



Irish
Hawking
Club
Journal
2023

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Please send any article submissions and/or photographs to the editor at the above address or to irish.hawking.club@gmail.com.

All material is subject to scrutiny by the committee.

POLICY AND OBJECTIVES

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.

The objectives of the Club are:

to represent falconry throughout Ireland and to foster international cooperation 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 cooperation with all national hunting organisations with like objectives;

to encourage conservation and 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, import and keeping of birds of prey, the hunting of quarry species and the right of access to land;

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

Editor's Welcome

Alan Jackson

Hello from the Isle of Man and welcome to the 2023 edition of the IHC Journal.

When Hilary White gently persuaded me to take on the role of editor I was daunted for several reasons I don't live in Ireland, I only know a few members from field meets I have enjoyed in the past and, more importantly, I had no idea what the job involved.

As a retired dairy farmer who took up falconry late in life I have had a great deal of fun flying goshawks, some of which I bred, and a single peregrine. Hardly enough to claim any kind of expertise and yet I have been treated with total acceptance by the IHC members I have been fortunate to meet. That is why I said yes to Hilary and I feel honoured to be involved.

It took me a long time to make up my mind and a couple of personal issues set me back so I apologise for this issue being later than usual, entirely my fault. I would like to thank our contributors as there are some cracking articles, past and contemporary as well home and abroad. It is particularly pleasing to have contributions from two new members.

I look forward to renewing my travels to your lovely Island and meeting as many of you as possible this coming year.

Alan.



Cover art



"Peregrine at Spanish Head" by Dr Jeremy Paul.

Jeremy worked as a marine biologist in wild and remote areas which sparked his love of wildlife and their surroundings. He developed his art to the stage where he was able to pursue it as a career. He lives on the Isle of Man and has had many one man exhibitions and commissions, including a series of Manx stamps portraying the Island's birds of prey. This picture is available as a print so please visit Jeremy's website www.jeremypaulwildlifeartist.co.uk/



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This Journal is all about the contributors and their articles, without them there will be nothing to enjoy. I therefore appeal to all who read this to consider sending me copy for the next issue.

It doesn't matter if you don't consider yourselves to be writers, just let me have whatever it is you would like included and we can tidy it up.

Any article is much more interesting with accompanying photographs, or artwork, as I know many of you enjoy painting the birds and scenes you love.

So maybe you have read a book, attended a field meet, met up with falconers with a story to tell or want to explain to others how you have trained and flown your own birds; they are all of interest to other falconers and members of the public who come across the Journal. Also if you want to write an equipment review or advertise in the Journal please get in touch.

And please, don't wait, just send anything to me as soon as you can because by the time you read this I will be putting together the next issue.

Alan Jackson alan.comeover@gmail.com



Good news

Just before we went to press, Hilary White received this email from Gary Timbrell, CEO of the IAF

Dear Members of the IAF Board and Working Groups,

I am very pleased to inform you all of success in maintaining IAF accreditation as advisory NGO to the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the ICH. This process must be gone through every four years and is, to be frank, exhausting. It is by no means an automatic renewal, forms running into several tens of pages must be completed, and every year several advisory NGOs get struck off the list for not fulfilling their obligations to their element.

We are very lucky in that Dr. Bohumil Straka did this for us several times before stepping back from other mainstream IAF activities; Bohumil advised on this latest renewal and Patrizia Cimberio worked particularly hard to ensure that the IAF remains active in promoting falconry, which remains high in the collective thoughts of the national delegates at the UNESCO ICH Convention. We were unable to send anyone in person to the eighteenth session of UNESCO ICH in Botswana, last December, where accreditation renewals were discussed and voted upon. Yet despite that we still managed to maintain our accreditation. Many thanks to all concerned.

Gary

Gary Timbrell
CEO to the IAF

Gary asked me to point out that:

Each country in the listing must also provide regular reports on how their particular government is encouraging and preserving the element (in this case Falconry, but also the other three elements listed by Ireland).



Director's address

With our season having just finished at the end of January it is a great pleasure to welcome you to this year's Irish Hawking Club Journal. Many thanks to all who wrote and contributed their articles for this year's edition and a special thanks to Alan Jackson for coming on board as editor and bringing it all together.

Our journal has always been regarded as one of the best of the National Falconry Club journals available and this year's is no exception. It carries a very wide and interesting range of topics whether of a practical falconry or a reminiscent nature. So; our members will find plenty to interest, amuse and even stimulate their own falconry ambitions. I say stimulate with good reason.

I remember back in my youth acquiring a copy of the compendium of the British Falconers' Club journals from 1937 to 1971; basically it was thirty four BFC journals in one book. I still have it on my bookshelf at home and the many articles, hawking reports and flight descriptions, often by the most famous falconers of the time, played no small part in stimulating my own ambition and imagination at a time when I was only starting out in falconry.

Whereas the early falconry books of this period focused more on the practicalities of handling the birds along with the theories of practising the different branches of our sport, it was in the journals more often that the falconry really came alive with the flight descriptions sometimes taken straight from the falconers' hawking diaries. Often the annual reports from the moor and downs were included and allowed you to see how the same falcons had flown year after year, with their score of grouse or rook annotated for each season. These reports gave one a real feel for something yet to be experienced and, best of all, they were usually honest enough to include the disasters that afflict us all as falconers too such as the death or loss of a good falcon.

So, as we hang our gloves up for the moulting and breeding season just beginning, may I wish all our members well and I look forward to seeing you all in the field in the coming season.

Maurice Nicholson
Director IHC



Visit by Dr Neil Forbes

'Managing raptors for health and longevity'



Raptor Welfare & Management

The Irish Hawking Club presents:
Managing Raptors for Health & Longevity
By: Dr. Neil Forbes BVetMed Dip ECZM(avian) FRCVS,
RCVS Emeritus Specialist Zoo and Wildlife (avian)

When: July 6th 2024: 09:00 - 17:00
Midlands Park Hotel - Jessop Street, Portlaoise, R32 KV20

Cost:
€80 (excl. booking fees) - Coffee, Tea & Lunch included
*€40 - Irish Hawking Club Members
**Parking at venue not included

Register:
<https://IHC-Raptor-Management.eventbrite.ie>

Why:
The Irish Hawking Club is committed to both conservation and the welfare of captive raptors. Through this program we are working to better educate raptor keepers and managers; to establish care standards, which will help ensure the health and longevity of captive raptors, as well as wild raptors in rehabilitation across the nation.
All proceeds will go to The Horstmann Trust.

Questions or problems booking?
Contact Andi Chewning at irish.hawking.club@gmail.com



On behalf of the Irish Hawking Club and its Committee I am proud to announce that there will be an educational event held this summer with Dr. Neil Forbes presenting his course on Managing Raptors for Health and Longevity, with all proceeds to benefit The Horstmann Trust.

The Horstmann Trust is *'the UK's only dedicated vulture breed for release conservation charity'* although the trust itself is newly established as a registered charity (2022) decades of knowledge and research went into the founding. The overall aims and objectives of the charity are to be an effective part of the vulture conservation community and to play an active role in sharing information and resources, through education, teaching of rehabilitation, and captive breeding skills to colleagues around the world

The breed and release part of the project is dedicated to the conservation of vulnerable vulture populations by breeding in captivity. By prioritising genetic diversity, optimal health and natural behaviours to ensure the birds' successful reintroduction into the wild. They employ a variety of release techniques and monitor the birds post-release to assess their progress and adapt their strategies accordingly. By raising public awareness and promoting sustainable practices, their breed and release projects contribute significantly to the recovery of these vital species, fostering a balanced ecosystem for future generations.

<https://vultures.ngo/conservation/>

As to the course, it is a full-day course which covers a broad range of issues relating to the keeping of birds of prey (i.e. legislation, new diseases, ailments, injuries, good husbandry practices, etc.) with

the second part of the day comprising of a hands-on workshop covering emergency first-aid and wound stabilisation for field injuries and other accidents.

The first day of the course will be aimed at falconers and zookeepers who work with raptors, providing a look at the new legislation from the UK which may make its way into Irish law, as well as information on new diseases and updated welfare standards. The second and third days will be more clinical focusing on providing further education about avian medicine and training to veterinarians from across the nation.

The Raptor Welfare & Management Course will be held on July 6, 2024 at The Midlands Park Hotel from 09:00 - 17:00. It is €80 for public/non-IHC members and €40 for current IHC members as the committee have voted to subsidise the cost for any members of the club who wish to attend.

This course is open to all, and is not exclusive to members of The Irish Hawking Club but places will be limited.

The Avian Medicine training for veterinarians will be on July 7 & 8, 2024 at The Midlands Park Hotel from 09:00 - 17:00 both days.

More information and booking is available online at <https://IHC-Raptor-Management.eventbrite.ie> for the Raptor Welfare & Management course.

And <https://IHC-Avian-Medicine-1.eventbrite.ie> for the Avian Medicine veterinary training.

Yours in sport,

Andi Chewning.



The aims and objectives of the charity are to be an effective part of the vulture conservation community and to play an active role in sharing information and resources. We combine this with on-going teaching of rehabilitation and captive breeding skills to colleagues around the world. Only through working with other organisations, both in and ex-situ, can the knowledge and expertise be exploited to its full potential.

Our work currently focuses on 4 main species – Hooded vultures, Egyptian vultures, Bearded vultures and Andean condors – and our goal is to maintain sustainable, genetically diverse and consistently breeding collections with these birds.

Book review

Christian de Coune (1941-2011) *compiled by Jevgeni Shergalin*

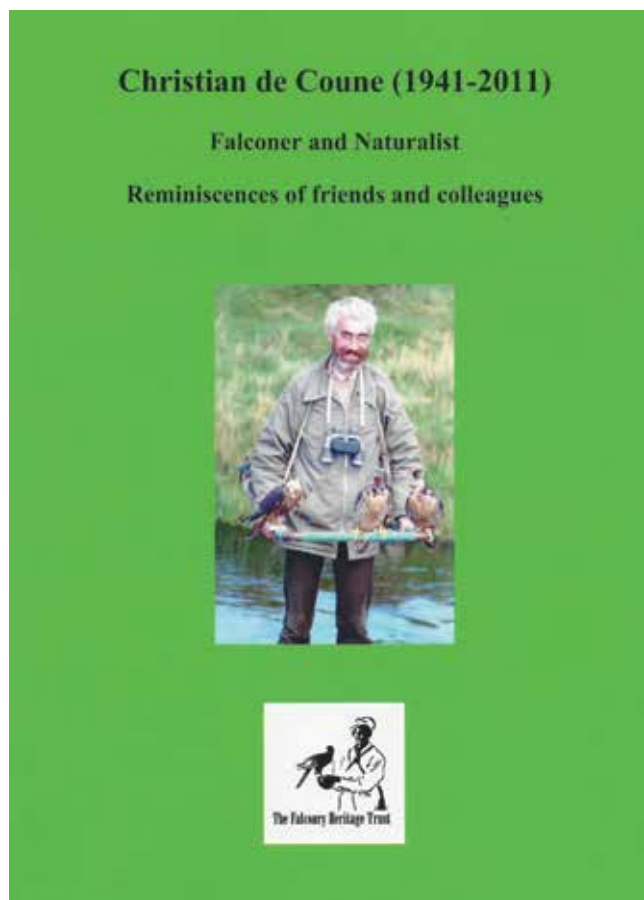
By Gary Timbrell CEO of IAF

It is an honour to be asked to write a review of a book about one of one's heroes, so I admit from the start that this is not an objective review, it is going to be positive, whatever.

As I get older and move into the company of silverbacks, the cranky old men I used to give out about when I thought the world should be run by youth, I often reflect on the people I have known and respected and who have influenced me, people whose company I am proud to have been allowed to enjoy. As falconers, we are lucky that age and generations matter less to us than to those with interests of lesser consequence. I have been told that a man in his lifetime only meets five gentlemen (gentlemen being defined as someone who treats all others as gentlemen), I am proud to be able to number among my five (all of them falconers): Roger Upton, Liam Ó Broin, Philippe le Hardy de Beaulieu and Christian de Coune. I leave the fifth anonymous for fear of upsetting someone in the IHC.

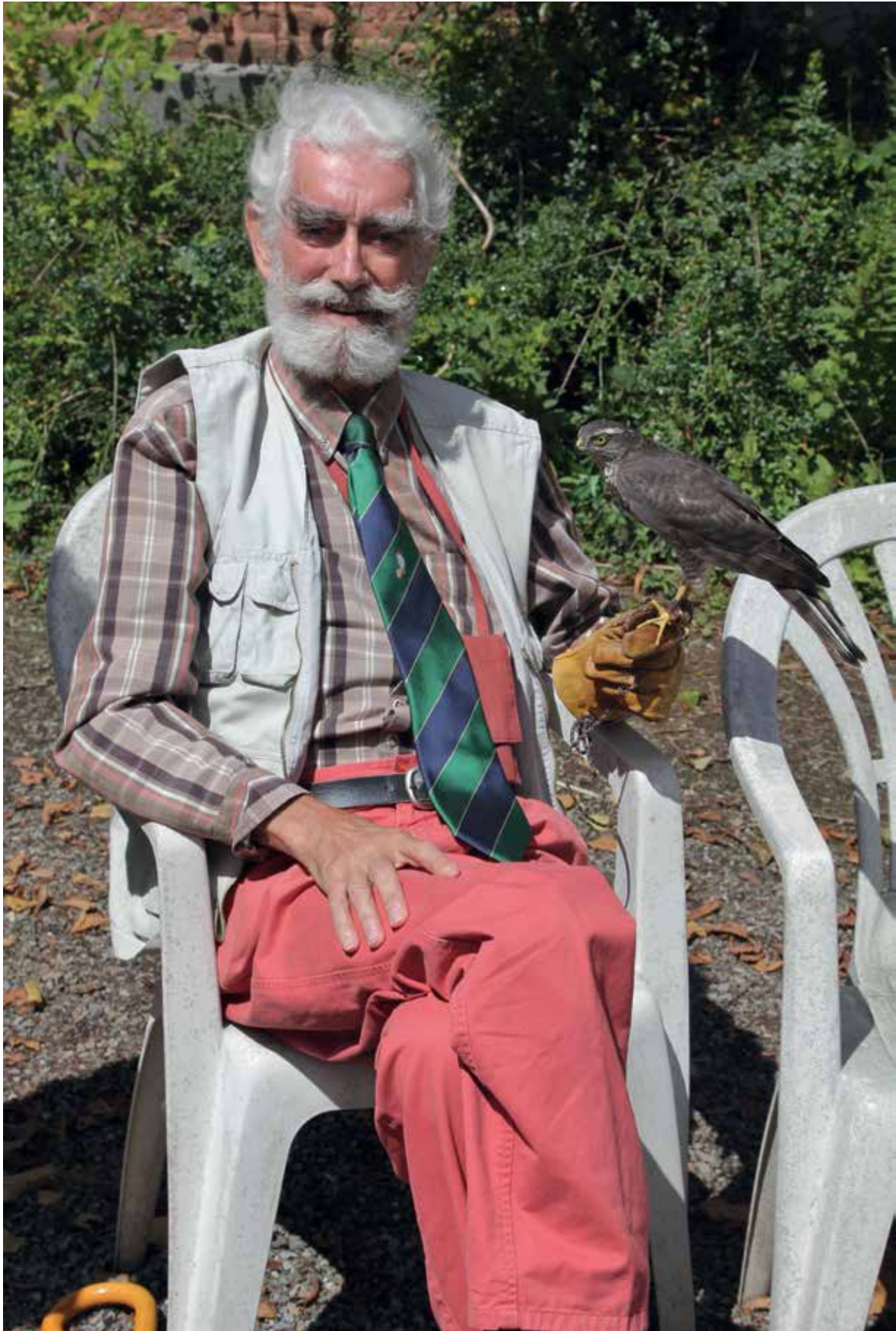
Christian de Coune was definitely one of my heroes, as he was to so many of the contributors to this book, not least to its author. I first met Jevgeni (Shergalin, who put the book together) and Christian at the same IAF meeting in Amarillo in Texas. From that first meeting, we began to learn from Christian, and have benefited from the encouragement and the charm and personality of a remarkable gentleman. Anyone from the Irish Hawking Club lucky enough to have been in the Conyngham Arms Hotel in Slane, where we used to hold our AGMs, will remember a fascinating talk that that Christian gave on the topic of 'Little Words'.

Christian's legacy to falconry is not that he was a great falconer (I never saw him fly a hawk, although he did fly sparrowhawks until the '90s), no, his legacy is that he saved falconry by dedicating his time and money to protecting it during troubled times from the late sixties onwards, he used his philosophy of 'little words' to influence all the European institutions. He attended every meeting in Brussels and steered conversations in the right directions, preventing the death of falconry on several occasions, so death by the stroke of a pen was avoided by 'little words'.



Yes, it was an honour to be asked to write a review, but it is a particularly hard thing to do; all the chapters of the book sing the praises of a great man, so what can I say about the man that is not already said by someone better in the pages that come afterwards? I know you will enjoy reading it, dipping into it a chapter at a time, savouring snippets and anecdotes and seeing the admiration that other iconic figures in modern falconry have for such an iconic figure.

I admired Christian every bit as much as all of the contributors to this book, I also admire Jevgeni for all his work in compiling it and his patience in collecting the tributes. We worked together in the IAF, all three of us, towards the glorious moment when Falconry would be added to the UNESCO list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. One of the earliest thoughts we had from researching for it was that history must be written down, because before writing started, there was probably no history, or more likely, an awful lot of history will never be known simply because no-one wrote it down. The history of our friend, Christian de Coune is recorded. You will enjoy it.



