

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WGM-25
Falcons and Me - IV
To Trap a Hawk

Højsdal 12
Hareskov, Denmark
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Dear Dick,

A falconer obtains hawks for training either as young birds at the nest or as fully-grown birds after they have "flown the coop". The nestlings are called eyasses by falconers; birds trapped after they leave the nest are called "passagers" if they are on migration.

Eyasses are obtained by scaling to the falcon's cliffside eyrie or climbing up the nesting tree and removing the young birds from the nest just before they are ready to fly. Passage birds are trapped on migration or on their wintering grounds. Eyasses are preferred by some falconers who want to concentrate on only one kind of game. Eyasses can be "entered" and flown at pheasants, for example, and will refuse to chase other birds.

My experience with eyasses is limited. I have always preferred the qualities of the wild-trapped falcon; she already is an experienced hunter and has been hardened by the exercise of at least several weeks of flying after leaving the nest. The passage falcon's habits are more gentle and mannerly than those of the eyass. The latter often becomes "imprinted" and looks upon the falconer as a parent. The unfortunate result of this process is that eyasses often scream when the falconer comes within sight. This is a nerve-racking habit which is often incurable.

Passagers never scream. They also have the good sense to know that such potential food sources as dogs and cats are not for them. I have seen eyass goshawks fly at dogs, ladies' fur hats, and miscellaneous barnyard animals. They have no way, except through experience, of knowing what they are supposed to hunt and can therefore, at times, be rather dangerous. J. H. M. Pieters of Enschede, Holland once raised a goshawk from the egg. This bird was a good hunter, but would fly at all sorts of moving objects. The gos tried repeatedly to grab Pieters in the face, obviously considering it his next meal. Pieters and his hand-raised goshawk parted ways.

The difficulty about deciding on a wild-caught falcon is that one must first catch the bird. In taking eyasses from the nest, one is almost assured of success unless the rope breaks. Trapping wild

falcons is a more demanding pastime and requires an intimate knowledge of the falcons themselves, as well as skill in the various methods of trapping them.

This letter describes how falcons are trapped. It also kills two birds with one stone (sorry about that) because I shall use our Greenland falcon-banding project as an example of how to trap hawks. This project is the conclusion of WGM-23, the last part of the summer in a nutshell.

No one method is the best for capturing all the kinds of hawks. All trapping methods have one thing in common, however. They all use a bait animal--living or dead--usually a bird. Thus enters a rather delicate question in falconry, the use of live bait. The bait bird is in complete safety in some trapping methods. In trapping wild goshawks, for instance, the best means is to use a cage-like box with a bait pigeon. The goshawk flies into the trap and springs it closed, but has no chance to take the bait, which is protected by a wire mesh. But falcons cannot usually be enticed into such an arrangement, nor are they particularly interested in dead bait, unless they themselves have killed it. One is left, therefore, with no choice but to use live bait, as far as possible assuring its protection. If someone would invent an artificial, mechanical-bait lure for falcon trapping, the live-bait question could be avoided. But, so far as I know, nothing replaces the real thing for a falcon, although they can be brought to within shooting range by tossing a weighted handkerchief or a feather duster into the air.

Unlike the goshawk trapping, the idea behind falcon trapping is to use a bait bird which the falcon believes it can catch. I do not mean to imply that a live-bait bird is killed for each falcon trapped. The falcon is a lethal animal. Despite the best attempt to protect the bait bird, some fatalities occur. Last autumn we trapped thirty-one gyrfalcons in Greenland using nine pigeons. Seventeen pigeons were brought back and released in good health.

The main trapping methods for falcons, therefore, involve a live bait, plus some means of ensnaring the falcon when it attempts to take the bait. The terrain, surface conditions, temperature and wind, all are important factors in falcon trapping.

Sailing up the coast of Greenland to our trapping grounds last September, my partner Dick Graham and I spent hours discussing our strategy. Unlike many of us, Dick is a self-made falconer and has not been able to benefit from the knowledge of an experienced man. He has evolved some slick techniques for trapping, usually after trial-and error. He has traveled all over the North trapping gyrfalcons, but had never used (or seen used) the bow-net. He was naturally partial to the methods which he knew and which had worked well for him, methods to use while moving from place to place in the trapping area. But we were to be in one place so that the falcons literally had to come to us. For success in a stationary location, the bow-net

reigns supreme. I was anxious to show Dick how to bow-net, for I had learned the art from one of our best trappers, Bob Widmeier of Duluth, Minnesota.

After poring over the maps to find the best location, we were landed at a desolate coastal spot which looked just right for migrating gyrfalcons. We bade farewell to our boat crew and asked them to pick us up again in eight days. We had decided on a spot where the map indicated a hunting hut, but I knew that this hut was old and would be barely liveable. It would have to do, however, as there was no other shelter in the area. As our boat sailed away among the icebergs, a dark tiercel gyrfalcon flew by to satisfy his curiosity. One of his legs hung limply as he flew; he had presumably been winged by a hunter. Our excitement about seeing our first gyrfalcon of the trip was modified somewhat by the tiercel's injury.

The wounded tiercel sailed past us at low level. Then we were all alone with a pile of camping equipment on the shore and a nearby hut to settle in. The first thing we noticed was that the hut had no roof, just a skeleton of rafters. Peering inside the hut, we saw that storm waves had deposited 8 inches of sand onto the floor.

