

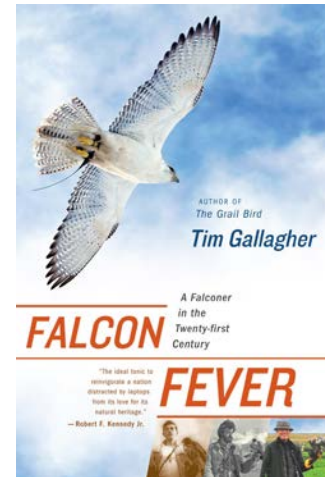
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Falcon Fever

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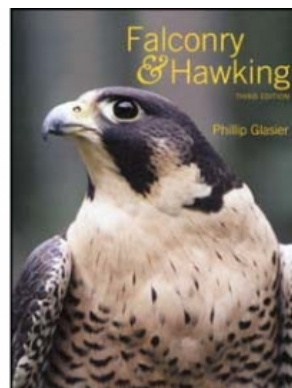
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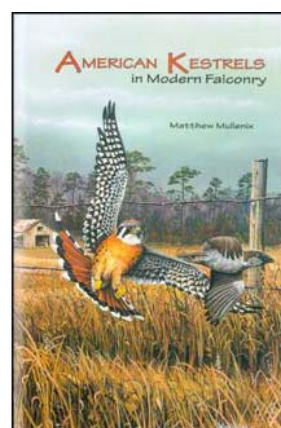
- **North American Falconry and Hunting Hawks** by Frank L. Beebe and Harold M. Webster



- **Falconry & Hawking** by Phillip Glasier
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- **The Falconer's Apprentice: A Guide to Training the Red-tailed Hawk** by William Oakes
- **American Kestrels in Modern Falconry** by Matthew Mullenix



Articles

- Gallagher. 2007. **The Crow Hawker**. NAFA Journal
- Gallagher. 2006. **Highland Fling**. NAFA Journal
- Radcliffe. 2006. **A Noble Alliance**. NAFA Journal

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THE CROW HAWKER

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY TIM GALLAGHER

*With Nick Fox
in Northumberland*

During my grouse-hawking trip to Scotland last year (see “Highland Fling,” *The Journal*, Volume 45, 2006), I decided to head south to England and take part in a very different kind of hawking, this time at crows. I’d made arrangements to meet John Loft there and to spend a couple of days crow hawking with Nick Fox. Although I hadn’t met either of the two falconers before, John seemed like an old friend. We’d been corresponding with each other for several years, since he authored the book, *A Merlin for Me*, and I got in touch with him.

I had always intended to write a book about merlins myself—ever since the spring of 1970, when my friend Hollis Roberts and I trained two eyas female merlins and flew them together as a cast. It was one of the most amazing experiences I’d ever had in falconry, and over the years I trained numerous merlins, both eyas and passage, and flew them at a variety of game in a variety of different hunting styles. They were all spectacular hunters, and I came to think that I’d carved a special niche for myself in falconry with these birds—which is why I had a momentary twinge of regret when I heard about John Loft’s merlin book. I remember thinking: *that should have been me; I should have written that book*. But I got over it quickly, especially after reading it. The book was full of fascinating lore about the history of merlin hawking, including some great material about E. B. Michell—famed merlin hawker and author of *The Art and Practice of Hawking*, and one of my childhood falconry heroes. So, I wrote a fan letter to John, and we’ve been pen pals ever since. But until that summer, we had never met. He lived quite a distance south of Scotland, in Lincolnshire, but he suggested that we meet halfway and go hawking with Nick Fox in the vast area along Hadrian’s Wall in Northumberland. The idea was appealing. I really wanted to meet John after all the years we’d been corresponding, and I had also heard great things about Nick Fox’s crow-hawking exploits.

Nick Fox spends several weeks each year flying falcons at crows in the wide-open spaces of northern England. His group, the Northumberland Crow Falcons, is dedicated to hawking crows in the traditional manner—on horseback. Above, he rides past with his peregrine-saker falcon en route to slipping her at a flock of crows.



Above and at left, Nick Fox gives marching orders to the members of the Northumberland Crow Falcons, who have come hawking with him. He points out the nearby trees and instructs the riders to head off any crows that attempt to put into them. When all is ready, Nick slips his falcon and the flight begins. If the crow is a ringer, the chase may go for miles.



I said goodbye to my Italian falconry friends—Umberto Caproni, Fulco Tosti, and Friky Pratesi, who were leasing a grouse estate in Scotland—and headed southward, driving hard for several hours, stopping only for coffee and gasoline. I was amazed to see the new highway rest stops along the way, featuring Starbucks-like coffee bars where young Scottish women with names like Fiona actually made great coffee—a new concept for the United Kingdom. But John Loft's road directions were tough to follow, including things like: look for an old, disused

public house, which may or may not have a pair of buffalo horns on the wall. (I saw nothing like that.) You might find a left turn that is probably signposted.

I drove up, up, up into the stony green hills—and got completely lost. But I did know the place was somewhere close to Hadrian's Wall, and I was somewhat familiar with the area. I'd explored the wall and the ancient Roman ruins of Vindalonda a couple of times previously years earlier. I knew there was an excellent museum there, so I went straight to it and asked directions. Fortunately, a woman



Northumberland has a centuries-old tradition of falconry. Major Hawkins Fisher flew peregrines at rooks here in the Nineteenth Century, but he was not the first falconer in the area. A carving on a stone cross dating from the Seventh Century depicts a man holding a raptor on his fist. The Northumberland Crow Falcons carry on the tradition. Above, the mounted hawking party crosses a valley to approach another flock of crows. What begins as a perfectly orderly process with military-like precision quite often breaks down into a wild melee as the riders gallop off to keep the flight in view and to head off the crow if it tries to dive for cover. But the flights are always exciting and good fun.

who worked there knew the exact farm I was looking for and gave me some much-improved directions.