Christian at the annual General Meeting of the Belgian Club Marie Borgogne, and a delayed celebration of his 70th birthday, 2011 (photo Patrick Morel)



My view on snipe hawking

Eric Witkowski, Co Kerry



I will try to explain my view on snipe hawking, one of the more recently discovered branches of falconry, (with small exemptions), which will not only test your falcon to the limit but also you as a falconer. Many give up trying, finding it too demanding in many aspects. Few have succeeded to complete all necessary elements of this sport. You need good dogs, proper land, and enough time to merge all of that. If you miss just one, you only have a small chance to be successful. It is also important to be a very patient falconer in order to achieve good potential in your falcon.

It needs to start from the dogs, or one at least. This is first because the saying goes, 'good dogs make good falcons'. You've got to get and train a good bloodline dog, who will hold the points long enough to let your falcon get up there. Sometimes 3 minutes is enough, but with a young falcon and scarce prey 15 minutes might not be enough. Then your dog is expected to be able to flush on command a distance away from you, which I've found very useful. What happens after the flush with your dog makes no difference to the hawk. Sometimes it is even better when your dog is chasing prey after flush, that keeps them airborne as snipe often will bail under the falcon, especially with high cover available. It should go without saying: your dog can never touch your falcon. As time goes on with frequent trips to the hunting ground, your dog will understand more about your expectations towards him. I've found through the years that with two dogs you'll find snipe quicker, especially when you need to get a point quickly after a bump or for a second stoop.

'For snipe hawkers it is a dream land'

Land. We are blessed here in Ireland with plenty of so-called "waste land" of raised and blanket bogs where snipe will reside in large numbers in the winter months. For snipe hawkers it is a dream land with snipe often being so plentiful that there might be one rising for every step made.

In general, lowland raised bogs are better, surrounded by green pastures where snipe feed at night and come back to a bog to rest during the day. The density of snipe depends a lot on weather conditions, disturbance, time of the year and available cover. The best weather is wet and not too windy. Lots of rain around means snipe have worms near the top of the surface, easy to reach and plentiful. They can fill up their stomachs and spend more time on a bog to have a rest. Dry periods makes worms go deeper to the ground and are harder to find. Frost has the same effect, plus hard ground is difficult to penetrate. That might force snipe to stay longer on feeding grounds making them scarce on the bogs. It would be much easier to find them on the pastures than than bogs. Short cover is also necessary, as they will be less likely to

dump under a falcon attack. High cover makes that much more possible.

Time is crucial, you need enough time in the winter months to go out every day in the daylight for 2-3 hours and train your team. The best results come if you can ensure you make it on a daily basis. It is very important at the beginning of the training process. When your bird is already wedded to snipe, you should be able to go hawking at least 4 times a week. This will allow you to keep your bird fit and confident. Through the years I've learned that when trying to catch a snipe you need to be patient, often very patient. You can't make short cuts, everything must be done in the right pace and order. A long term plan is also good to have as you'll need to be persistent in your steps. Patience also helps increase the pitch, when you don't know if snipe will still hold and not bump at the tiercel's next climbing circle.



Sometimes it costs a lot to hold on!

So if you have sorted and considered all of the above, you can collect your tiercel. It seems to be easier with an eyass peregrine than swapping from other prey with an experienced bird.

Young birds have a better desire to fly 'wasting' time for unsuccessful attacks than experienced, seasoned

birds. So first make your bird climb up to minimum 50-60m and hold well over dogs/yourself. In Ireland we can only use captive bred birds or wild taken birds from a nest. Some people would try wild hacking, all my birds up to now were not hacked. I always fly them as long as possible, giving them time to find their wings, so at an early stage they can be up to, and often more than, 30 minutes in the air daily in one or two flights.

Snipe arrive in Ireland in good numbers in October, you need to keep your bird flying before that through the summer months. You have some time to guide your bird to fly well. You can fly on other prey, but once the snipe arrive switch only to snipe until the tiercel is well experienced taking them. It took from 10 days to 2 months for my former tiercels to kill their first snipe from the day they stooped the first one. My current tiercel, which is very good now after 4 seasons, was very slow to kill a few and make it look easy.

'Your tiercel needs to feel strong and be able to afford to waste his energy for missed attacks'

The biggest problem falconers encounter is that their birds soon, after several unsuccessful attacks, lose their interest and are not holding position. A common mistake is to drop their weight which actually makes things worse. Your tiercel needs to feel strong and be able to afford to waste his energy for missed attacks. So it is important to keep their weight as high as possible, and when they begin to blank snipe you have to raise their weight up. Always worked for me. When all above works well, it is extremely rewarding. But if not, it could be very frustrating.

My tiercel is nearly 4 years old now, and we are looking forward to his fifth season in the field. He is a good flyer, can stay in the air up to an hour and has caught many snipe in a superb style. Good style for me is clean strike or bound to a snipe mid air after a nice vertical stoop from at least 150-180m. His highest kill was from 260m. It is really hard to beat. The higher the pitch and the faster the stoop the harder it is to catch a snipe.

One particular day stuck in my mind last season when we visited our great blanket bog in the



At Mike Nichols' cairn on Glencar bog, with Mark Upton and Maurice Nicholson

heart of the Iveragh peninsula in county Kerry where I live. Glencar bog is an extensive bog surrounded by the mountains, so better not to lose a bird there. I have many good memories from my trips there with many falconer friends. It was my last trip there before the season ended. This large blanket bog, with picturesque mountains bordering it, makes for a wonderful atmosphere for this sport. It was an overcast day with a slight breeze but nothing was going to stop our enthusiasm to go hawking. In attendance was Don Ryan, Keith Barker, and Shay O'Byrne with peregrine tiercels and Emily Venables

with a merlin and others spectating. With us were the dogs, my two red setters Axel and Max, Don's red and white setter Libby and Keith's English pointer Buster. When everyone was ready we set off onto the lovely large bog where Mike Nichols' cairn was erected after his passing few years ago.

I have to say I was proud of my flight. The first point I had was from Max. My tiercel had already climbed around 250m and was waiting on patiently above. It seems as though my tiercel knows that when I pull my camera out to record, the flush is about to come. 'Get him' I yelled, and the snipe was

flushed. The peregrine stooped like a jet at tremendous speed but just missed the snipe, as the snipe pulled into some hedge growth. My tiercel wasn't disheartened however, as he started climbing immediately for another stoop. He knows we are going to find another snipe soon. The second point was held by three dogs. Max was the main dog on point, with Axel and Libby backing him. It was a beautiful set up. The snipe was flushed and the tiercel tucked his wings in and dropped from a round 210m this time. He very nearly caught the snipe, but the snipe pulled in again at the last fraction of a second. It was nail biting to watch! Still determined for a catch, my tiercel climbed again, much to the surprise of my fellow falconers. When hunting on our home bogs, this is what my team would often do, up to 3 stoops. This was the highest pitch of the three, Axel was on point this time and when commanded to flush he did it perfectly. Tiercel stooped and it was by far the most spectacular flight of the day, we all thought he'd caught the snipe!

However, unfortunately the pesky snipe managed to get away this time. My dogs and I carried on trying to find just one more point. Tiercel seemed to be tireless that day and really wanted to have a fresh, warm meal. We had one more stoop after from a respected pitch but unfortunately another miss. I called him down to a lure and fed him full crop after this fantastic flight.



It is not always about the kill, but more the spectacle of great team work between falcons in their natural habitats and the dogs, everyone clearly understands their role in the team.

Tiercel caught more than 40 snipe in the season, topping up with few pheasants and a woodcock. A truly great season we had. I'm hoping for a clean moult and another successful season.



Eric can be contacted at

kerryfalconry@gmail.com

My first bird experience

Stijn Suykerbuyk, Belgium



Stijn was born and raised near Essen on the Belgium/ Dutch border. He works as an environmental laboratory technician for a chemical company and spends as much time hawking as he can. He visited the Sneem meet earlier this year and, as he puts it, joined the best hawking club in the world, the IHC.

Birds run in my family's veins, especially my Grandfather, who devoted a lot of his life to them. He started out by catching wild songbirds. Evolving later in his life to keeping exotic species, catching, ringing and releasing birds for research purpose. And joining the local barn owl project by building and placing nest boxes. He noticed my interest in birds and took me along. Soon, I got some zebra finches and a big aviary with exotics after that. But once I saw a display with birds of prey at the Belgium zoo park 'Pairi Daiza' I was sold. Only 10 years old at the time but I was determined to pursue this passion.

At first, I read books about wild birds, a few dutch falconry books and some online forums. That was soon not enough and I met a few different mentors where I started helping with the day-to-day care and displays. I learned a lot from them, and also that display work is not my real interest.

At the age of 14 one of my mentors found me ready to get my own bird and brought me in contact with a breeder of Harris hawks. All of this, of course, with the support of my parents and granddad. Without whom it was not possible at this age. So after the initial acquaintance I had to wait until the 15th of August 2008 to collect my first bird, a beautiful female Harris hawk that I named Kyra. The breeder provided her jesses and anklets and off we went. At home her mews and all the other equipment were waiting, and so her training began.

As a young lad, one of the advantages, that I have now lost, was the time available to train her. As it was a holiday I could devote all my free time to her so she was flying free in less than 3 weeks.



Hunting was not in the picture at first since it is only legal from the age of 18, and getting good permissions here in Belgium is very difficult since game is very scarce. I did some displays with her first, helping my mentors. But

that faded quickly because it was not my interest at the time.

The following years consisted of free-flying her a lot, trying to get her soaring a bit, which I found almost impossible in our flat country. But soon her killer instinct arose. She killed a squirrel, a small mammal, and frequently targeted our chickens. I noticed a Harris hawk is a hunting bird and not suited for just free-flying. So I started my hunting journey with her when she was almost 8 years old.

At first, it was difficult to get her motivated and get her weight right. She took some rabbits but refused the long slips. Lure machine work got her fit



and confident enough to take the difficult slips. The book *The Harris's Hawk Revolution*, by Jennifer and Tom Coulson was an eye-opener for me and helped me so much to understand the complicated Harris hawk's mind. A must-read for the Harris hawk fanatic. Martin Hollinshead also provides some great info. I made all the possible beginner mistakes with her you can imagine, but most undesired behaviour can be corrected. The smart Harris hawk will try and succeed to outmanoeuvre you, so you really need to analyse every behaviour and try to be a step ahead.

Fast forward to today, many rabbits later, Kyra is 15 years old. Although I trained and hunted multiple Harris hawks for friends on a loan basis, Kyra is still the only hawk I own myself. Needless to say, she will stay with me for life. The last few years it is taking

more work to get her fit after the moult, but her experience makes up for that. Just bring her weight down, one day of some jump-ups in the garden and the next day she is flying free. Manning has become unnecessary so I just need to build her fitness. In one or two weeks she is killing rabbits, from August till the end of February.

Some lessons I learned from Kyra:

- *Don't blame the bird but yourself for unwanted behaviour because you taught it.*
- *Instead of swapping your hawk for a different species, try different hunting styles and prey species.*
- *Don't get more birds than your time allows. For me, with a full-time job 1-2 hawks are the maximum. There is no point or honour in keeping more hawks when you can't get the best out of them.*

I hope I can enjoy my first bird for many years to come and have some wonderful hunting seasons ahead with her!



Is hunting with a golden eagle for you?

Ronnie Moore, England



Brown hare 12lbs, 1980

Ronnie has been a hunting falconer for 50 years, hunting with goshawks- eyass, passage and haggard; as well as lanners, prairies and peregrines in England and Scotland for the last 20 years. Throughout that time his favourite hunting companion was his female golden eagle Ailsa. Their hunting partnership lasted 28 years until her sad death at the grand old age of 30.

I handled my first Golden Eagle in the field in around 1976, it was a female and it did not belong to me. It's owner, Colin, was hunting on pasture land that was swarming with mixomatosis rabbits and it had taken two. Each time he approached the eagle it chased him and when it did he shouted for me to hide the rabbits which I duly did, but the eagle just flew off and caught another one. This time Colin approached it and whilst it refused to let go of the rabbit he tried to wind up it's jesses with a forked stick. Annoyed at this, the eagle let go of the rabbit, swung up and grabbed Colin's

ungloved hand, driving it's talons right through the palm. It then released Colin's hand and he ran off screaming to be tended by others in the party.

'when you get it wrong with a golden eagle, you have a very dangerous creature on your hands'

I threw a chunk of the rabbit to the enraged eagle and when it had finished eating it no one in the party would go anywhere near it. Feeling I had drawn the short straw to try to pick the bird up I approached it with much trepidation, particularly in view of what it had done to Colin's hand. I pinned the bird's jesses down with the forked stick and wound them round the end, the eagle then started flapping like hell at the end of the stick trying to get at me. Not a pleasant incident to be involved with I can assure you, but I managed to get back to the vehicle and secure her in

the back. I was ok but the unfortunate Colin required hospital treatment.

You would have thought that this incident would have put me off for life but it had the opposite effect, I wanted to hunt with them myself. This fateful day served to illustrate what can happen when you get it wrong with a golden eagle; you have a very dangerous creature on your hands. Not just to the handler either, this bird later missed a hare and then attacked a youth in the field because he was wearing a parka with a fur lined hood. I know there are a few falconers in Ireland that are hunting with golden eagles and from what I have heard they are doing really well with them. They will tell you that once you get your eagle sorted and it has accepted you as a hunting partner the thrill and satisfaction you can get hunting with one of these magnificent creatures is immense.

To me, when the conditions are all perfect; the weather, the terrain and an ample supply of suitable quarry, there is nothing in falconry that I have been involved in or witnessed that comes close to hunting with your golden eagle. I will end on a high note by describing one of my perfect days hunting with my Golden Eagle Ailsa who, from the very start, was hunted from an aerial position, on the soar.

I checked the weather and the wind was in the right direction with a blue sky and white fluffy clouds. With no sign of fog or snow everything was set for a good day's hunting. I put Ailsa out to weather with a clean bath and she jumped in it immediately. I loved watching her bathe, she would roll on her side really wallowing in the water then she would squat down and move her lower body backwards and forwards. When she was happy with her ablutions she would jump back on her perch, spread her wings high to dry out then have a really intense preen, spending quite a time oiling her feathers. She looked magnificent with her feathers gleaming and shining in the morning sun. My hawking bag was already packed in the car so I loaded her up and set off to the high Yorkshire dales, a cracking piece of ground with high limestone cliffs that stretched for about 3/4 of a mile. I could hunt this ground in any wind from southwest to northwest and today it was a perfect westerly.

We arrived at the farm, had a word with the farmer to let him know we were about, and off we went. She did not have any telemetry on her as I did not have any until about three years later so I hoped I had got my training right. My companion that day, about 43 years ago, was Steve Smith who is a well known member of the British Falconers Club. We got out the car and set off up the hill away from the farm house. When we got to the bottom of the cliffs I unhooded her and she did her usual thing, looked round and lifted off to land at the base of the cliffs. She had a rouse, a mute then off she went, rolling back up the cliffs till she hit the wind. She just went up

higher and higher and we stood there watching her, when I saw her stop climbing and turn into the wind I said to Steve 'right, we are away'.

We started to beat the ground and it was not long before we moved a rabbit and I shouted my normal call when the quarry was sighted, 'Hare, Hare', she dropped one wing then turned over and plummeted to earth in a full teardrop stoop, as good as anything I've seen a Peregrine do. She was still head first about ten or fifteen feet from the ground when she just seemed to somersault, drop her feet and bind to the unfortunate rabbit. Absolutely stunning!

I did my usual routine when she made a kill, let her calm down, cover the already dead rabbit with my copious hawking bag, blow my feeding whistle then give her the usual reward. This was a skinned out front leg of a rabbit. While she was eating this I ran the urine out of the rabbit then put it in my bag. When she had finished her reward I offered her the back of my right hand on which she always feaked her beak, it never failed to give me a wonderful feeling when she did this, she would close her eyes and rub each side making sure it was perfectly clean. I would then hold my arm up until she felt the wind and lift off. Sometimes she would land on a rock to have a rouse and a mute before lifting off and climbing to get back into position. Other times she would just lift off and start to climb to make her pitch, sometimes she would go so high she would look the size of a pigeon or even a starling. This particular day she seemed to be at least two thousand feet according to Steve. We started to beat for her again and the same thing happened, another scintillating stoop ending in



A good pitch, ready to stoop



The power and majesty

another kill. She took another three rabbits in similar style and I decided to give her one last flight, even though she was flying with five rabbit front legs in her crop, she still was keen to hunt. Having seen her do this numerous times I'm convinced that in the wild, when conditions are in their favour and there is an ample supply of quarry, a Golden Eagle will catch and stash for when harder times come.

As we were watching her through the binoculars I saw her slice and thought it's about time to call it a day, but just as I was about to bring her down I saw her do a little circle, drop one wing, turn over and go into yet another teardrop stoop; at what we didn't know as we had not moved anything. Then again, when she was only feet from the ground, she turned over and levelled out, dropped her feet and bound to a rabbit that was tucked into a seat. What a finish! That to me was a perfect day's hunting, I could have asked for no more from Ailsa, she was with us directly overhead all the time we were beating for her,

she didn't drift away but trusted us to provide quarry for her.

I spent a lot of time and heart ache with numerous disappointments to get her to that standard of hunting, but when you had days like those it is just an absolute privilege to be out with her and for her to accept me as her equal; she gave me that privilege. I was thirty four when I started hunting her and we hunted together every season for the next twenty eight years until I was sixty two, she sadly past away at the grand old age of thirty and I had her cremated.