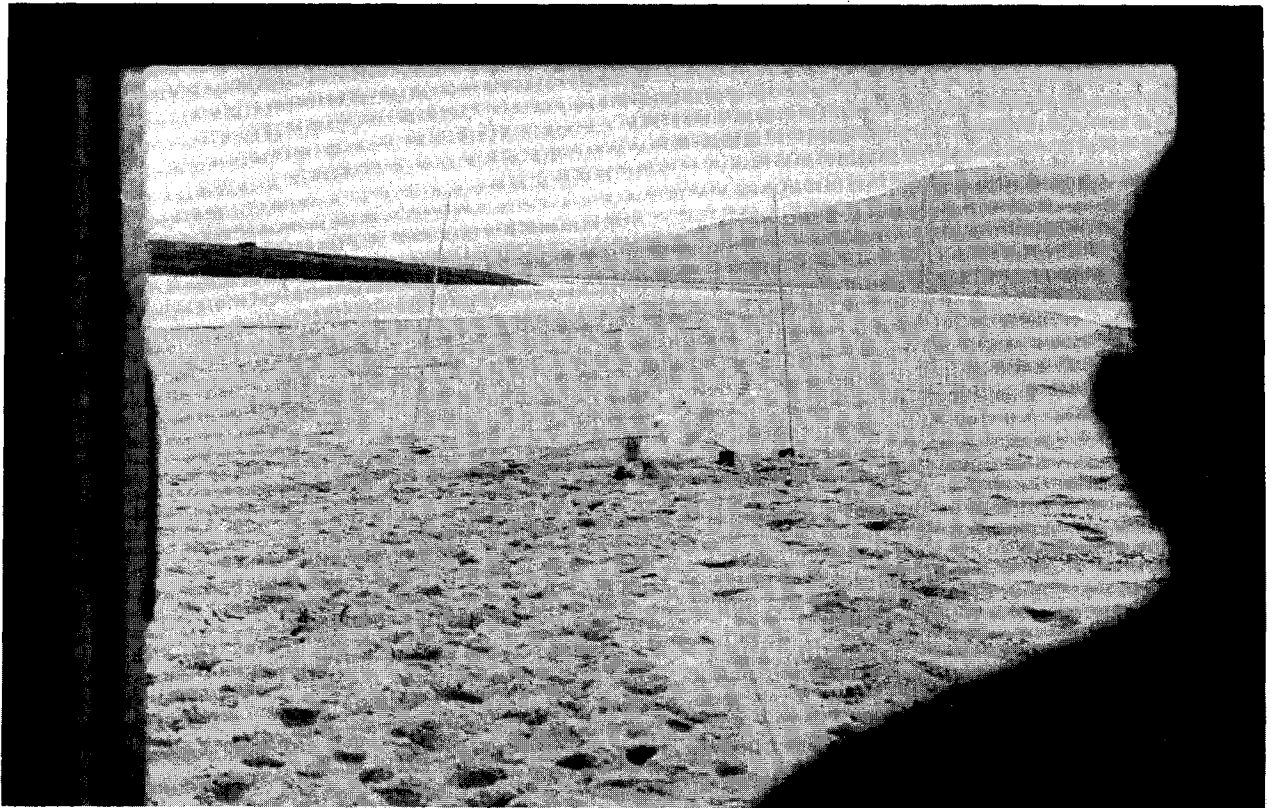
By late afternoon we had fashioned a tarpaulin over part of the roof and had shoveled quite a bit of wet sand from the hut. While arranging our cooking gear and giving the pigeons food and water, we caught a glimpse of a light gray gyrfalcon chasing a bird in the distance.

So everything would be ready for trapping early the next morning, we decided to set up the bow-net. Then we could cook a meal, get a good night's sleep, and be up before dawn the next day.

The bow-net is formed by two semi-circular hoops of metal, each hinged to the other. When laid flat on the ground it forms a large circle. One half of the hoop is pegged down, the other half folded back over the first. A baggy net, which has been fastened around the entire hoop, is tucked back out of sight. The bow-net is placed about 25 yards from the trapping hut or blind. A 20-foot-high pole is then erected near the bow-net with a line running from the top of the pole back to the trapping hut. On this line is attached a pigeon, usually laced up in a leather corset for protection. A pull-line from the bow-net to the trapping hut completes the rig.

The bow-net is an old trapping method of Dutch origin. The Dutch used a much more elaborate system, usually with two or three nets, various lure pigeons and different pigeons in the bow-net, plus a shrike, or butcher-bird, which served to warn the trapper of an approaching falcon by twittering nervously. Our rig was much more simple than the old Dutch method, but I believe it was just as effective.

By about seven o'clock that first evening everything was ready. Dick was probably looking at the whole setup with a bit of skepticism.



A white gyrfalcon coming in to the bow-net

We decided to practice a bit so we would be better coordinated the next day. We laced up a pigeon in the jacket and returned to the hut to give it a few swings in the air. We were about to give the bow-net a tug to make certain it was pulling over without obstruction when W-H-O-O-S-S-H, a white streak whipped by the lure pole. Even in the gathering dusk there was no mistaking that flash of action. My heart was somewhere around my tonsils, pounding hard. Dick whispered, none too softly, "Omagod, two yanks on the lure line and there's a falcon!"

The falcon made a few passes at the lure pigeon, which by this time we had pulled to the center of the bow-net. The falcon plopped down on the ground beside the bow-net and, in that curiously awkward lope many birds have when trying to walk, it half-hopped over to and clunked onto the pigeon. It stood motionless for a second looking warily at Dick and me. We had not yet put up the burlap hide and were in full view in the doorway of the hut. Then the falcon lowered its head to dispatch the pigeon and I pulled the bow-net line with all my might. The metal hoop whipped over completing the circle; our first gyrfalcon was beating furiously to get out of the net. We sprinted from the hut, gingerly took the falcon from the net, and collapsed on the ground shaky with excitement. "Pretty slick system, this. Not bad for a trial run," said Dick.