On the way, I spotted a man standing beside a small red Renault at the side of the road. He was thin and wiry with a neatly trimmed gray beard. I stopped and rolled down my window.

“You wouldn’t be John Loft, would you?” I asked.

Beaming, he walked over to me as I got out of the car, and we shook hands. It was wonderful to finally meet him, and we stood in the road for ten minutes or more, having a conversation. John is a retired schoolmaster who now spends much of his time writing and also working on translations of early falconry texts. He told me he had recently turned eighty years old and no longer trained falcons.

“Why not?” I asked. “You must have all kinds of free time now that you’re retired.”

“Yes, but at my age, you never know when you might hop the twig,” he said.

“Hop the twig?” I said, laughing. “I’ve never heard that one before.”

We finally got back into our cars. John told me to follow close behind and he’d take me to Nick’s cottage. As we traveled along the tiny roads, I thought, I never would have found this place in a million years.

Meeting Nick was great—he is friendly and outgoing, with a wry sense of humor. A well-known raptor biologist and falconer, he has produced several films and books about the sport. He introduced me to his Swedish wife, Barbro, and John Lawson, a young man from Finland who had signed on as an apprentice with him, working with the birds and learning the ropes of falcon handling.

Lawson looked a bit like a younger, leaner Sylvester Stallone, and he spoke nearly flawless English. His father was actually originally from England, so he had a good person to learn the language from. Nick worked him hard. When we went out hawking that afternoon, Nick would give him instructions like: “See those crows in that tree a half mile out in the open field? As soon as I put up the falcon, run over there and head the crows off if they try to put into them.” And Lawson was off sprinting full out. And if the crows went somewhere else, Nick would get on the walkie-talkie and send him over there.

The first afternoon, we headed up to the high ground along Hadrian’s Wall and actually slipped the falcon (a peregrine-saker) from the ancient Roman stone works, which had been erected only fifty years or so after the birth of Christ. This is one of the windiest places



I've been in my life. Years earlier, my wife and I had taken our eldest daughter, Railey, here when she was seven years old, and she had been terrified by the velocity of the wind and had to hold onto the wall as she walked along. It's an exciting and beautiful place. It seemed as though I could see a hundred miles on either side, and it was all green, open, and magnificent—perhaps not that much different from how it looked in Roman times.

Flying there was effortless for the falcon, which went up like a kite on a string above us. When some crows took off in the distance, she went off chasing them. But the flights seemed like they were in slow motion in all the wind. The falcon would put a crow into a small, sparsely foliated tree and go right in after it, sometimes hopping from branch to branch, trying to either catch the crow or put it to flight again so the chase could resume.

After perhaps forty-five minutes of this, we saw a storm blowing in from miles away. Nick brought out his lure, which he swung on the end of a long fishing rod blank with a piece of surgical rubber tubing on the end and gave the bird a fast series of stoops. Nick seemed very good at timing the arrival of the storm. He took his time stooping the bird, then fed and hooded her and started down the hill just as the clouds were about to burst. We sprinted from Hadrian's Wall and then down the steep hill all the way to the Land Cruiser and got

there just as the rain began pelting down in one of the most powerful thunderstorms I've ever seen. We all huddled in the car until it passed and the sun came out again.

One day recently Nick had been out there with this same bird at Hadrian's Wall, when a group of Hasidic Jews came walking along, sightseeing along the wall, clad in their distinctive black hats and robes, with dark beards and long side-locks of hair blowing wildly in the wind—looking remarkably similar to the clump of black feathers Nick uses as a lure to exercise his birds. The falcon made several nice stoops at the men as they ran along the wall, ducking each time the bird shot past. Nick finally got the falcon interested in the real lure, called her back, and beat a hasty retreat down the hill.

Unlike the flights at red grouse in Scotland, crow hawking is generally not done from a waiting-on position above the falconer. Instead, the falcon is flown directly from the fist as the crows flush. In the best crow flights, the crows ring up high above the spectators, fighting to maintain an altitude advantage over the falcon—just as skylarks do when they're chased by merlins. Later that day, we got just such a flight, and it was fabulous. At one point, both birds—the falcon and the crow—were right above us, hundreds of feet up, battling for aerial supremacy. The falcon actually bound to the crow at one point and went almost all

The falcon is slipped and the chase begins, a duel of speed, stamina, and determination as predator and prey fight to gain an altitude advantage.



Finally, after a lengthy ringing flight going up into the clouds, the crow is bested and plummets earthward with the falcon in hot pursuit. Not all of the crows ring up, but the ones that do provide an unforgettable spectacle.





Wide-open spaces are a basic requirement for hunting crows and rooks successfully. The area where Nick Fox goes hawking is nearly perfect, with just enough escape cover to make things interesting. At right, the end of the flight as Nick's peregrine-saker falcon, Rainbow, feeds on her kill.

the way to the ground with it before the crow broke away. And this time, the crow out-flew the falcon and disappeared into a cloud-filled blue sky.

This part of England has a centuries-old tradition of falconry. There's actually a Seventh



Century stone carving in Northumberland called the Bewcastle Cross, which depicts a man holding a trained raptor on his fist. More recently, in the late Nineteenth Century, famed falconer Major Hawkins Fisher hawked ferociously in this area, flying peregrine falcons at rooks in spectacularly high ringing flights. I love the old black-and-white pictures of Fisher in the field with his falcons. He's always sitting or standing bolt upright, usually wearing a derby hat.

