

The HOME FORUM

# Flying with falcons

For thousands of years, humans have worked to win the trust of wild birds of prey.

**T**EN-YEAR-OLD Walter Funke and his father, Don, set up their cage trap in the snow in a field near Ithaca, N.Y. Then they sat in their car to wait for a hawk to get curious enough about the meat it held to fly into the trap (the trap doesn't hurt the hawk). A lot of red-tailed hawks hang out in the area, and the increasingly bad weather meant the hawks were likely to be hungry. That would make them more curious. Finally, Walter and Don's patience paid off.

Don had recently passed the test to become an apprentice falconer, and this newly trapped male red-tailed hawk (named Fletch) is his first bird. Don will probably fly Fletch for a couple of seasons and then release him back into the wild. Don's sponsor has been a master falconer for 30 years. He will guide Don along the way and monitor his progress with the bird.

Falconry is thousands of years old, but it's fairly new to America. It's rare to read an account of anyone flying a bird of prey here before the 1930s. Falconry clubs began to form in the 1950s, and the sport became highly regulated by the federal government in the 1970s. Today there are about 4,000 master falconers in the United States and several thousand more general and apprentice falconers.



ADAM BUTLER/AP/FILE

**TRIBAL TRADITION:** A member of the al-Azmi Bedouin tribe in Kuwait holds onto his hunting falcon (a saker, perhaps) at a camp near Kuwait's northeastern border with Iraq. Falconry has been an integral part of this desert tribe's culture for centuries.

So-called "Renaissance fairs" and bird-of-prey shows whet the public appetite for falconry. They also provide opportunities for falconers to earn a living doing what they love to do. When one sees a peregrine falcon soaring through the air, one can easily conjure up scenes we've read about in books: Medieval lords and ladies riding, holding hooded falcons on gloved fists. Or an Arab sheik, clad in flowing robes, surveying the desert sands with his hunting falcon perched on his wrist.

Falconry is considered a sport and – according to most falconers – a way of life.

Ultimately, falconry is a finely tuned relationship between a human and a wild bird of prey (also called a raptor). Falconers may "fly" eagles, owls, hawks, or falcons. The bird comes to rely on the falconer as a source of food. You can watch a peregrine falcon "waiting on" (flying in high, tight circles over) a falconer. The falcon is waiting for the falconer to flush out game.

The falconer, on his or her part, becomes an expert on the natural history of the places chosen to fly the bird, the bird's quirks, and training techniques. Training requires a gentle hand and a high level of trust.

"Prepare for a major commitment," says Jason Smyth when asked what advice he'd offer a would-be falconer. Mr. Smyth is an 18-year-old falconer from St. Louis. "Falconry is not for everyone, and it is not for anyone who is not willing to take a major portion of his time and donate it to the cause."

**A**FTER Jason passed his state falconry exam last year, he trapped a red-tailed hawk. He's now flying Aquila for his second season. But as Jason found out, the time commitment is enormous. He spent many hours a day providing for Aquila's basic needs in those first few weeks after he trapped him. He had to work hard to persuade the bird that he did not intend to hurt him.

Many people discover falconry first in books. In "My Side of the Mountain" (1959) by Jean Craighead George, young Sam Gribble runs away to the Catskill Mountains of upstate New York. There he

sets up house in a huge hollowed-out tree, with his peregrine falcon, Frightful, and a weasel for companions. Ms. George's book greatly influenced Jason, who decided to become a falconer after reading it. (Ms. George's brothers, in fact, were some of the first falconers in the United States.)

Maryanne Coody, a 17-year-old falconer from Campbell, Texas, became interested in falconry at 10. "I love to read and had come across falconry in 'The Flight of the Dragon Kyn' [1993] by Susan Fletcher," she says. "I knew I wanted a bird to sit on my fist and to come back when I called him." Today Maryanne has a red-tailed hawk named Grimmerath, or Grim for short. "We're both still learning," Maryanne says.

"But we both have high hopes for this year and the ones to come."

It's a long and difficult process to become a falconer.

In addition to the federal regulations, each state has its own guidelines. There are three levels of falconer: apprentice, general, and master. You must be at least 14 years old to be an apprentice, and you can't become an apprentice until you've passed your state's falconry exam, which includes questions about bird biology, laws, and falconry equipment and history. Then you must find a sponsor – a general or master falconer – to guide you and sign all the paperwork.

