.

IHC members will probably be aware of the slew of American titles such as *A Rage For Falcons* by Bodio, *A Fascination For Falcons* by Burnham, or *The Hunting Falcon* by our good friend Bruce Hoak, all of which deal with peregrines to a greater or lesser degree, along with some questionable sub-fiction efforts like *Wings For My Flight* by Houle, but space dictates I'll keep to the ones that suit our specific peregrine theme the most.

Some American books I would go to frequently would be these three: *City Peregrines* by Saul Frank, *Learning To Fly* by P Liotta and *Bolt From The Blue* by Dekker.

*City Peregrines* is a great book about the wild urban falcons of Manhattan, and is based on many years of observation of these birds as they established themselves in entirely new habitat on skyscraper ledges and river bridge structures. Really amazing stuff, and it would provide very specific information for anyone that visit NYC. Highly recommended.

*Learning To Fly* is an account by a USAF fast jet pilot about his

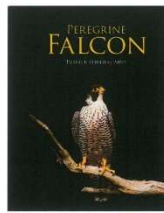
other life with peregrines, both helping at hack sites on the reintroduction projects and as a falconer. He is not the most convincing falconer, and at times the book veers into some odd-philosophical areas, but it is written from an unusual perspective and I enjoyed it.

**Bull From The Blue.** Dick Dekker's book, is a thin paperback which deals in particular with the hunting strategies of wild peregrines, and is interesting for that reason.

The rather comically titled **Stories Of The Blue Meemie** by Anderson is worth a mention too. Despite the awful title, the book is an account of a life spent around the various USA large falcon research and reintroduction projects.

Before leaving the American contributions to the falcon genre, if there is such a thing, I must mention one work of fiction, **Peregrine** by William Bayer is a whodunnit thriller with an exotic sub plot (I'm not joking) about a falconer who trains his bird to murder people by stooping at them and clubbing them on the head, with

fatal consequences. The Hollywood movie can't be far behind. I think we all need this book in our collections!



some seasons spent at a Scottish sea-cliff eyrie during 1910-1912. The photos are taken on primitive glass-plate type equipment which must have been a nightmare to lug to the inaccessible cliff site, and to get the necessary exposures (without the bird moving while being photographed!). It is a testament to the Victorian can-do attitude.

The accurate and detailed field notes still stand up today – there is even a comprehensive list of the prey species delivered to the nest over the nesting season (amusingly, diary entry from May 29, 1912, 2.57pm features a domestic chicken!). By the way, there is a modern reprint of this book available on eBay; don't buy it – it is a really bad-quality facsimile. The original can still be found from time to time.

**The Peregrines Of The Lake District** by Dawson is maybe the oddest book of my collection. It is a small, hardback volume which appears to be an apology for, and a manual on, egg collecting of all things. To this end, it gives a detailed list of the various known falcon

eyries in the Cumbria and Pennines regions, down to their OS map coordinates! It is quite a bizarre book. I can only imagine that it is not generally available, and can't actually remember where I found my copy (I suspect it was privately published). It's a jaw dropper.

**The Peregrine's Saga** by Henry Williamson, famed for *Tarka the Otter*, is Williamson's lesser known fictional work about a peregrine and its dealings with men. It is probably the first book to consider the concept of the urban peregrine too. The prose style is quite dated now, but is still worth a read for what it is. It deserves a special mention for the accompanying Charles Tunnicliffe woodcut illustrations, which are magnificent. (Which prompts me to mention Tunnicliffe's **The Peregrine Sketchbook**, quite often seen discounted in the art section of Dublin bookshops and well worth a punt or two).

can add Emma Ford's succinctly filled **Peregrine**. It's now rare and pricey, though, I was lucky enough to receive it as a significant birthday present from a falconer friend.

Even in the last few weeks, I see yet another book has been released, **The Peregrine Falcon** by P Stirling Aird, proving that the species is continuing to catch readers' and writers' imagination. I've just acquired a copy from Amazon but haven't got around to reading it yet, I'm afraid.



The falcon and fierce gentle continue to inspire the writing of hefty pieces of literature, and some of the more recent additions to the canon of work are sumptuous and much sought after, not to mention expensive.

Many books have already been published about the efforts made to help the decimated wild American falcon population since the fifties. Tom Cade and Bill Burnham, both synonymous with that initiative, have recently published **Return Of The Peregrine**, a large and impressive volume summarising that work and its success. If your coffee table is big enough, you

All of the books I have mentioned are interesting in their own way, and anyone with an interest in falcons and falconry could while away an hour reading any of them. But if I could leave you with one book from all of them, it would be **The Peregrine** by J.A. Baker.

This isn't a falconry manual or even a species monograph as such, but as a lyrical description

of time spent trying to get a glimpse of a wild animal, and to get close to what is ultimately inspiring about these raptors, you will not find a better work. It is as close to proper literature as a book about falcons can be.

I first read it when I was a lot younger than I am now. I remember as a kid, it was the only book about falcons I could find in my local library, and it also just so happened to be a literary masterpiece too. I still go back to this book and it still gets close to the essence of what it is to see falcons fly in a clear sky.

### Review a book

Has your day been saved by a trusty piece of text, or do you find some are not worthy of the hype they get?

Tell the rest of your club your verdict on a falconry book, old or new, and why you think it does or doesn't deserve to live in every member's bookcase.

hylwhite@gmail.com

I remember as a kid, it was the only book about falcons I could find in my local library, and it also happened to be a literary masterpiece. I still go back to this book and it still gets close to the essence of what it is to see falcons fly in a clear sky

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## Falconry: 4000 Years Of A Hunting Art

IAF Executive Secretary Gary Timbrell, Co Cork

Why is Brussels important to falconers? All falconers, falconers from all over the world? In every international convention that affects falconry – CITES, the Bern Convention, the Bird Directive and all the rest, the EU votes as a block; 27 individual votes all voting the same way. It also influences the votes of neighbouring and peripheral non-EU countries, for example Switzerland and Turkey. It is also a fact that almost every bill of legislation of the past 30 years that affects falconry and falconers has originated in an EU state (frequently the UK, although many UK falconers like to blame the EU as if they weren't in it). This is why IAF likes to act like the Skibbereen Eagle and keep its eye on things.

Falconers from 18 countries gathered with EU decision-makers at the European Parliament in Brussels to launch a unique exhibition: IAF and FACE (European Federation for Hunting and Conservation) joined with European Parliament's Sustainable Hunting Intergroup President, Véronique Mathieu and MEP Bogdan Marcinkiewicz who hosted an internationally themed visual display in this, the very heart of Europe. It was a huge opportunity for falconers and other conservationists to meet with EU decision-makers and for the MEPs to meet falconers and to gain an understanding of falconry.

The purpose behind the event was to show to Members of the European Parliament and officials the international and cultural aspects of falconry. The principle behind our efforts towards UNESCO recognition for falconry has been that it is easy to be anti-sport, but much harder to be anti-culture. The event continued the celebrations around the UNESCO inscription and followed on from a lower key reception in Strasbourg in 2011 the EU Parliament sits for six months in Strasbourg and six months in Brussels. Every MEP, all 742, was invited to visit the four-day exhibition and to the inaugural reception which included refreshments. VIPs from UNESCO, national embassies, NGOs and hunters' organizations also attended as well as delegates from IAF member organizations who received their invitations from Mme Mathieu.

Entry to the EU Parliament building is by invitation of a MEP and secure access badge, authorized well in advance, so there was no general 'off-the-street' access, but large number of visitors to the European Parliament deliberately made falconry part of their tour. 450 people were served drinks and fine game meat from Poland (provided by MEP Marcinkiewicz) at the opening and an average daily footfall of 200 people came through the exhibition.

This unique international exhibition

from the 6th-9th November, brought together displays of images, falconry equipment, tools, books and historical artifacts to convey the deep artistry at the heart of our global cultural heritage. There was a photo opportunity for the MEPs and officials with falcons and hawks of the Club Marie de Bourgogne outside the main entrance of the European Parliament, Place du Luxembourg. This majestic sight was accompanied by opening fanfares of traditional jaghorn blowers of the Czech Republic and the Trompes du Duché de Limbourg serenaded the guests as they left.

Jac van Gerven, curator of the Valkenwaard Falconry Museum in Holland, gave a demonstration of orison hood-making and a short film *Falconry Our Intangible Living Heritage* offered an outline of the UNESCO-recognized heritage to the assembled MEPs and guests. French MEP Véronique Mathieu and Polish MEP Bogdan Marcinkiewicz gave the inaugural address and were joined by the Parliament's President of the Culture & Education Committee, Doris Pack, Avv. Giovanni Bonas, Vice-president FACE IACE Secretary-General Angus Middleton and IAF President Frank Bond also addressed the assembly.

Special derogations were granted for the numbers attending the



opening (usually exhibition openings are limited to 50 people) and for entry of fauna into the European Parliament Building. This is truly exceptional and the dispensation was granted directly by the President of the European Parliament; such is the high esteem carried by the UNESCO recognition of falconry as Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

In her opening speech, Mme Mathieu stressed the importance of hunting and hawking at the present time. Angus Middleton,

Secretary FACE thanked Frank Bond for his achievements over the past six years in the IAF and Frank, as the official representative of falconry, pointed out the benefits of falconers in the great birds of prey protection projects being carried out e.g., the reintroduction of the peregrine, in Poland, the free-nesting project in Poland, conducted in cooperation with German falconers and praised the efforts of Austria and Hungary who would shortly add their falconry to the UNESCO lists of intangible heritage.

It was a huge opportunity for EU decision-makers and MEPs to meet falconers and to gain an understanding of falconry

This was certainly the most successful event I have been involved with in the 12 years of working in IAF. There was not one single negative remark from any of the MEPs or visitors who passed through and it even made the EU Parliament's Facebook page (yes, there is one) with several hundred positive comments and 'likes'. At last, falconry is normal.

## IAF Committee News and message from newly appointed IAF president Dr Adrian Lombard



**I and the other national delegates around the world, recently received this message from newly appointed IAF President, Dr Adrian Lombard, South Africa. Ed**

Dear Delegate,

It is nearly six years since I set up these groups as a

means of communicating with the members of the IAF. The past six years have been an incredible journey, both for the IAF and for myself.

Under the leadership of Frank Bond, the IAF has increased in size by another 50%, whilst it has grown in stature as a truly international NGO representing the interests and aspirations of Falconers from all over the

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(L-R) Outgoing IAF President Frank Bond, President Elect Dr Adrian Lombard, Vice President for the Americas Ralph Rogers, VP for Europe Dr Thomas Reiter, VP for Asia, Africa and Oceania Babyl Kantakbayeva, Advisory Council Chairman Dr Bohumil Straka

Globe. We are represented on a number of international forums and are developing as an effective voice for Falconers.

For my part, serving as Executive Secretary of the IAF has been an experience that has transformed my life. I have met people and made friends, gone to places and seen things that I never dreamed would be possible. In the process, I have learned a great deal about falconry, conservation, heritage, law and politics and I trust that these insights will help to guide and direct me in the years ahead.

With the New Year comes a change in the leadership of the IAF. This is a real change with new faces occupying most of the leadership positions. Nevertheless, the old leadership will be retained to provide guidance and continuity for the future. There are also a number of members who are completely new to the leadership of our organization to bring us energy and enthusiasm with new ideas. The future promises to be both exciting and challenging. We are looking to institute the business plan with the establishment of a permanent professional office and foundations to create sustainable funding for the IAF and its projects. There is much work to be done and we shall be calling on you to assist.

I would like to thank you, all, for your support and encouragement. With the elections behind us, we will all work together for the good of our organization, our Art and our passion for Falconry.

Please allow me to wish you all, with your families and the falconers whom you represent, the very best for Christmas and the New Year.

Dr Adrian Lombard, IAF President Elect

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assembly through the official process. We also seized the chance and added new members to our falconry world. I must say that all the presentations of the applicants were truly amazing.