It is my wish that when I pass away our ashes will be taken up to that very piece of ground, mixed together and cast off on a westerly wind where we will spend an eternity hunting together.



If you have any comments or questions about this article, or golden eagles in general, Ronnie invites comments at ronnietheeagle@hotmail.com

Right - 1st brown hare. (photo by D A Aldred)

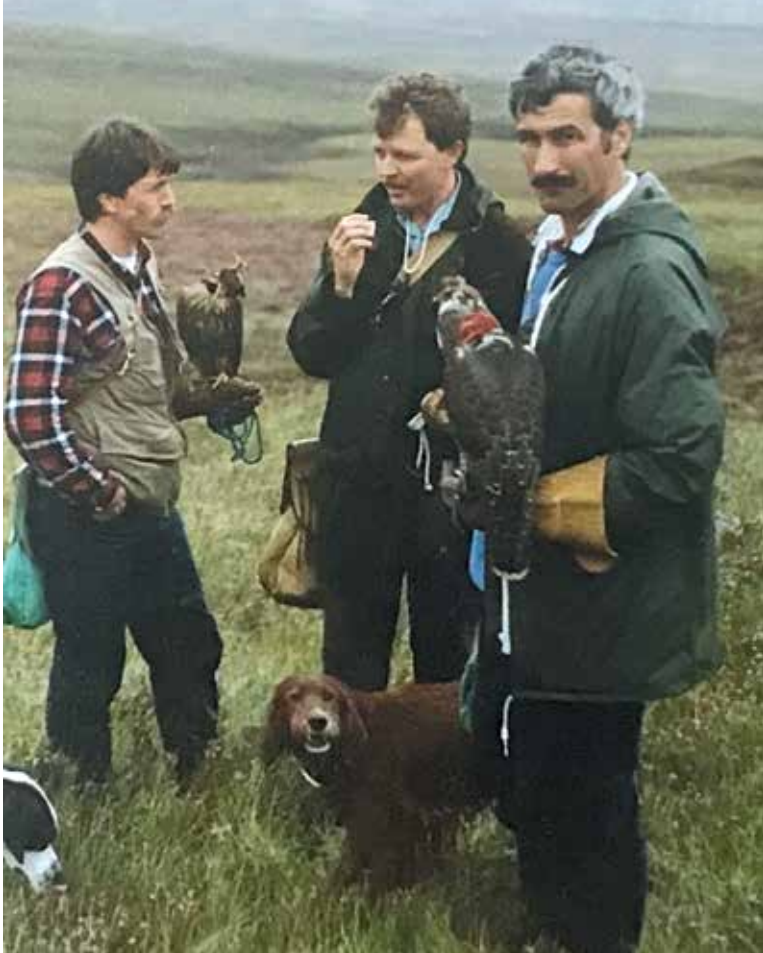


Below - Taking in the scenery. (photo by Val Smith)



A first attempt at grouse hawking: Scotland 1988

Maurice Nicholson, Co Wicklow



Eric Armstrong with Steffi, David Frank with Jerry and Maurice with Heather

Ever since I had first become interested in falcons and falconry I had read about one of the high pinnacles of our sport: hawking red grouse with a peregrine falcon. Poring over the descriptions in the old books by Ronald Stevens and Roger Upton was enough to get my heart racing as I imagined the explosion of a covey from the heather and the stoop from the falcon towering high above. I had been rook hawking for a few years when the dream of hawking grouse suddenly became a possibility for me.

It all started in the spring of 1988 when David Frank, who now runs the Western Sporting falconry goods shop in Sheridan, Wyoming, came into my veterinary clinic in Kent with an injured Black Sparrowhawk that he was flying. As I was examining this unusual hawk, which I suspected of having dislocated a hip after striking a pheasant, David

started tempting me. 'Would you fancy trying grouse hawking this season in Scotland?' 'Absolutely... tell me more!' 'I've just heard of a moor up north of Inverness that might be available for hawking this August. It's 14,000 acres of hill that has been shot over dogs for many years but no real game keeping done for some time. I am planning to go up north and go out with the estate dog handler and see what the grouse numbers look like.'

I felt a rush of excitement. I had been hawking rooks for four years with peregrines but my latest tiercel had been poisoned a few weeks before when a neighbour sprayed a lot of weedkillers accidentally over my garden fence. 'Count me in if it's a runner... I have a proven grouse trained dog but the only thing is, I have no falcon at the moment.'

David was curator of birds at the Leeds Castle estate close to Maidstone where my practice was based. He hailed from San Diego, California where he had been in charge of all the free flying bird displays at the San Diego Zoo. He also had been one of that wild brotherhood of Californian duck hawkers of the 1970's and 80's that hawked the migratory flocks each season from the Bay Area of San Francisco all the way down south to the Mexican border. He had brought two of his hybrid tiercels to the UK with him when he came to work in Kent: Jerry, a Gyr/Prairie and Ivan a Peale's/Prairie.

Although we came from entirely different falconry traditions and experiences, David and I had the same dream when it came to falconry in the United Kingdom...we both wanted to hawk the king of game birds, the Scottish red grouse and a little matter like me not having a falcon wasn't going to put Dave off. 'Don't worry, I have got a good breeder lined up for a new female peregrine for myself this June. There's a good chance he'll have one for you as well.'

David duly drove to Scotland a week later and spent a couple of days out with Nancy MacNiocail and her team of pointers and setters on the Midfean Estate in Rosshire. When he came back, he was full of enthusiasm as there had been plenty of pairs of grouse. The ground was very hilly but still suitable enough as many of the big slopes faced the prevailing

winds and the cost was surprisingly reasonable for the two weeks we planned to stay. Now we just had to make sure we got our two new falcons and to get them ready to go on the Glorious Twelfth.

When the two new eyasses arrived in June, to my surprise they were both imprints. I had flown four peregrines up to then but all had been parent reared and I had assumed these would be too so I was taken aback at this discovery. David just laughed. 'You'll see. Flying an imprint has disadvantages but there are advantages too. We have two nice looking females and we are going to have some fun but I gotta tell you... as I did all the sourcing, the dark one's mine.'

When I looked at the two new eyasses in the free loft aviary for the first time I could see why he had made his choice. His chosen falcon was of a smouldering black hue and the mail of her breast was marked with the darkest of deep brown streaks. The other falcon by comparison was of a much lighter creamy brown colouring but with a stockier, more robust and powerful build. I was delighted with her but I could see why David had chosen the darker one.

Once we had manned them up and got them flying free, David and I used to meet up and go out every evening together with the two falcons, training them to wait on. In calm conditions we flew them on the low ground below the downs but when the wind was blowing hard we soared them off the tops and, above all, tried to let them fly well out and reward them for going high.

My falcon, for an imprint, was very quiet and the only time she ever vocalised was when I picked her up from the block. Right from the start though I knew I had a brilliant falcon for Heather, as I named her, flew with real drive and tempo and mounted instinctively into the sky. She was never one for gliding or resting on her wings but chopped continuously and powerfully through the air. Within a couple of weeks she was flying very wide at times and I had to learn to hold my nerve, not to produce the lure and just let her fly. Every time she eventually came back over me and I didn't have a single long retrieval. All through her career she reminded me of a big tiercel rather than a female; such was the manner of her flight. David named his falcon Steffi after Steffi Graf who had just won Wimbledon but the dark smouldering beauty proved to be a very babyish imprint and David really struggled to get her flying wide or high. I was beginning to see the



Heather, eyass peregrine falcon, on a perch at Fearn Lodge

disadvantages of flying an imprint. Evening after evening she would come screaming back around him instead of going out and making height. David just shook his head and laughed. 'I picked the wrong damn one. Typical David Frank.... going for the pretty one! I'll fly this behaviour out of her but her first season is going to be a struggle!'

'our accommodation was in the west wing of Fearn Lodge'

On the 11th of August we set off in convoy on the long drive from the garden of England to the Scottish Highlands, breaking up the journey to put the falcons out on their blocks a couple of times during the day. Another American friend of David's, Eric Armstrong and his wife accompanied us. We reached our destination, the village of Ardgay and our accommodation was in the west wing of Fearn Lodge, the home of Charlie Brooke and his family who owned the estate. The Lodge sat on the southern edge of the Dornoch Firth with the hills of the estate rising up to the south below it. The estate was now primarily a salmon farm but it had a long sporting history. Charlie's aunt, Eppie Buist, had been the doyenne of the pointer and setter field trial world in the UK for many years and had trained all her pointers who carried the Fearn prefix on the Midfearn estate.

We set up the screen perches for the falcons in a room off the kitchen and after a couple of wee drams we were ready for bed and excited for the days to come. The next morning after weathering the



Fearn Lodge, Ardgay Ross-shire

falcons for a few hours we set off up the long track to the moor with David's favourite country music booming all around us in the car as we jolted along. When we came out onto the hill above, the wonderful vista of thousands of acres of heather in bloom was there to greet us. It seemed to run to the horizon south, east and west but it hadn't been burnt much over the recent years for there were none of the tell tale patchworks of different aged heather we had seen as we drove up past the driven grouse moors on our way north. This was wilder, unkempt, dogging moorland and I realised for the first time how much walking we were going to be doing for there was only one main track up to the home beat. From there on, it was going to be all on foot across the other seven beats. The weather was breezier than we would have liked with showers of spitting rain starting and stopping as we set off with the cadge. We knew we would be lucky to get a few flights before the weather closed in.

We were so lucky that year that it was a good breeding year for grouse and right from the start the dogs began finding birds on the flat home beat. David had Hooligan, a trained English pointer he had bought from Guy Wallace, and I had Moanruad Chilli, a field

trial bitch from Jack Nash in Co. Limerick. Both dogs ranged well and I can still remember the excitement I felt when I knew Chilli had a covey of grouse in front of her and I unhooded Heather to fly at grouse for the first time. The tension was almost unbearable as I waited for her to leave the fist but soon she was off and chopping her way out and up through the air.

There is so much to get right if grouse hawking is to be successful and in those early days I had them all to learn. I had read about them, of course, but reading about them is never enough; you have to experience the importance of the falcon pinning the grouse by flying over the point and the need for the falconer to head the point. Then the grouse have to be flushed downwind and the timing of the flush has to be exactly right. Otherwise failure is guaranteed against this amazing wild bird that will turn into the wind at any opportunity and burn a falcon off by boring through the oncoming wind.

On that very first point, I began to learn some of these rudiments for, although Heather mounted well enough for a beginner, when she was two hundred feet or so up she drifted downwind before she had pinned the birds below. I was still running forward to get well upwind of the point when 'boom'... a covey of

ten burst into the air right in front of the dog. What an incredible sight it was! With the cock calling, they hurtled upwind like torpedos. Heather turned and raced across the sky and chased them right out of sight. It had been no contest but it was a beginning. She had seen her first grouse and chased them hard.

David next flew Steffi and, as predicted, she came circling around screaming her lungs out. Although not mounting well over the pointing dog, David was determined to begin her education and circled around upwind of the point. When she came back over his head at no great height he flushed the grouse and she turned over on the covey of 8 as it rose below her. She seemed to have no hope whatsoever. Then, a sleepy straggler from the covey rose from the heather almost into her grasp and she snagged it and brought it down. We couldn't believe it but David was laughing and cheering. 'This is going to start changing her guys.... there's nothing like a kill to get the natural instincts kicking in.'

After David had fed his falcon up it was Jerry the duck hawk's turn and this Gyr/Prairie tiercel showed all his experience when Hooligan got the next point, ringing up in tight concentric circles overhead up to over 400 ft. Then he wandered over and back across the sky above, not sure where he was meant to be, for usually he had a pond to zone in on and a dog on point was a new experience for him. David headed the point and waved his glove frantically and when Jerry eventually came racing across the sky, he ran in towards the dog and a covey of five burst away downwind. Jerry hesitated for an instant, surprised by

the sudden explosion of wings below and then he turned over and drove down, beating his wings hard for the first couple of seconds. He levelled out behind the departing covey and, steaming up behind them, bound to one of the rear young grouse. We were all thrilled. We had our first real stoop and a second grouse in the bag and it was only our first day out.

'eventually we got a point and David cast Ivan off'

The wind was beginning to rise, gusting hard at times and swinging around to the northwest. David was keen to get Ivan, his Peale's/Prairie, in the air before the day turned against us for this experienced duck hawk had not flown free yet that season. We drove back down the track and walked out on to 'The Struie' a high slope that rose up over the water of the firth below. It was the northernmost piece of the estate but only flyable with northerly or north west winds. The heather was rank too, making the dogs' work very hard indeed but eventually we got a point and David cast Ivan off. He streamed over and back in the updraft above us and then, showing his lack of fitness on this first day out, he was carried off on the wind and high up the slope. David swung his lure but now the wind was suddenly gusting hard continuously and we saw Ivan crossing the ridge high above. There was no way he was going to come back upwind to us now and we had a retrieval on our hands on the other side of the hills. We were using Luksander telemetry on all the falcons and, as the rain had now started too, we decided to end our first day out and go and get our errant tiercel back.

David was confident we would soon have Ivan back but when we drove the couple of kilometres around the far side of the Struie hill and he switched on his telemetry, not a beep was forthcoming from any direction on the receiver. 'He must have ridden the wind and gone further' he opined. So Dave clamped his magnetic antenna on the roof and off we headed, expecting to hear the tell tale beep on the receiver at any second. Not a bit of



Maurice with Heather and Moanruad Chilli

it! On and on we drove until we hit the Glenmorangie Whisky distillery near the town of Tain and suddenly we got the faintest of beeps. We had now travelled nearly 12 kilometres. 'That little bastard....first day out and off he goes. I'm going to make sure he's a bit keener tomorrow' David said.

We began to home in on the signal which was coming from south west of the town, checking out the maps we had for the best access routes. It was another hour before we began to get close at last but now we had a forestry plantation in the way and the light was fading fast. We decided to leave Ivan out for the night and get home and get the falcons and dogs settled for the night and planned to get back again at dawn to pick him up. He was unlikely to move further overnight.

David and I were back there at first light the next morning and straight away had a nice strong signal booming from the receiver so we began homing in on it along the edge of a young plantation. The signal was growing loud and clear and we knew the tiercel had to be somewhere close by and, as we moved through some rough ground ahead, we could see a small pond and heard the tell tale calling of a hen mallard. 'Can you believe it?' Dave said, I bet he killed a duck yesterday.'

But he was wrong. Just thirty yards further on as we came to the small pond, the signal was booming out of the receiver and we looked up at the young trees all around us but no sign of a bird of any sort. Then we both saw the falcon at the same time.... a feathery shape suspended a couple of feet above the ground ahead. It was Ivan alright but he had obviously struck the sheep fence by the pond at high speed and was impaled there lifeless. Dave had been right about one thing. He had obviously reverted to type and, riding the high wind the day before, he must have seen his old quarry below and stooped from way above. He had probably been killed instantly. It was a sobering find and brought the highs of the previous day swooping down low. We may have taken 2 grouse but we had lost one of our flying team too.

Over the next few days, we flew the remaining falcons on some of the other beats, Garvary, Corriefearn and the Glen beat. The dogs were finding good size coveys and we were able to give the two eyasses two to four attempts each day which was fantastic for their education. Heather especially began to realise the importance of the pointing dog and, as well as mounting well in her usual pumping style, she

was beginning to learn all about positioning now too. On her third day out she stooped hard from around 400 feet and feathered a grouse on two occasions and on her last flight she knocked one down but lost it on the ground. She was learning how tough these wonderful birds are and that she would have to hit them hard to disable them. If she was going to bind she would have to hold on for dear life.

We falconers were being educated rapidly too. We saw how quickly the advantages of a big pitch could be lost by the slightest misjudgement of the timing of the flush especially as neither of our dogs were flushing on command. Instead, David and I were heading the point and trying to flush when the falcon was upwind of us and just turning around downwind. The canny grouse knew the danger of the anchor shape high above and on many occasions they stuck in there, invisible and unmoving, as we rushed in. We knew they were there; so we jumped and shouted and waved our arms. If they didn't flush we would drop down to our hunkers for the falcon above would already be moving downwind now and we crouched low and immobile until the falcon came around again.

Not only did we see how advantageous a dog flushing on command could be to us, we soon realised we had made a very fundamental error when it came to the dogs. We simply didn't have enough of them for the ground we had to cover and we were in danger of asking too much from the pointer and setter we had brought along. In the short term, we got over this by asking the very generous Nancy Read (MacNiocail) to work a couple of her dogs with us and she obliged us on a few occasions. She also let us borrow a couple of her dogs on the days when she could not join us. It was a huge help over the rest of our stay for it meant we could run one dog at a time and give them plenty of rest as well. David ended up buying Barry, one of Nancy's Irish setters and I decided I would never go grouse hawking again without at least two dogs and preferably three.

We lost two days to the weather that first week but on our fifth day of the season Heather finally took her first grouse. The weather was misty and damp but she mounted to around 400 feet and at long last I got a flush spot on. She stooped downwind at a small covey of six and knocked a grouse down. I stayed still and she circled around above me as I directed Chilli to find the bird again. I flushed it as Heather swung around and she bound to it. What a feeling it was! I gave her plenty of space and time to

enjoy her success and to pluck her grouse before I moved in close to her and helped her break into it, feeding her some tidbits from my fingers and letting her finish her meal on my fist. She was well satisfied and had a nice big crop on her and chuckled to me as I slipped her hood back on.