In the failing light we photographed our first catch, which turned out to be a male. We weighed him, took wing measurements, then placed an aluminum band (Zoological Museum, Copenhagen nr. 359451) over his leg and launched him up into the darkening sky. Gyrfalcons cannot be exported from Greenland--dead or alive--so this trip was for the sake of science.

I must admit feeling rather spunky as we cooked up our supper that night. A visitor happening upon that lonely spot would have heard, even above the roar of the primus, some mighty raucous storytelling. We tried to dispel the dark with a line-up of candles and a kerosene lantern, but it was the usual first-night camping confusion. We finally got sorted out and crawled, shivering, into our sleeping bags. Up before dawn tomorrow.

Getting up in the morning has never been much of a problem for me. (Oh, ho! mumbles the typist, risking demotion.) Cold-weather camping, however, changes things a bit. One of the most miserable experiences must be getting out of a nice, warm sleeping bag into the frosty darkness of a northern morning.

By 0530 the depressing thoughts of early morning had been dispelled by a steaming mug of coffee. I was ready for the day; so, it seemed, was the sun as it made its first hesitating presence known behind the distant hills.

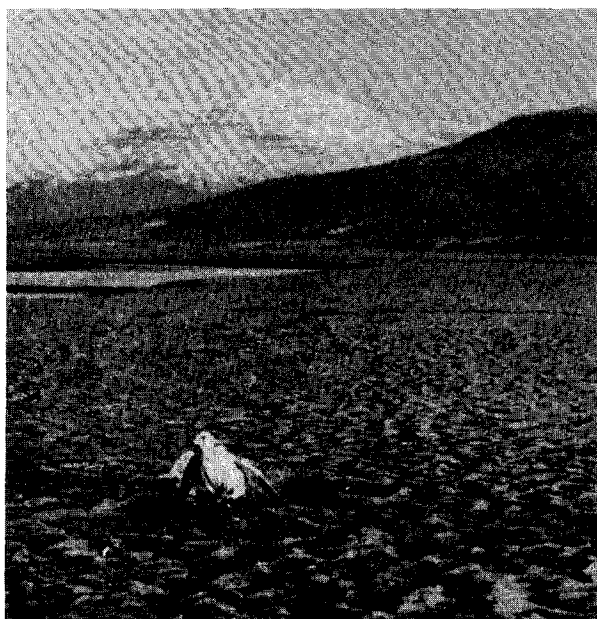
To the bow-net rig we had added another trapping method, the dho-gazza. The dho-gazza, which came from India, is a 5 by 7 foot net held vertical between two poles. It is normally used after one sees a falcon perching; it is then set up, net facing falcon, with a lure bird near the net. As the falcon zooms in after the bait, it hits the net, the poles collapse and the falcon is enmeshed. I use the dho-gazza with a bow-net rig to provide an alternative trapping possibility if the falcon is spooky of the bow-net. It also provides additional protection for the bow-net pigeon.

Just before six o'clock we began pulling the line to flap the lure pigeon into the air. We gave it several tosses and let it drop to the ground. I expected any moment to hear a whoosh like a small jet, see the blur of white, and feel that strange pang of excitement which comes with falcon trapping. After a moment, I turned to Dick in disgust, but in that split second I missed the flash of white streaking by, but did manage to hear the whoosh. We were in business again.

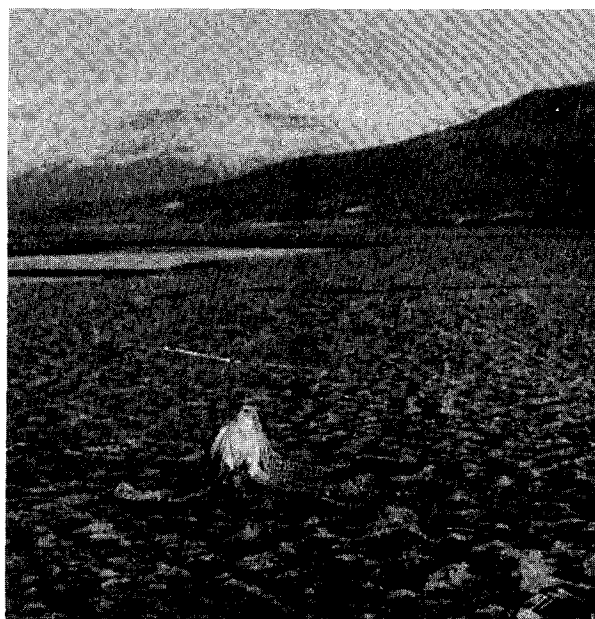
So hectic was that first day's trapping that we barely had time for meals. If we were keeping the falcons to train, it would have been easier. Instead we were banding and releasing them after weighing and measuring the bird and taking a set of standard photographs. To weigh the birds and to take the photographs of plumage, we had to outfit each falcon with the equipment used on trained falcons: a leather strip (jess) on each leg, swivel, leash, and hood. The hood quiets the falcon immediately and enables the bird to be handled without it



A falcon approaching the bow-net



In the bow-net



Caught

becoming upset. After the weights, measurements, and photographs had been taken, the falcon was banded and the leash, swivel, and jesses removed. Then, with movie camera whirring, the falcon was released into the air. The whole operation usually took close to an hour.