One of the things that I have to mention is that the next year IAF AGM will be held in Holland. This will be more approachable to European falconers and I really can't wait to see can the Netherlands beat what the USA did this year. During this event, in all of the rooms where the fal-



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Meanwhile, Dr. Lombard announced his recommendations for the other officers and the rest of the Advisory Committee; the Council of Delegates announced their consent. The new Executive-Secretary will be Gary Timbrell (Ireland) and the Treasurer remains António Carapuço (Portugal).

The new Advisory Committee will include, in addition to these officers: Dr. Bohumil Straka (Czech Rep) Chairman and with special responsibility for UN-ESCO matters; Véronique Blotrock (Belgium) Public Relations Officer; Zayed Al Madeed (Qatar) with special responsibilities in the Gulf States; Dan Cecchini (USA) database; Professor Matt Gage (UK) science; Majid Al Mansouri (UAE); Janusz Sielicki (Poland) conservation; Yukio Asaoka (Japan) with special responsibilities in far eastern countries; Dr Laço Molnar (Slovakia) veterinary matters; Fernando Féas (Spain) with special responsibilities in Latin America.

Dr Lombard also announced his intention to extend their number with non-voting members chosen for their specialist skills: Frank Bond (USA) General Counsel to IAF; Patrick Morel (Belgium) Brussels Counsel; Dr. Javier Ceballos (Spain) ethics; Pete Rodas (USA) database support; Anthony Crosswell (UK) journal editor; Alexander Prinz (Germany) European Transparency Register; Dianne Moller (USA) women's working group; Adrian Reuter (Mexico) CITES; Keiya Nakajima (Japan) science and conservation; Jevgeni Shergalin (Estonia) Information Officer; Frits Kleyn (Netherlands) arts and culture; Patrizia Cimberio (Italy) website support.

(extract from IAF Newsletter)

coners were meeting, there was an exhibition of panels dedicated to 4000 years of falconry cultural heritage. The author of the panels is Patrizia Camberio.

The last day was topped with a banquet – delicious food in the company of great falconers. What else can a man ask for? The speech of each of the presenters was touching and funny. Now the only thing to wish is that next year in Holland there will be even more falconers.

## A Short report on NAFA Meet and IAF AGM in Kearney, USA

By Tomislav Cvar, Croatia



I was Saturday when I landed in Kearney. I was lucky enough that the Qatar representatives were on the same flight from Denver with me, otherwise I would have been kind of lost in USA! They had a person waiting at arrivals for them and after landing it was only few seconds when they started talking about falcons – that blew their cover! I squeezed into the van with them and went to check-in to the hotel.

The hotel was a nice place with very hospitable staff. I had no problem with getting anything from day one. I was sharing my room with Jonas Toth, the Hungarian representative. I liked that since I have learned from my business colleagues a nice collection of nasty and dirty Hungarian words that I had

no problem to present to my newly formed friend!

On Sunday morning, I visited the reception desk and registered for the NAFA and IAF meetings. That is where I met Cathy, a cheerful lady who had more life than some 19-year-old girls. The fun started. I was lagged and supplied with load of welcome gifts.

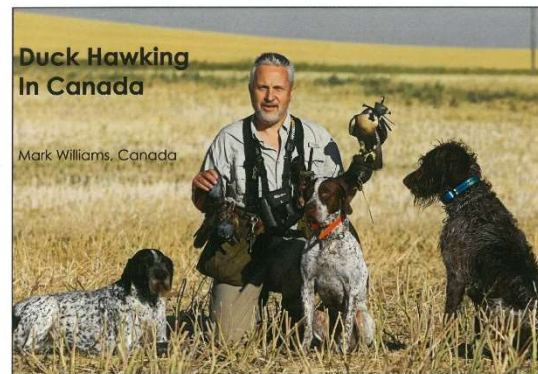
On Sunday evening, the NAFA meet was begun. It was my first time in the USA and all the people talking in the accent of Hollywood movies was unreal. There were plans made for tomorrow's hawking and trapping.

Being a longwinger, I hoped to see some of the falcon action. But the chance

twisted my plans and I ended up with Deanna Sischo Curtis and Sylvia Benlich Redling. The ladies were flying Red-tails. I have never thought much of these birds, actually I looked down on them, thinking that they are clumsy and slow. It was a new experience to me. On the days to come, I saw Red-tails fly better in the woods, through branches and in the open than many goshawks that I have seen, back home and here. Great birds.

Later in the week, the IAF AGM took place. A lot of people came earlier and we had a great time before the actual official business began. During the AGM, we had to choose new leadership. The AGM had a nice report from former president Frank Bond, who led the

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## Duck Hawking In Canada

Mark Williams, Canada

Unlike most parts of the UK where I used to live, the terrain and conditions in many parts of North America are very conducive to duck hawking. As a result, it is widely practiced in North America, and they have it down to a fine art. In northern Alberta, Canada, we have very little in the way of upland game flying so ducks are the mainstay of our longwing hawking.

The season starts on September 1st and utilizing CITES 107-day migratory game bird season, it goes until December 15th. However, the freeze-up comes well before and all the ducks fly south except for a few flocks of mallard that winter here on the large open water near the warm water run-off from the local power stations. While the season is relatively short, the abundance of ducks, suitable land to fly and ease of access to fly, all con-

tribute to some pretty awesome and intense duck hawking.

### Species of Ducks

Most of the hawking I practiced in the UK was with Goshawks, and to try some duck hawking was a rare treat usually only found at a fieldmeal or such. Water birds such as coots and moorhens were common Goshawk prey but not really that challenging. Except for the mallard, I never really studied the different species of ducks we had in the UK so I am unable to make comparisons. Here in Canada, we classify the ducks into two main categories, these being puddle ducks and divers.

Each of the different species of duck has their own behavioural characteristics that make for a variety of flights even under the same conditions and terrain. The

best types of ducks to fly are the bigger "puddle" ducks such as the mallards, gadwalls, pintail, widgeon and the slightly smaller shoveller. Of all these, the gadwall seems to be the most fearless and clean-flying duck. Either that or they are just plain stupid! Once they leave a body of water they don't re-enter but keep on going in an attempt to find another body of water. Because of this trait they are ideal for a young hawk to fly since they give the inexperienced bird a clean shot at catching it. Mallards are in my experience the strongest and fastest flyers. They do an occasional turn back to water if hard-pressed and only rarely bail out under a falcon. The pintail is a duck I have never caught. They are usually seen passing through my area in the return migration during springtime but rarely breed here, choosing to go fur-

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ther north instead. They are seldom caught because they are usually the last duck to flush allowing the other ducks to go first and draw the falcon while they pop out the back door so to speak.

The three species of teal (green-wing, bluewing and cinnamon) are the smallest puddle ducks. They can be exasperating to fly since they are often difficult to flush in the first place and once airborne are prone to 'bailing out' under a stooping falcon. In the past, I have had to wade into water past my knees in an attempt to serve my falcon and sometimes one's dog can grab a reluctant duck in the water that won't flush under the falcon. Contrary to many falconers' perceptions, a teal's flight is quite slow even though those wings are flapping like crazy. The best bird to fly at these species of small ducks is a Tiercel Peregrine as the teal seem less intimidated by its presence high above and are less inclined to dump under it.

The diving ducks (ruddy duck and buffhead etc), are the most difficult to flush and in my opinion the least sporting to catch. The only time I have caught these diving ducks is when they flush with the main flock in the initial flush and then they are 'dead in the air'. Their powers of flight are not as good as the bigger ducks, much like the coots or 'mudhens' as they are often referred to here. The joke amongst local falconers is that if you catch one, it counts as a negative head count on your quarry list!

#### Hawks Used

The most commonly used birds for duck hawking here are the

Peregrine (falcon and tiercel), Prairie Falcon, Gyr hybrids and least of all the pure Gyr. The big birds, like female Gyrs and female hybrids thereof, tend to intimidate even the big ducks and flushing can be a problem. Contrary to some perceptions, some of the best duck hawks I have seen have been the smaller Peregrine tiercels. The ducks seem less intimidated by them and flush nicely under them. Again generalising here, most tiercels are naturally high flyers and so the combination makes for some spectacular flights. My tiercel Anatum Peregrine GB flew at 550g (1lb.3oz) and he caught as many mallards as he did teal and gadwalls. He was probably the best bird I have flown to date. In his second season he caught 31 head in 43 days of hunting! Admittedly, one has to be prepared to get in quickly and help them out where as the bigger females subdue big ducks much easier. While I do not condone flying big ducks with small tiercels, these little birds have big hearts and even though there may be smaller ducks in the fleeing flock, their confidence level can be so high that sometimes they just go for it! Sadly, this also can be their undoing as was in GB's case. A bad leg injury from a high-speed impact with quarry resulted in an early retirement for this courageous little bird.

#### The Set-Ups

The great thing about duck hawking here is that it is very much a spectator's sport. The flight starts and usually ends very close to the falconer. If one has an experienced bird flying ducks it can make for some great flying that a non-falconer can come and witness (e.g. landowners). Most of our set-ups, as we refer to

them, are sloughs or large ponds that are dispersed around the countryside in any good year. Occasionally, we get dry years that can make for difficult duck hawking but it is still very good by European standards. It means you have 30 locations to choose from instead of 60! To any visitor from the UK or Europe, the abundance of game and space to fly is always a topic of conversation. Trying to fly large rivers or marshes is futile as the ducks are nearly always able to put back in. The best set ups are small dug-outs or sloughs. Large bodies of water consisting of several acres are fine providing the ducks are in sufficient numbers to encourage a flush. It is often over the big water that you see your falcon go real high since they need a good pitch to cover their 'killing cone'. Flying field ducks is another option and can make for some pretty spectacular flights.

#### Approach

Compared to hawking grouse, duck hawking is almost an armchair sport. We drive around looking for suitable set ups and when we find such a flight we simply pull over, careful not to park in view of the ducks. It is advisable to seek landowner permission in advance if possible. I have never had a problem gaining permission and in the area that I live I am fortunate to have numerous areas covering several hundred acres that I am able to fly. Once telemetry is checked, the falcon is unhooded and cast off. At this point we unload the dogs from the truck while the bird takes a pitch. It is often wise to have a dog or two to help flush or at the very least a few medium sized stones in your pocket to throw if needed. Once the hawk is over the water and gaining al-

I find pitch varies depending upon the individual bird, the size of water and type of set up. Most hawks can kill ducks from anything over 150-200ft. Of course we all want to see the blistering teardrop from the heavens and a nice knock down

itude, the ducks are very reluctant to flush. That said, some ducks get jumpy if hunted a lot and flush easily. As with any set-up, wind direction is a big consideration. The ducks will nearly always flush into wind although often will turn downwind if the flush is orchestrated well. After a few duck flights, an inexperienced bird will learn to wait on above the water and slightly up wind.

