

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WGM-28
Falcons and Me - VI
A-birding We Will Go

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"I do invite you to-morrow morn-
ing to my house to breakfast;
after, we'll a-birding together.
I have a fine hawk for the bush."

(W. Shakespeare, The Merry Wives
of Windsor, III, iii.)

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Dear Dick,

My last newsletter on falconry (WGM-27) barely got into the bread-and-butter aspect of the sport: trained falcons as hunters. The trapping and taming of falcons, making suitable equipment, and providing proper housing for them are all towards one end. Falconry's aim is the hunting of game species. The picture changes a bit when this final stage of falconry is attained. The falconer himself is all-important in the initial stages. The skills he possesses in trapping and taming are vital, to say the least. But once his tame falcon is ready to resume hunting after being reclaimed from the wild, the falconer himself takes a back seat. In fact, he is relegated to the role of an observer (not a neutral one, to be sure!) for it is really the falcon who does the hunting.

The falconer must decide what game birds or animals he will attempt to catch with his falcon. The local game prized by the falconer is often different from what the falcon would normally be taking in the wild. Falcons will more readily hunt small birds than large, and slow-flying ones rather than the more swift game birds. Since the falconer is often aiming at game for his dinner table, he will dissuade his falcon from taking meadow larks and flickers or sea gulls and starlings. Pheasant, grouse, and ducks fill the larder requirements much better than the miscellany of other birds which are the falcon's normal fare.

Man, of course, has a natural hunting instinct. But what a ploy when a falconer casually mentions to his wife that the guests coming Saturday evening might like to have some pheasant for dinner. "I'd better take 'Blondie' over to that newly-cut field of soy

beans and scare up a few birds." Falconers' dreams are made of such stuff, but cold reality dictates another tale.

In point of fact, falconry is the least efficient means of hunting today and, as I said in my first falconry letter (WGM-15), if one is interested in meat for the table or taking the legal limit each day, falconry is not the way to do it. Conditions must be ideal to succeed in hunting with falcons. The flights most often remembered and recounted in falconers' bull-sessions are many times those which have ended unsuccessfully, when the falconer returned home empty-handed. The dashing speed and excitement of the chase, not its final result, is the magnet of falconry.

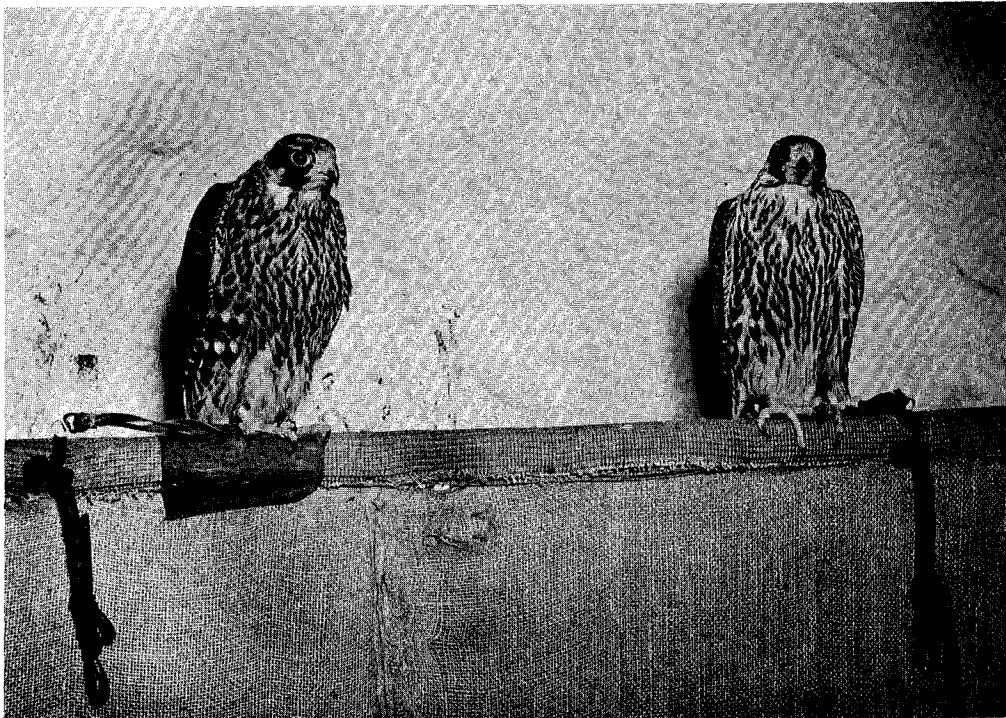
How does a falconer train his bird to hunt a particular game species? The falcon is "entered" (as falconers say) on pheasants, for example, by providing the newly-trained falcon with an easy pheasant to catch or merely by allowing the falcon to kill a pheasant at her perch. In this entering, the falcon quickly dispatches the pheasant with a twist of the beak. It is then allowed to eat a bit of the pheasant. If the falconer is interested in crow or magpie hawking, however, the entering is not so straightforward. Pheasant flesh is quite tasty to most falcons, but not all falcons would order crow from the menu if they had a choice. But in entering the falcon, it must first kill the prey which it is to take while out hunting--never mind what the crow tastes like. So the falconer contrives to obtain a crow which he lets the falcon kill. Then, in a subtle move, the falconer substitutes for the crow a tasty morsel of pigeon or starling. The falcon is thereby led to believe that crow is, after all, not really all that bad.