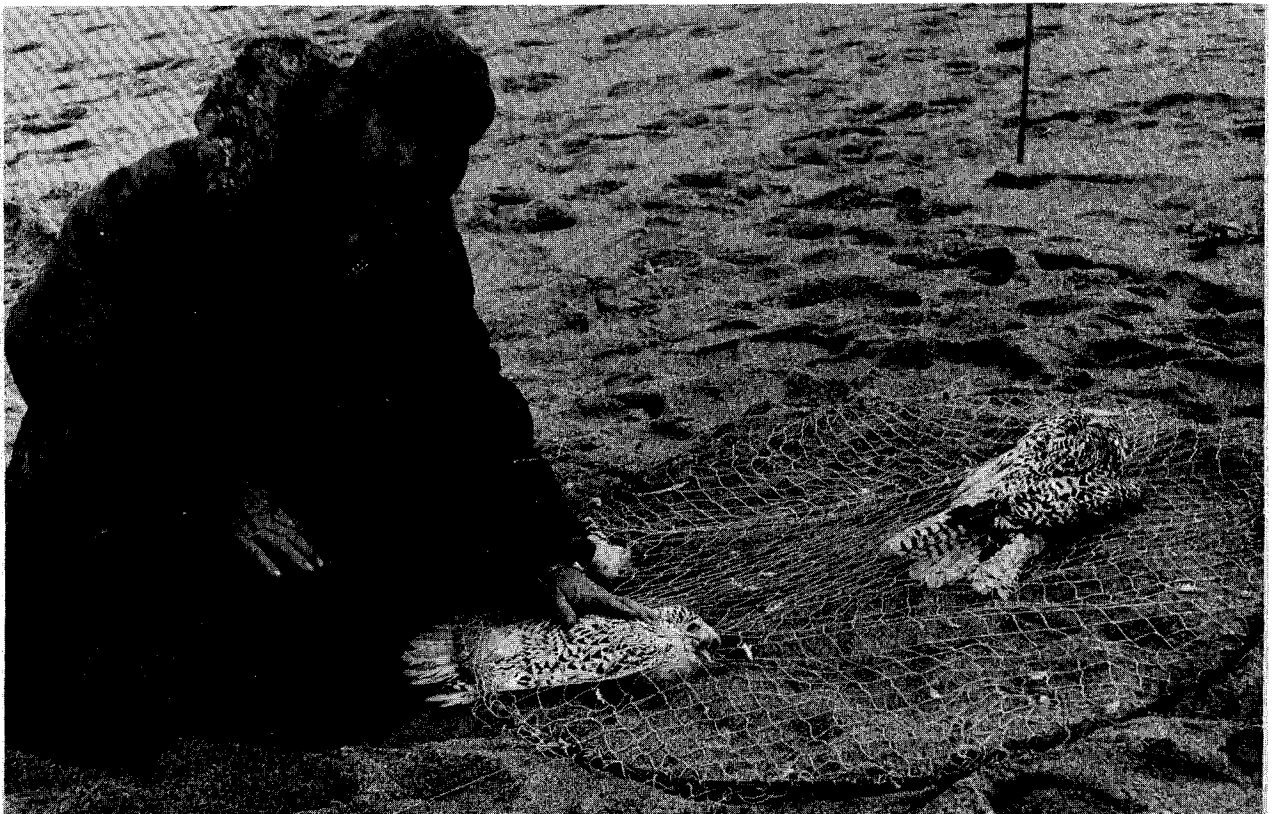
The photographs on pages 4, 6, and 7 give a good idea of the whole process. The photograph on page 4 was taken from inside the hut. A white falcon is just landing in the bow-net, which is propped up slightly by a wine bottle found nearby. The two bamboo poles support the dho-gazza; we caught only one falcon in the dho-gazza, but we learned the reason and it will be changed for the next effort.

"Whitey" puts in her daily appearance at the bow-net



The four small photographs on page 6 show in sequence a gyrfalcon approaching the bow-net (1 and 2), landing in the setup (3), and the moment after the net has been pulled over (4).

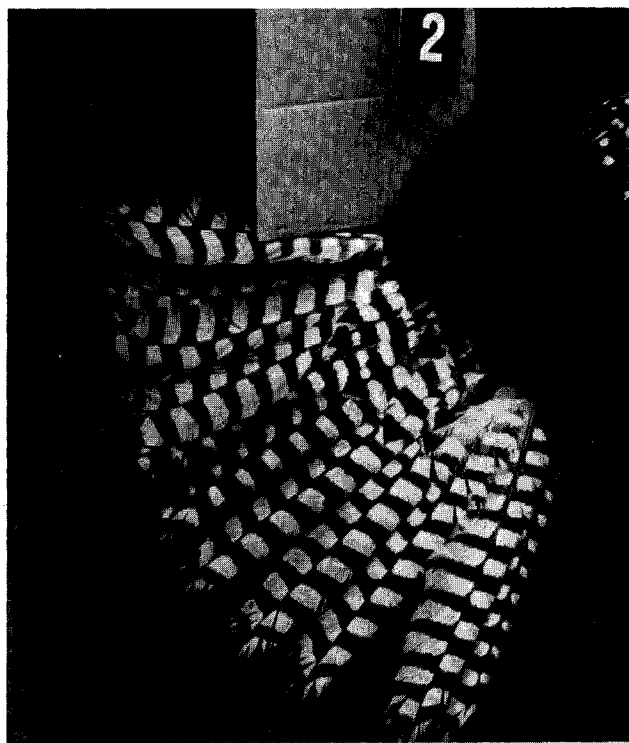
The picture on page 7 shows WGM taking a white bird out of the bow-net. This falcon became our part-time mascot and movie actress. She was trapped ten times in all: six times in the bow-net, twice by lasso, once in a pull-in, and once by snares. So bothersome did "Whitey" (as we named her) become that several times she spoiled our chances of trapping new falcons. She remained in the vicinity of our camp during our entire stay. Thinking back on it now, perhaps we should have kept her in the hut until it was time to leave, but we didn't want her to get any ideas about coming south with us since that would have been illegal. We eventually took to feeding her a meal so she would not be hungry and attempt to raid our traps for a day or so.