#### Flushing

While the falcon is climbing, we discreetly walk into position to flush the ducks, remaining out of their sight if possible. The dogs are held back until the appropriate moment when the hawk is in position and then we send them in to make for a clean flush. I used to use a German Wire-haired and a German Short-haired Pointer for this purpose but in recent years, with more upland hawking, I run one wirehair and one English pointer. They are very adaptable for flushing and pointing as the situation demands and both do well in water and flushing although the wirehair is much more hardier in cold weather. It is always important to get the ducks to flush cleanly, otherwise the falcon pulls out of the stoop as the straggler ducks get up and put back into water. More often

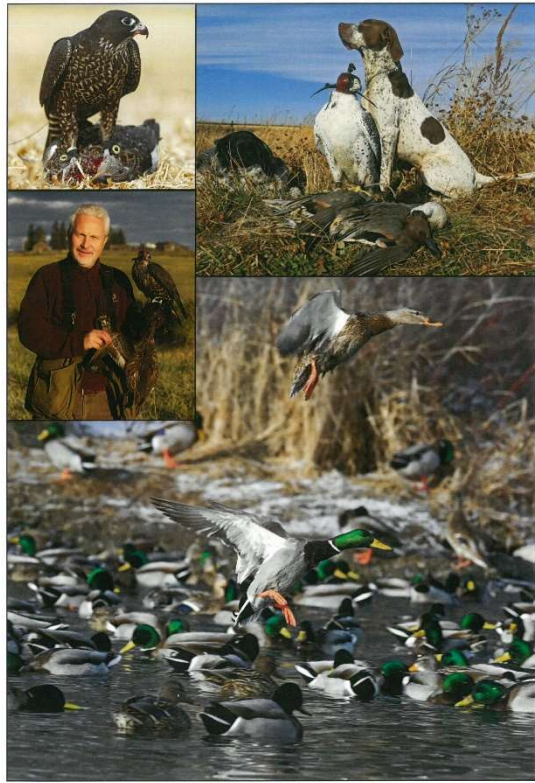
than not, while the hawk is low and in the process of regaining its pitch the odd duck will panic and make a run for it and then the flight turns into a tail chase or rat hunt etc. Although often successful, the aesthetics of the flight is soured as a result. At this point, I think it is appropriate to mention pitch. I find this varies depending upon the individual bird, the size of water and type of set up. Most hawks can kill ducks from anything over 150-200ft. Of course we all want to see the blistering teardrop from the heavens and a nice knock down. In reality I find the falcon decides the pitch based upon previous experience, terrain and the circumstances, much like they decide to bird or till on any given duck flight. My birds take different pitches on different set-ups. Sometimes they are too high and by the time they get down the ducks have left the country or worse still made it to another body of water. I tend to recognize when my bird has reached its pitch for any given flight set-up.

#### Hazards

Due to the ever increasing population of the countryside and livestock farming practices, fences and wires are the most common hazards falconers have to be

concerned with. Many of us have had the misfortune to have experienced, or know of someone who has experienced, the often-fatal consequence that a run-in with a power line or fence can have. Even when you go to lengths to avoid fences, the flight can go wrong and a subsequent tail chase ends in tragedy. Even as I write this article, I recently lost a fine tiercel Peregrine to a thin electric wire fence, while another friend lost his Prairie Falcon to a high-voltage power pole. Other natural hazards we have to consider in these parts are coyotes, hared and snowy owls, redtails and eagles. All are opportunists and have caused the death of many a bird, particularly when on the kill. I have had a coyote run in on my falcon while she is trying to dispatch a duck that she had just caught. Being used to any dogs proved near fatal for her. Luckily I was there just in time.

Falconry to me is a real life drama. It is about living on the edge, particularly for our birds. The best birds are confident and bold and push it to the limit. That is why they are so successful. They fly 'on the edge' all the time and sadly, this is also why if flown often and long enough, it increases the chances of them meeting with a



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violent and sudden demise. When I slip I never know what is in store for her, however I try to prepare for it. If I was not prepared, I would not fly her and to own a hawk and not fly it for fear of losing it, is a travesty. All we can do as partners in this natural drama is to try our best to exercise good judgement and balance the risks to reduce the opportunity for Murphy's Law to raise its ugly head.

opportunities for duck flights in a day than for sharp-tail grouse or huns. This makes for a more social day's hawking with a group of friends. While sharp-tail grouse are probably a greater challenge and match for a falcon, for sheer fun, enjoyment and close-quarter flying, you can't beat a good day's duck hawking in my humble opinion.

Photography by Mark Williams

Like many falconers here, I find duck hawking great fun. Depending where you live, you can usually get far more



some of the best duck hawks I have seen have been the smaller Peregrine tiercels. The ducks seem less intimidated by them and flush nicely under them. Most tiercels are naturally high flyers and so the combination makes for some spectacular flights

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## Musings on Art, Falconry and Al Ain

Shay O'Byrne, Co Wicklow

It all began when I entered a couple of paintings to the 2nd International Falconry Festival Art Competition in Al Ain. Little did I know that an adventure lay ahead of me. A few months later I was delighted to receive the news that one of the paintings had been short-listed for the competition, and that I would be sponsored by the organisers to attend the festival which was held between December 11th and 18th, 2011.

The trip to the United Arab Emirates was pure magic. Every-

great to meet with Eoghan Ryan, Sean Woods, Terry Turkington and Neal Carroll for breakfast. They had all arrived the previous evening and we had a lot of catching up to do. I was now excited about the coming days and nights.

There were many events during the week-long festival, which was shared between the desert camp at Ramah at the beginning and then at the festival site at Al-Jahill Fort in the city of Al Ain, where the art

ture and Heritage, and the Emirates Falconers Club.

The Art and Photography Exhibition consisted of work selected from open submission by artists and photographers from around the world, the theme, naturally, being falconry and birds of prey. There were a number of different categories such as

hawking, portrait, human, flight, quarry, etc, with a first prize to be adjudicated in each category. The exhibitions were held in two separate marquee-style tents, set up with white

falconry requires discipline, patience, a willingness to learn, a keen sense of awareness, good observational skills, and a close bond with nature – all similar attributes to being an artist

thing was laid on for us, from airport transfers, transport, hotel, food, etc. With so many guests from all over the world to be catered for, it must have been a logistical nightmare for Nick Fox and Mary Lobb to organise, so congratulations to them and the whole team for an excellent job.

The flight over with Etihad Airways was excellent, and they were also very good about transporting a large wooden crate with my congratulatory message. With wooden box and all, I arrived exhausted at the hotel on the Sunday morning so it was

and photography exhibitions were held.

Activities included hunting with falcons on camels at the desert camp, falcon racing (where Sean Woods and myself were interviewed for local TV), saluki racing, conferences, workshops, falconry displays, art and photography exhibitions, and finally culminating in the Grand Parade of Nations with more than 75 countries represented. It was a truly international event, hosted by His Highness Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of the UAE, the Abu Dhabi Authority for Cul-

walls and spotlights, just two of the numerous tents and temporary buildings that graced the festival site at Al-Jahill Fort.

At the Art Exhibition, it was really interesting to see how artists interpreted the brief for the competition, how they tackled their subject matter through a variety of disciplines such as drawing, painting, sculpture, or traditional crafts. The resulting work was very mixed, as one might expect in any group exhibition, with some very strong figurative work and some not so. In my opinion, some of the paintings were per-

haps too like photographs, too illustrative and flat looking, though most were academically well executed. I usually prefer looser, more painterly work. I remember a small, very small piece of a mallard made of feathers collaged on board, a rather quirky piece. Names that stick out are Alison Wilson, an English artist who had a lovely small oil painting of a falconer on horseback, and a German artist, Cema Goubabeek, with beautifully painted gyrfalcon and peregrine paintings arranged in unusual staggered compositions. Some of the sculpture work was excellent, in particular Kate Faulkner's large, bold, expressive golden eagle in bronze, and the piece by sculptor Carolyn Morton, both of whom also had trade stands at the festival.

The Photography Exhibition was also very exciting, with a great selection of falconry and bird of prey subjects from photographers all over the world, including breeding, trapping, climbing to nest sites, with some excellent shots of wild raptors nesting and hunting too.

An international panel of judges selected the winners which were announced on the Thursday evening at a special prizegiving ceremony. I will remember the excitement and anticipation among the exhibitors beforehand. As we waited, there was a great bit of chatter about who might win, and it was wonderful to meet artists of different nationalities and cultural backgrounds. I couldn't believe when it was announced that I had won first prize for my painting *Surprise Encounter* of a peregrine on a pheasant in the Quarry Category. I was over the moon! The lads back at the IHC tent were delighted for me, needless to say there were a few celebrations that night, and that's all we'll say about that!

Both exhibitions were well attended, and were even visited

by members of the royal family. The work was generally well received, and provoked discussion between visitors and artists alike on technique, inspiration, and other opportunities. It reminded me of that expression, bankers talk about art (maybe not as much now) while artists talk about money. As mentioned, a number of the artists had trade stands at the festival which also attracted a lot of interest. Business I believe was fairly quiet though. Perhaps visitors came specifically to see the falconry displays and to purchase falconry equipment rather than artwork. Having met some of the artists and visitors, there was generally very good feedback on the art on display, which can only broaden and enrich our cultural experience.

Though most of what little falconry art I have seen over my life are reproductions, one of my favourites is George E Lodge, a master who painted and drew from life. I first came across his work in Gerald Lascelles book *The Art Of Falconry* where his illustrations fired me as a boy and a young falconer. The one of a sparrowhawk on a bowperch was indelibly imprinted on me. There are some excellent temporary falconry/wildlife artists such as Andrew Ellis. However, I feel there a number who are just good illustrators, whose work can lack feeling and emotion. I believe with all good painting, including the genre of falconry, the artist has to be true to himself in attempting to capture what he feels about his chosen subject, through composition, line, and colour, in maintaining the freshness and urgency that inspired him in the first place. Sometimes, a five minute sketch from life can have more resonance than a work slavishly worked on for months.

As a painter, exhibiting now for

over 30 years, my love of the countryside, nature, wild places, birds and falconry, have been hugely inspirational in the development of my work. I have often discovered the less obvious or neglected aspects of the landscape that can trigger a starting point for the work. When painting is a constant pull and tug, through mixing colours, adding layers of paint and removing them, in a struggle to attempt to capture what I want to say about the subject. There is always the problem of knowing when to stop, which is of paramount importance for the painting to work: one stroke of the brush can ruin a good painting. It's a constant knife edge to get it right, not unlike the art and practice of falconry itself. To quote Robert Henri from his exceptional book *The Art Spirit* on the subject of the artist and painting: 'He who has contemplated has met with himself, is in a state to see into the realities beyond the surface of the subject. Nature reveals to him, and, seeing and feeling intensely, he paints, and whether he wills it or not, each brush stroke is an exact record of such as he was at that exact moment the stroke was made.' He also says 'the amount of artists and good beautiful or ugly, the beauty is in the work itself.' Wise words, indeed.

What really struck me at the Festival was the huge amount of artists and photographers who were also falconers. To practice it well, falconry usually requires discipline, patience, a willingness to learn, a keen sense of awareness, good observational skills, particularly in the field, and a close bond with nature – all similar attributes to being an artist. It's possibly an innate thing, and that through visual art it's just another means of expressing the things we love such as nature, falconry, and the wild places of this world.



Reports  
International Festival of Falconry, 2011, Al Ain  
Abu Dhabi Falcon Hospital Visit by Sean Woods  
Racing Falcons and Salukis by Terry Turkington

In the days just before the opening of the International Festival of Falconry in Al Ain, Terry Turkington, Shay O'Byrne, Neal Carroll and myself went for a visit to the world's first falcon hospital. We were very privileged at the opportunity as we later discovered that tours are not usually open to the public but they had arranged with the festival to allow a number of small groups. We were greeted at a large statue of a falcon overlooking the reception area of the site. As we entered the reception, we noticed two local guys watching TV while their falcons were sitting on a few perches in the centre of the room. That's a walling room I wouldn't mind waiting in!

After everyone had got through the doors, we were greeted by the hospital's founder, Margit Gabriele Muller. She took us into what could only be described as small museum of Arab Falconry. The room had all kinds of stuff, including a lot of information regarding the conservation of birds of prey and their prey

species. It was at this stage of the tour that we saw a falcon passport. Due to the UAE prohibiting falconry (except during this festival), falconers here must travel to nearby countries such as Pakistan or Morocco to hunt with their birds. With this passport, they can travel as cabin passengers in the Arab airlines. The passport included every detail you could imagine about the bird, expect a photo!

Margit then took us into the examination room where we saw various kinds of falcons hooded and perched, ready for general checks. During the time we were there we got to see two falcons anaesthetised and given a routine check, which included blood samples, imping, coping and general body inspection. We then got another walk around the site and got a peek into the surgery rooms, but were unable to enter them.