The next day would be the main event for us. Instead of driving around in a Land Cruiser to fly the falcons, Nick would do his specialty—releasing his falcon from horseback and galloping along to keep up with the flight and reflush the crows. We gathered up the horses and drove to a rendezvous place to meet the other members of the

Northumberland Crow Falcons—a group Nick had founded years earlier. Nick and Barbro wore green hunting coats with the group's initials, NCF, engraved on the brass buttons. Some of the others wore tweed coats, but they all wore ties, and the event had all the pomp of fox hunting.

Nick is a fabulous rider and cuts quite a figure galloping up on his Arabian horse, holding a falcon on his left fist. He is a skillful enough horseman to hold his falcon perfectly steady as he rides. He ran the show like a general, handing each person a walky-talky and giving them their marching orders—telling them which clumps of trees to ride to so they could head off any crows that tried to escape there. Still, every time a falcon was slipped at the crows, things quickly broke down into a wild melee, with people riding this way and that, sometimes getting stuck in the mud or unhorsed in ditches, but it was all part of the fun. And the crows were completely unpredictable.

After several great flights, Nick's peregrine-saker falcon, Rainbow—the same one that had made the spectacular ringing flight the day before—finally caught a crow. I went in on the kill and took several pictures of the falcon with her crow. Then Nick let me feed her on my fist as John Loft stood beside me feeding another falcon.

"Are you sure you're ready to give up hawking?" I said. We both laughed.

As we stood around, we spoke with Michael, one of the other riders. He was in his sixties—an ex-British officer, and he looked the part, with a steady bearing, an upright stance, and

a clipped accent. In the early 1960s, he had been stationed in Oman—a country bordering southeastern Saudi Arabia—training the country's military, and he had taken up falconry there, learning the art directly from the local people whose ancestors had trained falcons for thousands of years. Michael spoke with great fondness of the old days, camping in the desert with the Arab tribesmen and galloping after falcons as they chased houbara bustards across the barren desert sands.

"It's a different world now," John lamented.

"Yes, but not, I fear, a better one," said Michael.

The next morning I bid a farewell to everyone and thanked Nick and Barbro for their hospitality. As we walked out to our cars, I shook John's hand and gave him a hug. I only regretted that our visit together had been so brief. I drove behind him as he left, following him back to the main road that cuts horizontally across this narrow part of Britain. I waved goodbye as we turned in opposite directions, then I took off fast, driving hard all the way back to Caithness. I was eager to spend more time with Roger and Mark Upton and also to meet a few more falconers before heading back home to New York, where my own falcon, Macduff, was waiting to start a new season of hawking. ■

This article is excerpted from Tim Gallagher's latest book, Falcon Fever, which will be published in May 2008 by Houghton Mifflin.

Tim Gallagher (left) and John Loft feed up two of Nick Fox's falcons at the end of a great day of crow hawking. John Loft is the author of A Merlin for Me, a fascinating look at merlin hawking.





HIGHLAND FLING

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY TIM GALLAGHER

Hawking red grouse in the Highlands of Scotland

This past August, I finally did something I've been wanting to do since the 1960s: I spent a couple of weeks hawking red grouse in Scotland with several distinguished falconers. I have to admit, going hawking there was like a dream come true to me. I'm just surprised how long it took me to do it. Although I'm originally from Britain, and I even lived at a grouse lodge in Yorkshire for a while as a boy, I didn't get seriously involved in falconry until I was 12 years old and living in Southern California. But I always loved reading about grouse hawking in British books such as *The Art and Practice of Hawking*, by E. B. Michell, *As the Falcon her Bells*, by Phillip Glasier, and *Falconry*, by Gilbert Blaine. And now I would finally get a chance to experience it myself in all its glory.

I won't bore you with the travails of the early part of my trip—of how I left for Britain just as Heathrow Airport had the big clampdown after a terrorist scare and barred all carry-on luggage; of how I had to put my computer, all of my camera equipment, clothes, and rubber wellies into uninsured check-in luggage (where they were lost for three days); of how I arrived without having slept for more than 35 hours and had to step immediately into a stick-shift, right-hand-drive car and blast for three hours along a busy Scottish roadway, driving on the opposite side of the road from what I was used to and having to negotiate endless confusing roundabouts. That would be a far too tedious tale to tell. Let me just say that there is nothing more effective than abject terror for curing road drowsiness.

I was supposed to meet Roger and Mark Upton at 2:00 o'clock in the afternoon at their cottage near Dunbeath, in the heart of Caithness. It was just past noon when I had picked up my rental car, and Dunbeath was a three-hour-drive away. I knew I'd be late, and I had no way of getting in touch with them, so I just hit the A-9 highway and went speeding northward—across bridges and causeways, sometimes driving on two-way roads so narrow they would have been single lanes in America.



Roger Upton carries a cadge of peregrines across a grouse moor in Caithness, above. At left, the Upton's perched their falcons on the lawn outside their cottage each morning, if the weather was good. On the facing page, Mark Upton's excellent eight-year old tiercel peregrine, the Artful Dodger, goes into a colossal stoop after a grouse.



I finally got to Dunbeath, following Mark Upton's explicit directions—the best directions anyone has ever given me in Britain. I turned left off the highway and skirted the village, driving up a single-track road, where if someone is coming the other way, one of you has to back up all the way to a wide spot to let the other person's car get through. After going across an old stone cart-bridge, up a hill, and through a gate, I found myself driving on a narrow gravel track cutting right through the bushes and shrubs, so close together they scratched and scraped the sides of my car as

I burrowed through. But I found the place. And Roger and Mark were standing in front, miraculously just loading up their dark-blue Land Rover. They had kindly waited for me, and Roger even paused to make me a cup of tea before we left. I immediately got my second wind, and we were off to fly peregrines at grouse.

We drove the Land Rover to the fence at the edge of a 40,000-acre grouse moor and loaded the peregrines—two tiercels and two falcons—onto a cadge. From there, we trudged miles across spongy, tundra-like ground and



Roger Upton, above, prepares to release his intermewed peregrine. His dog is on point nearby. At right, Mark Upton picks up his tiercel peregrine, the Artful Dodger, on a grouse kill—one of several he caught during the author's visit.