She killed again the next day, this time on the Garvary beat, when after mounting up well over 300 feet, I flushed a pair under her. This time she knocked her grouse down, threw up sharply and took it on the ground. I flew her three times the next day over good sized coveys. On the first two flights she missed narrowly each time and the clever grouse turned into the wind and burned her off. On her third flight she knocked a grouse in hard but in spite of our efforts we could not locate it again with the setter so I called her in and fed her up.

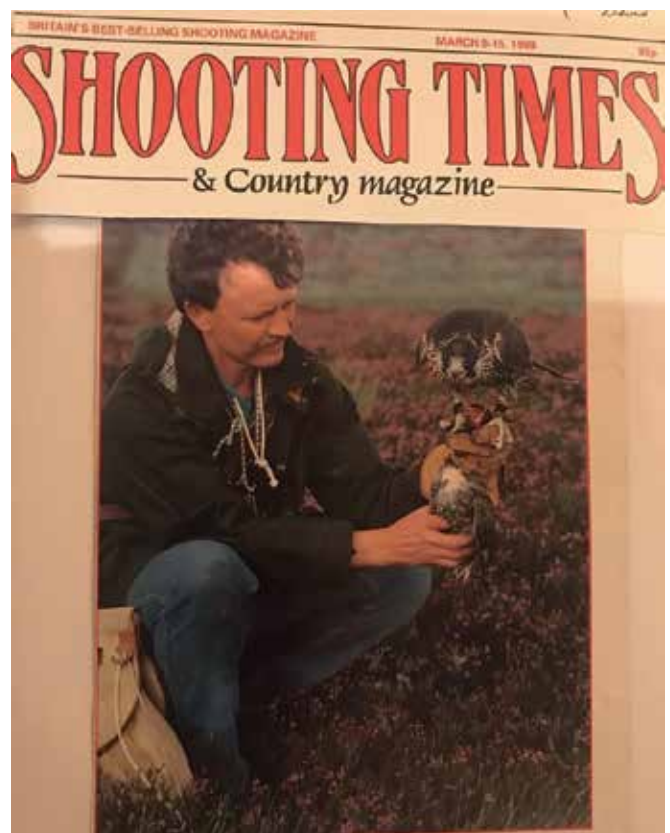
Jerry the gyr/prairie became very adept at one manoeuvre in particular.... the rapid wing over and bind on the ground probably from the prairie falcon genes he carried. He learned very quickly too what this new type of hawking involved and was killing a grouse every day. The dusky Steffi after her very lucky start was not giving herself much chance and had resorted to cuckoo or hitch winged flying at times much to David's disgust but he persevered day after day. At times she would forget herself and start flying normally and David would do his best to get a flush for her and get her at least chasing some grouse.

One of the great joys of hawking in Scotland, especially early in the season, is that there are always other falconers not too far away and on one of our days we were joined by Steve Williams, Steve Tyler and Philip Lovell who were hawking on the neighbouring Strathrusedale Moor. Steve had been flying grouse for many years so it was great for us amateurs to see an experienced grouse hawker in action. He had a brilliant English pointer bitch in Tammy who would flush exactly on command and we could see the difference this made. There were lots of little touches that became apparent too.... Steve with his ungloved hand always out behind him as he got in position, checking with his spread fingers for the exact wind direction as he concentrated his visual attention on the falcon and dog. His flush was always dead downwind as a result.

The weather continued to be unsettled and there were no easy flights for the falcons over the rest of my stay but on my last day out Heather took her third grouse, a single bird she knocked down hard and

took on the ground. I was delighted to have taken three grouse with her during my first foray into game hawking and to have learned so much about the challenges involved. David stayed on for another two weeks as I returned home and I was happy to leave Heather with him to fly, knowing the experience would be invaluable for her. She went on to take another four grouse for David and Jerry notched up a score of 15 grouse.

Wildlife photographer, David Hoskins accompanied David for a couple of days and took a splendid photo of Heather and he after a kill which subsequently appeared on the cover of the Shooting Times in March the next year.



David Frank with Heather and grouse on the cover of the "Shooting Times"

Over the Autumn I took Grey and French Partridge, wild duck and pheasant with her back down in Kent but I soon realised that flying pheasant had the potential to ruin her as a grouse hawk as there's nothing like a running pheasant to ruin a good pitch. So I decided from then on I would fly her at grouse only and for the next eight years had some marvellous sport with her. Looking back at my diaries, I see that when we returned to Midfearn the next year, she took 35 grouse over 4 weeks but that's another story.



David Frank with Jerry and grouse

The Midfearn moor was based around Fearn Lodge, the residence which sat on the south side of the Dornoch Firth and was the home of Charlie Brooke and his family.



My first encounter with the Irish Hawking Club

Mark Upton, England



Maurice Nicholson with Heather and Mark Upton with cadge

In 1990 I had a good spell of free time and I was spending a long hawking season in the North of Scotland, grouse hawking with my father and an Italian friend, Umberto Caproni. They were sharing a moor called Sandside on the North Coast of Scotland. A dramatically scenic grouse moor, with a large house that the owners still lived in. The house was a lovely Victorian rambling stone built house, sat amongst what must have once been the most wonderful grounds and gardens. They had altered a wing to accommodate the falconers and our guests. The house was at the top of a long drive and backing onto it were a selection of beautifully built farm buildings of a Victorian model farm. Beyond the buildings were smallish cliffs and the North Sea with a view of a little fishing harbour and distant views of the Orkney islands. The only thing that spoils the tranquil idyll of bygone days was the grey monstrosity of Dounreay, the 1950's atomic power station situated across the bay, aptly named by the locals, Doomreay.

Sadly the moor, which had once been good when two Italian falconers had taken it in the late 1960's, was on the decline. As was true of many of these northern moors, through poor management and lack of resources. My father and Umberto had a team of four or five peregrines, including Rona and Christian of my father's and Laura and Pacific of Umberto's, and although we were lacking grouse three of the team were going well and we had been enjoying some good hawking.

My father was a close friend of Johnny Morris and Johnny had mentioned that he and some friends were hoping to come over to Scotland to see a little grouse hawking and have some days with various friends as they toured around Scotland. My father had invited them to come to join us for a few days without thinking that they would really come. I don't think he had told Umberto and I had heard nothing about it until Johnny called to say they were indeed in Scotland and were planning a visit. Umberto, a fantastic host, readily agreed and we prepared for

Johnny and some friends to join us the following day.

On they day in question we had enjoyed a lovely morning weathering the hawks in front of the house and Umberto had gone off to Thurso, the nearest town, to get in some supplies for our guests. After lunch we were slowly readying ourselves for going out on the hill when a convoy of cars came up the drive and parked behind the house. Out of the cars poured a host of charming Irish hawking enthusiasts, I think probably the majority of the Irish Hawking Club of those far off days. The party consisted of Hon Johnny Morris, Thelma Mansfield, Alec Finn, Seán Ryan, Maurice Nicholson, Richard Ward and a couple of others who's names I can't remember. We invited them in for some refreshments and while my father entertained, there was slight panic behind the scenes by Umberto and I who weren't sure how we were going to cater for, or house, everyone. Luckily the owners came to the rescue and let us have a couple more bedrooms. These lovely old lodges were sensibly built with many bedrooms and bathrooms for large shooting parties.

After a bite of lunch we all got in the cars and took the short drive out onto the heather hills. I can't remember a lot about the hawking but reading my

father's diaries I get an impression of the day. Johnny was flying a peregrine tiercel and Maurice had a couple of wild taken eyasses, both falcons, and a couple of red Irish Setters, both very good and I remember one was called Silver. My father remarks in his diary about the quality of the setters and of 'a blue falcon of Maurice's flying well.'

After hawking we all returned to Sandside House and after sorting out the hawks and dogs, retired to the house for the evening. Umberto and I needn't have worried about anything, everyone was found somewhere to sleep and between us all plenty of food was found and everyone mucked in and helped. I think we found enough grouse from the previous few days to feed everyone and others produced a wonderful feast in no time, from what we had in the house or they had. The meal was washed down with good Italian wine from Umberto's family estates and after dinner we sat round enjoying good malt whisky, talking hawking and telling stories. Musical instruments appeared and we were treated to some of the best of Irish Folk Music. Umberto who, although speaking excellent English, was having trouble understanding stories and jokes told with a strong Irish accent, quietly disappeared off to his bed



Ready to go hawking: Umberto Caproni, Roger Upton, Thelma Mansfield, Mark Upton, Maurice Nicholson, Sean McDonagh, Richard Ward, Alec Finn and Sean Ryan



Alec Finn on bazouki and Sean Ryan on tin whistle for the Apres Hawking

but the rest of us stayed up to the wee hours enjoying one of the best ceilidhs Sandside had had in many years. Good friendships were made that night, as always when falconers get together, and I received several invitations to visit Ireland. I had not been to Ireland before but my younger brother, who was a jump jockey, had spent some time there working for John Oxx, racehorse trainer on the Curragh. He had really enjoyed himself and came back with great stories of what a wonderful place Ireland was.

Having been invited I was determined to go. I contacted Johnny and Thelma who probably weren't expecting this young artist/falconer to remember their invitation and they kindly agreed to put me up. Johnny

showed me around Dublin and the Wicklow Mountains where he had previously attempted grouse hawking. They took me to the Smithfield Horse Fair in the streets of Dublin, which I later painted, and around the National Museum of Ireland. Johnny had also organised that I should go and spend a few days in the West and stay with Alec Finn and his family, at Oranmore Castle. I will never forget that on the day in question Johnny told me Alec wouldn't be at Oranmore until late and that I should go and find him in Galway. I asked where in Galway and Johnny replied that if I found my way to the quay and then asked someone where to find Alec Finn they would direct me. I thought he was mad and spent, what was in those days a long drive across Ireland, in great trepidation wondering how I would ever find Alec. I found my way in the dark and rain to the quay, parked up and had a look around for someone to ask where Alec could be found. And to my great surprise the first person I asked pointed to a bar and said you will find him playing in there. I went in and there was Alec and some friends playing music in the bar.

'Alec and Richard took me to see Ronald Stevens.'

Later Alec took me back to the castle and I was given a lovely bed in the old keep of the castle. The next day I explored the Burren and the following day Alec took me to have lunch with the artist Richard



Roger Upton with Umberto Caproni

Ward. He lived in a beautiful spot up a long track somewhere in the hills behind Oughterard. His wife gave us a lovely lunch and I looked at his paintings and we discussed art. Then the highlight of the trip, Alec and Richard took me to see Ronald Stevens. Ronald was a good friend of my fathers but I had never met him. Of course I had heard a lot about him and read his books and was very excited to meet him. He was very elderly by then and had long before left Fermoye Lodge to move into a bungalow above Oughterard. He was very deaf and his eyesight poor but we talked a lot about falconry, he was especially interested in our grouse hawking in Caithness and said he had made the wrong decision when he had left the Longmynd (Shropshire) to come to Ireland for grouse hawking and should have gone to Caithness in Scotland instead. I think this was very influenced by the fact that his protégé, Geoffrey Pollard, had had such successes going to Caithness for the red grouse, later followed by Stephen Frank and my father. We also talked about gyrs, which he held a great fascination for and was very interested in the gyrs my father and Umberto had flown in more recent years. I remember a wonderful, huge tapestry of a medieval hawking screen covering a whole wall of the room we were sat in, with Ronald sat a table in front

of it. I wish I had taken photographs. It turned out that I was very lucky to meet him when I did, because only a few months later Alec phoned me at home to tell me that Ronald had passed away. Although he had thought he had made a mistake going to Connemara for the grouse hawking, I think he hugely enjoyed his years in Ireland, where he fitted in well and was visited by falconers from all around the world.

This was of course the first of many trips to Ireland where I have enjoyed some of the best of company and good hawking. I am lucky that my wife's family own a house at Cleggan in Connemara which we visit regularly with the family and it is beginning to feel like a second home. It is so sad that it is now so very difficult to bring hawks over as I would dearly like to have a serious go at snipe with some of my grouse tiercels.



Irish 'hole in the wall gang': Richard Ward, Alec Finn, Maurice Nicholson, Sean McDonagh, Sean Ryan and Thelma Mansfield

(Photo by John Morris)

Rantings of a middle-aged apprentice

Mark Curtin, Cork



The act of Falconry seems to draw a certain type of person into its deep realm for a variety of different reasons. Having spoken to a few experienced falconers my first impression was that falconry was not a mere hobby but more akin to a religion to these people. I myself will admit to experiencing a strong 'calling' of sorts to this ancient art but kept my thoughts to myself for fear of ridicule. Each falconer had his own unique story to tell but all were intriguing to listen to. I appreciated these people sharing their experiences with me so I decided it would be only fair to share mine.

Having recently reached the half century milestone I now had a bit more spare time on my hands. I had developed a deep hunger for some type of serious challenge. Having logged the symptoms of my chronic ailment onto 'Google' I was rewarded with the words 'Male Menopause' on the screen. I was certain that 'Google' never lied so I was intent on finding a solution. The local cycling club was an option but I had no intention of joining this herd of MAMILS (middle aged men in lycra) as they

always blocked the road during my early morning fishing trips. I also had a recent invitation to go riding with a few lads on motorbikes but memories from my youth of a smashed Yamaha 350cc and six months on crutches weren't that encouraging. My long suffering wife's refusal to dye her hair with peroxide didn't help either. The blonde with the flowing hair had to be part of the package, didn't it? Despondently, I gazed at the small dusty pile of books in the corner of the room. These books had been my companions for many years. I owed a lot to Beebe, Parry Jones and the Coulsons as their tales of the exploits of falconry world had managed to keep me sane during the recent pandemic. It was time to bite the bullet so I logged the words 'Falconry Ireland' into Google. Once again, I was rewarded with a truthful reply, as the words 'Irish Hawking Club' magically appeared on the screen.

My first encounter with a genuine hunting falconer was organised for me by the IHC. I had arranged to meet him at his mews, which were situated in probably the wildest and most scenic part of my neighbouring County Waterford. After

our initial introductions were made the whole topic of falconry was our main discussion. As the conversation progressed I was starting to daydream of my future flying adventures when he suddenly grabbed my forearm and dug his fingers into my flesh. 'Sooner or later you are going to get footed by a hawk and its going to hurt, really hurt' he explained as he made direct eye contact. I had learned my first lesson which taught me that falconry was not going to be an episode of Walt Disney. I had also suddenly come to understand that falconers themselves were just as unpredictable as the wild raptors in their possession. I am greatly indebted to this man, as he vouched for me as a prospective falconer. He also travelled at his own expense to inspect my mews and give me advice. My only consolation is that someday, I myself may introduce a newcomer to the sport and indirectly repay this debt. He also explained that although the reading of falconry books was definitely a requirement, falconry was also a 'hands on experience'. He advised me to get into the middle of some real action, with the astringers.

As to the whereabouts of Ireland's best austringers I immediately got one definite answer 'the Sneem Meet'. I was making my preparations on the night before my trip to Kerry when things suddenly became a bit daunting. The I.H.C. was a club that had been established before I was born and in a few hours I would be barging my way into a group of complete strangers. Falconry, throughout history, has been shrouded in mystery and the stuff of legends. It was the sport of Arab Sheiks, Dukes and Duchesses and was widely regarded as a passion belonging to the elite classes. I could be punching well above my weight but my curiosity had gotten the better of me. 'Fail we may but sail we must' came to mind as I realised that I had nothing to lose by pursuing this encounter.

'With the instinct and eyes of a peregrine she had merely plucked the awkward bird from the flock'

The grounds of the Sneem hotel were bustling with activity as I arrived on that wet November morning. A pair of giddy Irish setters were being watered, car boots were being loaded up and a large display of raptors were spread across the hotel lawn on their individual perches. People of all ages and nationalities dressed in proper hunting attire were busy sorting out their preparations for the day ahead and I could sense the excitement in the air from both the hunters and their animals. I was busy soaking up the atmosphere when I heard my name being called. I was greeted by a young woman who introduced herself as the committee member whom I had previously contacted. We had never formally met so I was surprised by the sharpness of her intuition in picking the newcomer out of a group of hotel guests. With the instinct and eyes of a peregrine she had merely plucked the awkward bird from the flock. Her enthusiasm for the day ahead was contagious and after a brief chat she signalled to the rest of the group. She seemed to have fired the starter pistol as we were now all scuttling off to the majestic sand dunes of Derrynane for a days hawking.



Hawking at Derrynane

Every hunter has their own role to play during the course of a day's hunt. I could be classed as a stray hound that had wandered into a pack. As a newcomer I would have to learn the ways of the pack. I was now an apprentice and a rookie. I had served an apprenticeship in my youth that has slowly evolved into a small business but now I was back where I had started. I was once again at the bottom rung of the ladder, but this time it was different, it was fun. During everyday conversations with people, I often went off on a rant about falconry. Phrases such as 'wild hacking' and descriptions of a 'downward stoop' were often met with peculiar stares by my captive audience. 'That guy is away with the birds again' I once overheard. It was the truth, I was 'away with the birds' and I would happily stay away rather than returning to a dreary life devoid of this passion. The people at this meet were different, they spoke the language that I was eagerly trying to learn. They not only spoke it but they spoke it fluently and spoke of nothing else. No quarry was taken on that particular day, but it did not matter to me. I was like a heavy sponge as I soaked up much information that it would take me a few days to process it all. I did return to hunt again with this group and witnessed many dramatic and successful flights but that is another story.