After being entered to a certain quarry, the falcon will not normally look at other game. The snag in this process is that if there is not much game about, the falcon will soon become discouraged. The falconer, in order to prevent his bird from wandering, will then have to provide something for the falcon to chase. This situation, which is the fate of many falconers in the more built-up areas of our country, usually results in the falconer either throwing out bagged-pigeons or flying his falcon to the lure. Many a promising game hawk has ended up chasing either barn pigeons or the artificial lure. But, if game is available, most falconers will try for that and not toss out bagged-pigeons.

What would be a typical day's outing with a pair of falcons? My repertoire of stories of successful hunting with falcons is limited, to say the least. Some falconers take an annual vacation to the wheat stubble lands of Saskatchewan where they fly their birds at Hungarian partridge. Others hunt the corn fields of Nebraska and Iowa. Many falconers must be content to seek out a variety of local game under terrain conditions far from ideal. I place myself in this last category. In the past 20 years I have lived in Philadelphia, New Hampshire, Norway, Sweden, Iceland, Germany, Montreal, Labrador, and Denmark. There must be an international law stating

that when a falconer has the time, he lives in unsuitable terrain with little game; and when he lives in an ideal place for hawking, he hardly has time to breathe. But we were beginning a typical day in falconry when truth broke in: a spring day in New Hampshire, years ago...

"Blackie" and "Blondie" are two female passage peregrine falcons, caught on the eastern coast of the United States during the autumn migration. They have been manned and entered to fly on both duck and pheasant. Blondie is a rather chunky, light-headed falcon. She has big feet; her flying weight is usually around 31 ounces. At 31.5 ounces she might seek out a tree to perch in if the day is warm. She is usually keen for hunting, but does not appear particularly swift and graceful in flight. Blackie is a bit lighter in weight and hunts best at about 28 ounces. She is a dark falcon, almost black. She has small feet, but uses them well (in fact, she likes to grab me in moments of displeasure). Blackie seems to prefer early-morning hunting. I have therefore been keeping her hooded at night to avoid broken feathers when she thrashes about on the screen perch at dawn each day.



(1-r) Blackie and Blondie in the hawk house

Both falcons were last flown on Wednesday. Thursday was a rainy day with strong, gusty winds. Friday was filled with lectures; preparing a special bulletin-board display for Professor Carlson prevented me from getting out on a hunting date Friday afternoon, so Saturday is the big day. On Wednesday, Blackie caught a barn pigeon; Blondie shared in the meal. Both birds seem to be getting on well with each other. Thursday noon, both birds cast up large oval pellets of pigeon feathers and bone. They fed on beef heart both Thursday and Friday.

Saturday morning I had a seminar. Both falcons appeared "keen" (hungry) when I went into the news early Saturday. When I untied her from the screen perch, I noticed that Blondie's "mutes" (excrement) appeared somewhat greenish, so I weighed her to see if she was down a bit. At 30.5 ounces, Blondie's weight was slightly lower than it should be. She stepped up on my glove, looked around near her feet, received a cube of meat, and then bobbed her head at a passing blue jay. As I walked out to the lawn with her on my fist she muted (luckily not on my shoe this time) and "roused", shaking her feathers vigorously. Then a series of rapid wing-flappings and another rouse. I tied her down to her block; she began taking in the local sights and sounds.