A rare occurrence in trapping: two falcons at once



A final mug shot



Tail feather pattern



1 - 2 - 3...



Release

Our bow-net was so efficient that on one occasion we trapped two gyrs at once (photo p. 8). So far as I know, this is unique--at least I have never heard of it happening before.

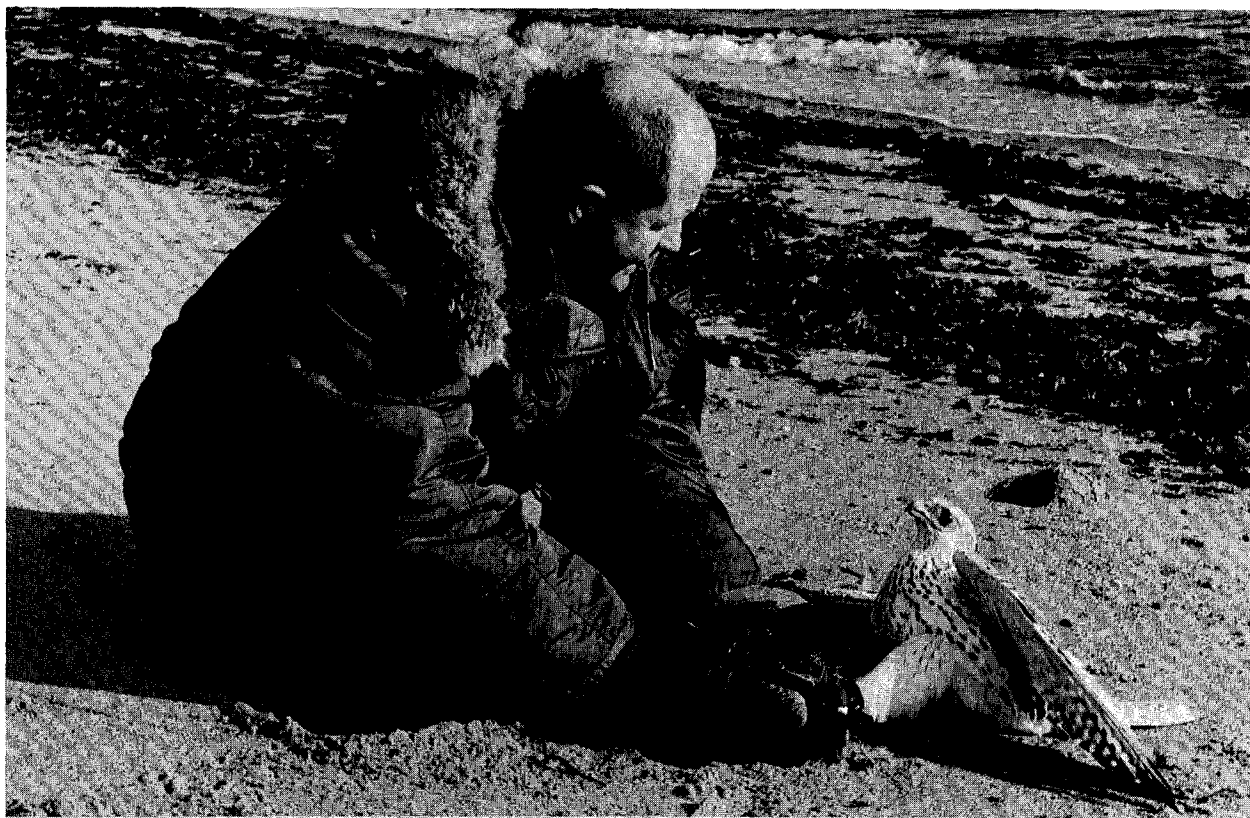
During that first day of trapping, a damp fog drifted in and it began to drizzle rain. Our makeshift roof began to show its imperfections as the rain increased, so we were forced to take out several hours for general repairs and cleanup. Even so, we trapped and banded five different falcons, and retrapped three birds we had banded earlier: the first falcon of the trip, caught the previous evening, came back for another try, "Whitey" started her act and had another go, and falcon number 2 (p. 9) was also retaken, this time on snares.

The noose harness (known as snares, or snare jacket to most falconers) is an ancient trapping method, but one which was recently "re-discovered" in the eastern United States. The noose harness is believed to be of Arab origin, but whereas the Arabs use horsehair nooses on a woven cloth jacket, we use nylon tied into a leather jacket into which the pigeon is laced. The pigeon has complete freedom of movement and is, at the same time, protected by the strong leather. This is a mobile trapping method, used by the falconer as he walks cross-country. The pigeon and jacket are attached to a long line; the falconer occasionally gives the pigeon a toss into the air. If a hungry falcon is in the vicinity, it will come in to catch the pigeon and, hopefully, get itself caught in one of the many nylon nooses on the harness.