The final part of our tour brought us into the moulting pen. This was an extremely

large enclosure where falconers paid to leave their birds to moult. The enclosure was hexagonal, with two open boxes at each end. These boxes had a number of perches that were situated below air conditioning systems, something that is definitely essential during the hottest times of the year out there. The enclosure gave the birds the opportunity to be at fat weight and also fly around and get plenty of exercise. This resulted in the birds coming out of the moult not only needing less fitness training, but also the birds seem to moult faster as they are in a fitter condition. The visit to the moulting pen concluded our tour of the hospital and it really showed what Western vets can aim towards.

On our first day at the desert camp, Sean and Eoghan went hunting on camels so Neal and I decided to go saluki racing as I have done a lot of dog racing



at home I was very keen to see how the Arabs did it. We got on the coach and travelled a couple of miles up the road to a racing track for both camels and salukis. The camels had raced earlier, with small robotic jockeys whipping them round an oval sand track, the straight being over 1500m long. It had a tarmac road the whole way round the inside and outside. The lure was a stuffed gazelle on a crane about 5m long out the side of a Toyota pick-up truck.

Just like at home, the dogs took a bit of time to get organised into groups but this is where it started to differ. It was 25 dogs in each race, compared to our six per race – no wonder it started later! Eventually we were ready to start. The pick-up started to go with a 50m head-start. Suddenly, the dogs were released by the handlers. The sand was flying from their hocks! Then it got more exciting and quite scary as the Arabs ran to their 4x4 jeeps and took off up the outside of the track at speed, with horns blowing and shouting out the windows at the dogs. It was sort of dangerous for the pedestrians, as Neal and I found out! We got closer to the barrier at the side of the track.

During the second race, a kind local offered us a lift in his jeep. We accepted his offer as the

race was so long we could only see a certain amount of it and in the jeep we could follow the race the whole way. It was a white 4500 cc off road cruiser with three black salukis in the boot. The back seat headrest had chunks of foam hanging out of them where the excited salukis had ripped them. The falconer pulled in at the head of the jeeps and started the flashing lights and sirens and joined in! It was filming out the side window as we went 30-40mph when something shot over my shoulder. It was a saluki from our boot which proceeded into the front and tried to get out the driver's window to join the race! The driver caught it round the neck and just carried on driving. It was the most adrenaline-fuelled race I have ever seen, and there were five in total that day.

The falcon racing was more of a time trial. It was, I would say, a 300-400m straight line to a falconer swinging a lure. There was a device like a speed trap at each end which measured the length of time it took the bird to complete the course. Most of the falcons and falconers were Gysr or Gyr/Saker/Peregrine hybrids. It was a two-day event so there was hundreds of contestants competing for prizes of a car and lots of





## Red Grouse Hawking

Matt Gage, England

In the early 1980's, falconry was practised by a tiny minority in Britain and Ireland. Most of us with a fierce desire for the art had to connect through literature or bird-watching, and I spent many an hour watching wild raptors on Rathlin Island off Antrim, my original family home.

For me, the ultimate falconry dream had to be hunting high-flying peregrines over an English pointer of red grouse. In post-DOT Britain, getting hold of a buzzard to fly was enough of a challenge, let alone a noble peregrine, so I resigned my pipe dream to the bottom drawer (labelled 'sheer fantasy'). But then things got better through the 1990's. Wild raptor populations began to recover, captive breeding took off, equipment and knowledge became more accessible, and it started to seem possible to practice falconry to a good standard in conjunction with other less eccentric activities, like having a job or a family. I played hard with peregrines on the low ground, started an English pointer, and made plans to turn my grouse dream into reality. In 2000, I visited northern Scotland with a couple of friends, one of whom was an experienced grouse fanatic, and we dabbled on a couple of small patches of heather, and even saw one or two grouse. Despite the lack of game

and shortness of time, I was hooked on the opportunities that were there, and returned to the balmie south with a gameplan in my head. After doing a lot of detective work and writing many letters of enquiry to landowners, I was fortunate enough to be offered a let on a moor in Cairnness, right in the heart of gamehawking Flow country at the very top of Scotland. I've returned to this very special place every year since, and also been lucky enough to enjoy extra opportunities through the season on some 'Falkshire' moors. There is always more to learn and discover in falconry, but here are some thoughts and experiences, learnt through thick and thin, from chasing good sport with peregrines over English pointers of red grouse.

Ireland has a stock of red grouse, but it has declined considerably and many remnant populations are vulnerable. The big survey completed in 2008 estimated there to be 4200 adult birds in the Republic, a 50% decline in range and number over the previous 40 years (<http://www.npws.ie/publications/ris/wildlife/manuals/IWM50.pdf>). The main cause of the decline is grouse habitat erosion and loss, driven by EU subsidies for sheep farming and forestry leading to overgrazing or conifer-planting. Although we have suffered losses in grouse numbers across many

areas, declines in Britain are far less severe, and it is notable that shooting income has led to the conservation of good grouse habitat and healthy populations on many moors. I would say that Ireland has great potential to improve in grouse numbers, because suitable habitat is widespread from the South to the North. Management practices that really work are well established, but it takes the appropriate incentives, such as the possibility to enjoy a sustainable harvest, maybe through 'falconry'. Let's hope this improves into the future as politicians appreciate the importance of sustainable hunting for conservation, and grouse hawking takes off a bit, like it has for snipe, in Ireland.

### Finding A Moor

Ask most lairds why they own and run a grouse moor, and the answer will be quite low on the list: they mostly do it for love, not money. People who maintain and run grouse moors for sport are the unsung - often bad-mouthed - heroes of conservation of the British uplands, a unique habitat in its own right. Numerous studies have clearly shown that grouse management is greatly beneficial for other upland specialist species, which have all been lost on those estates, turned over to forestry or heavier grazing. Indeed, the North

York Moors National Park have recognised this formally by entering into a formal Wildlife Enhancement Scheme agreement with the British Falconers' Club Yorkshire region to allow a patch of heather moorland to be managed both for conservation and falconry. The syndicate have improved Levisham moor for upland wildlife and for hawking grouse, and there is now a small but huntable head of grouse being enjoyed. This agreement has been a defining success, showing how low-impact hunting is entirely congruent with conservation of biodiversity and unique habitat. This sort of 'arrangement' could work extremely well in Ireland too.

In general, therefore, it's not simply a case of buying your way into a moor with a fat wallet. In my experience, Highland keepers and lairds are pretty particular people who care a great deal about good behaviour and etiquette on and off the moor. Falconers have a steeper hill to climb here into favour, because raptors are not generally popular on grouse moors. Some lairds and keepers are informed and open-minded, and our laird has played a driving role in keeping traditional Flow country grouse hawking alive. But in general, it's hard to find a good let, and it means that falconers actually on grouse moors (and beyond) have a responsibility to fly the flag of good sport and behaviour. It only takes one or two bad apples for the word to spread quickly about what 'falconers' get up to, and news of misbehaviour travels very fast up there. You might think that in the open expanses of heather moorland, there isn't much opportunity for misbehaviour, but much of the upland sporting culture is

built around rigorous cooperation between estates, and a view towards sustainability in the longer term. Because of this, practices like greedy bag-filling, unsporting behaviour to the quarry, straying over marches, racing on the hill tracks, errant hawks and dogs, disrespect to the accommodation, are just a few of the things that vex the protectors of the grouse and traditional Highland sport. Our laird has actually descended with his cheque book on (shouting) micro-ants, provided a refund, and sent them packing.

So the first thing to realise is that it's difficult, but not impossible, to find a grouse moor that will allow falconry. If you manage to locate a moor with a possible agreement to you for falconry, what should you look out for? Naturally, you will be interested in the grouse population, and this will depend on whether you're happy to walk out

enough grouse for a hawking let, the birds could still be very jumpy and difficult to manage for nice flights off a point. Enlightened estate owners will realise that falconers take much much smaller bags than guns, and create less disturbance, so you could get lucky and be allowed onto a moor that has a few grouse and a bit of early shooting, and this has worked fine for me. Be wary of very low grouse numbers, and don't let your enthusiasm run away too much. Hawking and running dogs all day for a single point on a jumpy, barren pair is no fun after a week. Tempters get strained, dogs and hawks get disillusioned, and it's no good for the moor to hunt out the last point. By the same token that you get bad apples in the falconry barrel, so too can the odd moor owner think it's acceptable to let a barren moor; if you're unsure, see if you can walk the moor and look out for grouse marks and check heather quality, both of which tell you a lot if you can't run a dog. Another tradition that is widely upheld on Scottish grouse moors, is that last year's tenant (assuming all went well) is usually offered the next season's let first. This means that both parties have a responsibility: the landlord because you get offered first refusal, but also the tenant because if you decide on a year out if the grouse are looking bad, you may well be out permanently. You've therefore got to be prepared to take the good years and the bad if you want to keep returning.

If your detective work and diplomacy are on track, next let's get a bit more particular in case you have a choice (which is unlikely). Relief is important on a moor, and



Grouse marks persist for a few weeks so give hints on the population size

day for a couple of points, or whether you want ten points in a short walk from the Range Rover, and home in time for tea and crumpets. Here, financial considerations will creep in, because a well-stocked moor will cost you more because of competition with the shooting market. If the moor has been shot hard, but still carries

excellent to eat; mature them in the fridge for a few days, and then pan-fry them hard for five minutes followed by a 12 minute roast in a very hot oven. Serve them up with red cabbage, roast potatoes, and a nice Chianti. And make sure you have a good cook in your team who can do this to perfection!

Back to the management... Heather patches are burnt regularly to create a patchwork of young, medium and old ground that provides the right combination of nutrition and cover, and maximises the number of available territories per acre. Heather beetle can be a particular problem on damp grouse moors with sparser heather cover: eggs are laid in sphagnum, and the beetle larvae eat the growing heather shoots. Whole miles of moorland can be devastated by this pest, leaving behind red or grey stands of heather that were once green and purple. The beetle's main predators, which are essential for growth, so a warm dry hatch is a big bonus and has a marked effect on the season's productivity ahead. After three weeks, heather becomes the mainstay of the chicks' diet, and it is heather quality that is fundamental to a grouse moor's productivity. Despite this somewhat monotonous diet, grouse are

sheep sides and deep ravines (where grouse will often head) can make for hard walking and tricky tracking. Aspect can be important too, with nice updrifts helping, but nasty downdrifts spoiling a beat. If the moor is at high elevation, low cloud can be a problem; if it's at low elevation, check could be a nuisance, and fencing more so. What's the eagle situation like? This is becoming a real problem now. What are the neighbour like, and do they shoot hard? Unfortunately incidents have happened. If grouse are at low density, how big is the estate? What is the accommodation like for dogs and hawks? Is there a safe weathering lawn? Is there the all-important freezer space for hawk food? If all looks good, you're doing very well, so the final question might concern the dates available. Many estates run a fairly traditional season with grouse in August and September, then onto deer in October, with perhaps some pheasant or partridge shooting too on the estate margins. If you get the chance to go at any time of the grouse season, there are pros and cons throughout. August grouse can still be a bit green, and you might encounter some birds that are too young to hunt if the summer weather forced a second clutch after hatch. Having said that, there's a reason why the Glorious Twelfth is when it is, and shooters don't want to drive weak flyers past the butts either. Young, full-sized grouse fly very fast, and are more honest than overwintered birds, so they provide excellent sport. In Cairnness, we probably encounter grouse that are too young, meaning they can be flown down by a half-fil hawk, from about 5% of points in August, and less in September. It's still a disappointment to flush a young cooey, because it almost always teaches

the hawk only bad lessons, and disturbs the growing family, but I have seen even three-quarter-grown grouse burn off big female peregrines before they get into the swing of it! Positives of August! Grouse are the long days, lower risks of gales and rain, and the heather is in bloom. It's holiday season and a good time of year to get a fresh eyess purring. Unfortunately all that warm weather means the highly midge will be on the wing in the far north, and he is not to be taken lightly. Freddie Mackay, our keeper, has fought the midge single-handedly on the hill for 50 years, and although he has a number of gaelic disciplines for *Colicoides impunctatus*, his final conclusion is 'You'll never beat the midge... NEVER!' As soon as the wind drops, midges will be up and out of the damp heather, and they make life outside almost intolerable for man and beast. Hawks must not be left on weathering lawns, or you will return to find them in a state of hysteria with swollen eyelids, and cerea and feet bitten. The same goes for dogs in outside kennels. Hawking in calm conditions is tolerable as long as you keep moving, but a kill will see your hawking buddies desert you as you stand and scratch and swear, while you fly and get your star to take her reward in a dense midge cloud. There is nothing you can do to stop them biting because most repellents aren't effective, and we've even tried German army weapon's-grade DEET. Interestingly, something that does work better than anything is 'Skin So Soft', so book your Avon lady to call, and stock up before your trip, because you're worth it.