Dodger scores again, above. This excellent tiercel could always be depended on to fly high and stoop hard, sometimes folding up completely into a blistering stoop and hammering the grouse.

through heather in a steady drizzle (this was Scotland, after all), taking turns carrying the cadge and holding the two pointers.

When we got our first point, Mark put up his 17-year-old tiercel, Oliver Twist, who took a moderate pitch, waiting on steadily overhead. On the flush, he came down smartly, clipping a grouse and sending it down hard into cover, but it escaped when he crashed down.

Oliver has had a remarkable career—both as a hunter and as a breeder. He is the parent or grandparent of an amazing number of the falcons I saw being flown during my stay in Scotland, and they were all excellent.

Next, Roger picked up his intermewed falcon, Glorious (Oliver's daughter), from the cadge and removed her leash and swivel. By this time, the drizzle had turned into a steady downpour. Roger gave a wry smile as he struck his falcon's hood and said, "Mad dogs and Englishmen." Glorious took off without hesitation and fought her way upward into position above him. Roger charged in after the grouse, but it was no good—a false point. This was a rare occurrence—the dog may have been scenting a clump of feathers that Oliver had knocked

out of the other grouse.

On the next point, Mark put up his other tiercel, the Artful Dodger—the eight-year-old son of Oliver. (Clearly Mark likes to name his falcons after Charles Dickens characters—he also has an intermewed peregrine named Peggotty.) Dodger went up nicely in spite of the rain, circling high and steady above us, pumping his wings constantly. On the flush, at least a dozen grouse burst from the heather beneath him, providing an irresistible target. Dodger turned over and with a few powerful strokes of his wings came streaking down in a sizzling vertical stoop, finally folding up completely. He cut down a grouse in a puff of feathers, threw up high, then plummeted down after another one, hammering it in beautiful style and taking it to the ground. Dodger was absolutely exhausted, with bill agape, after this performance. But it was completely understandable. This was only his third or fourth day in the field this season. Mark gave him a well-deserved feed on the grouse.

Roger is a tall man with thick gray hair and a beard. A former horseman in the Queen's Household Cavalry, he cuts a dashing figure



in the field, often wearing a tweed cap and sportcoat, sometimes with a red handkerchief stuffed in the front pocket as an accent. He has become the chief chronicler and historian of British falconry, authoring a series of books—*A Bird in the Hand: Celebrated Falconers of the Past*; *O! For a Falconer's Voice: Memories of the Old Hawking Club*; *Hood, Leash, and Lure: Falconry in the Twentieth Century*; as well as some books on Arabian falconry. Being interested in the history of falconry myself, it was great to spend time with Roger, staying up late into the night, listening to stories about the old days and all the great falconers like Gilbert Blaine and the others who hawked at Caithness over the years.

Grouse hawkers came to this area because it was much flatter than other parts of the Highlands, making it more suitable for flying longwings, particularly in the years before telemetry. Caithness is beautiful. The land is wild, almost like the Alaskan tundra in places. On the rugged coast near the grouse moor where we were flying, the great castle at Dunbeath seems to hang at the edge of a cliff overlooking the sea, stark and breathtaking.

Before the bridges and causeways were built across the firths (or estuaries) in this area, people would have to drive—or in earlier times, ride a horse or wagon—far inland to get around every firth. When Gilbert Blaine started hawking in Caithness in the early 20th century, the area was remote, requiring a long arduous journey on unpaved roads to get there. Sometimes he would have the falcons shipped

by boat to spare them the rough ride.

Other members of the Old Hawking Club also use to hawk in this area. John Frost, one of the best professional falconers ever employed by the club, took sick with pneumonia one season and died there. One morning, Roger and I visited Frost's grave, not far from Dunbeath.

Roger's son, Mark, is a gifted falconer, and his peregrines made some of the best flights I saw during my stay in Scotland. He is an artist who most often paints scenes of hawks, horses, dogs, and various other country field sports. He's also done some excellent illustrations of Arabian falconry, based on hawking trips he has taken to the Middle East with Roger. Mark is an excellent cook and prepared most of the meals, especially the evening dinners, which were often memorable.

Mark tended to rise late while I was there and kept to himself most mornings, working on paintings. I would go off hiking with Roger and a couple of the dogs, up along the stream in the gorge below the cottage. The streams here are not what you would call gin-clear. Far from it, they are the dark amber color of good scotch, stained from the rich peat they flow through. Sometimes peregrines nest on the cliffs just upriver of the cottage. On our walks, we would pass a gorge called Gunn's Leap, where an earlier member of the Gunn Clan (one of the most important local clans) supposedly escaped from some enemies by leaping to the other side of the river at this spot. Now, I've always been pretty good at the

For scenic beauty, the heather-covered hills at Lochindorb are unsurpassed. Above, Umberto Caproni casts off his nine-year old peregrine, Olgina, one of Oliver Twist's daughters. At left, falcons blocked out at Lochindorb. At right, a red grouse flies hard to escape a peregrine.



broad jump, but this chasm looks easily 10 times wider than anything I could ever have jumped across.

Another illustrious member of this clan was Neill Gunn, a popular author who spent his life in the Dunbeath area and set most of his novels there. Some of the place names around the grouse moor Roger leases are mentioned in Gunn's books.

I stayed with Roger and Mark for several days, watching their falcons improve vastly each day as they got back into shape after being taken up from the moult. The tiercels had become fit quickly and were hammering grouse like old pros in just three or four days. It took a little longer with the falcons, but the last time I saw Roger fly Glorious, she fought her way up to a good pitch in a driving rain, clobbered a grouse back into the heather, and remounted a couple of times for reflushes.