You must also build a suitable place to house your raptor and acquire the necessary equipment. The raptor's cage and your "furniture" (jesses, hoods, perches, etc.) will be inspected by a fish and game

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## A falconer's glossary

**MANY OF THESE** are from medieval times. Some have slipped into modern usage – though in slightly different form.

**BEWITS:** leather straps that hold bells to the bird's legs to help the falconer keep track of him in the field.

**CADGE:** a carrier for taking hawks into the field. In the Middle Ages, a cadge was hauled by a 'cadger' or 'codger' – a term still used today. Codgers were usually older men.

**EYAS:** a bird taken from a nest.

**FURNITURE:** falconry equipment, including hoods, jesses, and perches.

**HAGGARD:** any wild adult bird or wild-trapped adult bird. This may be the source of the expression 'old hag.'

**HOOD:** the leather cap that covers a bird's head. Birds are completely calm when

they're in darkness.

**JESSES:** short leather straps attached to a bird's legs. The falconer holds the jesses to keep the bird on his hand.

**LURE:** a stuffed leather pouch with a bit of meat attached that is swung on a line to call a bird back to the falconer.

**MEWS:** a flight chamber where a bird can fly loose.

**PASSAGE BIRD:** a first-year, wild-caught bird.

**STOOP:** a power dive by a falcon.

**TIERCEL:** originally a term for a male peregrine, now used for most male raptors (birds of prey). Male raptors are about one-third the size of females.

R.D.

## A brief history of 'hawking'

FALCONRY HAS EXISTED for several thousand years. Before firearms were invented, this was a way to catch flying birds for food. But falconry takes a lot of work, and there were easier ways to catch birds, so falconry became a sport for the rich instead. Asian falconers and their trained falcons moved westward along the Silk Road with other valued goods like salt and silk. They carried falconry into the heart of Europe.

Hawking (another word for falconry) had reached England by the 600s. The beautiful Bayeux Tapestry (woven to commemorate the Norman invasion of England in 1066) shows King Harold taking a trained falcon and hounds on his visit to William of Normandy in 1064. The language of falconry comes from Norman England. Words like *eyas*, *lure*, and *mews* (see glossary on facing page) come from Norman French. Even 'falcon' is French-based.

The earliest Western book on falconry was written in 1247 by Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, a crusader. When his book was translated into English in 1943, 'The Art of Falconry' brought the world of medieval falconry to curious Americans who took up the sport. Many of Frederick II's training

techniques are the same as those used by falconers today.

During the Middle Ages, according to 'The Boke [Book] of St. Albans' (1486), a rigid social code was applied to falconry in Western Europe. Nobility of certain ranks could fly certain birds. Only kings could fly a gyrfalcon, while knights hawked with sakers. Mary, Queen of Scots, was an avid falconer and flew a merlin even while imprisoned by her cousin, Elizabeth I. Yeomen flew the goshawk or hobby, which was said to be able to 'sufficiently stock a larder.'

Most nobles didn't train their birds themselves. Instead they hired falconers, and master falconers were paid extravagant sums of money. The office of master of the mews was created for the falconer in charge of obtaining, grooming, and keeping the king's best hawks in constant readiness for hunting. Falconry terms appear in art and literature – the works of Shakespeare is filled with images drawn from falconry.

The popularity of falconry declined in the 1800s, when firearms became readily available. Nobles became more interested in 'shooting parties' than in hunting with falcons.

R.D.

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representative from your state.

Finally, after you've paid various state and federal fees, you become a licensed falconer. Now you can trap a raptor, which in most states is a wild-caught first-year red-tailed hawk or kestrel.

You're eligible to become a general falconer if you're at least 18 and have been an apprentice for at least two years. You can obtain the title of master falconer only if you've been a general falconer for at least five years. It takes a minimum of seven years, then, to become a master falconer!

If you find you can't stop thinking about hawks and falcons, the North American Falconers Association's website ([www.n-a-f-a.org](http://www.n-a-f-a.org)) tells how to get started as a falconer. It also has a recommended reading list. NAFA urges would-

be falconers to meet other falconers to see

what they do and to become better acquainted with the sport. Many raptor rehabilitators (people who work with injured birds of prey) are falconers or employ falconers to exercise the birds. Find a raptor rehabilitator in your area and arrange to visit him or her. You may be able to volunteer to help care for the birds, which is useful experience.

Finally, you can visit one of the two falconry schools in the US: the Equinox Resort in Manchester, Vt., or the Greenbriar Resort, in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va. For a fee, you can fly a bird under the guidance of a master falconer.

"Falconry is very rewarding," says Jason Smyth, the St. Louis-based falconer, "if you take the time and effort to develop a relationship with one of God's most amazing works of art."

Rachel Dickinson



KEVIN MCGOWAN

**YOUNG HAWK:** MacDuff is a first-year male peregrine from Ithaca, N.Y. Note the leather hood covering his eyes. This keeps the bird calm.