As the frosts come in late September and October, the midges die back, and the grouse have toughened up. In November and early

December, if you get high pressure conditions you've struck gold as it's a fantastic time to hunt red grouse in the frosty blue. As long as the moor hasn't been shot too hard, they should still hold to a point (though less reliably than earlier on), and they will explode from the heather and fly like black cannonballs to the horizon. Their back becomes armoured as their synsarcium lutes up, and they can take whumping hits and just keep on going. Your hawks will be fit and on the game, so you can hit the ground running. Unfortunately, like the grouse, the weather can toughen up too in the winter, and if you can only grab a week and there's a deep Atlantic low passing slowly through, you could be stuffed if the moor has the wrong aspect. If the rain or steel comes hard, then take your salmon rod and try to enjoy some fishing!

### Grouse Basics

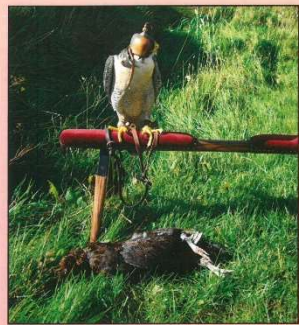
The red grouse is a type of willow grouse, and is endemic to the British and Irish uplands. Although some believe there are different scoticus and hibernicus subspecies, genetic and morphological analyses in 2006 revealed no differences between British and Irish grouse, even from Irish museum specimens before a few Scottish birds were released (see <http://www.doeni.gov.uk/mica/redgrousefinalreport.pdf>). Unfortunately, the study also found that Irish grouse genetic diversity was in significant decline, and much lower than British grouse, which tallies with the general decline in Ireland's grouse numbers. Adult grouse subsist almost entirely on ling heather, with a few berries and bog cotton thrown down too. Grouse cannot be economically reared and released on a scale that is normal for partridges, pheas-



There is never any judgemental sniping, just an acceptance that things don't always go right, and celebrations when they do







## A good confident tiercel is a perfect match for red grouse: Bertie in his tenth season

whole load of positives, this purity can also allow negatives. Everything revolves around the point, and clever hawks will pick that up very quickly. One of the most frustrating things that can happen in grouse hawking is when falcons hang tight over the point. The dog indicates exactly where those tasty bundles are going to explode from, and the way the falconer is waving his arms about and creeping round the point in that habitual manner makes everything very predictable to your hawk, which can lead to her thinking that the closer she is to the point of action, the better. Try and avoid obvious cues of how the flight and flush are going to happen. Of course you can't blame the hawk, as she thinks that the closer she is to the point, and just a bit upwind, is the best place to catch a grouse. A few downwind flushes off the point into the falcon's feet before the grouse get properly going will encourage point hanging and drag down her pitch. Grouse can be caught from low pitches if your dog is good and you get the timing just right, so be wary of this unless you want a meat hawk. It's especially relevant if you're flying a grouse rookie, when the first few flights are going to be very influential for your hawk. So once she's had a grouse to taste, be prepared to flush for a lesson rather than a kill in the early stages, and you will reap the investment later on. If your hawk

hangs on the point too tightly, then flushing the grouse into the wind as she flies forward from a downwind position should stop her killing from a low pitch. Grouse can row into a wind like no other game bird I've seen, and can do this at the bottom of a high falcon's stoop and still sometimes pull away. So if your hawk is hanging tight in a manner that displeases you, flush as she flies forward to the point, and make sure she sees the birds, gets a bit of a stoop, but the grouse pull away and escape. Although the flush is still a reward to her, it's not nearly as incentivizing as a kill. Who knows, she might even learn the importance of height through failing to kill (though falcons seem to learn best from success). It takes a lot of steel to flush deliberately so she fails to succeed, when you might otherwise bag your first grouse, but if you want a high flyer my advice would be to make things testing to start with if there are opportunities ahead. On the other hand, if your hawk needs some killing confidence, then it's your call.

Something that can affirm tight flying even further, is re-flushing grouse that have dumped into cover if the hawk is right on their tail. It can help to station people during the flight near patches of likely cover, like streams, hags or reed beds to discourage dumping in the first place. Again, it'll be your

call whether to re-flush a grouse, because sometimes it will do little harm and provide a second sporting spectacle, and might even be needed to encourage the chances of a kill for a rookie that has had a run of bad luck, while at other times it will negate style in your gamehawk, waste a good grouse, and encourage disobedience to the lure. Damaged grouse should probably be re-flushed so they are not left to suffer if they cannot be picked up by the dog. If the grouse has out-flown the falcon and then dumps, it's won fair and square, and your hawk wasn't good enough, so give it fair sport. It's a great lesson to the hawk to be out-flown for a good distance by a grouse. If my falcon has flown high and done everything right, and the grouse dumps before she gets down to have a crack of it, then I might encourage a remount and repeat attempt. I realise that this makes her a bit less obedient to the lure. Often, grouse will simply repeat the dump, especially if there is appropriate cover about, and if you suspect this is going to be the case then it's a good policy to re-flush the grouse into the wind when the hawk is out of position downwind, which should encourage the grouse to fly to escape. At least then the hawk is beaten fairly, and it's a good lesson. Roger Upton likes dumping grouse to naughty street kids who know where all the hidey holes are, and scuffle down them under tight pressure. It's amazing where grouse will escape to: down holes, under hanging hags, up to their necks in streams. These tactics obviously help escape from wild peregrines. Hopefully you won't see too much of this and the grouse will outfly your hawk and encourage her to mount even higher and stoop even faster next time. By the time you get to the end of your trip,

everything should be in full swing, and you're hopefully enjoying great sport and everything will go right on your last day. Then it's time to tip the keeper well if things have gone great, pack up your kit, and clean up the cottage - hopefully you'll have a few grouse feathers to sweep up.

### The Future

Like so many wild places, we are losing and damaging the habitats where grouse thrive. As the general public becomes increasingly detached from nature and field sports, so the demand for this habitat has waned further north in Britain, and perhaps the same in Ireland? Three-quarters of the world's heather moorland is in the UK, but we have presided over the loss of almost a quarter of our heathery habitat in the last 50 years as we plough it up and plant forestry monocultures, dig out the peat, or over-graze it. The same is happening in Ireland. The heather uplands also probably face a fairly bleak longer-term future because of climate change, being especially vulnerable habitat in that regard. Despite this negativity, we are some way off these situations, and there is ample opportunity for the low-impact sport of falconry to contribute to the maintenance of grouse moors, as long as we maintain a positive profile of ourselves as a low-impact, sustainable form of hunting. If there is a huntable head of grouse after a bit of shooting, then winter grouse hawking parties might also allow a moor and collage some extra income at a time when things are otherwise quiet. Similarly, conservation organisations have seen the benefits of contributions from falconry towards habitat protection, in return for allowing some sustainable harvest of the grouse there. After all,

we don't want very much back at all. Hawking grouse in the uplands is hard work on many levels, but the rewards are great if you can crack it. For me, the uplands remain one of the last wildernesses in the Britain where you might genuinely catch a grouse that had never seen a sign of human activity before your dog appeared over the ridge. If we don't allow activities that value the existence of these wild places, then we will lose them.

## TELEMETRY

**IHC strongly recommends the use of radio telemetry by all members when flying their birds of prey.**

**Not to do so, especially in the case of non-native species and hybrids, could jeopardise the good will that exists between the responsible falconers in IHC, with the other non-government organisations concerned with conservation and wildlife and with the wildlife authorities themselves.**

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## A Year With Sparrowhawks – Wild Encounters, Wild Take & Wild Excitement

Eoghan Ryan, Dublin

It was December 26, 2010. The entire landscape was a white-wash. Snow everywhere. One of the coldest winters in decades. Temperatures had plummeted at night to -10°C. I walked out from the village, up the road which was covered in snow and ice. All life seemed to slow down. Birds which would take prompt flight at an approach of any human being, hopped or fluttered along the hedgerow's edge. Fieldfares and redwings still were in abundance. They had fled the extreme cold of Iceland, northern Scandinavia and Europe to seek the mild Atlantic coast. They had headed south, but here on the Dingle Peninsula there wasn't much further south they could go without facing the tremendous effort of an expansive sea crossing on weakened wings.

A redwing hopped limply along a mere four feet ahead of me. It seemed I could have even picked one up, and a short while later, just to prove the point to myself, I did exactly that. I felt the sharpness of its breastbone, low on reserves and then released the poor thing. At an open gate, I disturbed a female sparrowhawk on a fresh kill. She slipped away across the field and up into a yew tree waiting for me to pass.

Later that afternoon, I spotted another

other kill, another redwing – head consumed, breast feathers plucked bare, but not a morsel taken from the breast. The breastbone protruded with little meat on either side, as if the sparrow, having deplored its prey was insulted with the offering and decided to seek another meatier victim – or perhaps another surprise disturbance after a kill. A short while later, just before dusk, a kestrel graced the evening sky with its wisp wind-hovering and moments later another sparrow (or perhaps the earlier one) glided up and over the hedgerow in characteristic surprise ambush, only to find me trodding along in deep snow.

Such encounters with spars were so frequent, that I was convinced they were nesting close to the village. With three small boys under the age of five and a steady job, it didn't seem practical to get a hawk. And besides, I was now renting in Dublin, so dog runs and aviaries seemed impractical. But I had not had a bird in approximately five years and these regular sightings got me thinking and wanting some of the action that I glimpsed through these fleeting natural encounters.

The knowledge that they were so plentiful had me contemplating

taking one under license the following summer. And so, I made my application to the National Parks and Wildlife Service that January. Though I was still not committed to taking one. With the commitments of a young family, I really didn't know if I could afford the time necessary to do justice to the flying and hunting a bird of prey on a regular basis. At least, I thought to myself, I could fly the bird for a few months and then release it back into the wild if I found I didn't have the time.

The months passed and spring approached. Back in Dublin, there is quite a large park beside the house. During the winter and spring months, I had seen spars there and in its vicinity – one still-hunting from a bare winter branch in a grove, another slipping over the rooftops of houses, one sooting on a fine warm spring day, etc. The park is composed of many groups of trees – small and large, in early summer, as the evenings got longer, I would slip into these wooded areas – combing through them, all the time looking up for a twinged nest of between 18-24in across. There were similar nests from hooded crows and even wood pigeons. I scouted trees, examining these and other nests, trying to leave no 'stone unturned'. Not since my childhood had I engaged in such

an activity. On one particular evening I came across what I was sure was a plucking post – a stump of a tree, rotten and covered in a carpet of moss, with the feathers of a song bird. I scanned the immediate vicinity but could not find a nest. I suspected if there was one there, it was hidden by the ivy on some nearby trees. I returned a few days later but there were no fresh kills, so I assumed that it was just an opportunistic kill in the woods. About 20m from this point, I came across what I was certain was an old sparrowhawk nest, but there was no sign of it being used this season.