Unfortunately, Caithness does not have as many grouse as it did in its falconry heyday, and the Uptons have to work hard to find enough slips. Some of the best areas—such as the grouse moors hawked for years by Gilbert Blaine and later by Geoffrey Pollard and oth-

ers—have been largely ruined for grouse by pine plantations, which the government subsidizes. Many falconers have stopped coming to Caithness and now fly in more productive areas south of Inverness.

After leaving Mark and Roger, I drove to an area near Grantown-on-Spey to visit some Italian falconers—Umberto Caproni, Fulco





Umberto Caproni, above, picks up his falcon, Olgina, from a kill at Lochindorb. At right, Frikki Pratesi feeds up his intermewed peregrine, Carpe Diem, after a spectacular flight and a kill.

Tosti, and Ferrante “Frikki” Pratesi. They have been coming to Scotland for decades and were leasing two enormous grouse moors: one at Lochindorb, a pretty Scottish lake (or “loch)



surrounded by picturesque hills clad in purple heather; the other nearly an hour’s drive away in an area with steep, rugged hills. Both places were crawling with grouse. Sometimes as we were moving in on a point with a peregrine above us, we’d flush a different grouse at our feet and get a colossal stoop from straight overhead. If we were lucky, we’d get a chance to put another falcon up and fly the original point.

Although she tended to be headstrong, Frikki’s pointer, Vodka, was excellent at finding grouse and incredibly steady on a point. I remember her once being on point for nearly an hour on an adjacent hillside as we flew a peregrine on a different covey of grouse.

We then flew Vodka’s point with Frikki’s excellent intermewed falcon, Carpe Diem, who went incredibly high on the updraft of the wind blowing against the hillside and whacked a grouse stone dead in a classic stoop. Of course, we spent a lot of time trying to get Vodka to obey us. One day Frikki told me, “People probably think we’re all heavy drinkers, because we’re always walking around the moor, shouting, ‘Vodka!’”

Umberto, Fulco, and Frikki had leased the entire lodge at the edge of Lochindorb Loch for a couple of months, and several non-falconer friends from Italy had joined them while I was there. Most of them tended to wake up late, have a fantastic brunch in the late morning, then head off for a tough afternoon of hawking, trudging up and down steep hills in wind, rain, and sometimes frigid temperatures to watch the falcons fly. We would often get back well after dark, then partake in a sumptuous gourmet meal of grouse, salmon, and other local specialties, washed down with fine wine. We’d finish the evening in the game room, staying up late shooting billiards or playing ferocious ping-pong games. They were lively company, although, because I speak no Italian, I sometimes felt like I was in a Federico Fellini film without subtitles. Umberto would often key in on this and give me a thumbnail sketch of the conversation.

But after a couple of glasses of wine, I was usually laughing right along with everyone else anyway, even though I had no idea what they were saying.

One of the most interesting parts of my trip to Scotland was driving to the Dornach Firth area, south of Caithness, to visit Stephen Frank. Steve is one of a handful of legendary British falconers who, like Geoffrey Pollard, kept the sport of falconry alive in the years after World War II, maintaining a quality of grouse hawking as great as that of Gilbert Blaine in his heyday.

Although they were good friends, Geoffrey Pollard and Stephen Frank could not have been more different. Geoff brought all of the dignity of a barrister into the hawking field, walking slowly and quietly across the grouse moor, solemn and serious—lacking only the powdered wig and black robes to complete the picture.

Steve cut quite a different image in his youth, racing full speed over the moors like a wild stag, clad in sneakers and a bright-red sweater (which he hoped his falcons would key in on), his voice echoing across the valley as he shouted at his dog and his falcon, rejoicing in a cracking good stoop or a kill. He was a picture of vigor, exuberance, and boundless optimism.

I had gone to Geoff Pollard’s cottage in Dunbeath for tea a couple of times, and the place was immaculate—clean, tidy, tastefully furnished, with paintings of falcons and hunting scenes hung on the walls. We ate cake and biscuits and drank tea from fine china cups. Steve’s cottage was, well . . . different. He lives in an old stone crofter’s cottage that he bought years ago for next to nothing. He likes

At right, Fulco Tosti feeds up his intermewed peregrine, Sensiva, after she killed a grouse in fine style. Umberto, Frikki, and Fulco usually each took at least two falcons hawking most days, and the flights they got were spectacular.



Renowned German falconer and raptor biologist Christian Saar with his eyas tiercel peregrine and his pointer, Jette, hawking on Stephen Frank's grouse moor. He has come hawking with Steve in Scotland almost every season since the 1960s.



to say that the place is “a bit undusted.” It’s the ultimate bachelor falconer pad: worn old chairs, a battered sofa covered with dog hair (with an aging pointer asleep on it); dishes piled high, damp wool socks steaming on the heater; stacks of books and picture albums, cards and pictures stuck everywhere—basically the detritus of a long lifetime of falconry. A pair of barn swallows had taken up residence in the bathroom. Getting in and out through a broken windowpane, they had built a nest on top of the mirror and were raising young. (Steve advises visitors to use nature’s bathroom outside.)

When I dropped by Steve’s cottage, Christian Saar—the famed German falconer and raptor biologist—was visiting, as he has done nearly every grouse season since the 1960s. The two are great friends and share the same optimistic outlook toward life. They are in their late 70s and have both had hip replacements, but they are in no way ready to give up the sport they love. (I think it’s significant that both of them are training new eyas peregrines, and Steve has a new pointer pup.)

We all sat together in front of Steve’s cottage, basking in one of those rare Scottish

days when the sun is shining. His old pointer, Handel, lay curled nearby on an old easy chair with foam rubber stuffing sticking out of torn seams in the tweed-like material. We spoke about hawks and hawking, the great falconers of the past, and about the dogs Steve had known. He is as much (or possibly even more) of a dog person than a falconer, and the dogs he has bred, the bloodlines he has developed, have become popular with field-trial enthusiasts and falconers alike.

