

FALCONRY FACT SHEET

Origins

Reputed to be the oldest sport in the world, falconry probably originated in China around 2000BC. It began as a means of obtaining food for the table, but as the fascination of keeping and training hawks and falcons grew, the art spread to Europe, where it reached Britain about AD860.

When the Normans arrived, much land became privately owned, so hunting was only possible by the upper classes, which considered it a noble art, and part of a proper education. The office of Royal Falconer was a very well paid and highly respected post. Certain social ranks were expected to own particular species, such as:

Emperor-	eagle or vulture
King-	gyr falcon
Prince-	falcon gentill (peregrine)
Duke-	falcon of the rock (peregrine)
Earl-	peregrine
Baron-	bastarde (? buzzard)
Knight-	saker
Squire-	lanner
Lady-	merlin
Youngman-	hobby
Yeoman-	goshawk
Priest-	sparrowhawk
Clerk-	musket (male sparrowhawk)
Knave-	kestrel



This list from the 15th century 'Boke of St. Albans' shows the value attached to birds of prey in those days.

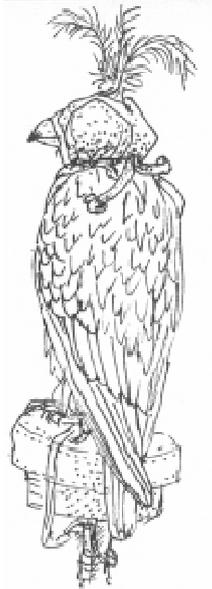


Every British king from Ethelbert II to George III has practised falconry; Richard II created the Royal Mews for housing his falcons at Charring Cross, though Henry VIII later turned it into stables. Mary Queen of Scots was a notable falconer, and went lark hawking with her merlins while detained by Elizabeth I. With the advent of guns, shooting replaced hawking, and little was seen of the sport for many years.

Today, falconry has experienced a revival of interest, mainly because of concerns over the near extinction of some species such as the peregrine, eagle and kite in the U.K., and it is through captive breeding programs that many endangered species can be returned to the wild. The practice of falconry helps understand more fully the needs and behaviour of birds of prey, and creates awareness in future generations of the unique beauty of these raptors, and the need for their conservation.

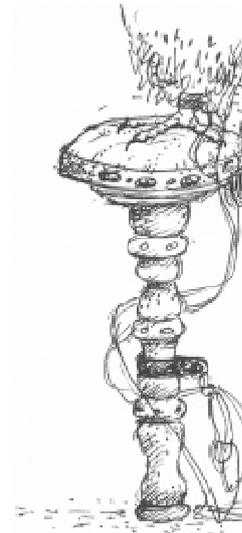
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The Practice of Falconry



Strictly speaking, falconry means the ‘taking’ of wild game or ‘quarry’ in its natural state with trained hawks or falcons. Today, it is increasingly difficult to find land where this is possible or permitted, but many hawk owners are able to help a farmer reduce the rabbit population, or a falcon can be used to deter pigeons from crops. More frequently, falcons are flown to a ‘lure’, which is a leather weight with meat tied on and attached to a long string. The falconer throws out the lure towards the flying falcon, and then snatches it away to simulate the quarry in flight. This gives the falcon good exercise and helps maintain her fitness, and is usually most enjoyable for both falconer and bird. (Any falcon is referred to as ‘she’). If the falcon catches the lure, she is allowed to eat her reward, or if the falconer sees she is tiring, he will throw the lure to her for an easy catch, letting her know with a loud cry of ‘Ho!’.

The training of birds of prey takes many long hours of gentle patience, in which the necessary trusting partnership is built up. The first stage is to persuade the bird to sit quietly on the falconer’s gloved hand, and this is done by offering her a little meat on the glove when she is hungry. All training is done in this way, by rewarding with food, so must be done when the bird is hungry. Eventually, she will fly to the falconer’s hand for her food, and then to the lure. She is carefully weighed every day, as is her food, and it is noted at what weight she best responds to the falconer. This is known as her ‘flying weight’ and she is only exercised to the lure or hunted when at that critical weight.



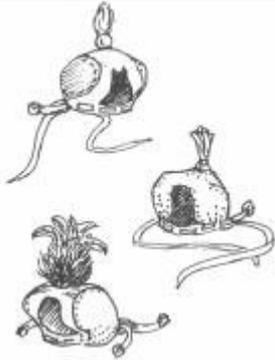
Equipment.

Birds of prey wear leather **anklets** to which are attached **jesses** (leather straps or cords) which connect to a **swivel** tied to a **leash**. This is secured by a special **falconers’ knot** to the **block** or **bow perch** on which the bird is sitting. This is to prevent one from attacking its neighbour, as they are territorial, and will attempt to kill and eat any bird they see as a threat or food. Their legs are extremely strong, being their main killing weapon, so they have no discomfort being tethered in this way. Leash, swivel and jesses are removed when the bird flies so that there is no danger of being caught up by them.

