

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Falcons and Me - I
The Beginning

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Dear Dick,

While feeding up my falcon late this afternoon after flying him to the lure for exercise, I got into conversation with the tenant farmer who lets me use his fields for hawking. He asked me the usual questions about falconry and how to train birds of prey for hunting. He had often seen my tiercel (male) prairie falcon zooming over his land and was amazed at his speed and obedience.

The farmer told me that he seldom sees hawks in the area any more. He thought that most had been shot, despite almost total protection of birds of prey in Denmark. After talking with the farmer, I decided to begin writing occasional newsletters about my hawking activities. His interest was one more indication of the fascination which falconry has for many people. Also, and more important, the farmer's keen observation of a decline in raptors is all too true today--a part of the late Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" come true. Perhaps a few words on this subject would help point out that our headlong dash into the indiscriminate use of chemical pesticides is fraught with grim overtones.

I must admit some reluctance in taking up a discussion of falconry, a hobby of mine for many years. As a hobby and a source of great enjoyment, falconry is for me a rather personal pleasure, not easily described. I shall probably find it difficult to portray accurately the thrill of watching a falcon hurtling across the skies. The trapping, training, and hunting with hawks is also beset with possibilities for misunderstanding. But I am convinced that the charges of cruelty, often heard by falconers today, are groundless in most cases.

So it is with some hesitation that I begin to write about one of my pastimes. But it is important to portray falconry as an example of how some people, albeit few, spend their leisure time. Everyone knows how important leisure time has become and will be in the future. Although I have not personally discovered where all this leisure time people keep talking about is hiding, I do know that the free time at my disposal is filled with something which gives me enjoyment and satisfaction. Falconry is not everyone's cup of tea, and indeed cannot tolerate popularization (hence, part of my reluctance in writing about it at all), so that what I write should not be taken as encouragement for others to take up the sport. But having for



WGM and Greenland gyrfalcon - 1955

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so long received joy from this healthy, harmless, and challenging hobby, I feel some responsibility to describe it for others as a small return for all the fun I've had through the years.

If any falconers happen to read these newsletters, I hope they will bear with me--for falconers are a peculiar lot (my mother says that it isn't necessary to be crazy to be a falconer, but it helps), and rather prone to hasty castigation and backbiting. My casual discourses, of course not aimed for falconers' digestion, will cover falconry as a sport and how it works--from trapping through training, and finally an attempt to spotlight the catastrophic population drop in some of our hawks, with probable causes.

The farmer asked me today where it all began--falconry itself as well as my interest in it. The history of falconry had best be left for another time. My interest in the sport dates back to teen-age days in the early 1940's. For a long time I had a keen interest in birds, with a particular fascination for birds of prey. I cannot say how falcons and hawks first captured my attention. As a youngster, I could not possibly have recognized that they were among the most highly-developed of our animals. But highly-specialized they are, and I think that most people, given the chance, would quickly recognize with admiration the beauty, power, and grace of our hawks and eagles in action. One day I saw a Cooper's hawk catch a flicker. To me this was not something cruel. Rather I felt a dim recognition, although amateurish and unexplainable, that here was nature at work, killing to live, the struggle to survive. I had often heard about good hawks and bad hawks, but I soon came to realize that "good" or "bad" were meaningless words bandied about by Man. Moreover, almost all hawks were labeled "bad" and persecuted relentlessly. In time, even the "good" hawks would suffer this fate.

Anyway I became fascinated with hawks and falcons and eagles. I was aware that they had been used by people for hunting in the distant past and the whole idea seemed terribly romantic to my

Miniver Cheevyish mind...in days of olde, etc. I suppose that the way most people get involved in falconry is through interest in both hawks and hunting--and finally a combination of the two. But I must admit that hunting has never held much fascination for me, probably because I have never discovered the joy of killing other animals as it is accomplished with such efficiency today.