A while later, we moved inside to look at some of Steve’s picture albums and to show them, on my laptop computer screen, some of the pictures I had already taken during my trip to Scotland. Steve apologized for not having any decent food to offer me, but then whipped up a great meal of sausage, eggs, and coffee, with a beer chaser.

Later that afternoon, we drove to Steve’s grouse moor, which was just over the hill behind his cottage. Steve and Christian now try to drive as close as possible to the hawking areas, to avoid stressing their arthritic joints. We chugged

up a steep, rocky path in Steve’s small red station wagon, with Christian’s VW van lurching and bouncing behind us. When we got high enough on the hillside, we let out Handel, along with Christian’s dog, Jette, and worked the moor with them, searching for grouse. Unfortunately, grouse were scarce, so it took a long walk before Handel went on point and Steve put up his eyas peregrine. The young tiercel went up decently and was well positioned for a stoop, but we weren’t able to flush any grouse. Perhaps they had run ahead of the point.

A short time later, Jette came on point, and Christian slipped his eyas tiercel. By this time, it was starting to drizzle, but the peregrine waited on well above us. An old cock grouse broke first, drawing the tiercel’s fire. And as soon as he was committed to the stoop, all the young, inexperienced grouse blew out the back door and escaped, as did the cock. But there were no regrets. Christian called down his tiercel and fed him, just before the weather fell apart. As the rains came pouring down, we sat in Steve’s car, passing around a flask of scotch and talking about great flights and falcons and dogs long past.



At perhaps that same moment, a ceremony was taking place on a different grouse moor about an hour-and-a-half’s drive north. Geoffrey Pollard was with Roger Upton and several other friends, scattering the ashes of his wife, Diana. I think with this symbolic act, he was saying goodbye to life.

I had noticed in my conversations with Geoff that he had a wry, witty sense of humor, but his comments were almost always tinged with melancholy. Down deep, he obviously was not a happy man. “It’s so hard to give up all of this,” he told me one day, nodding toward his three falcons, which were perched on blocks in the garden. “I’ve only been good at two things in my life,” he said later, “falconry and the law, and now they’re both finished for me.” One of Geoff’s sons took him back to England shortly after he had scattered his wife’s ashes. Roger Upton remarked sadly to me, “He won’t be back in Scotland again.” He was right. Less than two months later, on a quite Sunday morning in mid-October, Geoffrey Pollard passed away, just a few days shy of his 80th birthday (see page 4). I am grateful to have met him. ■



Stephen Frank (above) and Geoffrey Pollard (below) were giants in British falconry. They were among a handful of dedicated grouse hawkers who kept the sport alive after World War II, maintaining a quality of flying as great as that of Gilbert Blaine. Steve is still flying falcons at grouse in Scotland. Geoff passed away in October 2006.



A Noble Alliance

BY ROLFE RADCLIFFE

Experiences training and hunting with my first red-tail

Two weeks before capturing my first red-tailed hawk, I faced the exciting task of going hawk trapping. I embarked on a cold, snowy January day with my twin brother, Robin, and my mentor, master falconer Carrie Webber. We reached our destination, a game farm, around noon. I immediately spotted a magnificent, immature red-tail perched on the corner of a building rooftop. I launched our bal chatri. The trap landed below the roof ledge opposite the young hawk. We drove out to the road to watch. The dark chocolate-brown bird did not move. Lacking patience we replaced the BC, suspicious that the rooftop was obstructing the hawk's view. Our trap was loaded with two gerbils: Skunky was black, Chipmunk dark gray. The gerbils would soon become pets for Mopane, my five-year-old son—if they survived a season of hawk trapping.

The gerbils landed carefully on the gravel road, and we drove away with excitement and anticipation. The hawk quickly showed signs of interest, and launched from the snowy rooftop flying directly to the BC. The trap rocked with the attack. Soon the hawk became frustrated and attempted to fly away but was held by the trap. We raced to the bird, but as we stepped out of the truck, the hawk lifted off the trap, tearing free. The three of us stood surprised as the hawk landed in a



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pine tree. Two nooses lay untied on the trap. My maze of slipknots was defective. Although tied with the skill of a surgeon, these knots were the work of a greenhorn. The falconer learned an arduous first lesson.

CAPTURE DAY

January 20, 2007: A couple of weeks later we were hawk trapping again. Upon arriving at the game farm, we located several haggard red-tailed hawks. But then soon, inside the farm, we spotted three passage red-tails grasping a freshly killed pheasant. We hastily placed the BC loaded with gerbils into the pen and returned to the truck with the pheasant. The hawks had opened the game bird and started feeding, but most of the meat remained.

Twenty minutes passed . . . no hawks!

The three red-tails did not return, so we discussed our tactics. Like football players breaking after a huddle, we leaped from the truck to set up the next play. We placed the pheasant inside another BC and exchanged it for the cold gerbils, then waited with anticipation once again. We left the trap. Upon returning we noticed a dark bird on the trap and suspected that it was a crow. We approached and found two passage red-tailed hawks. One clung to the

trap, the other sat above on a perch. Robin and I ran from the vehicle and raced into the pen where the hawk wrestled with the trap. My friend Erin, here to experience the thrill of hawk trapping, watched us approach the bird. The hawk lay on its back, wings spread wide, mouth agape, piercing eyes locked in mine. A terrible lizard creature flashed through my mind. I sensed I was capturing a velociraptor, a prehistoric dinosaur rather than a young red-tailed hawk. I folded the wings to secure the bird. Robin simultaneously snatched the legs and carefully released the two nooses entangling the toes. We exchanged smiles as we walked back to the truck, proud to be carrying a striking, young hawk.

