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4 COMMENTS

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Falconry on the Black Sea coast



(<https://>

turkeyetc.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/img_4886.jpg)

I've been a pretty hopeless blogger recently. At least part of the reason is that I've been working on a long piece that has occupied far more of my time than it perhaps should have done.

It's a 15,000-word article about *atmacacılık*, a falconry tradition practiced mainly within the Laz

community in Rize and Artvin provinces. It's about other things as well: the different kinds of cultural and environmental destruction to have afflicted that region over the past century, the tea industry, the allure of birds of prey, and the Black Sea itself. I first began working on this story nearly a year and a half ago, on and off in the background, so it's been a long time in the works. I'm now doing edits and it will hopefully be published sometime this summer in London-based literary magazine *The White Review* (I wrote a piece about Gezi Park for them [here \(http://www.thewhitereview.org/features/occupy-gezi-from-the-fringes-to-the-centre-and-back-again/\)](http://www.thewhitereview.org/features/occupy-gezi-from-the-fringes-to-the-centre-and-back-again/)).

To give you a flavour of what *atmacacılık* is about, I'm posting the story I did on it for the Times when I first visited the region in September 2012, along with a few of my photos.

Some of you may ask: "With everything going on these days, why the hell has he been writing about this?" Well, those people will be glad to hear that with this out the way, I'll be reporting more closely on the deeply worrying developments in Turkish politics, on the upcoming elections, and also hopefully becoming a slightly better blogger.

Here is the *Times* article from September 2012 (<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/environment/wildlife/article3553234.ece>):

Kemal Özbayraktar remembers a time when every boy in his village was obsessed with sparrowhawks. Today he is among an ageing group of falconers trying to keep alive one of the world's more unusual hunting traditions.

Every late September on the northeastern Black Sea coast of Turkey, hundreds of local men take to the mountains carrying a stick with a small bird perched on its tip.

The bird — a red-backed shrike — is caught and trained to act as a lure for wild sparrowhawks, tens of thousands of which migrate through the region between September and October. After trapping the hawks in nets, falconers spend a week taming them before using them to hunt quail. A month later they release them to continue on their migration.

"When I was a child there were 5,000 falconers in this area. Now there are 300," said Mr Özbayraktar, 70, head of the falconry association in the town of Arhavi. "When something is declining this fast it cannot survive."

Movement to the cities, modern forms of entertainment, and the availability of firearms have caused the tradition's popularity to plummet. The coastal strip of rice and wheat fields that once provided habitat for the migrating quail has given way to tea plantations and expanding towns. Hizir Yogurtcu, 80, has kept sparrowhawks since he was ten years old. "There used to be rice fields all along the coast and they were full of quail," he said. "Now there is only concrete."

The birds once provided important seasonal subsistence within the Laz community, an ethnic group of about 90,000 in Turkey's Rize and Artvin provinces. Now, as both the quail and the sparrowhawkers dwindle, international falconry groups are taking an interest in how the hunters tame hawks in the space of a few days. "The sparrowhawk is the wildest of raptors and one of the hardest to handle," said Turan Basri, a British falconer who visited the region this week to research the tradition. "I'm amazed that they can man them in such a short space of time."

The key, falconers believe, is intense and constant human contact. In Arhavi and other towns along the coast, perches for hawks are seen in streets, restaurants, and cafés. Owners take their hawks with them everywhere, constantly stroking them and keeping them awake late into the night, until they lose their fear of man.

The taming of wild birds of prey was once widespread. Known as “passagers”, wild birds caught on their first migration were seen as preferable to reared ones by falconers because they did not need to be taught to hunt.

The practice has long been outlawed in Britain, Europe, and many other parts of the world, but in Turkey an exception exists for sparrowhawks, where falconers use only recently fledged females. In 2010 falconry was added to Unesco’s list of intangible cultural heritage.

Since then, falconers have been lobbying Turkey to recognise this status. “What you’re seeing in Turkey is a very focused form of falconry that hinges on the migration,” Nick Fox, a leading British falconer, said. “The whole technique is geared towards manning the birds as soon as possible and then releasing them at the end.”

“It feels sad to release them,” said Mr Özbayraktar, “because you invest so much effort to train the bird, and some of them are very special. If it’s a good bird, I’ll say to it, ‘I’m releasing you, but promise to send me two of your best daughters next year’.”



A recently caught sparrowhawk.

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