

GRACE FROM A GLOVED HAND

Ordinary Montanans with boundless patience and zeal dedicate themselves to an ancient sport once practiced by kings, sheiks, and emperors. **BY DAVE CARTY**

The truck in front of me had two hunting dogs in back. That was strange in itself—I'd almost never seen another bird hunter in this area—but even more unusual was how the fellow had been hunting. When he stopped and introduced himself, I learned that while I'd been chasing Hungarian partridge and sharp-tailed grouse with my pointing dog and a shotgun, Craig Campbell of Bozeman had been hunting nearby wheat fields that same afternoon with two pointing dogs and his falcon. Campbell was a falconer, the first I'd ever met. >>

QUIET TIME A gyrfalcon rests on a falconer's thick leather glove, or gauntlet. A stiff leather hood, used by falconers worldwide for thousands of years, keeps the bird calm by blocking visual stimulation. The decorative leather knob at the top is for easy removal.

Campbell and other falconers later introduced me to this remarkable hunting method that has an ancient and royal heritage and is still practiced today by a handful of dedicated Montanans from all walks of life.

Falconry is a sport that predates Montana and the rest of the United States by thousands of years. It was first practiced in Mesopotamia, now Iraq, as early as 2000 BC and later developed in Persia, India, China, Korea, and Japan. The Romans introduced falconry, also known as hawking, throughout Europe and Great Britain, where both royalty and commoners practiced it widely during the Middle Ages. Social class determined raptor ownership: Only kings could fly gyrfalcons, the largest of all falcons; earls and dukes owned peregrines; yeomen used goshawks; and peasants were restricted to kestrels. Among the famous British and European royals who

flew falcons were Mary, Queen of Scots, King Charlemagne, and Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I. Falconry's popularity began to decline in the 17th century, after the invention of firearms provided a more efficient way to kill game.

In the United States, falconry was rarely practiced until after World War II. Two of the sport's leading early practitioners were wildlife research scientists Frank and John Craighead, who first wrote about it in *National Geographic* in 1939. The North American Falconers' Association was established in 1961, but the use of raptors for hunting did not take off until several years later, when falconers discovered that the ubiquitous red-tailed hawk was trainable. (The term "falconer" includes both true falconers, who hunt only with what are known as "long-wings": peregrines, merlins, and other falcons, and "austringers," who use red-tailed hawks, goshawks, and other

buteos and accipiters.) Today roughly 4,000 falconers are licensed in the United States.

Despite its raptor diversity and abundance, Montana has not been a big falconry state. Only about 90 licensed falconers practice the sport here. Falconry has been legal in Montana since 1971, when the legislature passed a law requiring that falconers be licensed by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. A few years later, the state adopted the federal guidelines for registering and keeping the birds, including regulations mandating that raptors wear identifying leg bands and that a falconer's facilities and equipment be inspected before a license is issued. The stringent requirements for owning, hunting, and trapping raptors were established largely at the urging of the practitioners themselves.

This is no sport for dilettantes. Falconry requires extensive training, constant practice, and an almost



FOLLOW THAT FALCON

A peregrine takes flight with tiny radio transmitters and trailing antennae attached to its legs. Falconers use electronic receivers to track their birds from up to several miles away.

TRAINING A RAPTOR



PHOTOS BY JULIE CONWAY/COWAN CREATIVE

ANCIENT TECHNIQUES Falconers still use many training methods and devices unchanged from antiquity. 1. Wild raptors are captured in a bal-chatri, a baited box covered with fishing line snares that capture the bird when it lands to grab the bait. Once trapped, the bird is quickly hooded and secured. 2. After trapping a red-tailed hawk, a falconer carefully inspects the bird and cleans its beak. 3. Lightweight leather jesses are attached to a raptor's legs

so it can be tied to a perch. 4. A red-tailed hawk is secured to a training line, called a creance, for an early training session. 5. A stiff leather hood keeps a captive raptor calm by blocking distracting sights. 6. An American kestrel plucks raw meat from a lure used for aerial training. 7. A falconer holds a red-tailed hawk on a heavy glove, called a gauntlet. Small bells connected to the jesses help the falconer hear and interpret the raptor's actions.