On another evening, I resumed my search the opposite side of the park and soon found what I thought looked like a sparrow's nest approximately 25ft up a spruce tree in what was otherwise a predominantly ash wood. This tree however was unclimbable, and there wasn't any other tree in its immediate vicinity which would allow me to get higher and look into this nest. I returned a few days later. I decided I would sit quietly under some tree branches a distance of perhaps 15 metres away and see if I could see any movement or activity at the nest site. As was often happened, I soon discovered that the location I chose had feathers scattered about and I realised I had found the plucking post! I moved position – another five metres or so away, hidden under the undergrowth of a young chestnut tree, its under-canopy of large five-spined leaves leaving me well screened from view. I would give myself half an hour. Approximately five minutes later, I heard the distinctive high pitched call of a musketeer sparrow approach. The female rose from her nest and sailed down towards the plucking post. I did not see the food pass – the vegetation

blocked my view, but suddenly the female was about 4m away with the kill in her talons – plucking it on the ground. A few seconds later, she lifted her head and our eyes met. For approximately three or four seconds, she stared me in the face – I didn't move. She then took the kill up to the safety of her nest. The male continued making his call – perhaps in annoyance of my presence but a short while later, everything resumed to stillness and quietness in the wood.

During the spring period, I recalled seeing a sparrow on the soar high in the sky not too far from my house, but in the opposite direction from where I discovered this first nest. Then one evening I decided to go for a ride on my bike and clear my head after a hectic day in the office. As I approached this area, I recalled the earlier image some weeks prior to this day of the hawk on the soar. Birds of prey frequently go on the soar above their selected nest site early in the breeding season.

I entered into the linear park that runs along the river. I decided I would go for a wander in one of the wooded areas on the off chance I could find a nest. This wood was a mixed deciduous wood and within five minutes, I spotted a sparrow's nest high up in a silver birch tree. I knew it was a sparrow's nest because I could clearly make out the distinctive barred tail of a female protruding the outer edge of the nest. I later discovered the plucking post – this time a fallen branch of a tree. There were the remains of rabbit, dormice and a fresh gold finch.

The problem with both these sites was they were in public parks and both trees were unclimbable. In late May and early June, I would

return to the Dingle Peninsula, I checked Google Earth and Bing Maps, looked at the aerial photography of a likely area and identified the most distinctive wooded areas close to the village.

I decided to comb the two main woods here. The first was a smaller coniferous woodland of older pine trees of 30 or so years, with some newer Sitka spruce trees on one side. Earlier in the year, I had seen a musketeer make a bee-line across a nearby field, beating its wings low to the ground and slipping into the corner of the woods. A few hundred metres away on another day, a female slipped over the high hedgerows on either side of the lane as I drove down the gentle hillside. I was fairly confident that this wood might hold a nest. It wasn't properly managed and as I passed through, I was disturbed by the large horse barking like sound I heard in the tops of the tree canopies. Initially, I didn't see anything, but then a short while later herons laboriously flapped their wings and squawked and circled the tree tops. I was in the middle of a heronry, yet having passed under several nests, I couldn't for the life of me make out where their nests were, though they were evident by the good number of large turquoise-blush egg shells on the forest floor. The evergreen foliage on these Austrian pines was thick, concealing most of the brancher heron chicks and their nests. I thought to myself, "What hope have I of finding a sparrowhawk nest if I can't even spot the heron's nests!" I continued my search and on the opposite side of the woods the trees weren't as densely planted and so I could make out more heron nests.

I pondered whether a sparrow would even bother nesting in such a

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place, as I had known that herons had a broad and varied diet and twice had seen them take adult rats from the water's edge, so surely they were capable of taking a young sparrow chick from a nest?

Perhaps 45 minutes or so after I entered the wood, I spotted what definitely looked like a sparrowhawk nest up in a spruce tree. I scaled up the 25ft or so and when I looked in there were four buff coloured eggs speckled in rusty red. Adrenalin pumping, I slipped back down as quickly as I could. I had not seen any sign of the parents.

The following day, I decided to comb a larger plantation approximately a mile away from the first site. As I covered several square kilometres, I knew I couldn't cover the entire area, but given the number of sightings I had seen close to the village, I had a hunch that if a sparrowhawk was nesting in the area, it was likely to be nesting close enough to the edge of the plantation on the side that was nearest the village – this was also the side of the forest that opened up to the hedgerows and fields, whereas on the opposite of the forest it would open up onto the mountainside of heather. In fact, the plantation was so large that it is very likely that there were more than one or two nests in this plantation.

I started on the side closest to the village and zigzagged my way through the plantation. As first the process was relatively easy going, but after about an hour or so, I came to younger trees more densely grown. It was darker here and I suspected I was not as close as I thought. I came across older trees with more natural daylight reaching the forest floor. The

young shoots of blackberry bramble had grown waist high and gripped, plucked and tore of my clothes. Movement was so hard going that I cursed the brambles and fallen trees that blocked my course. I then cursed myself for wasting time and energy on what was appearing to be a futile exercise. But something made me persevere, and then about ten minutes later found myself crossing over a small stream where the trees were more thinly spaced and I could move freely along the forest floor. My head stayed cocked upwards looking for nests. It was a fine day, with blue skies and bright sunlight. Just then there was a flash of wings, bright buff coloured underwings catching the light, circled through the upper canopy. There was a second or two for my brain to process the information – it was a female sparrow. She took her position about 70m away on the branch of a tree and watched me intently. Her nest site was on a Silka spire approximately 30ft up. I sprinted up the tree and found two young fluffy chicks and one egg inside! When I got to the ground, I followed the small stream down until I came across a rough logging track, placed a stone on a nearby fence to mark the entrance to the wood and headed home elated.

I now had four active nest sites identified. Two in Dublin and two in Kerry. My application to the NPWS stated that I would take from either Dublin or Kerry.

Landlords typically don't like pets. There was a large old compost heap in the corner of our Dublin garden. One day, I asked the landlord, "would you mind if I cleared out that old compost heap?" Work away, he said.

Another day, I asked him, "do you mind if I cut down that old tree stump, it looks a bit rotten?" "That's fine", he said. Another day, I asked him, "would you mind if I got a garden shed and put it in the corner, there?" No problem he said. Oh, and "would you mind if I got a hawk and kept it in that garden shed – I'll adapt it for the hawk". "Uh Oh...What!", he said. A short while later I had him reassured that there would be no impact on him or the neighbours! The one problem was, I hadn't decided whether to imprint or not!

I arranged to meet the local ranger for this part of Kerry one Saturday morning to take him into the largest forestry plantation to take my sparrow. The ranger was impressed as he had to beat his way into the plantation and by his reaction must have wondered how I'd found this site. I scaled the tree again, took the larger of the three chicks, which was now a good sized white downy ball with the hint of feathers coming through. I placed her into a small neat canvas bag I had already prepared with a rope strapped to the handles and gently lowered her down to the ranger.

I had given some serious thought as to whether to imprint. I had previously trained and flown an imprint merlin and an imprint Goshawk. Both were noisy. Too noisy for my liking and my neighbours' (I suspect, though, they were probably too polite to say). Also, given the work commitments of a nine to five job (usually more!), I didn't know if I'd have enough time at the critical period of early hunting to get the sparrow focused away from me (and screaming!) and putting all her focus and energy onto her selected quarry so as to stop the screaming. On the other hand, a parent-reared Red Tailed Hawk I

had for nine years had the most placid temperament and was effectively bomb proof. I made some calls and had various discussions about the merits or otherwise of imprinting with some other falconers. I had decided not to imprint, but I then had the challenge of trying to feed the young downy chick without her noticing or hearing my approach. I quickly realised

me. I instinctively decided after about two weeks that I might as well imprint.

The result, I believe, was that I ended up with a social imprint, but not necessarily a full sexually imprinted sparrow. There was some vocalisation and screaming when she got close to flying weight, but this stopped in the field and in-



**We were off to a good start. This flying from the fist and calling from trees developed basic good manners. It was time to enter her on larger quarry – magpies**

cluded into the house and a few minutes later the sparrow was about to feed my young bird. The wild sparrow was probably the one which was nesting in the park beside my house; her own offspring would have fledged the nest by this time and on hearing the screaming, she must have thought that it was one of her own little dears that was hungry and had decided on instinct to come to her assistance. At the sight of me however, she took off.

Training commenced as soon as I could and even before she was hand penned. I flew her on a few evenings in open fields with relatively few trees around. She chased meadow pipits, larks and finches well. She was

An interesting little thing happened one evening when she was still

dead in the car when she was taken out to hunt. Mind you, once she was hunting and entered on magpies, if she saw one of these feathered piebalds she would let out a scream as if to say, "Let me at them!"

flying at around 255g, and while she had been responding instantly to the fist and lure in the local park on the creance, her response rate now wasn't all that great.

Gradually, I dropped her weight to 240g and even a slight bit lower. I recall some very pleasant evenings with multiple slips. Just below 240g, she would frequently return to the fist if she had missed or given up on her quarry, which was particularly nice. The small birds had a technique of instantly climbing high in the air rather than seek the safety and cover of the field's hedgerows, and despite the sparrow's speed, she wasn't a match for these quick aerial mounts. As my arm was continuously raised high above my head walking through fields looking for slips, I got tired and so I developed an alternative method and would simply perch the sparrow on the antlers that formed the top of my long hand-carved, silt beating stick. Given that my stick was relatively light, I was able to simply hold the stick in either hand, giving her a better advantage. If anything darted, she was off, unrestrained and in her own time. However, despite several evenings in this

manner, she was unable to make a kill.

At the beginning of August, I was back in Kerry and decided to try her on the relatively flat and treeless Maharee's peninsula. This area had a number of natural meadows, rough grazing areas and arable fields used for vegetable growing, with an abundance of birdlife. The fields are small, with dry stone walls interspersed with low-lying hedgerows with plenty of breaks and gaps. On the second day out, I parked the car, walked across the first small field towards a short hedgerow, raised the hawk above my head and gave a gentle tap to the brambles with the stick. Out darted what looked like a duncock and flew straight across the open field, heading for the opposite hedgerow. The sparrow was instantly off. I was sure the LBJ (little brown job) was going to make it when, with turbo boost style, the sparrow closed in on its prey and buried into the long meadow grass. I stayed back, letting her depulme her victim. When she had consumed more than half of it, I started to slowly make in, and just as she finished off the last few morsels, she gently hopped onto the fist for a little



**She had taken the prey a good 170m from the spot where she was released – not bad for a short-distance sprinter**

top up. Perfect.

The second week in August found me in Waterford. The weather was particularly wet and windy and unsuitable for flying. Nonetheless, I persevered and in two consecutive evenings she managed to snatch small birds from the air. On the first evening, I had driven around looking for a suitable spot to hunt when I saw a flock of sparrows and larks take flight from the edge of a road into a field. I dashed out, got hawk on fist and had some fun, with the sparrow darting back and forth along the hedgerow while I ran and beat my stick. She took what looked like a young sparrow from the hedge top, and as I came along her side of the ditch, she simply flew straight onto my fist with her prey in talons.

On the second evening, I was walking up a laneway with dense hedge on either side. Something fluttered into an isolated hawthorn that rose higher than the rest of the ditch. The sparrow took off and spiralled up and around the hawthorn. The warbler-like bird got instantly nervous, broke for denser cover and was quickly taken in flight in the centre of the lane. The sparrow's momentum this time took her away from me and she continued about 40m up the laneway. As I sat alongside her as she ate, an inquisitive wild sparrow glided over our heads and slipped away across the adjoining field.