The photos opposite show falcon number 9 being caught on snares (by a toe on her right foot). Number 9 falcon was a beauty and also surprisingly tame and well-mannered. So tame was she, we were able to take all of her measurements unhooded. She sat on the scales outdoors (photo p. 12), posed for pictures, and ate a good meal from the gloved fist within an hour of being trapped. She was a typical first-year, white Greenland gyrfalcon--a real beauty (photo p. 13).

As the days progressed, we trapped and banded more new falcons, but we were bothered a bit by "Whitey" and her gang so that we took only 13 different falcons, but 17 times we re-trapped birds we had already banded. Later on we trapped and banded a tiercel further south in Greenland. This gave us a total of 14 birds banded, 17 re-trapped, for a grand total of 31 falcons caught. Ten falcons were females, four males. Ten out of the fourteen were what we call "white" gyrfalcons or of the lightest color phase; four were darker. The photos on page 14 show the darkest bird taken.

Toward the end of our stay we trapped fewer new birds and more "retakes". The gyrfalcons were obviously not migrating past our hut too rapidly. We decided then to take daily walks into the surrounding country with snares and two other methods: the lasso and the pull-in (or cover-up).



Number 9 falcon snared (top) on nylon noose which is removed (bottom)

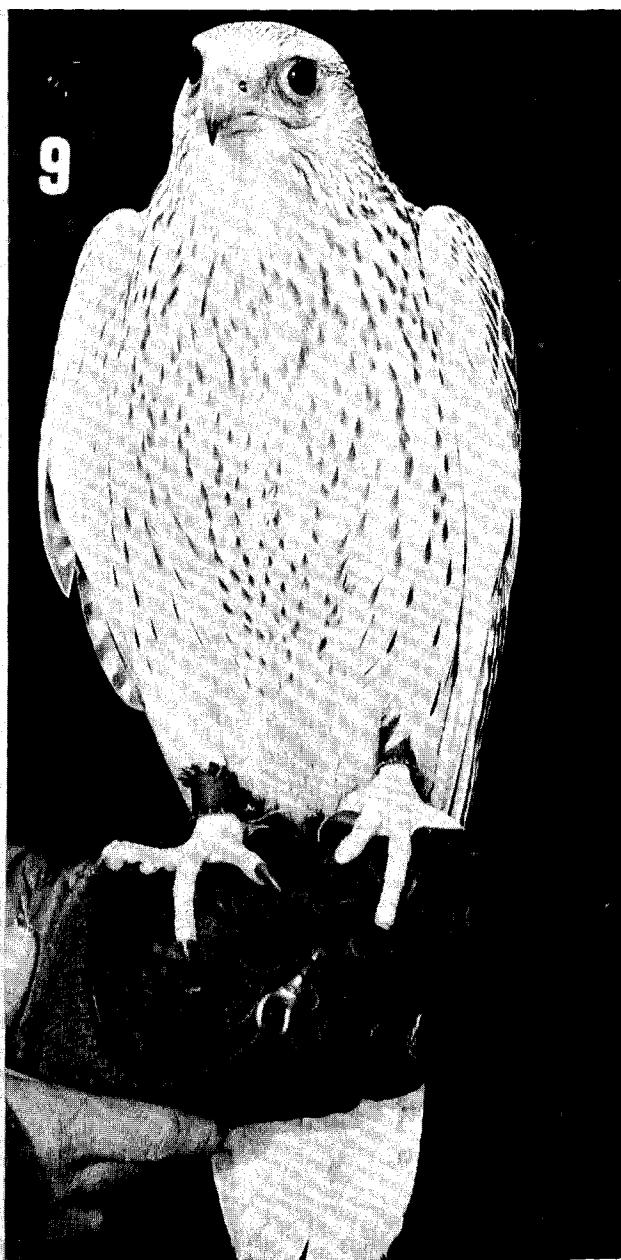
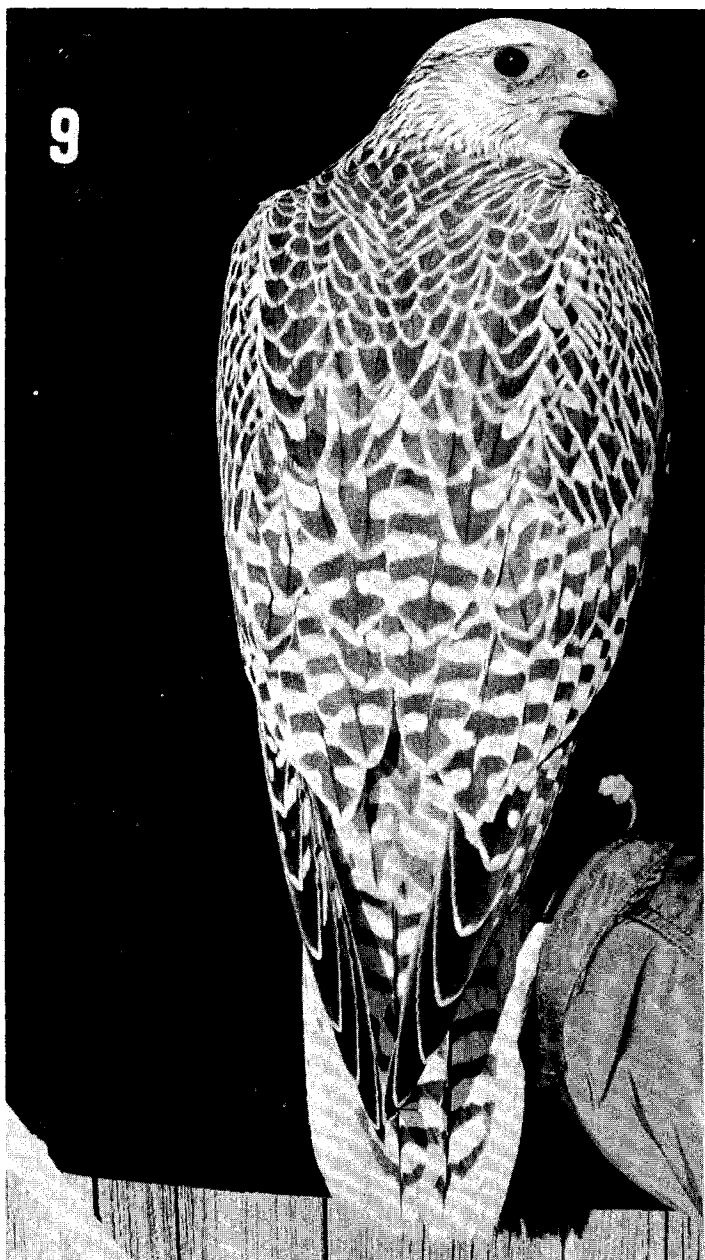