Blackie, still hooded from the night before, stepped up to my glove which I had eased around behind her legs. Out on the lawn I tied her to her block and unhooded her; she also roused vigorously.

It was a clear day. The falcons might as well bathe and be ready for flying when I get back from the seminar. Blondie bated towards me as soon as she saw the bath pan (an inverted trash can lid) I was carrying out to her block. Blondie had often headed for a local stream as soon as I cast her off my fist, and that meant a wasted day in the field as she sat in a tree to dry her feathers.

While I ate breakfast, Blondie splashed about in the bath. When I left for the geography department I put the pan near Blackie's block. The last glimpse of the lawn as I drove off showed Blondie sitting quite wet and bedraggled on her block, wings spread to the sun. Blackie, sitting in the shallow bath, was peering at something far up in the blue sky with her head tilted in a funny way. She was using one eye which, with its telescopic vision, could readily discern high-flying birds impossible for me to see.

When I later returned from the seminar, both falcons were sitting motionless on their blocks. Blondie sat with one foot tucked up. Blackie bated for the car as I drove in the driveway. I untied and hooded each bird in turn. Each jumped to my fist and gulped a morsel of meat. To save time in the field, I took off their leashes and swivels. I rolled the jess ends between my fingers to lessen the gap of the slit caused by the swivel. This would help to avoid a possible hang-up on a tree branch or fence.

Several barn pigeons were in their carrying case in the station wagon. The lures had fresh chicken heads clipped on. I say lures because one is not enough when two falcons are in the air at the same time. The day was cool, but the sun warm. Some of the fields were clear of snow; we should find good thermals above their dark surfaces. Falcons, liking the easy way, often seek out local thermals on which to ride as they circle up to "wait-on".

In the station wagon the falcons rode on a bar which spanned the width of the back seat. They sat loose, but hooded, for the short ride out to the flying field. For longer journeys some falcons like to lie down on a pillow; some even become car sick.

Not far from Hanover, north along the river, is a large field below Oak Hill where ski-buffs from Dartmouth find a slope handy to town. Arriving at the field, I was reminded of a day the previous December. Don Foote and I had been flying Blondie, hoping to get her to wait-on. All of a sudden she began climbing in earnest, at the same time drifting down the river valley. I knew right away that she had lost all interest in us--she paid no heed to the lure and whistle. Don took a lure and drove south along the river road, but Blondie had soon set her wings and tail, and was gradually spiraling ever higher on motionless wings. Soon she had drifted out of sight, heading south down the Connecticut river. Two dejected falconers returned to Hanover that afternoon; Blondie was gone. The sight of her empty block on the lawn sent a twinge of remorse through my body.

Three weeks later, near the end of that Christmas vacation, a businessman arrived in Philadelphia after having traveled from Pittsburgh by train. He was a friend of my father and had spent an evening at our home. After he had gone I found a newspaper which he left on the coffee table--a paper from a small mining town in the Alleghenies. A short article on page 1 caught my eye. The week before, the foreman at a local lumber yard saw a pigeon fly into the warehouse hotly pursued by a hawk. The pigeon darted out another window but the hawk landed on a rafter, quite confused.

The foreman pointed up at the hawk and had the shock of the hawk flying down to his outstretched arm. The man saw the two leather straps and brass bells on the hawk's legs. With commendable calm, the foreman slowly reached out and held the ends of the straps. The hawk was caught. The bird was shipped to the local game warden, who sent it to Pennsylvania Game zoo at Hershey.

As I read the short article, a pang of excitement coursed through my body. Could the hawk be Blondie? It seemed too much of a long shot. I phoned Hershey and was told that the bird was a peregrine, a protected bird in Pennsylvania. I explained my loss of Blondie, which had occurred in New Hampshire. Finally Corny McFadden phoned someone in Harrisburg and the way was cleared. I could have the hawk--

if she was mine. Blondie had no name tag on her jesses. But I did know my own bells, which were tied on with red leather "bewits".

At Hershey I was shown into a room where a brown bird sat on a perch in the corner. In a flash the hawk flew across to me. It was Blondie. But she was not quite the same bird. I shuddered at the stubs of wing and tail feathers, presumably broken during her shipment to Hershey in a box. The keeper was convinced that Blondie was mine as soon as she flew to my fist. And since I had described the bells with their red leather strips, the game warden handed Blondie over to me--almost with a sigh of relief.