KATE DAVIS

fanatical dedication to the birds. "You can't just put them in a barn, throw in some food once in a while, then hunt them," Campbell says. "You have to fly them year-round, and fly them at game during the season. Then you need dogs for pointing the birds, and homing pigeons for training. Falconry is a huge investment." Especially in time. It can take years before someone with a budding interest in the sport can actually own, then hunt with, a bird of prey.

To earn an FWP apprentice license, a prospective falconer must be at least 14 years old, find an experienced falconer willing to be a mentor for two years, and pass a comprehensive written test. Apprentices may fly

only kestrels or young red-tailed hawks, which are common and easier to handle than other raptors. After two years, an apprentice may receive a general license and keep two raptors of any species. After five years in the general category, a falconer qualifies as a master and may keep up to three birds. In addition to a state license, all falconers must receive certification from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. "Falconry is not just a sport," says Kate Davis, a master falconer and founder of the Raptors of the Rockies education center in the Bitterroot Valley. "It's more a complete and all-consuming lifestyle that you dedicate yourself to year-round. I basically try to talk people out of it."

A widely used raptor for falconry is the gyrfalcon-peregrine cross, which has the size of the former and the speed of the latter. Also popular are pure-strain peregrines, northern goshawks, red-tailed and Harris's hawks, merlins, and kestrels. Falconers obtain raptors by buying them from a licensed propagator, trapping immature birds, or taking chicks from the nest. Though legal in Montana, chick removal has been controversial, especially for peregrine falcons. The species was federally delisted in 1999 and removed from the Montana list of endangered species in 2005. In 2008 the

FWP Commission agreed to requests by many falconers to allow an annual total "take" of three peregrine chicks (less than 5 percent of the known production of young) to be raised and trained for falconry. The ruling was opposed by other falconers who wanted the commission to wait until peregrines had recovered throughout their entire historical habitat in the state.

Hunting with hawks and falcons is a spectator sport in which the raptor does most of the work. When the hunt begins, a falcon is released to circle in the sky hundreds of feet above the falconer, who often uses hunting dogs to locate and flush game birds. Once the falcon spots the quarry, it drops from the sky in a "stoop" at breathtaking speed—up to 200 miles per hour for a peregrine or gyrfalcon. Falcons kill some birds by striking the head or body with open talons. They kill others by flying in a J-pattern and coming up underneath the quarry, grabbing the belly and pulling the bird to the ground before finishing it off with a bite to the spine. When hunting with a hawk, falconers generally carry the bird on their fist, protected from the talons by a thick leather glove, called a gauntlet. To keep the hawk calm, its head is covered by a stiff

leather hood. When a rabbit, squirrel, or game bird is spotted, the hood is removed and the hawk jets after the quarry. Sometimes a hawk is allowed to follow the handler by perching in treetops or on power poles until the quarry is spotted. Harris's hawks often are hunted in pairs from atop a 10-foot-tall, T-shaped perch the handler carries while walking in the field. To locate their raptors from a distance, falconers attach small bells or light-weight radio transmitters to the birds' legs.

After the kill, a trained raptor returns to the handler's glove or perch or stays with the dead prey until it is retrieved. Raptors are generally not allowed to eat their prey other than the head and neck. "When everything goes as planned, the raptor will step off its kill and take the treat—such as a quail leg—and then you can keep the game bird for a meal," says Davis.

Hawks are used to hunt small mammals and birds, both flying and on the ground, while falcons are used only for flying birds. The exception is kestrels, which, topping out at just 5 ounces, are too small for birds larger than sparrows. "A lot of falconers actually fly their kestrels to chase grasshoppers and dragonflies," Campbell says, describing what is known as microhawking.

Falconry is not a sport that puts much meat on the table. According to the Colorado Division of Wildlife, it takes the average falconer more than nine hours of hunting to kill a single game bird. (With a shotgun, by comparison, it's not uncommon to kill a limit of four sharptails before noon.) Part of the sport's appeal is its heritage, which includes terminology, training methods, and certain gear that have remained basically unchanged for thousands of years. But the big attraction, says Davis, is watching raptors in action. "A falcon's stoop is so remarkable that sometimes we cheer when it hits the prey," she says.