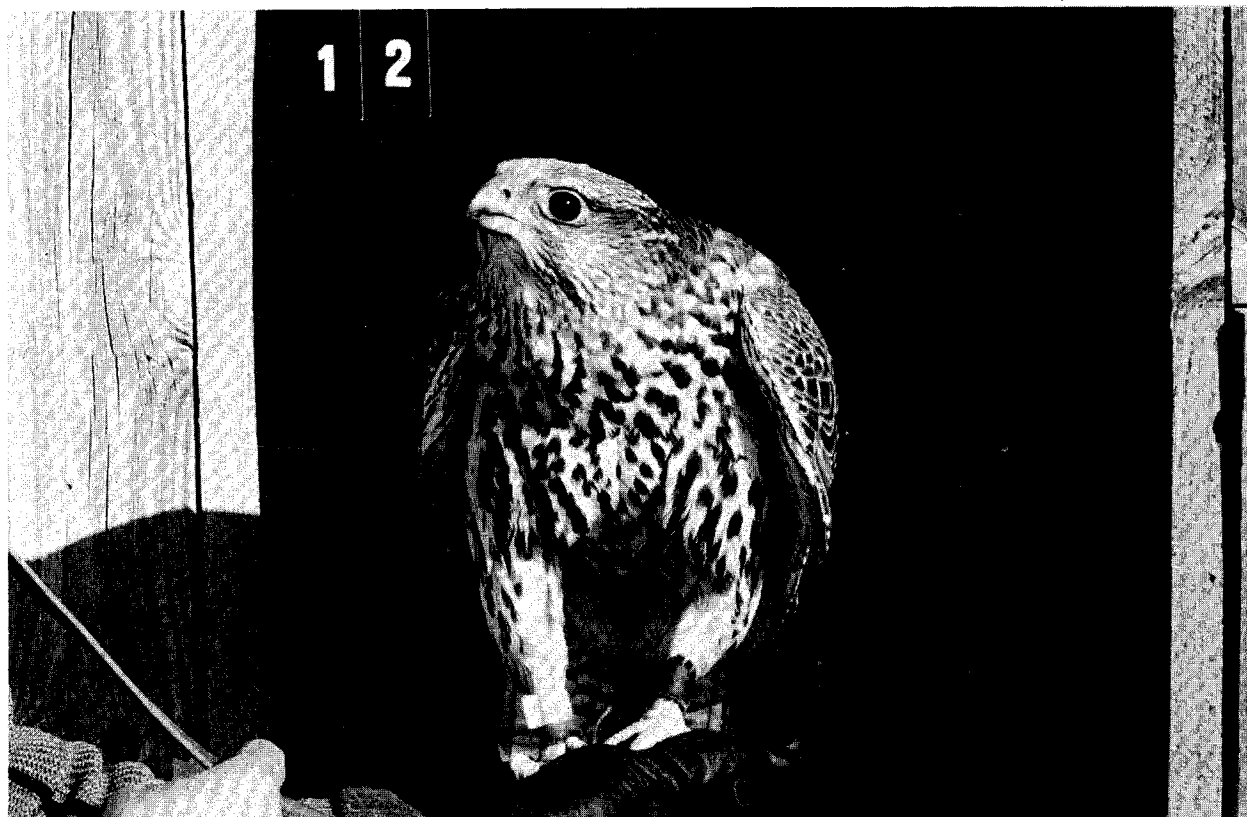
Dick Graham weighing number 9 falcon

Lassoing a falcon is nothing out of the Wild West. If a falcon is seen on a kill, it is chased off and a light line, made into a noose, is placed in a circle around the dead bird. The trapper then retires to a discreet distance. The falcon often will return to a kill; if this happens, the line is yanked quickly, the noose is drawn up tight, and, hopefully, the falcon is caught by the legs.