Another August evening, I flew her along a hedgerow in a barley field. Having missed a flush, she plucked in an oak tree. I made my way towards her, continuously tapping and beating the hedgerows. Out darted two or three sparrows which continued directly under the oak. The sparrow stooped down into the cover and did not re-emerge.

but I didn't see the final movement of her flight. I took my time, eventually finding a gap in the hedgerow, jumped to the other side to the steep ditch and found my way to the gentle sound of bells. There stood my sparrow in the very bottom of a dry ditch, plucking and consuming her latest victim. As I sat down alongside her, I suddenly watched as she downed the last piece of her prey – it looked like the leg of a young rat or perhaps a field mouse!

We were off to a good start. This flying from the fist and calling from trees developed basic good manners. It was time, I thought, to enter her on larger quarry – magpies. Flying out a car window doesn't come naturally to birds so I encouraged her by diving into a field and having a friend drag a lure or dead bird on the ground as I drove by at a very slow pace. Even despite such efforts, she ignored her intended quarry during her initial flights at the real thing – jackdaws, magpies and rooks.

On some days, she would chase but not commit, or she would fly directly at the intended quarry but at the last second divert away. If the quarry started to fly, she might pursue again, but still not commit. Hilary White and Rowland Eustace took her out a few times around this time and had the same result from her. I found this frustrating and she went for nearly two weeks of this before she committed. All it took was a slight reduction in her flying weight to make her keener. Once she got the knack of it, there was no stopping her and her weight was brought back up a bit again.

Her first few slips were short ones, and I found the local industrial and business parks reasonably good –

particularly those that had generous green verges on tree-lined avenues. Summer evenings and weekends were generally quiet in these parks, making it possible to get some discreet slips (but I later noticed some security cameras mounted on adjacent buildings!). Even with short slips, a wary magpie can quickly pivot using its long tail and make a handy escape, but she quickly mastered this in this environment. There was a significant risk flying in this environment. One fine summer's day, I flew her in an industrial/business park next to a motorway, and there was large security fencing to the rear of the large warehouse buildings. After she missed a magpie, she started to mount and soar around. I quickly swung the lure, but when there was no immediate response, I flung it with speed horizontally across the car park like a bar in a direct line of flight. She immediately responded and dropped down after it.

She bagged a good number of magpies and the odd jackdaw in these industrial parks, but the environment meant that she was generally confined to shorter flights. These became too easy for her and I didn't find it sporting enough. Out of City West Business Campus, there were larger expanses of green and I found it was a great spot for longer slips. On one August evening, the Friday before the National Country and Game Fair, she was slipped at jackdaw on a green area and as I manoeuvred the car, I lost sight of her. There had been a flock of black-headed gulls on the green too and all had now disappeared. I looked around but could not see the sparrow anywhere. A few moments later, I caught a glimpse of a flash of white. There was a landscaped berm and just over the other side of it was my

spar with the sea gull in its talons both flapping and struggling. This was a good 60-70m from where I had slipped her. Returning to Dublin after the game fair, I slipped her on a rook. She caught it, lost it and pursued it again before hailing it and walling for my arrival.

**M**aggies were without doubt her favourite quarry. She would sit, erect and alert, her body stiffened for the glimpse of a magpie. One evening in City West, I spotted a wood pigeon on a green area and slipped the sparrow. The sparrow hit the wood pigeon and was gripping it but as I slowed the car ready to get out, I watched as the wood pigeon sped past me with the sparrow in hot pursuit. I followed the flight in my car and turned into a large car park. I thought I saw the pigeon fly away in the far corner of the car park, but there was no sign of my sparrow. I jumped out of the vehicle and looked around. Instantly, I heard the noisy mad cawing commotion so characteristic of magpies and looked up to find a number of them gathering as one was held in the sparrow's talons, approximately 35ft up a birch tree! As I got closer, they tumbled down through the canopy and onto the ground where I dispatched the magpie and rewarded the sparrow. I then returned to my two youngest boys, who were both less than two years old and in baby seats in the back of the car.

One summers evening, I went to fly my hawk near my house for a bit of exercise before it got dark. As I approached a wooded area, I noticed a wood pigeon and then a magpie head into the wood perhaps to roost for the night. As we passed through the wood, the sparrow started to bob her head up

and down and from side to side but I couldn't see a thing. Instinctively loosened my grip on the jesses (which wasn't perhaps the cleverest thing to do - I was in an urban area, close to a motorway, in a dense enough wooded area and it was nearly dark). The sparrow took off, swerving in and out through the trees. After about 25m, she ascended steeply up approximately 5m high and simply plucked a magpie out of the tree.

The two birds tumbled down into some brambles where I quickly relieved both hawk and quarry. So many times, this bird amazed me by getting quarry at times and days that I least expected it, and that was just one more example.

Another evening, I went hawking in a limited window of opportunity between putting the kids to bed and it getting dark. I decided to try for a repeat of the incident above. This time, the sparrow took off into the canopy of the trees and all I saw was three wood pigeons take flight. There was no sign of her and despite walking around the woods and the park in the late evening with telemetry, I could not find her. I eventually thought I had it narrowed down to one area, but by now it was very dark and I had no flashlight. I returned around 5.30am. I still got a signal from the same area, but for the life of me I couldn't pin point her. I suspected that she might be on the ground on a kill from the night before. Then a good hour or so later, just as it was getting bright, I lost the signal. At first I thought the battery may have died but then turned up the volume in the receiver and realised she had moved. I started following the signal, and shortly afterwards I began to hear that mad cawing commotion of magpies. I ran, following the sound to the edge of

the park and spotted about 10-15 magpies and a few crows on a telegraph wire and houses. I jumped over the perimeter fencing and, as I did, I noticed a lady in her dressing gown leaning out of her bedroom window with her nightgown still on. I ran into the neighbour's garden and there was the sparrow. On another magpie.

Another time, I slipped the hawk out the window into a field where there were two rooks and a magpie. I lost track of her and spent a while trying to locate her. Suddenly, in the reeds along a river bank, there she was in the water. Submerged in her talons was a drowned magpie, and the sparrow was soaked to the skin. As I walked back to the car with her, she looked weakened, cold and shivering. I had wasted about ten minutes looking for her in the wrong direction while she was probably fighting the cold water and the magpie. She recovered quickly, however.

One time, I spotted four magpies on a rabbit road kill along a country road. As I drove closer, the magpies very warily took flight and were well airborne by the time the hawk was slipped. Ninety metres away was a woodland and the magpies were heading towards it rapidly. The sparrow ascended up after them, focusing on the last two and just shy of the 80m, but approximately 8m up in the sky, with tail-twisting dexterity, she snagged one of the magpies. I began to deliberately seek out magpies that were in full flight for future slips as they provided much more spectacular and sporting flights.

But one of the highlights for me was when I spotted about six magpies about 200m out from the road in a big open field, about 300-400m

ahead. I contemplated whether it was worth even chasing her on a flight, when approximately 150m ahead, a lone magpie flew across the road about 4-5m high, I accelerated, and as I got within 50m of the magpie, I slipped the sparrow. The magpie was instantly aware of its pursuer and continued to climb upwards out in this open field. A spectacular tail chase ensued, culminating in a great zigzag tail chase with twirling and swerving - upwards about 6 or 7m high in the air. The sparrow clutched its prey and they tumbled down to the grass.

She had taken the prey a good 170m from the spot where she was released - not bad for a short distance sprinter. To put this in perspective, I recall reading in the book *A Merlin For Me* by John Loft, a statistic on the average length of time various birds of prey spend pursuing their prey - the sparrow is cited at two seconds! They often sit still hunting on a tree branch and then dart out after some unsuspecting passerby. So, it is my belief that longer slips of 100m or so on airborne flying quarry are impressive and sporting for a sparrow.

I had approximately three flights of blackbird, one impressive long flight across a field, but unfortunately although she gained on the blackbird, she was unable to get to it before it got to cover. On two other occasions she took feather but did not manage to catch the respective blackbirds.

By the end of November, she had taken approximately 31 head since she had been entered in August - not bad considering that she was only flown on weekends once the daylight hours became shorter. Around two thirds of her quarry was magpies, though she did take rook, jackdaw and a

black headed gull. On one occasion, she had been slipped at some rooks, missed but continued flying. A few minutes later, one rook stooped at her and hit her and a light puff of feathers came from her back. After this incident she was always wary of flying at rook and although she would pursue them, she would veer off them at the last split second before impact. But if they took flight, she would pursue them but not with the full 100% commitment she put into magpies.

She damaged a feather following her encounter with a rook, but on reflection I think that feather may have been weakened following an incident with her leash, then the tussle with the rook would have exacerbated this damage. My advice is that sparrow should be kept freehanded following initial marning and training; if they don't fly readily onto your fist when you enter the aviary then they are unlikely to return to you in the field. I didn't want to make my aviary too big for her to build up any significant speed, and I kept the window opening in an aviary somewhat restricted in dimensions so that she wouldn't impulsively fly at some passing garden bird.

I stopped flying her at the end of November as I took off for two weekends in December for the Third International Festival of Falconry in Al Ain, UAE. On my return, she was well up in weight and I was eager to get her going again.

During the Christmas break, I was back in Kerry and foolishly slipped her on a very windy day at a crow in an open treeless area where I was sure I'd be able to find her if she got blown off course or out of

## The Invisible Stampede

James Knight, Co Mayo



I have parked up in the Land Rover with the radio on. Joe Duffy is taking calls, earnest members of the public debating a controversial episode in Ireland's history. The engine is off but the radio is on loud. It's the only way I can hear it against the lashing rain on the metal roof, the windscreen appears a solid wall of water, the wind whistles and groans as it shudders into the front bumper like a pack of Munster rugby forwards. Whoever designed Land Rovers wasn't a sailor, or a falconer, because they had no concept of wind. Perhaps they were bald and deaf or wind tunnels weren't invented or the word 'streamlined' hadn't evolved. Land Rovers, the proper ones, meet moving air with all the grace and ease of a concrete block. Parking broadside just wasn't an option. Through all the noise, cutting like a scalpel, is the high pitched call of one of our baby Harris hawks. I have come up here, perched on the hillside looking down the whole length of

Lough Nafooy to fly them in the wind. Here, on the edge of Connemara, we are not blessed with an abundance of rabbits or pheasants, or clear, fine days of high pressure weather. But, what we do have is open green hills and wind. Plenty of wind. Some of my finest Falconry memories have been flying Harris hawks in this open and windswept landscape.

When I had left the house, the rain had started but I had convinced myself it was just a squall that would be gone in 20 minutes. After all, it is high summer, the end of July, this is our first time here but I thought it would be perfect. The wind blows straight up the slope, the winding road and convenient parking place three-quarters of the way up. Perhaps it will be, on another day.

Today, low grey clouds scrape past. The bracken a flattened sea of green, thrashing manically from side to side. As if each frond has an

invisible terrier attached, trying to kill it like a rat. I can't see to the end of the Lough or any of the mountain tops. It is claustrophobic and the longer I wait the more the pressure builds. The voices on the radio are becoming more argumentative, opinionated, extreme. The wind doesn't lie. The rain on the tin roof is incessant, and the regular, impatient call from the Raptor Box is getting to me. I should just go home and feed them on the fist, have them both safely in the aviary. Most falconers wouldn't dream of flying them in this. No, that's the lazy option, I should fly them, it will blow out, they need lots of exercise every day, they need this experience, it will be great to see them hanging in this wind. What could go wrong here? There are no fences, cars, wire, just open Connemara hillsides. Wait a little longer.

Last year, we imprinted a clutch of four Harris hawks. Nothing complicated: openly hand-fed, kept

loose together and flown together. The pleasure we had from their 'training' and continue to have with them has been amazing. We would cart them up Mount Gable to watch them learn to soar and stoop, chasing each other like a litter of whippets. They would stop and attack grass, pluck moss, foot sheep dung, bite the dog's tail or sit warily beside a rock as the ravens flew past. This year, we planned on doing exactly the same. Except, of course, the great thing about Falconry is that it is never the same!