In the wild, they will sit quietly without movement for many hours and only fly to hunt for essential food. They are happy to sit on their blocks or bow perches or when returned to their large aviaries, continue to sit quietly, awaiting dinner time: in fact, it is quite difficult to get them to exercise at all. Shade and water are essential, however, as many drink and bathe frequently and some thoroughly enjoy being sprayed or hosed!

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Other equipment used by the falconer includes the **creance**, a very long piece of cord, which is attached to the bird in training, and secured at the other end by the falconer. This controls the extent of early flights and prevents a trainee bird dashing off and harming itself, or getting lost before the flying weight is established. When flying free, a small **radio transmitter** is attached

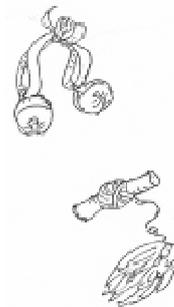


to the leg or central tail feather, and by using a receiver, the falconer can locate his bird over many miles. A **bell** is usually attached as well, as this can locate the bird when hidden by trees or bushes. When falcons are used for hunting or carried in close proximity to others, they are frequently hooded using a close fitting, carefully made leather **hood**. This gives the bird the impression that night has fallen, so it becomes very calm and tends to sleep. This can prove very useful for veterinary visits or other stressful occasions.

The **glove** is the falconer's own most essential piece of equipment, as it protects him from the crushing strength of the feet and devastatingly penetrating power of the talons. It is usually made-to-measure with strong supple leather with a double thickness over the wrist where the bird sits. A bird being carried 'on the fist' is usually tied by the leash to a ring on the glove, and the leash is wrapped firmly between the fingers. The glove is worn on the left hand for a right-handed falconer to handle the equipment and the bird more easily.

Birds used for Falconry in the U.K.

Falconry, or hawking, as it is sometimes known, encourages the birds to use their natural instincts in their natural environment. Where quarry is taken in the air, the **falcons** would be 'flown at' such species as pheasant, partridge, grouse or duck and for these, the **Peregrine** would be favoured. The **Saker** is often flown at rooks and crows, while the manoeuvrable **Lanner** is used for magpies and smaller birds. The Lanner is reputed to be the only falcon able to take its prey head-on. The superior size of the **Gyrfalcon** means it is usually reserved for larger quarry such as grouse, but it is not used often, as it proves difficult to train.



The hunting of ground dwelling prey is where the **hawks** come into their own, with the **Common Buzzard** and the **Harris Hawk** firm favourites. The latter is a native of the southern U.S.A. and South America, and is unique in that it is the only bird of prey to hunt in an organised pack. This makes it an ideal bird for a group of falconers to hunt together, and many a pleasant outing can be planned to reduce a farmer's troublesome excess of rabbits with these friendly and amenable birds. The American **Red-tailed Buzzard** or **Hawk** is another popular choice for rabbit hunting.

It can be stressed that it is not really the catching of the quarry that is important to the falconer, but the quality of the flight for the bird. A hunting day can be a great success even if one returns home with an empty bag!

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Hybrids and A.I.

There has been much interest in the last few years in producing hybrid falcons by artificial insemination, as the best traits of the parent birds can produce ideal offspring for falconry. This involves imprinting the chick exclusively on a human 'parent' from about 10 days old, who will attend and feed it until it is fully fledged and in training. The falcon then grows to regard its 'parent' as its mate, and a deep bond develops between the falconer and his bird. This can ensure that the falcon is much less likely to wander off and get lost. This bond enables them to be exercised and hunted at a much higher 'flying weight', which is better for the bird.

Artificial insemination of imprinted peregrines has saved them from the brink of extinction in the U.S.A. where the Peregrine Fund pioneered this technique. They have been able to release large numbers back into the wild to give sustainable populations throughout the continent.

Everyday terms derived from Falconry.

Boozer- 'bouse' means to drink, so a bouser is bird that drinks a lot.

Bated breath- 'bating' is beating the wings, which makes the bird breathless.

Mantle- this is the act of spreading the wings around its food to protect it.

Rouse- this means shaking and fluffing up the feathers before taking flight.

Hacked off- Hacking is the practice of letting a young bird go free to practice hunting.

Cadge- this is a frame on which falcons are carried out to hunt. The man carrying the frame, the 'Cadger', is not paid so must beg for tips.

Mews- originally, the place in which a falcon is kept while she moults or is in 'mew'; as falconry declined, these tended to be converted into stables, then garages, then smart houses.