So that I could experience falconry firsthand, Campbell allowed me to tag along one morning. The regular firearms bird season had ended, but because the falconry season runs through March 31, he was still hunting

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DUCK DINNER Master falconer Kate Davis of Florence holds her prized peregrine, Sibley, and a recently killed mallard.

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with his birds almost daily. We met at his house near Bozeman and loaded his pointers. After driving miles onto the prairie, Campbell pulled over and released a pointer, which raced out into the grasslands. It was not long before the dog went on point. Campbell loosed the falcon on his wrist, and the handsome creature caught a breeze and soared into the sky hundreds of feet above us. As we approached the dog, a covey of Hungarian partridge burst from

the short grass, their russet feathers glowing red in the winter sun. Then the birds did something I'd never seen in all my years of Hun hunting: They dove back into the wheat just a few dozen yards ahead. Ordinarily, Huns will fly wildly when flushed, but they had spotted the falcon overhead and refused to remain in flight. One bird, perhaps braver or dumber than the rest, kept flying. Suddenly, with the wind screaming through its pinions, Campbell's falcon dropped from the sky. We watched the Hun dart frantically behind a hill with the falcon just a few feet behind and closing. Neither reemerged. We found the raptor 15 minutes later.

Davis says locating a falcon after the kill can be difficult, even using a radio receiver. On a recent duck hunt in a swamp with her six-year-old peregrine falcon, Sibley, Davis flushed two mallards. "Sibley hit the second one hard, and I got scared because all I could hear was a *whack*, and I thought she might have hurt herself. I went wading across the slough literally up to my waist, but I couldn't find her. Then I happened to look down a little creek, and there's Sibley, floating along

with both wings and her tail spread out, just her head out of the water. I ran over there, thinking she might have broken her back or something. I took my glove off and reached underwater, and she's got the drake mallard by the head, dead as a doornail. I was so proud, but it took a while to get out of the slough, my legs were shaking so bad."

Davis, author of *Falcons of North America*, can't remember a time when she didn't love raptors. "I started flying kestrels when I was a teenager, and I've never

stopped," she says. A fondness for raptors can be bittersweet. The birds are often electrocuted by power lines, injured by flying into wires, or killed by larger raptors such as golden eagles or great-horned owls. Sometimes, after months of training, a captive bird may simply fly off, as once happened with a beloved Harris's hawk Davis owned. "One day I was flying her in my backyard, and she just took off and disappeared. I couldn't believe it," she says. Having previously lost a peregrine, Davis

expected the worst. But perhaps certain birds form an attachment to their owners, because four months later the hawk reappeared, flying circles around Davis's house. "I was so thrilled," she says. "She was real skinny, so I guess she eventually got hungry and figured, 'I'd better go home now.'"

Many websites are filled with information and video clips of falconry techniques and equipment. Among the most comprehensive is themodernapprentice.com.

FALCONRY GEAR

SCALE A traditional balance scale is used to ensure a raptor is at its ideal "flying weight," which varies with the bird's age and experience.

GLOVE Most falconers carry the birds on their hand, protected by a buckskin glove. For large birds, a falconer needs to wear a gauntlet, made of three or four thick leather layers.

TRANSMITTER AND RECEIVER Falconers fit their birds with light radio transmitters they can track from up to several miles away with handheld receivers.

HAWKING BAG Falconers use a light-weight, compartmentalized bag to carry equipment.

CREANCE During early training sessions, the bird is flown on this light tether line before eventually being allowed to fly free.

LURE Meant to resemble a quarry, this scented dummy is attached to a long line and swung around the falconer's head to attract the raptor.

JESSES These short leather straps are knotted loosely around the bird's feet so it may be safely tied to a perch.

SWIVELS These prevent the jesses from becoming tangled.

BELLS Attached to the jesses, bells help a falconer find a lost bird or track one moving its feet on the ground.

HOODS These trick a bird into thinking it is night so it remains still (the origin of the term "hoodwink"). Hoods prevent a bird from harming itself by becoming agitated by too much visual stimulation.



PROUD PEREGRINE A falcon spreads both wings to hide its kill. A well-trained raptor will relinquish its quarry and take a treat, leaving the game bird for the falconer.