The two Harris in the back are both females, half of the four that we bought in early May this year. The oldest chick was 14 days and the youngest was just ten days. Three of the four babies were siblings, turning out to be one female and two brothers. These three were from imported American parents who produce the largest stock for their breeder. The other female, the youngest and by far the smallest, was a Peruvian female from passage Peruvian parents that had been imported from a Portuguese breeder. We named her Inca and it was her that was calling in the box, always the noisy one, always different. The two females are chalk and cheese, Mayo weighing 2lbs 4oz and Inca 1lb 8oz. Both were now around 12 weeks old.

Last year, we had no fighting, but this year it hasn't been happy families, and to err on the side of caution, we separated them. At one point we thought that Inca would have to go on her own but, thankfully, they divided into pairs, the males together and the females together.

Something has changed. I switch off the radio and it's quieter. I give the windscreen wiper a couple of flicks and peer out. It's stopped. I can see the cloud lifting, revealing the whole length of Lough Nafooy, a patch of blue sky appearing and the black silhouette of a roven slides across it. It's a sign.

It's still windy so I decide on the solidity of Mayo, the bigger female. She steps out of her box and, with her telemetry on in a few seconds, I walk around to the front of the box, always the noisy one, always different. The two females are chalk and cheese, Mayo weighing 2lbs 4oz and Inca 1lb 8oz. Both were now around 12 weeks old.

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glove up quickly and she slowly inches her way back to me, swaying and rocking in the wind before throwing out her feet to grab the glove as gratefully as a young swimmer just making it to the side of the pool.

After her food reward, I put her down again and this time she launches more confidently and I leave her for longer, letting her curl back around me a couple of times, finding her wings in the rippling wind. She comes instantly back to the glove, sweeping through the wind as if she is starting to enjoy this. Before I can pop her onto the grass she is off again, into the wind and up. She is stiller in the air now, hanging above me, her head scanning the landscape. I turn to follow her gaze, to see the landscape and to drink it all in. Then I hear it coming. A roar. But there is nothing to see. The clouds are still rising. There is even a sparkle of light off the waves in the Lough. There is no rain, but something invisible is charging straight at us, growing. Never before have I experienced such strange invisibility. I can hear it advancing. I know it is coming and from which direction, straight at us from right along the valley. I know it is getting closer, and quickly. But, even though I face a clear view for miles, I can't see it because I am looking straight through it. Then I see the bracken flinging itself to the ground in terror, writhing under the feet of an invisible stampede, coming up the hillside.

At first, I raise my glove, but immediately I know it's too late. The blast of invisible air hits us and I can only watch. She is hanging there, hanging in, as the wind takes hold of her body. I am willing her to stay facing the wind, a turn now would be disastrous, she would be smashed to

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the floor like a ragdoll or carried over the hill to god knows where or best. Bravely she faces it, but it's taking her up the hill, backwards, further and further from me. I can see her wings tips vibrating and thrashing around like the bracken beneath. She is all over the place and, for one ghastly moment, she seems to explode as feathers stick out in all directions. But she pulls herself together and again faces the demons head-on. All I can do is stand and curse the wind and my stupidity. As she is being taken up the hill I see her dropping lower, fighting to get down, to meet the rising hillside, still falling in the air. Then I lose sight of her.

I don't run, I just head off up the twisting sheep paths through the bracken as the wind dies just as suddenly as it came. The green fronds of bracken bounce back up around me as the last invisible beasts race to catch up with the herd. By the time I get up to the near horizon, all is relatively peaceful except I have no idea where, in this ocean of knee-high green, she is. More impor-

tantly, how she is. She has a transmitter and so I will find her, but is she okay?

I takes only a couple of loud whistles and I hear her call back, a nervous tentative call. She is just a few yards from me, sitting on the floor in a patch of grass. Relief and gratitude. She is fine, and hops up on to the glove as I talk to her, apologising and praising her. I lie her on straight away and give her all her food, because that's it, we are heading home. Walking back down to the Land Rover. I don't trust the view. The clarity of it, washed from the storm, its brightening horizon. It's beautiful but it's a lie and I am listening for it, the invisible stampede. Only when we are back in the Land Rover do I relax. Inca can do some high jumps in her aviary - I am not taking any more risks today. There is music on the radio as I turn the Land Rover down the hill. There's a patch of blue sky above but drops of heavy rain hit the wind-screen.



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limited resources and back-to-the-drawing-board determination, the two men were doing pretty well down in El Salvador.

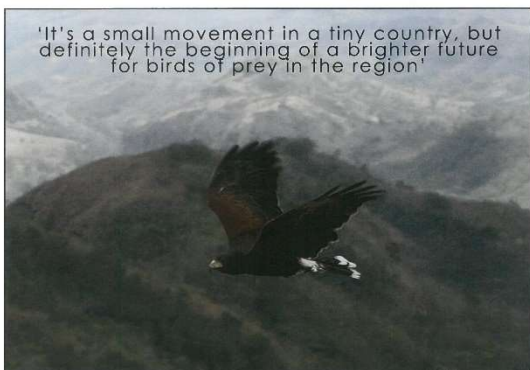
Upon his return, Roy's enthusiasm was stronger than ever; his confidence steadied, he now wanted to get other like-minded people involved as well. He founded Club y Escuela de Caza de El Salvador (The El Salvador Falconry Club and School). The primary purpose would be to promote falconry in a country where there had never been a tradition for the ancient art and to contribute to the conservation of birds or prey there. Since then, the club has actively collaborated with Salvadoran wildlife authorities towards the creation of falconry legislation and in conservation and educational projects related to birds of prey and their habitat.

The club now boasts 28 years of ex-

perience in handling, training and hunting with birds of prey, at both national and international level. In October, 1999 it was unanimously accepted as Corresponding Member of the IAF (International Association for Falconry and Conservation of and Birds of Prey), with Roy as the national delegate representing the falconers of El Salvador at AGMs since 2000. At this moment, the club is small, numbering only 15 or so members. Nevertheless, it is just about to become a fully recognised non-profit organisation that will be able to work on projects mainly related to the conservation of birds of prey in the area. The working group within this new organisation consists of experienced falconers, renowned environmentalists, raptor biologists, as well as new raptor and falconry enthusiasts who all share a common passion. 'It's a small movement in a tiny country, but definitely the beginning of a

brighter future for birds of prey in the region,' says Roy.

Even though there are only a few falconers in El Salvador, they have been lucky enough regarding the laws that regulate the activity there. Falconry regulations were never officially established, and therefore the activity was never prohibited either. The only request made by wildlife authorities is that the few birds being flown are registered. Nevertheless, the club has been continuously urging and assisting the authorities to elaborate on falconry regulations since 1998. The idea is to have something legally established that will primarily protect the interests of falconers and their sustainable practices, but that will also promote the conservation of raptors, their prey species, and the habitat that they share. 'These regulations obviously contemplate the sustainable utilisation of raptors, harvested from



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## Poetry, Hummingbirds and Falconry in El Salvador

Hilary White (Dublin) and Roy Beers (San Salvador)



Falconry does not have a recorded history anywhere in Central America prior to 1965. That was the year that a couple of nature-loving young men in El Salvador met by coincidence in the streets of the capital, San Salvador. The men acquired a pair of egypt White-tailed Kites (*Elanus leucurus*) with the intention of training them and hunting with them. They knew little at this point, let alone that they would become the founding fathers of Salvadoran falconry.

Moisés Daboub and Roy Beers had, by pure coincidence, started practicing on their own. Both were autodidacts who had been lucky enough to get a hold of a falconry text to hold their hand in those early days. For Moisés, it was Humphrey Ap Evans' Falconry which he turned to. Roy, meanwhile, had come across Phillip Glasier's evergreen Falconry And Hawking. It was through these books, essentially, that they were both able to start handling raptors and training them to fly to fal or lure. This wasn't Roy's first falconry proper, but it was enough to get them hooked and determined to expand their knowledge. They exchanged books with each other, devouring them in no time and constantly using them for reference and guidance in all of their field excursions. After all, it was here, in the Salvadoran country-

side with their raptors, that Roy and Moisés wanted to be.

What followed was a long, exciting, and sometimes frustrating road before they actually started hunting something and could call themselves falconers, not to mention the first falconers in that part of the world.

Falconry's first steps in the Central American tropics saw trial and error with a bemusing range of native raptor species, ranging from small buteos like the Road-side Hawk (*Buteo magnirostris*), and the Gray Hawk (*Buteo nitidus*), to the much bigger but not very impressive Great Black Hawk (*Buteogallus urubitinga*). The pair had the opportunity to fly what appear to be very exotic species to falconers on this side of the Atlantic, like Laughing Falcons (*Herpethos cacinans*) and a couple of 'untameable' passage Colared Forest Falcons (*Micrastur semitorquatus*), which Roy recalls them being 'terrified' by.

Unfortunately, all these hawks were available for sale in the streets of San Salvador, along with many other species of wildlife sold as pets. And it was not until El Salvador became a member of CITES (around 1987) that this activity finally became illegal and trade in wildlife reduced considerably. But it was just before this time that the

pair happened upon a key discovery that changed the curve of their fortunes - their first Harris Hawks. Now they actually had their hands on a hawk that was being referred to in their European falconry manuals, and what's more, it was an indigenous species. Now, all the highs and lows of handling all those other species of raptors was channelled into the training of these hawks. Roy had also invented something called the Velocaptor, a mechanical device that can whizz a dummy rabbit across a field at high speeds. Things were coming together and their long-held ambition to become real falconers was manifesting. Before they knew it, they were successfully hunting rabbits and nightjars at night with the aid of kongs.

Years passed before they finally crossed paths with an 'outsider falconer', a concept that had only existed to them in books up to that point. Roy got wind of a beginner's Falconry course by Emma Ford's British School of Falconry taking place at The Equinox in Vermont, US in July 1997. He quickly signed up to take part; his main objective being that he would pick the instructors' brains about 'as many things as possible in order to clear all the doubts' that he and Moisés had had over the years, and to determine if they were actually on the right track or not. The replies to these queries confirmed that, with

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Moisés (left), Roy (right) and that newspaper clipping from 1967

the wild, for the purpose of falconry,' Roy says, 'and it is only this aspect in which we are now encountering resistance. One of our main objectives will be to overcome this huge limitation, with the support of the international falconry community and scientific research that proves that such a controlled harvest does not affect the wild populations of raptors.' Roy's argument is that, in fact, the few specimens that they are permitted to take from the wild will most likely help the mission to educate and raise awareness of raptor and wildlife conservation. Ambassador animals, if you will.

As falconry becomes easier and easier (too easy, many would argue) to break into, the tale of how El Salvador got itself on the falconry map chimes with poignancy. These men had to succeed, one way or another, and were driven to strive for excellence when there was little in the way of tutoring, fancy equipment or ample literature.

With the Gathering underway and most of the country considering relatives being abroad, Irish readers may also find it bemusing that Roy has

Irish roots thanks to his paternal great-grandfather, Peter Patrick Brannon. His grandmother on his father's side, meanwhile, was the Salvadoran laureate Carmen Brannon, one of Central America's most celebrated poets. Writing under the nom de plume Claudia Las, she had 14 titles published in total, with much of her work currently on the nation's school syllabus.

Interestingly, one 1955 collection was titled *School Of Birds*, an interesting name given that her grandson would go on to teach many in her country about falconry. Roy recently revealed to me that his mother had given him an old newspaper cutting featuring a photo of him as a one-year-old tot with one of his grandmother's poems underneath. It had been written especially by her for Roy's first birthday and was only ever published in that newspaper edition in July, 1967. In the first verse of the poem, she mentions his favourite toy - a hummingbird. Perhaps a difficult species to find in El Salvador, but none-the-less a signal that the child would gravitate towards avian life and the poetry birds conjure in the hearts of falconers everywhere.

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