Once back in Philadelphia we tried "imping" in new feathers, but the task was almost hopeless. All that following spring in Hanover, Blondie flew well, but it pained me to see her ragged feathers. Falconers pride themselves on keeping their birds in perfect feather. The whole story about getting Blondie back may sound incredible, but it is true. Blondie had migrated south, but had obviously chosen to winter where she found a rich supply of local pigeons.

Now driving out to the Oak Hill field, the falcons swaying to keep balance as I swerved around potholes in the road, I wondered what Blondie would be thinking as she went up to wait-on above me. Maybe the migration urge was over. If she did drift off and disappear, I knew where I would begin to look for her--400 miles south in the valley-and-ridge section of Pennsylvania!

Out at the field, I strapped on my hawking bag, which contained the lures and two live pigeons. Binoculars and a whistle hung about my neck. I had the falcons' swivels and leashes in my pocket. Blondie stepped up to my glove; I unhooded her. She gave a few glances around the field. She focused, with bobbing head, on something over by a copse of trees, roused, and launched into the air. I clipped her hood to my hawking bag. Blackie was then cast off into the air in the same way. Both birds flew low to the ground, made a few halfhearted passes at each other, and then began circling up into the air, bells tinkling as they climbed.

I am always leery about flying falcons near rivers. If, from their pride of place, falcons sight quarry near the river, they may chase and make a kill on the opposite side. Then it is necessary to drive pell-mell down to the nearest bridge, over the river, and up the other shore to locate the place where the falcon has caught.

The common belief that falcons return to the falconer with their kill is not true. In lure flying, the falcon is trained to sit on the ground with the prey it has caught. The falconer then has to locate his bird, and is aided in this by the two bells worn by the falcon. The falcon will often eat the head and neck of the prey, and, before breaking further into the prey, begin to pluck off

feathers. The falconer therefore has 10 or 15 minutes to find his bird after the kill. If the falcon has time to eat a good meal before being located by the falconer, she may be inclined to fly off at the falconer's approach. Well-trained birds, however, can be taken up with a full crop. Indeed I have had falcons attempt to fly towards me with their prey when I came into sight. Falcons remember well the early tidbit offerings of meat: they also feel more at home on the falconer's fist.

Although rivers can be risky areas for flying falcons, they have the advantage of being good game areas. Saturday afternoon was no exception. A few minutes after the falcons had attained a good height above the field, two ducks came whistling along, apparently oblivious to the two killers above them. One of the falcons immediately folded her wings and began a vertical dive or "stoop". A few seconds later the other falcon stooped. But they had been too high in the air. The ducks' speed forced the falcons into a longer and more shallow dive, which robbed them of speed. (A falcon's stoop has been estimated at between 150 and 200 m.p.h.) Blackie got in a good attempt at one duck but, after missing on the first dive, had no further chance.

When the ducks came whipping by, I had mixed emotions. They were actually out of season, and my purpose in flying the birds that day was to give them exercise. Falcons have difficulty understanding the game laws, however, and will give a try regardless of season. If falconers were a more powerful group, they might be able to get their own hunting season as bow-and-arrow hunters have. To take a falcon out during the regular hunting season is courting trouble. When shotgun hunters are not blasting each other full of buckshot, they are more than anxious to let fly at most anything that is in the air, especially a hawk. For this reason most falconers refuse to fly their birds at all during the hunting season.

Anyway, the ducks were long gone; Blackie was cruising about near a farm at one end of the field while Blondie was beginning to climb once again into the blue. Soon Blackie joined her. In a few minutes the falcons were waiting-on above me once again. Rather than lure-fly them I decided to toss out a pigeon I had recently caught in a midnight raid in a local barn. The pigeon dodged Blackie's stoop, but had not planned on another falcon. Blondie waffled the pigeon after a long vertical dive. Both birds were sitting on the pigeon before the last feather had drifted to earth.

I was glad to see that the falcons were content to share the pigeon. When two falcons will eat from the same prey, they will not waste energy by crabbing while in the air. Eventually they would become a good team. I swiveled Blondie and tied her leash to my hawking bag on the ground. During this process she gave me an occasional glance, but continued eating with gusto. I then took up Blackie and let her eat a good crop of chicken head from my glove.