During my short time with the I.H.C. falconers have spoken of things that I am only beginning to understand. I have been warned that a bird of prey is an excellent judge of character. Trust can be earned slowly from this animal but can be broken in an instant. A bird can be traded with but to steal from it is an unforgivable act. To spoil or corrupt a bird is to spoil a child or corrupt a politician, as you will create a demon that will haunt you. I have barely scratched the surface of this art but I believe that falconry in Ireland is vastly underrated. It is an ancient practice but it is probably needed in today's society more than it ever was.

Young people in particular are bombarded with issues such as wars, globalisation and additions of every sort. People can easily lose their footing in a world that seems to spiral out of control. Falconry can provide a foundation and keep a person 'grounded'.

Discipline, teamwork, modesty, self-reliance, conservation, falconry encompasses all of these qualities. It also teaches us about failure but more importantly how to deal with it. Personally, this experience has taught me the value of respect. A raptor commands respect, nothing less. Through working with this creature we in turn learn to respect

ourselves and the environment that we are part of. It may not be the 'silver bullet' and probably won't bring about world peace but it is a step in the right direction.

Falconers have managed to form a working relationship with the fastest and arguably the wildest creature on the planet. They have formed this bond using ancient techniques based on patience, respect and discipline. If we ourselves incorporated these basic qualities into our daily interactions with one another, one can only imagine the progress and achievements that could be accomplished. As with falconry I suspect that the sky would be the limit.



Reflections on hawking with Goshawks in Pakistan

Bob Dalton,
England



Author with intermewed female passage goshawk

On a recent trip to Pakistan I had an invitation to join some falconers who would be flying Goshawks at Partridge up country. The invitation was obviously far too good to refuse and so a couple of days later saw us heading out of Islamabad and through Rawalpindi towards Jehlum, some four to five hours away, depending on traffic. We would be heading for the Padri Game Reserve, an area designated for hunting but made up of small farms, the farmers are compensated for the disturbance to their agricultural pattern and the system appears to work very well indeed. Certainly the area was supposed to have an abundance of partridges, five different species in fact. Bear in mind these are all totally wild partridges, there is no system of artificially raised and released game here.

About halfway into our journey we stopped for lunch at a roadside eatery and we alighted with an intermewed passage female Goshawk on my fist. She had been unhooded on the fist for the journey but as

a precaution against prodders and pokers whilst we ate, she was hooded up. This Goshawk, as with every other trained hawk or falcon I saw whilst in Pakistan, just simply did not bate. No matter what the provocation or the intensity of the hubbub going on around them they simply took everything in their stride. Many Pakistanis are used to seeing trained hawks in public places and pay them little or no attention. Those that haven't seen them before are very polite in their enquiries and all want the inevitable selfie with the man with the hawk. It takes no time at all to make them happy and be polite.

After a truly delicious lunch we pushed on so as to complete our journey. Another red-letter day for me in that we had only been driving again for twenty minutes or so and I was fortunate enough to see a Red Headed Merlin chasing some small birds across a field. My first ever falcon, more than fifty years ago, was a passage male Red Head and to see one in the

wild was very emotional for me. I had seen the African sub species when in Southern Africa and I was hoping to see Red Heads when I visited India. But it simply wasn't to be. Now I had seen one in the wild in Pakistan. Another tick on the bucket list.

On our arrival at the game lodge everyone was very pleasantly surprised at the standard of accommodation and communal relaxation areas. The views from the terraces of the lodge were simply incredible, looking down a meandering valley. The next morning everyone was up bright and early for a good breakfast prior to the days hawking. The mornings were cold until the sun had truly risen and on a nearby hillside, that we overlooked from our breakfast terrace, were nine Steppe Eagles sitting with their wings outstretched soaking up the warmth of the morning sun. In the sky Booted Eagles and LongLegged Buzzards were already starting their daily search for food and even a Goshawk was spotted flitting through reed patches around some water splashes, probably trying to take a duck by surprise.

After a leisurely breakfast, our party was joined by several local falconers along with three more Goshawks and a Sparrowhawk. As is always the case with these occasions, no matter what country you are in, there was a very great deal of chin wagging and general gossiping before we set off to hunt. Eventually a car arrived out of which, literally from the back seat, a small boy and a large lamb emerged. Apparently, this was what we had been waiting for. I was told that in order our hunting party should enjoy good luck the guest of honour must put his hand on the head of the lamb and just wish everyone a good day's hunting. It also transpired I was considered the guest of honour so I would put my hand on the head of the lamb and wish everybody good luck? What I hadn't realised at the time was that I was sentencing this lamb to death. By placing my hand on his head I had sealed his fate as our evening meal. We were informed that he would be prepared in a very traditional manner and that there would be more than enough to go round. I have to say I felt quite bad in the part I played but if it hadn't been me placing the hand upon his head someone else would have done. Larry's fate had been sealed the moment he got into the car.

Our day's hunting in the field was truly excellent and we took five Partridge in the morning and another four in the afternoon. Quarry was abundant and the Pointers worked really well, a sheer delight to watch. But what impressed above all else was the sheer obedience of the Goshawks. They took on all manner of slips, long and short, and were very determined in their pursuit. However their recall was truly excellent. As often as not the flight would end in tall grass, so falconer and Goshawk were totally unsighted with regard to each other. The falconer merely put up a gloved fist and blew his whistle and the hawk would unfailingly return. No one used telemetry and it is quite easy to see why.

The level of training of these Goshawks has to be seen to be believed. As to the falconers, I have nothing but admiration for these undoubted masters of their craft. The lasting memory that I took away from Pakistan is the sheer level of skill of the falconers there. The degree of manning that must go into their hawks and falcons can only be simply astonishing. When you spend time in the company of four or five intermewed passage Goshawks and after several days it suddenly occurs to you that you have not once seen



Falconer with goshawk

any of them bated, the level of skill on the part of the falconers is brought home to you. These Goshawks are treated to the full glare and hustle of daily life and take everything in their stride. Rarely do you see a falconer wearing a full glove, which is not some weird macho affectation, it is due to the fact that many falconers feel that the skin of the hawk's foot on their own flesh increases the bond and the trust.

It is very hard to argue with when I myself handled several Goshawks over the time I was in Pakistan, and even fed one up in the field after a very well deserved kill. At no time did I have, or was I wearing, a glove. Also at no time did I fear that not having a glove was a mistake that could have led to the need for anti-septic and bandages. It needs to be remembered of course that these are passage Goshawks with the manners you would associate with passage hawks. Not eyasses with the lack of respect.

On another trip I made to Pakistan with friend and fellow Project Lugger Trustee, Charles Gray, we were invited to meet a traditional falconer who had just obtained a passage female Goshawk and perhaps we would like to see the hawk and talk to him?

We arrived late afternoon in the small village square to be greeted with the sight of an immature Goshawk tied down by her leash to a charpoy, the ubiquitous wooden framed string bed found simply everywhere in Pakistan. Two charpoys were side by side. One was for the Goshawk and the other was

for anybody passing by that needed to sit and rest for a while or perhaps converse with friends. Everyone in the village knew of the falconer and knew to respect the safety of his hawk. Such a sight for them was nothing out of the usual and so people ignored the hawk and carried on with their daily lives around her. This of course was precisely the sort of manning she needed, and it was doing her a power of good from a falconer's point of view. The hawk, when we saw her, had her eyes fully open, that is not seeled at all, and was wearing a 'guba' and a tail guard, both made of cloth. The guba is a version of a type of casting jacket and serves to immobilise the hawks' wings whilst also protecting the feathers from becoming damaged. The hawk itself is tied down in the centre of the charpoy and only has the length of its jesses to move around. So the hawk is safe, secure and all the hours of daylight gets to see people and the bustle of daily life all around her.

This was day four of the Goshawk's training and manning and it was the first day her eyes had been completely unseeled. On her capture she had been fitted with her equipment then had her eyes seeled. For those unfamiliar with this process it means quite literally that a thread is passed through the lower eyelid on each side of the hawks' head and then the two threads are brought together on top of the hawks' head and tied so that the eyelids are kept shut. This is how she will remain for the first twenty-four hours and during this period will be on a falconers fist the whole time. She will be constantly carried and stroked during this period. She will also have a loose fitting hood slipped on and off just to accustom her to the movement and the feeling of wearing it. On the second full day the knot is eased a little on the threads allowing the eyes to be open just a little. Enough to let some light into the hawks' eyes. Again she is carried constantly, and a hood slipped on and off. The hawk will be encouraged to feed on the fist.

On day three, assuming all has gone to plan on the previous two days the threads will be loosened



Freshly trapped female goshawk on a charpoy

a little more and accordingly more light enters the hawks' eyes, and she can see a little more. She is still carried and stroked constantly and encouraged twice a day to take a small meal, without casting, on the fist. If all has gone to plan then at the end of the third day the threads are removed from the eyes, a hood put on and the hawk is left on a charpoy overnight to get its first true rest since being trapped. If this stage has not been reached, then the whole process just has an extra day or two added in the



Charles Gray with passage female goshawk

same manner as the previous three until the hawk is responsive and will eat on the fist. On the morning of day four the hawk is taken to the village square before first light and placed on the charpoy. She is still hooded. The falconer sits with her for a while, talking to her and stroking her and then removes the hood. The hawk can see all that is going on around her but cannot bate because of how she is equipped with the guba and tail protector and tied short to a flat surface. The hood is left beside her, and the falconer will tie one of his working dogs nearby, so the hawk sees the dog all day long.

After a while the falconer will get up and walk round the charpoy still talking to the hawk in his normal voice. He will go short distances, always within the hawk's sight, and repeatedly sit down beside the hawk, stroke her, then get up and wander round again. Every now and again he will offer her a small tit-bit of food as he sits beside her. The falconer will at some point wander off for a short period and when coming back, where possible, will do so from a different direction. Again he will sit with the hawk and offer small food rewards.

Obviously, the idea is to placate the hawk in general and secondly to teach her to welcome the approach of the falconer. Daily village life goes on around the hawk all day long so there is always something to occupy her mind. It is easy to see the logic in the methodology of the training approach and the results were certainly very plain to see. When Charlie and I viewed this particular hawk at just four days after her capture she was totally calm and tolerant of everything going on around her. Anyone could sit on the charpoy next to her or even, if gentle in movement, on the one she was tied to.

Neither Charlie nor I could get it out of our heads how exposed the hawk was, being tied down in the middle of a village square, albeit a very small one. But of course, as with so many other things we learnt on our trip, community life in Pakistan is very different to here. When we asked the falconer concerned if he was worried about leaving the hawk alone for periods, no matter how long their duration in time, so exposed like this his answer was simple. He said, without any arrogance or self-promotion, that everybody in the village knew him. Everyone knew he was a falconer, and this is what he did from time to time. No one in the village would harm the hawk, not even the small boys, and everyone kept an eye out for any stray dogs. What this stage of the training of a new hawk



Hawking in Pakistan is a sociable affair

did very much remind me of was the same initial stages when training a cheetah for hunting. It too is restrained in the upright position in a wooden frame and is hooded for much of the time, certainly the first forty-eight hours or so. It is constantly stroked and subjected to human voices to help tame it. In fact the traditional training of both hawks and cheetahs follow very similar patterns. Obviously, the manner in which the training is carried out differs considerably with one being a bird and the other a mammal, but nevertheless the patterns and goals in training follow quite similar paths. For those of you interested in learning more about the training and use in the field of cheetahs then there is a particularly interesting book entitled *The End of a Trail – The Cheetah in India*. The book is written by Mr. Divyabhanusinh, who was a former vice president of the Bombay Natural History Society and a member of The Cat Specialist Group as well as Survival Commission of the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

Whilst we were there, the falconer took the hawk up and she fed on the fist. Then she was

hooded up and we walked the short distance to the falconer's home where the hawk was placed on a screen perch for the night. We retired to the man's room, an essential room in most Pakistan households where, as the name implies, women are not allowed. Once there the falconer served us with coffee and sweetmeats. We talked of hawks and of hawking and compared training methods and the ethics behind how we each did things. For me the process used in Pakistan is simply incredible. Whilst the traditional Pakistan way of training passage goshawks may seem very alien to us in the west, the training method for passage goshawks is, overall, undoubtedly incredibly successful. I have personally been on hunting trips in Pakistan with several goshawks in tow and can honestly say that on a particular trip the intermewed passage female Goshawk allocated to me to fly was a great hunting hawk, catching a number of partridge. But in three days she was with me I cannot remember her bating. Getting in and out of cars, stopping at roadside eateries for lunch, absolutely nothing phased her. Her manning levels were simply astonishing. It would be impossible not to recognise that trained accipiter's in Pakistan are generally at the very top of their game.



Mentor and pupil

But then manning is constant. Not just on hunting days. Again cultures are different, and it must be borne in mind that wages in Pakistan for the unskilled worker are pitifully low. Most people who have the time to indulge in falconry are sufficiently

financially stable to be able employ a man with the basic skills required to simply carry a goshawk on the fist and, when required, fed it there. So someone with a Goshawk will have employed a person that can carry it all the hours of daylight and keep its manning to a very high level. This was admirably demonstrated later on in our visit to Pakistan when invited to a falconer's house for an evening meal and to see his hawks and dogs. I had met the falconer in question on a couple of occasions previously and when he heard I was back in his country he kindly extended an invitation to spend some time with him. The schedule for myself and Charlie was somewhat tight, but we did manage to spend an evening in his company. It turned out our host was the head man of his community and seemed to be quite affluent.

On arrival at his house we were greeted warmly and taken directly to the man's room where coffee was served. The room in this case was very large with around a dozen or so two-seater sofas around the edge of the room. Nearly all the seats were taken and amongst those sitting were three falconers, each with a Goshawk on the hand. One immature passage female, an intermewed passage male and an intermewed passage female.

The hawks were brought over to us one at a time to enable us to have a good close look at them. It was more than halfway through the hunting season and these hawks were hunted hard. But it was a testament to their falconers and our host that there wasn't a single tipped feather or indeed a single feather out of place. After the opportunity to scrutinise the hawks, our host wanted to show us some of his dogs. As well as pointers for working with the hawks our host was a very keen coursing man and had some superb greyhounds. His dog man went in and out several times and on each visit showed us one of the residents of our host's kennels. There was a coursing meet the following day and we were invited but our schedule unfortunately did not allow for us to stay overnight and attend the meet. In fact as the evening wore on, despite the wonderful time we were all having, we had to move on and continue our journey to our overnight destination which was Sialkot.

Later in the trip we found ourselves back in Rawalpindi and invited to another day of hunting partridges with Goshawks and a pointer. Our host for the days' hawking would not be present as he had to go abroad on business that morning but was more

than happy to have guests in his country shown some traditional sport. In general people in Pakistan really are so thoroughly welcoming and also make you feel so at home. A couple of phone calls and arrangements made to pick one falconer and Goshawk up on our way to the rendezvous and the other falconer, complete with hawk and pointer, would meet us there. It was a Sunday and the bazaar, where we were due to meet the first falconer, was thronged with people and vehicles and progress through the seething mass was very slow indeed. As we crept forward a figure emerged from an alleyway some distance behind us, and it was a falconer with a passage Goshawk on the fist. He made his way through the crowds to reach our vehicle and was quite literally brushing shoulders with people and they with him. The Goshawk never flinched or even showed signs of recognising she was in a totally alien environment. Again a quite staggering testimony to the skills of Pakistan falconers and the degree of perfection they obtain when it comes to manning their hawks. Now it would be all too easy to be cynical and think that a hawk like this that is so utterly bomb proof in such circumstances is probably no good at all in the field. What always used to be referred to as a 'Robin Hood Hawk'. In other words all for show and no real substance. In the case of this hawk and all the others I have seen flown, this would be very far from the mark. This hawk would indeed enjoy success later in the day.

We managed to work our way through and out of the crowded bazaar and after a short drive met up with the other falconer and a couple of other men that would be joining us for the day acting as beaters. Also with us would be one pointer for locating the partridges. We would be after Grey and Black Partridge and the conditions were good for hawking. It was not forecast to be too hot and there was just a very gently breeze blowing which would help with scenting for the dog. We set off and within fifteen minutes we had our first point. Unfortunately the partridge broke almost immediately before anyone was ready for the flush. The Goshawk was still cast off in the vague hopes of getting a kill, but the initial distance was just too much for it to make up. When the Goshawk finally pulled off and took momentary rest on the top of a small bush a Steppe Eagle came from nowhere and showed great interest in some more bushes not too far from where the Goshawk sat. The assumption was that this was where the partridge

had put in and if they, even fleetingly, showed their presence the Steppe Eagle would be in for a nice dinner.

The Goshawk was recalled to the fist and as it flew back a Lugger Falcon appeared overhead and circled our party for a while. She circled long and low



A break in the days hawking

enough for us to be able to clearly see she was an adult female. She appeared periodically throughout the day's sport obviously hoping for the possibility of a meal coming her way. Several older sportsmen I have spoken with in Pakistan, both falconers and shooting men, have remarked that this is not an unusual practice for this species of falcon. In our own case, the first partridge one of Goshawks took that morning, the Lugger chased one of the other partridge that was flushed with it. The Lugger failed in her quest and came back to circled us and was tossed half a partridge from the game bag as reward for her perseverance.

Hawking in Pakistan is a truly sociable and pleasant pastime as well as a source of some excellent sport. I advise anybody to see for themselves if given the opportunity.



Vikings and their raptors: Searching for traces of falconry in the the naval of Dublin

Hilary White, Dublin

Falconry is the art of hunting with trained birds of prey. As well as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Mankind, it is a National Cultural Heritage of Ireland as of 2019. This hunting art dates back more than 4,000 years, with its earliest known evidence found in Central Asia and Persia, before spreading west through the Middle East and Europe (Gersmann/Grimm et al, 2018). While falconry's popularity diminished with the advent of the shotgun, it never died out, the fundamentals of its art remaining largely the same and passed down from father to son, mother to daughter.