Robin carried the hawk in his gloved hands during the ride home. The red-tailed hawk was a large bird in excellent condition, and we suspected it was a female. She weighed nearly 1,500 grams with a crop full of pheasant. Back at the house, we placed the hawk into a large cardboard box to await the help of my mentor. Carrie soon arrived and we immediately set to work attaching anklets, jesses, swivel, leash, and bells. Next, we placed the bird into the newly constructed mews. Her new home was elegant with surrounding windows looking into

PHOTOGRAPHS BY???

the Buttermilk Falls State Forest. To ease the hawk’s transition into captivity and help prevent injury, we darkened the windows and secured her to a large perch via a short leash.

I named her Ra, after the ancient Egyptian sun god pictured as a hawk with a sun disk headdress. The father of all gods, Ra was believed to have created the world. Mopane objected, suggesting another name for our new friend. Shortly thereafter her barn name became “Hawky.” We left our hawk in the darkness of the mews. Neither hawk nor falconer could fathom the trials, tribulations, and adventures they would share in the days and weeks ahead.

MANNING

January 21 – February 8, 2007

Manning: the process of conditioning the hawk to her new surroundings with man. This definition sounded simple, but as I soon discovered, a frightened hawk can be a challenging learner. In the darkened mews, I was able to pick up and hold Hawky on the glove the first night. Over the course of several days I fed the hawk small pieces of pheasant breast. I was able to feed her only in complete darkness by placing tidbits of meat near her beak. About one week after capture, she started eating on her own. Cautiously the hawk fed from my glove while I used a flashlight to show her the food. Hawky ate vigorously while squeaking and looking at me. She allowed me to weigh her easily each day. Slowly her weight continued to drop.

On the first day of February, while trying to step her to the glove, Hawky jumped from her perch to the ground, walked, then ran to my glove and fed. She was becoming bolder with each of our encounters together. The following day, Hawky stepped to my glove with encouragement. Around this time we started adding new experiences: going outside, walking into the house, feeding outside, hooding in the dark, perching in the house and exposing her to our black Labrador Retriever, Aslan. All of these new experiences were helpful in manning the red-tailed hawk, and by the end of the first week of February, I could walk her outside after dark without her bating. Aslan would take more time, however, as the hawk remained anxious near him for weeks, revealing her innate fear of canids.

TRAINING

February 9 – March 9, 2007

One landmark for the falconer is the first flight to the glove. One February evening in failing light Hawky made four consecutive flights to

my garnished glove from a small perch above a woodpile. This was her first flight to me. I was ecstatic. With the confidence of a king, I walked her into the house and set her onto the perch beside Aslan. She made another flight. I hooded the bird and returned her to the mews—a great day for hawk and falconer. The following day she repeated the performance in daylight. I set up a routine. First I placed the hawk onto a perch with a creance and hood. Second, I removed the hood and walked directly away. Third, I simultaneously presented the quail-garnished glove and blew my hawk call whistle. I returned her to the perch after each flight and feeding. We were both gaining confidence in each other.

Hawky’s training advanced quickly. We started inside the house. I slowly increased the distance. Each time after feeding, Hawky enjoyed flying back to the perch, anxious for another chance to earn more food. I fed the hawk quail, cut up into small chunks to allow multiple feedings during training. At this time I also opened the front window of her mews and moved her perch closer to the window. Hawky spent much of her time now flying around the mews. An increased level of exercise with the same amount of food dropped her weight below 1,200 grams. The hawk continued to fly well and was ready for the longer flights made possible with a creance. Less than four weeks after capture, Hawky made her first creance flights with Buttermilk Falls as a backdrop.

Before long, the day arrived that I will never forget. I was alone with her at Robert Treman State Park. The weather was cold and windy. Hawk and falconer now relied solely on training and trust, and no longer on lines and luck. Without her creance attached, I released Hawky from my glove. She flew directly up to the large oak tree before us. I walked away. The hawk sat on a large, open branch and watched my every move intently. Apart from her anklets and field jesses, she was indistinguishable from any other red-tail. One difference remained: she was tied to the falconer with knots of training. Like the champion dog at an obedience show, Hawky flew back and forth a dozen times between the tree and my glove. She flew deftly and with confidence, lifting off carefully from the tree and gliding gently to my glove. The hawk was healthy, active, and strong. She was flying free—quick and dependable to the last flight. We were finally ready to hunt.

HUNTING

March 10 – March 31, 2007

Falconry: the sport of employing falcons, hawks, and sometimes eagles or owls in hunt-

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ing game. We were excited. Guiding a bird on hunting adventures is a partnership older than kings. Only three weeks remained of the hunting season. The time passed quickly. I was not expecting to catch anything. Yet, by season's end, Hawky had captured seven rabbits, three mice, two snakes, and one red squirrel. Our short season was full of memories.

I recall the day she missed her first rabbit. We arrived at the small farm in late morning. The young red-tailed hawk and I started our

hunt in a small wooded lot next to an old barn. A large brush pile lay across the path of the small woods. With the hawk perched high in an oak tree, I climbed onto the pile, jumping up and down like a boy at bedtime. Nothing happened. Repeat. Nothing. I took several steps farther onto the tangle of branches. Suddenly from the corner of my eye it happened. Movement. The immature hawk plunged in a vertical stoop. She looked like a torpedo, wings folded tightly against her sides, dropping like a bomb

PHOTOGRAPH BY ??????

to intersect the target below. The quarry was a rabbit. Screams echoed through the forest as the hawk collided with its victim. As quickly as the bird fell, the rabbit was off, running wildly through the trees. Hawky pursued on wing and hit the rabbit again. Next she chased it through the brush. Defeated, the hawk selected another high perch. She looked over the forest.