The daily meal, after lure-flying near
Hanover, New Hampshire

She finished quickly, cleaned her beak on my glove, roused, and closed one of her protective eyelids as I hooded her. After putting Blackie on the rack in the car, I took Blondie up on the fist, hooded her, and also placed her on the rack. Hawking was over for the day.

A final little episode illustrates another facet of game-hawking. Corny McFadden and I were hunting over some rolling fields in western New Jersey one day in 1951 following our return from Greenland. Corny had two white gyrs and, in addition, we took along Bob Jordan's grey gyr to give it some exercise.

One of the white birds missed a duck after a long vertical dive; the gyr pulled out of the stoop and flew after the duck in hot pursuit. The chase was soon out of sight. We waited for ten minutes or so, because after an unsuccessful chase, the falcon will usually return. But no white gyr appeared. We then began searching the fields in the direction the duck and falcon seemed to be heading. After an hour we had not found the falcon despite imagining we heard bells every few minutes.

The day waned, and in the frosty dusk we returned to our car. We rolled out the ever-present sleeping bags in a field, cooked a pot of soup, and sat around glumly until it was time for sleep. Corny recounted how the lost bird had been caught up in Greenland. Since we were not flying over our regular fields near Philadelphia, we knew the gyr would have little familiarity with the terrain and could not be expected to remain in the area for long. The last thing I heard before drowsiness took over was the tinkling of bells, but perhaps that came from the birds in the station wagon.

As with the night before, I heard bells the next morning. Poking my head out of the sleeping bag, I noticed the ground was covered with frost. The sun was already warming the upper treetops of the hedgerow nearby. The sky was deep blue. Suddenly I heard bells again. As sleep finally drained away, I nudged Corny's sleeping bag. The lost gyr was waiting-on directly above us. The sun's reflection on her white feathers, together with the deep blue of the sky, were the most beautiful (and welcome) sight in the world.

Corny tossed the lure between our sleeping bags and the gyr swooped in for her breakfast. She sat looking at us for a few seconds, as if to say she was glad to be back and sorry for the night out. Then she rocked her head in a few gentle movements, and opened her beak wide. Out popped a casting of feathers and bone. She then roused once and began feeding on the lure. There were duck feathers in the casting.

Sincerely,

Bill Mattox

W. G. Mattox

Received in New York August 26, 1968.

A glossary of falconry terms used in WGM-27 and 28.

hood	- a light-tight leather cap fitting over the falcon's head
jesses	- thin strips of leather attached one to each leg of the falcon
swivel	- a metal link (composed of two free-swinging rings) attached to the jess ends when the falcon is not flying
leash	- a leather thong passed through one end of the swivel and used to tie the falcon to a perch
block	- a perch, usually of wood or stone, on which a falcon is placed outdoors
bate	- the action of a falcon trying to fly off while still being retained by the jesses on the falconer's gauntlet, or by the leash and swivel while on the block
weather	- a falcon perching outdoors on a block before flying is said to be weathering
lure	- an artificial bird used to exercise the falcon or to call the falcon to the falconer
creance	- a light line used during the first day or two before a falcon flies free for the first time
keen	- an adjective describing a hungry falcon
stoop	- the vertical dive of a falcon. Also used as a verb, to dive
wait-on	- the circling of a falcon above the falconer or his dog after the falcon has attained a good hunting height above the ground
to gorge	- to eat a full meal or full crop
hawk house	- the mews, or room where falcons are sheltered

- reclaim - to change a falcon from the wild to a tamed state through training
- to enter - training a falcon to one particular game species
- quarry - the game hunted with falcons
- screen perch - an indoor perch on which hawks sit at night. A new development, the rundreck (round rack) may eventually replace the screen perch.
- casting - an oval pellet composed of indigestible feathers and bone matter, regurgitated by the falcon about 16 hours after eating
- to mute - when a falcon passes excrement; same action by a short-winged hawk is termed a "slice"
- to rouse - when a falcon puffs out all feathers and shakes them in a violent motion
- bewit - a leather or plastic strip used to tie a bell to the falcon's ankle
- to imp - to attach new feathers to the original stubs by using a wooden or metal needle and possibly glue
- pride of place - the highest pitch attained by a falcon while waiting-on above a falconer

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