Despite great interest in raptors, their symbolism, and falconry in Viking culture, particularly in the 10th and 11th centuries (Hagen, 2018, Oehrl, 2020), in Ireland there is only anecdotal evidence of falconry before the arrival of the Anglo-Normans in the 12th Century.

The remains of goshawks at Mount Sandel, Coleraine (c. 7000 BC), Dalkey Island, Dublin (c. 4000 BC) and Newgrange (c. 3600 BC) suggest an interaction at some level between man and raptor (D'Arcy, 1999), but there is no conclusive evidence that any of these represented trained hunting birds. The earliest written reference is in the Irish text *Beatha Colman Maic Luachain* (The Life of St Colman Maic Luachain), in which the 7th Century King of Tara is described as having 'da seabhac selga', or 'two hunting hawks' (O'Broin, 1993).

Falconry is as arcane a subject as you could wish for. It requires an apprenticeship to learn, a canon of textual manuals, lots of specialised equipment (much of which must be made by hand) and time. In most countries where it is practiced, a licence is required to both possess a hawk and to hunt with it. The challenge of training and keeping these highly strung animals requires perseverance, sensitivity and resolve. In light of its esoteric nature, I wondered how adequately disposed many of the archaeologists and historians working on Viking and medieval remains in Dublin would be to the telltale signs of this ancient and globally omnipresent system of foraging.

Wood Quay

Wood Quay in Dublin is one of the most important Viking hubs uncovered outside of Scandinavia. From the arrival of the Vikings in the 9th Century, the settlement along the River Liffey became a booming trade port that was key to Viking maritime economy.

Among the organic artefacts found preserved in the riverside mud were vast quantities of animal bone fragments from the 10th and 11th centuries, including what are believed to be various raptor species. These were presumed to be either food stuffs, arrow-quill resources, or raptors killed to protect poultry or livestock (Hamilton-Dyer, 2007). The hawks and falcons recorded at the Fishamble St site were made up of buzzard (MNI:10), White-tailed eagle (5), kite (4), osprey (2), hen harrier (2), marsh harrier (2), peregrine falcon (2), and sparrowhawk (1) (D'Arcy, 1993). Only the last two species would have been of use as practical hunting birds (an exception is found in modern-day New Zealand, where falconers hunt with a species of harrier). Apart from occasional visits by scavenging kites and buzzards, wild raptors do not live in human settlements and have never constituted normal food for people (Prummel, 2018).

In particular, the remains of the two peregrines (*Falco peregrinus*) at Wood Quay demand further examination in light of falconry's firm presence in the known world at that time (Gersmann/Grimm et al, 2018). These may have been trained birds, trapped or taken as chicks from their eyries in coastal or inland cliffs and discarded once they had died (Prummel, 2018). The small metal bells worn on the hawk's leg to help recover the bird in cover would have been likely removed for reuse. The jesses – the leather straps used to tether the bird – would have naturally decomposed or also been removed. Bone remains of dogs at Wood Quay possibly support the presence of falconry as they were and still are used to flush quarry for raptors to pursue.

With the utmost respect to those analysing the fragmented remains, one wonders how much potential for misidentification there may have been.

The Vikings harvested gyrfalcons (*Falco rusticolus*), the world's largest and historically most prestigious falcon species, from eyries in Norway



A comparison of peregrine and gyrfalcon scapulars showing the near identical size between a female peregrine and a male gyrfalcon (pictured left).

*(Chart courtesy of First premodern record of the gyrfalcon (*Falco rusticolus*) in northeast Greenland, www.polarresearch.net open access article)*

and Iceland as both a trading commodity but also as diplomatic sweeteners (Orten Lie, 2018). Dublin was a major trading hub, with artefacts from that era including amber from Lithuania, jet from Britannia, and Frankish metal work (Clarke et al, 2018). With this in mind, and with the fragility of these birds, some of which may have succumbed to illness or fatigue during the long and unforgiving sea journeys, the possibility exists that a number of falcons didn't make it further than Dublin.

Can we be certain that the two Wood Quay falcons were in fact peregrines? In most raptor species, the female is considerably larger than the male as a biological rule, and up to a third bigger in falcons (which is why male peregrines are called "tiercels" in falconry parlance – they are a "terce" or a third, smaller than the female). Even though the gyrfalcon is a larger species than the peregrine, there is very little size difference between a female peregrine and a male gyrfalcon, as the accompanying image shows. Perhaps these male birds were surplus to requirements as they held no advantage over the peregrine bar exotic allure. Size

mattered in falconry birds – not only did it lend falconers prestige, an important facet in nobility culture, but it increases the size of what can be caught for the dinner table. This would have made the gyrfalcon particularly prized in more southern climes and allowed medieval falconers to catch larger prey to consume.

Conspicuous by its absence at Wood Quay is the Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*), a species fundamental to falconry's global development. Goshawks are stealthy, powerful and lethally efficient hunters in enclosed landscapes, and capable of catching a wide range of game. So good were they at catering for the banquet room that they once carried the nickname "the cook's hawk".

They were prized as hunting birds not just by Vikings but cultures right around the world (Gersmann/ Grimm et al, 2018, Grimm et al, 2020). There is evidence that Ireland, with its vast oak landscape, was heavily populated with the species, and it would become an exported, regulated commodity in the later medieval period (D'Arcy, 1999). Their presence at

medieval settlements or burial sites is considered a key indicator of falconry (Prummel, 2018) but their glaring absence from Wood Quay and its almost complete taxonomy of palearctic raptors could be a sign that these birds were being shipped abroad to the Anglo-Saxon world or even further afield. The fragmentary nature of the remains also leaves a margin for error in accurate identification (Hamilton-Dyer, 2007) and therefore possible misidentifying of goshawk remains as those of similar size buteos (buzzard-type raptors) or red kites.*

(*At the time of writing, a number of goshawk remains have been uncovered at an archaeological excavation in Dublin city centre that may be from a Viking or medieval context. I am hoping to secure heritage funding to assist with the carbon dating of these remains so that more might be understood about them.)

Another artefact from Wood Quay possibly alludes to raptors warranting a special status among the settlers – a leather satchel containing “the claw of an eagle” recovered from a defensive embankment on Fishamble Street (Wallace, 2016). A specific species was never assigned to this artefact (requested for this study in Spring 2021 for reassessment but yet to be located by National Museum of Ireland Antiquities Department). What raises a possible connection to falconry is the context in which the remains were discovered – the bag itself. It is a large, over-the-shoulder pouch with a broad flap hanging down over it. On display at the National Museum of Ireland on Kildare Street, it is unmistakably like the customary falconry bag still worn to this day by falconers right around the globe.

It was suspected to have been originally for transporting an early medieval shrine (Wallace, 2016), but the bag might have been repurposed as a game bag for a falconer. When a hawk catches something, the falconer surreptitiously exchanges the kill for another piece of meat without the hawk knowing it is being relieved of its catch. The large flap is to hide the game away – out of sight, out of mind! Perhaps the foot is the remains of a trained bird that died in the field, or a memento of a highly prized hunting hawk that the falconer wished to keep. Falconers do build personal attachments to their hawks, particularly if it has fed their family. Perhaps the raptor foot has a connection to the Norse goddess Freya who is associated with falcons through her ‘falcon cloak’, and kept as a charm or amulet (Hagen, 2018).

Concluding points

Further analysis is probably needed on the remains to look more closely at these slight but

potentially insightful links to falconry in Dublin’s Viking heritage. The focus at the time was on domestic fowl and geese and only a relatively small sample of a much bigger haul was examined (O’Sullivan, T., personal communication, December 8, 2020). Some of this comprised small fragments and thus a full and comprehensive ID of any species is difficult (Hamilton-Dyer, 2007). The massive body of bird bone artefacts from Wood Quay lie in storage, unprocessed, to this day, and closely examining those and lost items such as the “eagle’s claw” is critical if evidence of link to falconry can be found.

Wood Quay has deepened our perception of Viking culture, reconfiguring these earliest Dubliners from marauding invaders to familial and cultivated



(above) a modern generic leather falconer's bag, and (below) the satchel containing the raptor's claw found at Fishamble Street (National Museum of Ireland)

settlers. Evidence of falconry would show that they practised a sophisticated and intricate hunting art that required a delicacy of touch in the training and management of these highly strung animals. It would also mean the earliest tangible traces of true falconry on the island of Ireland, thereby deepening the global heritage of this ancient but still living practice.

Acknowledgements

Howard Clarke, Ellen Hagen, Finbar McCormick, Grace O'Keefe, Tanya O'Sullivan, Pat Wallace.

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The 'Rickeby' elite burial (c. 600 AD, Sweden) contained typical raptors used in falconry across the Northern Hemisphere (Arkikon)



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Archaeology Ireland magazine

Hamilton-Dyer, S., Exploitation of Birds and Fish in Historic Ireland: A Brief Review of the Evidence. In *Environmental Archaeology in Ireland*, edited by Murphy, E.M. and Whitehouse, N.J. (Oxbow Books 2007).

Irish Hawking Club Annual

General Meeting 2023

Date: 03 November

Location: Sneem Hotel, Sneem Co, Kerry & Online

Meeting called by: The Committee

Type of meeting: Annual Meeting - Business

Attendees:

Maurice Nicholson, Robert Hutchinson, Hilary White, Andi Chewning, Darry Reed, Mick Quinn, Mark Upton, Rachele Upton, Stijn Suykerbuyk, Thomas, Keith Barker, Don Ryan, Eric Witkowski, Emily Venables, Declan Cairney, Clifford Ryan, Willy, Garry Timbrell, Thomas Richter, Therese Rafter, Ger Grant, Cassandra Campbell, Eoghan Ryan, Shay O'Byrne, Ger O'Neill, Andy Savage, Alan Jackson, Boukje Tuinhout.

Minutes:

Meeting was called to order by Maurice at 8:09 p.m. local time.

Secretary Andi Chewning read the minutes from the 2022 IHC AGM, there were no objections. Director Maurice Nicholson moved to accept the minutes as read, Eoghan Ryan seconded; minutes were approved as read.

President Robert Hutchinson gave a presidential address, thanking the overseas members for their presence, the previous committee for the job they did and the "great" shape they left the club in at their departure. As well specifically thanking Eric Witkowski for obtaining permission to fly on the Coillte area, Don Ryan for the tremendous effort he put in over many years to make Sneem such a fantastic place to gather for a falconry meet, and Immediate Past President Keith Barker for his hard work and dedication during his term as President and for leaving the club in such a good state. He also reminded those present to be thankful and appreciative to the hotel staff for their efforts. He mentioned the "3 Pillars" of what makes The Irish Hawking Club special.

The Journal - the quality of the publication and its content. He took a moment to specifically thank Darry Reed for her work as Editor and to commend her for keeping up the quality that it has been known to have.

The Public Presentation - giving the example of our presence at Phoenix Park and the effect it had for the benefit of falconry to the public eye, educating and demystifying it, as well as dispelling common misconceptions about falconry.

The Field Meets - thanking the membership for their efforts in organizing field meets and reiterating their importance and emphasizing that we should (collectively) continue to organize them and we (as a committee) should support them.

He mentioned how privileged we are to have the access to the land to have good quality field meets, as well as touching on the challenges faced by falconers in other countries, as well as some of those we face here; namely in the face of anti-hunting groups and anti-falconry mindsets. He went on to talk about the things we can do to combat these things and to help preserve our sport.

He talked about educating the public and interacting with them with respect and with amiability and not with disdain or condescension. Giving an example of an interaction he'd had just that morning with a member of the public who deemed tethering of bird as 'cruel' He reminded the members to take a personal responsibility for it, and not to always look to 'The Club' and 'big associations' to protect and defend falconry but asked everyone to take the opportunities they are presented with to do it themselves to 'protect our interests, to take every opportunity because our sport is magical...and it's something to be proud of, and the key thing is to keep flying'.

Treasurer Hilary White gave the Treasurer's report, thanking the members and the committee. He also thanked Anya Aseeva for her time as Treasurer. He started by explaining to the members the necessity of opening of a new account with Bank of Ireland after the closure of Ulster Bank and about the trials and tribulations to finally move the funds from the previous bank to the new.

A summary of The Treasurer's Report: Opening balance of €28,692.51 and a closing balance of €30,388.75 with an overall increase in balance of just under €1700. Just over €5820 of that increase was from Membership Dues and just over €1900 in costs was for the production and shipping of the journal; these were the two largest cost/profit areas. (Full treasurer's report to follow) No questions or comments.

Gary Timbrell moved to accept the Treasurer's Report as read, Mick Quinn seconded; no objections, motion passed.

Old Business:

The first item was an update from Director Maurice Nicholson about the proceedings with the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS/The Department). He began with the explanation about the time spent waiting for a meeting with all three sections of The Department (Licensing, Regional, CITES) and having to settle for an online meeting as opposed to the in-person meeting requested. He spoke of the 'frustration' and 'disappointment' we as committee members felt during and after the meeting, especially when it became clear that the people we were dealing with had 'no exposure to falconry and that the kind of issues we were raising meant very little to them'. From then we received a letter from The NPWS with a summation of their intent to change the laws governing falconry and falconry licensure over the coming years.

He summarized the proposal we have given to The Department. The main points of the proposal were the Licensing process, the Wild Take, and overall Welfare of the birds. Maurice spoke about how he spoke with different people and authorities on various matters before creating the proposal, including Dr Neil Forbes, regarding not only welfare but also legislation and the processes that have been both used and implemented in the UK.

Maurice then read from the proposal he submitted to The Department, which began with an explanation of falconry, its importance and cultural significance; as well as speaking of the individual sacrifice required to practice falconry.

The suggestions:

A mentoring & apprenticeship system that The Irish Hawking Club and knowledgeable falconers be heavily involved, if not fully responsible, for the creation of such system should it be put into place and not simply consulted or conferred with while the majority of the content creation is handled by those who lack practical knowledge and/or real experience. 'If the government are serious as they attest in safeguarding our practice that some areas of our National Parks should be made available for falconers to train and fly their birds on'. Speaking of the need for space, for longwings especially, and the growing hindrances and limitations falconers face in gaining access to such grounds. He mentioned also that falconry is the most sustainable of hunting practices and that the number of quarry taken are "miniscule" compared to other forms of hunting.

Wild Take.

About the cultural and inherited significance of the wild take of Irish raptors, and Ireland's special and unique ability to do so, and how this plays into the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage status.

Spoke about the sustainability, how the current license numbers amount to 0.550.65% of Irish Peregrine populations (based on population surveys, data modeling, and estimation, though the actual population of wild peregrines is probably higher meaning the number of birds taken via wild take is even lower than the quoted number).

Suggestions for changes to the current Wild Take Process:

Removal of the 'tick box' for the license application. Should be replaced with a separate application solely for the purpose of wild take, in addition to a small fee; to encourage people to think critically about their choice to enter the Wild Take.

An option to indicate whether the bird will be used for falconry or aviculture.

The Wild Take license should be for either a nestling or a young juvenile up to 5 months of age (a passage bird). Application should include questions about experience, any falconry association membership (not just IHC), and recommendation(s) from an experienced falconer. The application should also include the ability to list different potential sites for the proposed take.

Once a site is chosen and permission obtained, and the license to 'disturb a nest' granted notification of any revocation or a valid reason not to proceed needs to be given to the applicant immediately.

NPWS ranger presence at the time of removal needs to either be discontinued or regulated as it often interferes with the actual removal of the bird; and has on numerous occasions caused the total abandonment of license fulfillment for inappropriate reasons (unfounded ranger objection, scheduling conflicts causing delays which resulted in the chicks in question to be unsuitable, personal [ranger] objections that are not founded in the legality of the matter, etc). Wild Take should be permitted inside National Parks & Areas in an effort to showcase the safeguarding of the heritage

Welfare.

Reiteration that involvement from the IHC or at a minimum knowledgeable, reputable falconers and avian veterinarians be involved in the creation of

welfare laws to prevent the creation of such regulations being handled by those who lack specific experience or knowledge.

Submissions of similar regulations from other countries and governing bodies were submitted.

The legislation would cover all the standard areas of: Good Nutrition, Good Environment, Good Health/ Preventative Medical Practice, Good Husbandry and Tethering.

Maurice said that since we did not get much (any) feedback from The Department about the issues, we submitted an abundance of resources and evidences showcasing our position and the reasonings behind our requests & suggestions.

The floor was then open to questions & comments.

Eric Witkowski raised the question about the continual restrictions being enacted on quarry species and suggested an individual licensure to hunt certain species especially given the “miniscule” numbers falconers take by comparison. Maurice agreed and said that it is something we will need to pay special attention to before we bring it up with them. Gary suggested going to UNESCO directly as they were ‘higher up’ and more able to accomplish the things we would like to see especially given the pressure to involve “indigenous peoples and small communities” meaning the stakeholders must be consulted when a change in the law is proposed, otherwise the changes cannot go through. He mentioned we are entitled to ask for a meeting as we are routinely reporting to them on the status of falconry in Ireland.

Keith brought up the issue of ‘witchhunting’ and ‘being victimized’ without breaking the law. Why do we repeatedly apply for a new license before the old one expires, pay a fee, and not be granted them for several months (if ever), and in many cases not even receive acknowledgement of the applications/payments receipt. Maurice commented that we did bring it up with them and they could not give any answer to the question in our meeting. Eric Witkowski reiterated the asininity of it and mentioned that owls, parrots and other CITES listed and endangered species require no license at all to possess.