A few days later, she captured her first rabbit. Beside a rustic old barn stained dark charcoal from decades of changing weather,

I released Hawky. She was at meticulous hunting weight, 1,150 grams. Mopane and I entered the thick bramble directly below her perch. I stepped onto the first brush pile, and a rabbit darted across the small bog. Hawky dropped off the limb and sailed toward her target. The rabbit stopped and the hawk drilled a hole into the snow. The frightened rabbit retreated. Hawky followed on foot chasing awkwardly through the deep snow, like a stork in the mud. The rabbit escaped, and the hawk flew up to a new perch. We trudged on. Behind the barn we called to Hawky, hopeful she would follow. Executing a graceful swoop through the forest, she landed in a small birch tree. A small overturned skiff lay on the ground near her perch. Snow covered the bottom and rabbit tracks led under the side. I brushed a pile of snow off the boat and jumped hoping to scare out a rabbit. Nothing happened. I jumped again. Nothing. I stepped away from the boat. Suddenly, a streak of brown ripped through the air toward the ground. I raced over to where the raptorial bolt of lightning had struck. Mopane, with eyes wide open, arrived next. A large rabbit lay strewn across the snow below the bird. I was thrilled—our first rabbit together!

The capture of Hawky's second rabbit was dazzling. We had been hunting for almost an hour when she chose a high perch in a white pine. As we pushed ahead through the thick brush and cedar swamp, Hawky remained behind. I balked at her strategy knowing she was slightly heavy at 1,200 grams. My companions were Alex, age five and Madeline, age seven. They flanked my side as we crept slowly onward. Alex yelled, and I turned to watch a rabbit circle behind us. Hawky left the perch just as the rabbit raced across an opening in the dense forest. Soaring triumphed over scamper. The hawk stopped the rabbit instantly with a blow to the head.

More memories and rabbits followed.

We hunted at the farm again. Back in the mixed hardwood forest the hawk dove into a brush pile sending a terrified rabbit across the snow. Hawky followed close behind, but the rabbit circled back. The bird returned and lurched on a small branch. I jumped onto the pile and a rabbit exploded beneath me in a tangle of brush. Hawky dove at my feet and buried a rabbit in the snow. I made in, collected the rabbit and we continued on. Erin and I circled the marsh checking brush piles and thickets for rabbit tracks. Near the end of



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our hike, Hawky dropped from a high perch in an oak tree. She soared the length of one football field before plummeting into a thick tangle of brambles. We raced to her side. A large rabbit struggled to escape. Hawky had captured two rabbits in one hour—the first double of the season. We marveled over the grace and beauty of this spectacular bird.

Only one week remained of our first season. I decided to return to her favorite farm for our last weekend together. A steady, hard rain pelted down most of Saturday, but we hunted anyway. Arriving at the farm we found a large rabbit feeding near the front woods by the road. I released Hawky and she chose a perch in a large maple tree in the front of the house. She immediately spotted the rabbit and dropped from her branch. The rabbit leapt into the brush just in time, and the hawk landed on the ground. Hawky then flew up to a smaller maple tree to watch the action. We walked through the woodlot, and the rabbit burst out of the brush, racing across the yard. The hawk leaped into the pounding rain after the rabbit. Seconds later she connected, sending the rabbit tumbling across the ground. Hawky was very wet and reluctant to follow. The rain slowed to a drizzle. From a covered roost in

an old pine tree she spread her wings in the wind to dry.

Like a wet flower after a rain, Sunday opened sun-drenched, warm and beautiful. A light breeze mixed the fresh air. We started at the farm with Carrie, Mopane, and my friend Alain. The red-tailed hawk was anxious to fly. She selected a high perch to embark on the hunt. I circled around a far woodlot and started walking toward the hawk. Alain and Carrie pushed in from the sides. Only minutes passed before Hawky plummeted from above in her attack. I heard furor and tumult. By the time I reached the bird, she was fighting with an enormous rabbit. With the help of Carrie we collected the rabbit and continued hunting. In the thickest part of the forest, the hawk struck again. The rabbit darted from a brush pile, and was snared in a small opening within a tangle of blackberry brambles. With two rabbits in our bag, I carried Hawky back on my glove. She was content with a full round crop.

We shared other experiences, too. We chased squirrels around the house. It was a spectacle of exciting flights, jumping squirrels and a nervous falconer. We pestered field mice in the snow. Once, kneeling beside the hawk, I dug

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into the snow where she clung to something stubbornly. A black vole emerged, and Hawky swallowed it whole. And we hassled snakes on the ground. She loved to jump onto snakes lying in the sun on the forest floor. Each time I gathered the bird, she immediately swallowed the snake like a child slurping spaghetti. Our short, noteworthy season was over. Many lessons were learned through our first hawk. Many more lay ahead.

RELEASE DAY

Earth Day — April 22, 2007

In the morning, Mopane and I met John Parks, master falconer and director of the Cornell Raptor Program, who was going to band my red-tailed hawk before I release her. When that was done, we returned to the farm where we had shared countless experiences with the hawk. We gorged Hawky on a ruffed grouse

right before releasing her. She fed eagerly, finishing the breast and legs then sat there at ease with a bulging round crop. Mopane and I released Hawky behind the house where we often hunted. We held the hawk together, Mopane removed the hood, I cut the anklets, and she was free.

Hawky looked at us and pivoted on our gloves. Mopane and I were sad. She flew to a nearby tree and hopped from branch to branch enjoying her newfound independence—scratching, rubbing, and preening. The young hawk moved higher into the trees and soon flew off into the forest. Tears fell, and we said goodbye. We left her to the forest. I remember thinking, what a gallant bird . . . brave, spirited and honorable. And what a noble alliance: hawk and falconer. As Mopane and I walked back to the farm we knew we were lucky, blessed with an extraordinary friend—our first hawk. ■

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