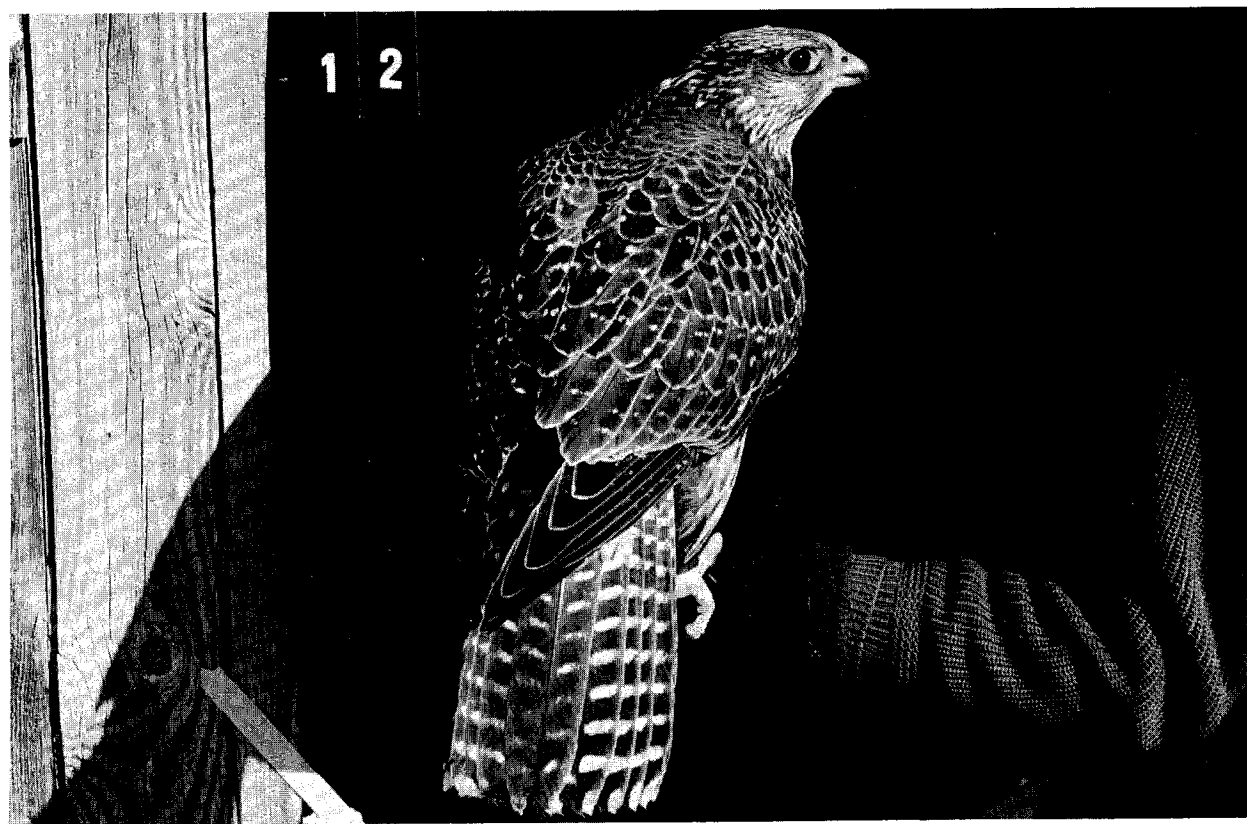
The pull-in (cover-up) is a modification of another trapping method from the East. It is the most exciting trapping method. The unmodified version, called a "dig-in", is used in our falcon-trapping areas of North America. Greenland is too rocky and the ground there is often frozen so that the method must be adapted for arctic trapping. The dig-in method involves bringing the falcon into the area with a throw-out pigeon. After the falcon has taken the pigeon, a shallow trench is dug in the ground (or beach). The trapper sits in this trench and is covered up to his nostrils (or has a burlap bag or basket over his head) with dirt or sand and left on his own. The trapper has another pigeon on a short line. When everything is set, the second trapper goes to scare the falcon off her kill. The falcon, done out of a meal, sees the other pigeon and comes in to continue the feed. The



Number 9 falcon - front and back portraits



A gyrfalcon of the gray phase, the darkest bird trapped





WGM banding "Whitey" at the bow-net

trapper hidden in the ground then slowly pulls in the bait until the falcon with its meal are sitting in his hands. Then (gently, gently), with trembling fingers, the falcon is grabbed by the legs and another bird is caught. I would imagine that after this experience the falcon is in need of the local bird psychiatrist!

Our method in Greenland dispensed with the digging and burying. Dick, in his large Air Force parka, merely stretched out on his stomach on the ground and brought the falcon and bait into him. On occasion I would do the reeling in, while trying at the same time to film the catch. Then, after a foot signal, I would stop pulling and Dick would grab.

A summary of how the 31 trapped birds were taken shows 19 caught in the bow-net, 6 by snares, 3 by pull-in, 2 by lasso, and 1 in the dho-gazza. The one dho-gazza bird was, of course, "Whitey", who insisted on trying each method.

That is, in outline, how to trap a hawk. Because of a law, we were not able to take any falcons from Greenland. We feel this regulation is unfortunate, for we are convinced that many first-year gyrfalcons (as with other birds of prey) do not survive their first year. We were certain, for example, that "Whitey" would not make it through the winter. If even one half of the young falcons in Greenland survived, the island would soon be flowing with falcons. But a rather neat balance is maintained, which indicates high mortality the first year.

Our data from weights and measurements are being worked up for publication. We hope to gather more material in Greenland in the future. Despite the excitement of trapping falcons, it is at best a tedious business, with many hours of uncomfortable waiting. As we waited and trapped, the early winter of Greenland descended upon us. The temperature inside our hut was way below freezing at night. The salt-water lagoon behind our camp froze. The first snows of winter swirled about us and geese honked south in V-shaped squadrons.

Waiting, trapping, and waiting again. Yes, a tedious business. The tedium of trapping is quickly forgotten, however, when one has the chance, even only for a few minutes, to hold a white falcon on the fist once again.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Bill Mattox".

W. G. Mattox

Received in New York March 12, 1968.