Clifford then spoke about the transfer & collection of birds and the wait times to hear back from The Department, having already waited six weeks

Don Ryan mentioned that there is a previously agreed system in place where one can specify a collection date at the time of application, and that

the person is able to collect the bird regardless of whether or not the paperwork has come through and the onus is on The NPWS to have the paperwork in order by the proposed collection date.

Next was an update on the journal. President Robert Hutchinson gave an update from Alan Jackson, saying that there were only a few articles submitted so far, and that he is awaiting more in order to produce a good quality journal, with a deadline of end of 2023. Alan also spoke and thanked the members for their confidence in him and encouraged the members to submit.

There was a small discussion on field meets, with an austringer meet at Dunbrody Estate on the 25th of November. The Moat Snipe meet on Dec 2nd & 3rd, and the Dingle Meet for the 26th & 27th of January 2024.

The last item of Old Business was the membership status, Andi Chewing gave a brief summary of the membership status, with around 125 total members both in Ireland and internationally. She said she felt the membership status was good overall with many of the members actively hosting and participating in field meets; as well as the fact that there were over 20 members present at the AGM in Sneem and a few more attending online. She also went on to speak of some changes to the benefits of new First Year Members, namely that first year members will receive field meet cap sponsorship from the club for the 12 months following the beginning of their membership in an effort to get them involved in the club and support those who are new to the sport getting the opportunity to go out and hunt with others and to network.

Eric asked how many new members there were, and she answered in the ballpark of 10, he followed that up with asking how many had dropped or not renewed, which was answered with only a couple.

Clifford asked if there is a system in place for new members coming into the club to get mentors. The answer was that there is no formal system in place currently.

New Business:

The first item of New Business was directly following the discussion on new members, with a call for a Mentorship Database to be established and a mentorship process to be set up. Not only to benefit the new members but to showcase to outside parties (for example the NPWS) that the Irish Hawking Club takes our sport seriously and are committed to ensuring the proper structures are in place and accessible should the requirement

of mentorship become a part of the licensure process in the future. Cassandra Campbell added that a letter or document produced by the IHC for new members relating to what being a falconer entails etc would be helpful for mentors to ensure they are all starting at the same place and to help demystify falconry a bit and to give resources to new members.

This discussion lead into a reiteration of the importance of the Online IAF Welfare Course, and that the Committee strongly advises that all members take the course.

The next item of New Business was an explanation of the Managing Raptors for Health and Longevity course by Dr Neil Forbes, which Andi had recently attended in Scotland. She explained that the proceeds of the course go to The Horstmann Trust for vulture research and conservation, she then gave then a brief summary of the course and what it covers, both the information and the practical handson training of emergency first aid for falconers and raptor handlers. She mentioned that she had spoken to Dr. Forbes during the day and he had said he would be happy to come to Ireland to give the course if there was enough interest. She ended by saying we would need at least 10 confirmed participants to justify the course being held. Hilary commented that this would be a good thing for the IHC to invest in perhaps through supplementing the member's attendance fees which was met with agreement from the other committee members. No official motions or votes were had on the latter.

Next was a presentation of a Thank You gift to Don Ryan for his "monumental contribution to The Irish Hawking Club". President Robert Hutchinson talked briefly about the history of the club, and it's more turbulent era, and said that although many people were involved in reshaping and bettering the club, and while none acted alone to accomplish this and many were to thank for it; is was now turn to thank and pay tribute to Don Ryan and his service to the club.

The last item was an address from Mark Upton (IHC member, Hawk Board Member, and Vice President of Europe to the IAF). He thanked those in attendance and said it was an honor to be asked to speak. He said that although the IHC is not the biggest club in Europe it is one of the most important, due in large part to the organization of the IAF Field Meet in Sneem in 2016 and the caliber of a meet it was, and the caliber of the hunting we continually produce. He said that although there are many challenges modern day falconers are

facing in the way of legislation and restrictions, 'nothing is killing falconry faster than lack of game' and implored the Irish falconers to be grateful for the abundance of wild game available to many and to keep flying. He also touched on the legislation and reiterated the earlier sentiment that the things the UK is enacting now are likely to be seen in Ireland's near future; he implored the members of North Ireland to make the most of their seats in the Hawk Board and to attend the meetings via Zoom to make the most of their votes and their place at the table in UK legislature.

There was no other new business.

Meeting adjourned at 9:24 p.m local time –
Clifford Ryan moved, Rachelle Upton seconded.

Andi Chewning, Secretary.



The Dark Side

Simon Tyers, England

While I was writing my recent publication, The Specialist Falcon, I was reflecting on past falcons I have flown. Many were pure but I also flew many different types of hybrids. These were of varied breeding, from peregrine x barbery to gyrs crossed with peregrines, or subspecies thereof. While gyr x barbaries will always hold a special place with me, I have had great sport with peregrine hybrids with either half or quarter black shaheen in them. I flew females predominantly as the males were on the smaller size and, as my main quarry was red grouse, the females were more suitable. They were very effective and a considerable number of head were taken both on the moor and lowland.

I actually caught my very first grouse with a 3/4 peregrine x 1/4 black shaheen female, Jade, one of two sisters I flew in the mid 1980s. Although not a very highmounting falcon, she was a formidable hunter and during the 1986/87 season she accounted for 45

'I decided i could accommodate another falcon on the cadge'

Going on memory and past records, the black shaheen hybrids had a tendency to bind to quarry far more regularly than other falcons I had flown or have flown since. I failed to recognise a possible reason for this at the time but, upon more recently studying the characteristics and natural hunting territory of black shaheens, I believe this is something that could be more typical to this falcon. Black shaheens are native to the Indian Subcontinent and will commonly include jungle regions within their territory, which determines hunting above the canopy for prey necessitating the need to bind as opposed to striking. The black shaheen hybrids certainly seem more prone to this style of taking quarry and, as I had acquired more hunting ground and was expanding my grey partridge release project, I decided I could accommodate another falcon on the cadge.

Being one that always likes to try something new and the challenges it brings, the new falcon would have to have black shaheen within its breeding. As many know, I am a huge enthusiast for hunting with gyrfalcons, either pure or hybrids. With this in mind, along with my ideas on binding, I decided to look to obtain a male gyr x black shaheen hybrid from good stock. Another reason for choosing a gyr hybrid as opposed to a peregrine was that it would be interesting to see how this falcon approached taking game. If my thought process was correct, the two types of falcons are quite opposite in their preferred hunting methods. The gyr has a preference for often striking game very hard then flying it down, while the black shaheen is quite the opposite, as I suspect, in preferring to bind.

Sourcing such a falcon was not easy as they are not regularly produced. While I have not flown a pure black shaheen, reports I have received on their performance were quite negative. I favour gyr hybrids through their ability to cope with the more frequent testing winds we experience but, again, information on success, particularly of males, was both patchy and not encouraging due to many factors.

After speaking to my contacts and many telephone conversations, Howard Waller agreed to produce the falcon I required from his impressive lines of gyrs and pure black shaheens. Howard only planned one clutch of hybrids and I was very lucky that it produced the male I required.

Mid-June saw Julie, my wife, and I taking the long trip north to collect the parent-reared falcon when he was eight weeks old. When he was brought out of the aviary, visually he fitted all my requirements, not only on size but also looks. His father was a magnificent hunting black gyr put to a beautiful black shaheen falcon. To say he was stunning was an understatement. As I said to Howard, you wouldn't think I'd been doing this for over 50 years; my excitement was the same as when I collected my first kestrel many years ago.

The falcon travelled well, hooded and on my fist for the long journey back south, and was taken directly to be placed in a hack chamber belonging to my good friends Peter Gill and Richard Hill of Falcon Mews. I am a great advocate for the use of such chambers; whether you call them hack or flight chambers makes no difference, but for gamehawks I find them hugely beneficial and much preferable to either wild or tame hacking here in the UK. I would normally prefer them to have their freedom in such an enclosure for around

three weeks, taking them up at 11 weeks old. Being such an early falcon, he was one of the first released into the pen and later, due to export issues as a consequence of avian flu, all the falcons were unable to be taken up for an extended period of six and a half weeks, making him over 14 weeks old when he was finally caught at the end of July.

'he was hooded and on the fist in a few seconds'

summer morning. Peter brought him to us and his basic furniture was fitted. As I use the now much improved Kaiser slip-on jesses, he was hooded and on the fist in a few seconds, sprayed with water and ready for the short journey home.

As always, I prefer to get all furniture, including back-pack, leg mounts etc., fitted immediately to prevent any setbacks caused by doing it at a later stage once training has commenced. As typical with any freshly taken up hawk, back-packing was easy while he was held on the fist by my hawking partner and he was quickly sprayed and left hooded to settle for a while.

I had already chosen a name for this new member of the team and as always – and to the frustration of my hawking partner (another reason to keep doing it) – like all of my falcons' and dogs' names, it would begin with the letter S. I have much pleasure in seeing my hawking partner get names mixed up, only getting the first letter right in most cases. I had high hopes for this new charge and it's always tempting to name them accordingly, with great expectations, but I preferred to not do this in this case for fear of him not living up to an impressive name, so he was called Smog to go with his colouring. It could also then be said that he matched his name if he proved quite thick and inclined to hang about low all day, should that be how he performed, but I prayed that was not going to be the case.

Training started later the same day and it was soon evident that this eyass was not typical. As with most falcons taken up from the hack pen, he wasn't at a fat weight but closer to what would be his flying weight due to the activity and interaction with so many

other falcons. He did feed on the fist on the first day but, even in a fairly darkened room, he was clearly very wild and not happy with losing his much-extended freedom.

'The falcon was clearly not going to man quickly'

This pattern continued for the next couple of days despite my conducting regular manning sessions with him, as I normally do. We would make a little progress but, once hooded and left for a short while, we would then be back to square one again. Saying that, he fed and took the hood well. I soon realised that I could not let things continue like this and didn't want these explosions in temper, at the slightest thing, to become the norm. This falcon was clearly not going to man quickly and appeared to be quite temperamental. I took the quick decision to take drastic action and resolved to go through the waking process as I would often do when training accipiters, not falcons. This was done for the next three consecutive nights. The first night he spent totally on the fist, being hooded then unhooded, stroked, touched on his feet and, eventually, his beak and body. Initially he would bite ferociously and bate but, with constant attention through the night, he started to respond. By 4am he was sitting with his foot up and wanting to close his eyes but I kept him busy. He was hooded and placed in the weathering at 8am while I got some sleep, then we were back at it during the day. His non-casting food intake was given throughout the day and night in small tidbits and his condition was monitored regularly. Night two saw a massive improvement with extended periods out of the hood with the TV on, where he would play with my fingers and even do some preening. Night three, and I introduced him to a raptor post in the lounge where he spent most of the night unhooded and was content for me to approach him, hood him while he stood on the post, take food from my fingers or just approach him and stroke him without much aggression. We still saw the occasional bate but if hooded, he would quickly settle without even the need to draw the braces.

Occasionally, and for no reason, we still encountered fits of rage, the causes of which were difficult to actually put a finger on. Although in time these pretty much disappeared, it would still be seen

throughout his training with him switching off and refusing to respond to known exercises. Not something easy to deal with but I needed to adapt to him. It was nothing to do with condition but rather mindset, which is common in gyrs. I am never one for starving a hawk into responding and behaving as that can cause so many issues and bad traits and, to be honest, is unnecessary and not how birds should be trained. Getting to know the hawk and its personal requirements is the art and brings far greater understanding and reward for both falcon and falconer.

Despite regular manning he would often have bouts of restlessness on the weathering lawn and would need further manning or hooding.

His progression to jumping to the fist and then lure work came quite swiftly with little adjustment of condition. As always, I only ever called him off to the lure once a day and he was allowed to take a good reward. This goes a long way to cementing a reliable response from any distance in the future. His time in the hack pen showed its benefits in manoeuvrability, agility and footing. He was instantly capable of footing a mid-air lure from whatever distance, which is a good preliminary exercise prior to drone training.

'Smog was a real natural'

Introduction to the drone was faultless as I had already introduced him to the sight of it, along with a suspended parachute, from the first day he was out of the hood on the weathering lawn. This was when we would see his flying ability develop and he certainly did not disappoint. While I've had some falcons that needed a few low height flights to the drone lure as they learnt to fly, Smog was a real natural. Heights were steadily increased and he always put in 100% effort and enthusiasm into mounting to the drone. He would always take the suspended lure with aggression, which is something I like to see.

What I did start to experience on a few occasions was him switching off to the drone for no apparent reason. It was not down to condition or any particular weather; rather more his frame of mind. While some intermewed falcons can sometimes be rather reluctant to fly the drone during reclaiming without suitable incentive, this is quite unusual in an eyass.

If he had been a little twitchy earlier in the day or was unsettled by others in the field, then I could expect the unexpected. This would sometimes manifest in mounting to the drone but then drifting, in which case if the drone was seen to move up, down or sideways, then this would more often than not turn him on and he would return with aggression and complete the exercise. What he would also do on some occasions was to mount right past the drone and garnished lure and just keep mounting for the sheer fun of it. This is when I saw the first signs of this falcon's potential. This was not thermal mounting, which any inexperienced falcon can soon learn, but rather determined power mounting and it was clear he loved it. The first time he did this no amount of drone movement would switch him back to it and he eventually pitched out at three thousand feet. What was pleasing was that he was never very far away and didn't drift. I've regularly seen reports of young falcons rising on thermals to great heights but also drifting huge distances, necessitating recovery from afar. Eventually coming down just over a mile away, Smog was easily recovered and not upset by the episode which is always pleasing when a young hawk first goes wandering. Sometimes the whole event can be unnerving and make them a little slow to recover, but not in this case.

It was soon time to finish with the drone as great heights had been achieved and it was clearly evident that this boy wanted to fly. I never overdo drone training but use it in a limited capacity to get the young falcons mounting and fit. Having already started partridge hawking with my intermewed falcons, we had assessed our wild partridge numbers and my release program was well underway so I had ample opportunities to pick the right set up to get Smog entered.

Putting a falcon up without the drone incentive to mount is always unpredictable: one can never be sure how they will perform. I've found in the vast majority of cases, if droned correctly, they mount to some degree. What is always the hardest part for them to learn is staying close enough to the falconer to see, and benefit from, a flush. Smog was initially fed on a fresh partridge carcass which he instantly reacted to when thrown and allowed a good crop. On his first flight, two days later, he was off the fist quickly and proceeded to mount very close. I did not want to push my luck and allow him to mount too high in case he was focusing upwards for a drone. At a few hundred feet he was shown his first flush and he immediately gave chase which is exactly

what I had hoped for and expected as he clearly had aggression and predator instinct.

Over the next few hawking days, Smog was left longer each time to see what he could and wanted to do. The longer he was left, the higher and wider he went and was always shown a flush. Here is where I encountered an issue which was purely my fault but quickly recognised.

Should a young falcon be mounting but not positioning and staying wide, I would normally wave, shout and move which often attracts the eyass' attention and curiosity. When it responds it would be served to show what it all meant. Should it not respond then, again, a flush is shown which the falcon would see and attempt but would be very unlikely to catch. In time, and with repetition and success, the eyass should soon learn what a wave means and what position to take.

'he actually managed to catch a couple of partridge'

What happened with Smog was the opposite. Climbing well but always wide, he would not respond to a wave, shout or movement but rather stay out in his position, often over a thousand feet wide of me. On the early occasions when I flushed to show him where he should be, expecting him to miss, he actually managed to catch a couple of partridge. All this ended up doing was teaching him to sit wide and wait for the flush: a wave or shout would then clearly make him hold his wide position, seeing it more as a signal a flush was imminent rather than one to come and position. He worked this out in a couple of instances and it was clear he was very intelligent and trusted his own ability.

I recognised my failing quickly and took immediate action. I would no longer shout or give indication of a flush, but rather show him one when he was climbing with a chance to see it, hoping that he would soon work it out himself. He was left to climb and some days was so rapid that if the wind was moderate, he would often soon drift and be too high and too far to be of any use if served. This is where my one recall to the lure education pays dividends: he

would respond instantly and return, often from over three quarters of a mile away and well over a thousand feet up.

As my confidence in him grew, and if conditions were right, I would leave him and time any flushes, irrespective of his pitch (which to be honest was always respectable), when he was in a closer position. Not easy, but with the help of the GPS 2D distance I was able to judge it better. This resulted in many long shallow stoops but I was always impressed with his turn of speed and ability to get on terms with his quarry.

It was mid-October when we started to see things falling into place and he took his first classic partridge in the wide open expanses of the Lincolnshire fens. From here on he just got better and better. His mounting ability, and speed in doing so, was always impressive. He only ever had one thing on his mind and that was to mount quickly and with determination. I would always leave him to return when he was ready and this was always at an impressive pitch. As with all my falcons I am very disciplined on the minimum pitch for which I will flush. This usually takes a season or two for me to instigate, depending on the individual falcon, but with Smog I found myself already doing this with a minimum pitch of seven hundred feet. Saying this, it was also extremely rare, even in the early stages, that he didn't attain this sort of altitude and within a very short period every flight was much higher and often breathtaking.