I once had an air rifle which I was able to use with deadly accuracy. After dropping a blackbird with a shot through the head one day, I was left with an empty, sick feeling. Here was a meaningless act; no order, no reason, no thrill. After a time I took up archery and became engrossed in the challenge of its difficult demands. About that time I met a man, an acquaintance of one of my father's business colleagues. This man actually trained falcons for hunting--a falconer! I was then, in a way, apprenticed to this man, a great, hulking character of some 280 pounds standing, as he was fond of saying, 5 feet 18 and a half in his stocking feet. And thus I came into close contact (eyeball-to-eyeball, so to speak) with falcons and hawks, saw them every day during vacations plus weekends, and began helping to train them. I was, as a young assistant, allowed to walk with a hawk upon my fist--for so is the wild bird tamed (or manned, as falconers say). Gradually even I could see the point of hunting with these birds. At the same time, my initial romantic notions were badly shaken by the patience and hard work this sport demanded.

Probably it was our lack of luck in hunting--for conditions must be ideal to succeed in falconry--that encouraged me at first. For here was a natural contest: a trained bird vs. its natural prey. In this contest I saw none of the distasteful aspects of blasting about the countryside with rifle and shotgun. Here was no question of wounded game crawling off into the brush to die a lingering death, but rather a pitting of two natural adversaries, the hunter and the hunted on their own terms and in their own environment. I saw right away that falcons often miss their quarry. The prey always had more than an even chance--indeed, if one is interested in filling the larder or taking the legal limit each day, falconry is not the way to do it! But when the quarry was struck, that was it--no winging, no lingering death. The big point was the challenge of training a falcon, plus my natural interest in birds of prey. And so the bond was forged, and let me say that once falconry is in your blood, for better or for worse, it is there to stay.

But I would hasten to add that a penthouse-dweller in New York City with no time to get out of town, or a businessman with no opportunity to fly his hawks each day, must of necessity forego this hobby until he is better situated--or else he becomes a pet-keeper, the anathema of all falconers. For here we get to the big division: the "hawkers" and the "talkers", the former dedicated in silence to his love of the sport, the latter seeking to impress and, by talk, to fill the void created by the frustrations and failures which are a part of falconry. The hawker flies his birds regularly and puts their welfare above all else; he goes about his business with as little show as possible, not wanting to call attention to a sport he knows most people are unsuited to pursue. He is keenly involved in studying birds of

prey and their natural habits, for only in this way can he succeed. And he must protect hawks from the slings and arrows of misinformed outdoorsmen, or else the basis for his pleasure (as is happening today) dwindles away. The talkers, on the other hand, go about everything with show, write popular magazine articles, deal in falcons for profit, and, in short, care not a whit for the morrow. They must have a hawk at all times and at any cost, even to the hawk itself. The falcon in such cases might as well be a budgie bird, for it is doomed to nothing but a sedentary life of sitting in the back garden, a tragic fate for one who joys in daily ringing flight.

My prairie falcon is the first hawk I have had in 11 years. In 1956 came two years with Uncle Sam, followed by two years of city living in Montreal, plus four years in the wilds of sub-Arctic Labrador where I had no facilities for hawking. Now I have a tiercel (the male, so named from the Latin because in birds of prey it is 1/3 smaller in size than the female) prairie falcon.

My adventures with him will form the basis for occasional newsletters in the future. But the next will look at falconry's rich history, and the various birds trained for hunting. I'll also spend some few words on how falcons are trapped and trained--as much as can easily be put down in writing.

Now that I think about it a bit more, perhaps it all started in a high school English class when we learned the lines from "The Eagle" by Tennyson:

"He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ring'd with the azure world he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
He watches from the mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls."

It is late and I must be off to bed. My tiercel is still awake, for I hear the tinkling of his bells in the mews. Tomorrow is Saturday and we shall wander a bit farther afield from our usual hawking place. The mild Danish winter this year is already losing its tenuous grip; the warm days of spring promise good flying.

Sincerely,

Bill Mattox

W. G. Mattox

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