What did soon start to occur was that, on the rare occasion that he missed a partridge, he would turn on his tail and remount despite me showing, and recalling him to, the lure. He would blatantly ignore it, having always been excellent as previously mentioned. I will never reflush on a miss for lots of reasons, especially for any falcon with gyr in it. If allowed to remount and served again, it doesn't take long for a falcon to only want to come down to a flush which is not always an option. Secondly, I see it as morally wrong on the quarry as it has evaded the falcon successfully, doesn't usually fly as well the second time and should be left alone thereafter. I sometimes tried offering him a dead carcass but he would not even respond to that, having already learnt the rewards of chasing live game. On the occasions this happened I would stand my ground and continue to recall to the lure. Smog would mount high again, often tracking back over into position, but would

eventually rake off downwind in a temper. This always ended up with a track of a mile or two where he would respond instantly to the lure when found sitting in a tree or on a building.

'His flying ability and footing were not those of a falcon of such a young age'

From here, any days that we didn't hunt, he would be called off to the lure once and fed as a reminder. This was fairly short-lived due to his intelligence and schooling. Smog quickly settled into a very successful hunting pattern and reliability. His pitches were always impressive and his positioning became perfect. He was soon challenged with more testing set ups as he was usually flown with the intermewed falcons, where huge distances have to be covered by walking under the mounting falcon. The more he hunted, the more successful he became, missing very few opportunities. What was pleasing was that right from his early successes he would bind to his quarry 95% of the time and with ease. His flying ability and footing were not those of a falcon of such a young age. His temperament started to improve and he became more settled with his continued success. For what hunting he had during his first season, he had an average pitch of over eight hundred and eighty feet and a success rate of 60%.

Despite hunting in areas with abundant check, he only paid passing interest on a handful of occasions and it was more playful than anything else. Despite his ability he never connected with check and on a couple of occasions, after playfully chasing the wrong quarry, he returned, mounted very high and took his partridge with style. What better lesson could he possibly have?

Soon, all the problems, unpredictability and waywardness had gone and he had learnt his routine and what gave him success. He became more settled on the lawn and was generally a more focused falcon. In over 50 years of falconry, I have never been so impressed with such a young falcon. His speed and efficiency in mounting to the most incredible four-figure pitches impressed all that have witnessed him.

There are many factors to Smog's success that must be taken into consideration before it is believed these are the must-have hybrids. He has super breeding, had the right understanding and

training, bountiful opportunities at quality game but, above all else, his success is accountable to him as an individual. He has confirmed my thinking on black shaheens and binding but one other trait he has, and one I have not seen to this degree with any other falcon, is his desire to take kills to cover. On more than one occasion have I had to hack my way into bramble to retrieve him and have seen him fly a considerable distance to take his prize to cover. His manners on a kill are perfect and if in the open, he is content to be approached and interacted with. Until I have flown a few more of these hybrids, I will have to wait and see if this is another trait or, more likely, something individual.

Thankfully, Smog did not live up to his name but, as with many of my falcons, he has other nicknames:

'The Dark Destroyer' is one he truly lives up to.



The falcon hospitals of the Middle East

Maurice Nicholson, Co Wicklow

In January of 1979 I moved to the Middle East, taking on a job as assistant veterinarian at the 'Veterinary Hospital' in Jumeirah, Dubai. It seems like a lifetime ago now. The clinic itself was very new and had opened its doors only two years previously. Set up by a vet from Cornwall, Dick Collins, it was just a few years younger than the UAE itself which had only come into existence in 1971 when some of the former British Trucial Sheikdoms joined together and the United Arab Emirates came into being.

Dick and I were the only western style vets in the country and, right from the off, I was introduced to a whole new variety of veterinary practice for, as well as providing a service to the pets of the expat community, we were vets to Dubai Zoo, Sheikh Mohammed's game park outside the city, the stables of the local Arab sheikhs as well as serving the local Emirati households of Dubai, many of whom had a few cows and small flocks of sheep and goats.



The waiting room

'I decided on that day that I was going to be falconer'

Within a few weeks, though, I discovered that we had a whole other group of clients, the local falconers who would arrive in from time to time with a falcon for us to treat. I was hooked from the start once I saw my first long winged falcon up close and I decided on that day that I was going to be a falconer. The challenges that Dick and I faced when presented with a sick falcon back then was considerable indeed for so little was known, both of the diseases these magnificent birds suffered from or their treatment. It was also in the early days before the internet and email brought easy communication so searching and acquiring information was no small feat.

The Arab falconers, we discovered, had a whole range of veterinary treatments, a falconer's lore of remedies which had been handed down from generations past. They often proclaimed their efficacy

to us but we believed most of them to be of little use. We had a copy of Philip Glasier's *Falconry and Hawking* which had a chapter devoted to the veterinary care of raptors written by his vet Michael Williams. Then we discovered that John Cooper had published a book 'Veterinary Aspects of Captive birds of Prey' and we immediately ordered a copy and it became our most reliant back up text. John had been a long time member of the British Falconers Club and had devoted himself to investigating the diseases seen in the hawks of the club members in a thoroughly scientific manner.

The real issue for us though was that, not only did we not have a database of information to refer to and no access to a veterinary laboratory in the Dubai of 1979, but when it came to investigating disease in exotic species such as the saker and peregrine falcons, the normal range of values had not yet been established. All these factors meant that our diagnoses were mostly based on the clinical signs being seen and our treatments often were extrapolated from our experiences with other species and our knowledge of poultry diseases.

I remember first coming across worms in the air sacs of a passage saker falcon and sending photos of them to my old parasitology lecturer in UCD, the late Dr. Kevin Dodd from Bray. He sent me a letter back identifying them as *Serratospiculum* species of worm and provided lots of information on them and suggested treatment. Anaesthesia was another area fraught with danger for us as safe anaesthetic regimes had not yet been developed for falcons and so a certain amount of risk had to be taken when it was really needed, as when operating on cases of bumblefoot or repairing wounds. Halothane, the regular gaseous anaesthetic we used for mammals proved to be far too dangerous to use in falcons so we tried combinations of Ketamine and Valium which proved to be of some value.

Things began to change significantly within a few years of me leaving Dubai in 1982. The ruling



Dubai falcon hospital, waiting to be swabbed

families of both Dubai and Abu Dhabi both decided to finance the development of hospitals devoted solely to the treatment of falcons. The Dubai Falcon Hospital was established by Sheikh Hamdan bin Rashid Al Maktoum in 1983 as the first hospital devoted to treating birds of prey. Two years later the Abu Dhabi Falcon Research Hospital was established by Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan at Al Khazna between Abu Dhabi and the inland town of Al Ain. Over the years others have followed in Qatar and Saudi Arabia and the UAE and the work and research that they have carried out has led to a great growth in the

knowledge of falcon diseases and their treatments. I have visited most of them over the years and have taken the opportunity to join the vets for a full mornings work on each occasion to keep up to date with the ever increasing bulk of knowledge and development.

The sheer number of falcons that go through these clinics each year is staggering and so the vets working there gain the kind of vast expertise of dealing with falcons that a vet like me could only ever dream of. The Al Wasl clinic in Dubai, set up by Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid and which I visited for a morning in January sees two and a half thousand falcons each year and is not open to the public. The Abu Dhabi Falcon Hospital is open to public falconers and sees up to eleven thousand falcons a year!

The data collected from all these clinic visits has not only helped to develop treatments for many conditions but a database of all the normal physiological and biochemical values is now firmly in place as a result. Now we vets can get value from blood sampling like never before. Likewise the troublesome bacteria and fungi are known and can be cultured and tested for sensitivity to antibiotics. The clinics have all been active in developing vaccines against the common viral diseases seen in the Middle East such as Newcastle Disease and Falcon Pox and they are produced in nearby laboratories and available for all falcons.

When it comes to examinations of sick (and healthy) falcons there have been two advances which have been particularly beneficial to the veterinary care of birds of prey: the arrival of a safe inhalant anaesthetic and the availability of the small rigid endoscope. Isoflurane came into use as a very safe new anaesthetic in the late 1980's. Now a falcon could be anaesthetised in 30 seconds by keeping its head in a mask and could be maintained safely for some time using an endotracheal tube and rebreathing circuit. The 2.7mm endoscope, developed for human joint examination, became the gold standard way of examining a live anaesthetised falcon. With a camera connected to a screen monitor,



The essentials, isoflourane anaesthesia and rigid endoscope (on table)

the lungs, air sacs, intestines, liver and heart could all be examined visually in a minimally invasive way and with little risk to the patient by inserting the scope through a tiny incision between the last two ribs on one side. Swabs could be taken for culture from any

diseased sites seen. Abscessed tissue could be removed as could the air sac worms I mentioned earlier. Uniquely it is the air sacs and the respiratory anatomy of the birds that make this possible. It cannot be done in a dog or cat without inflating the abdomen



Endoscopy of a falcon's intestinal tract



Collecting a mute sample

state of the art system and is based on something we have all come to learn as falconers: by the time our birds show signs of being sick they are already quite sick!

The Middle East falcon hospitals are a great example of what can be achieved when there is not only real passion behind an enterprise but when the funds necessary for its success are never an issue. All the ruling families of the Middle East have seen it as their duty to support in any way possible this magnificent part of their heritage and in doing so have done the rest of the world's falconry community a huge service. Now we have our own branch of veterinary medicine with a huge body of evidenced based data there to help us when our hawks are ill or need surgery. We falconers, and vets, everywhere owe them a great debt indeed.

The following Falcon Clinics allow tourists to visit:

The Abu Dhabi Falcon Hospital, UAE.

The Souq Wafiq Falcon Hospital, Doha, Qatar

to separate the organs. The gastrointestinal tract can be examined right down to the ventriculus by passing the scope down through the mouth and crop.

In all these falcon clinics, the falcons are regularly scoped and swabbed for disease, viral, bacterial and parasitological, at the end of the moult and any time they show signs of disease. A protocol is in place so that falcons for sale have to be examined and certified free of disease before a sale goes through. The clinics have their own in-house labs so that blood and mute tests are available in less than twenty minutes so that the treatment for any disease found is often started before the falcon even wakes up. This truly is a high speed,



Dr Ghibisha, a young Emirati vet, swabbing the crop of a gyr falcon at the Dubai Falcon Hospital



Importing grouse to the Manx hills

Alan Jackson, Isle of Man



20 years ago, living on the Isle of Man, I was stepping back in my farming career and had a little more time to indulge my passion for falconry. I had been flying a goshawk for a few years but hankered after trying to train a peregrine at game.

The Isle of Man, although small, has several areas of heather clad uplands on which reside a very small population of red grouse. These uplands are owned and administered by the Manx Government and sporting leases are available. As these leases only become available when they they have been given up by an existing tenant they are hard to come by. However, one hill tenancy became available and myself and a friend applied and were successful. My friend was more interested in the management required to encourage the few surviving pairs of grouse than the shooting of them. This was just as well as there was a voluntary ban on shooting grouse at the time. This was a response, brought in 30 years previously, in recognition that the grouse numbers were dwindling. Unfortunately, it had no effect as I believe it was not the reason for their decline.

Nevertheless my friend and I set about doing all the well known management work to encourage the grouse; this meant many happy hours on the hill trapping hooded crows and rats as well as the onerous, and often scary, job of burning strips in the heather to encourage new growth. We recorded the grouse population by counting birds in the summer and although there was a slight increase in the first couple of years it was a false dawn and overall the numbers continued to fall. In the meantime an adjacent hill became available and we took that on as well. This meant we had over a 1,000 hectares of hill in quite good condition but only around 10 pairs of grouse.

By now, as we had been doing a lot of work for several years to no avail, I decided that more proactive measures were required. The peregrine I was training had got bored waiting for game that my dog and I failed to produce and had become a proficient 'pursuit' bird, but that wasn't game hawking. I therefore thought that the grouse population required a boost and decided to bring some grouse in from the UK to give the natives a leg up. Determined to do the job

legally and with full endorsement from concerned parties I had little idea of the bureaucracy and sheer bloody minded opposition I would encounter. This soon became apparent when some of the other hill tenants voiced their opposition because of 'polluting the Manx grouse gene pool'. Contact with the landlord (the Manx Government) proved less than encouraging as the hill was an area of special scientific interest, a tick box exercise by the government to be seen to be doing something for wildlife, and they doubted that permission would be given. Contact with grouse moors in the UK proved disheartening as well with owners and gamekeepers wanting nothing to do with a scheme that might antagonise conservation bodies such as the RSPB. Although unwilling to actually supply birds we had much advice from UK gamekeepers ranging from 'don't bother' to more considered advice which was to try to catch young birds at the end of November.

This possible antagonism was because, since colonising the Island in the late 1970's, hen harriers had become very successful with more than 50

breeding pairs making the Island their home and many more wintering here. As there were very few pairs in the UK, believed to be because of persecution from grouse moor gamekeepers, the idea of helping grouse enthusiasts here to increase the grouse population was, as far as the RSPB was concerned, appalling! In an effort to defuse this situation I had much contact with the RSPB, both in correspondence and face to face meetings, but they were implacably opposed. Nevertheless, a contact in the UK knew of a moor that would be willing to help us and were prepared to help in the applications for legal permission that were required.

The owners of this moor were a water supply company who employed an ecologist and he was extremely helpful in dealing with Natural England, from whom we required a licence. This ecologist was a man of much more patience than I as Natural England were being pressurised by the RSPB to refuse permission, but he persisted and we were given a licence to catch 12 grouse and bring them to the Island. One of the many obstacles that were put in our way was that we had to have a veterinary surgeon to oversee the importation, we had one but they then said he had to be experienced with grouse! They also wanted to know how many grouse had been shot (100's) on the moor in the last three years so that they could assess whether taking 12 live grouse would deplete the local population.

Our landlords had, after a three week delay, given us permission to release the birds so we were ready to go. We planned to travel over on the morning ferry, catch up the birds after nightfall and return on the overnight ferry to release the birds before dawn. When we met the gamekeeper and his assistant I was taken aback when he asked me if I had experience netting grouse at night! Luckily he was joking and we drove up on the moor after dark with torches, crates for the birds and a small tape recorder. The tape machine had a recording of a vehicle's engine ticking over which we were assured would keep the grouse crouching to give us a chance to net them. It was a strange procession that crept across the hill that night; the underkeeper in front with a light, myself behind with the net, the gamekeeper next and my friend following to ferry any birds caught back to the crates. This was one of the most exciting things I had been involved in and we would have managed to catch the 12 we wanted had the keepers not been distracted into following a fox for half an hour! But we had 10 and were anxious to get off the moor and drive to the port as we did not want to miss the boat. Driving off the boat at six am we went straight to our hill where we then sexed, wormed and fitted radio transmitters to the 9 birds. One had unfortunately succumbed to shock and died. We then placed the crates into the heather and quietly walked away, leaving them to find their way out when it was light.



The grouse counting team, My wife Jean, Rastagh the flatcoat, Bella and Fizz the spaniels plus Bracken the Vizsla



Looking north from Injebreck to Slieau Freoaghane

We had two main objectives with this release which were one, to see if imported birds could give our native birds a 'shot in the arm' genetically and two, to see if some areas of the hills that looked good for grouse would attract birds not bound by loyalty to their natal site. Our plan was to track the birds to discover both their activity and distribution, to do this we paid several visits a week to the hills and attempted to locate the birds. We had no intention of disturbing them so we searched for signals and when we got a triangulation for a reasonably accurate position we marked the map and looked for the next one. If the signal for a bird had not moved from the previous visit we feared the worst and tracked the transmitter down to try to ascertain the cause of death.

All seemed well for the first week and we were surprised by how far and wide the birds wandered with none of them staying together. Not every bird was found on each visit, especially with 9 birds to track and many miles of walking to locate

them. It was only just after a week that one signal was from the same place and we found the bird eaten with the skeleton almost complete. It was lying in the heather with a halo of feathers round it so we attributed the blame to a hen harrier (peregrines tend to leave notches in the breastbone). Two weeks later we found the next carcass low down on the hill in some rushes, both wings bitten off and the ribcage eaten through with no plucked feathers. We blamed polecat or feral cat for that one but later we wondered if this bird had been knocked down by a peregrine and lost in the rushes to be eaten later as carrion. The carnage continued and by the end of January six of our imports were killed, a scant two months after their release.

Of the surviving three, one hen seemed to spend all her time avoiding any part of our hills where she might bump into other grouse. She lived throughout the summer but never nested and her signal suddenly disappeared in August. We knew one native cock was living a lonely life as the sole grouse



Searching for number three on Slieau Lhost

on a hill several miles from the release area and we were delighted when imported hen number three found him and they paired up. This bird had been particularly adventurous, travelling far and wide. Our hopes of her breeding were dashed when she was killed by a peregrine at the beginning of April. One hen, number 8, which we labelled as old because she had quite a lot of white feathers on her face, had remained near to the release area. In early January she was flushed with a native cock and we saw the pair together regularly in the same location. Sometimes we also saw what we believed was a second hen flush from nearby, was this 'a bit on the side' for number 8's cock, otherwise known as a satellite hen? We knew number 8 was sitting on eggs, as well as where, from the static signal and we even managed to see her on the nest without disturbing her. When she had left the site with her chicks we estimated that she had hatched seven or eight chicks

from the shell remains. Three weeks later we flushed two hens and a cock with 9 poults so we assumed that there had been a satellite hen and they had combined clutches. We were very pleased that at least one of our birds had paired with a native and produced offspring. This heroic bird also succumbed to a predator in the December of the same year, which we attributed to a peregrine.

As an experiment was it a success? Who knows? What I can say is that the outlook for grouse on the Island's uplands is bleak indeed when breeding aged birds are taken so readily.

'after many years of tracking, counting and following grouse on the Island I have come to the conclusion that there is one absolute fact, dead grouse don't breed'





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