

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WGM-27
Falcons and Me - V
To Train a Hawk

Højsdal 12
Hareskov, Denmark
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Dear Dick,

After a trapping trip, the falconer returns home a tired man, but full of the excitement of catching a falcon. The wild falcon which he has trapped hisses displeasure and seems far from the docile and well-mannered hunter it will become in a few short weeks. The photographs of wild-caught gyrfalcons in WGM-25 are perhaps misleading. They show freshly-trapped gyrfalcons calmly sitting on the falconer's glove one-half hour after capture, but few wild falcons are as unafraid as the northern gyrfalcon. Even among the gyrs, some birds are seemingly quite tame after capture while others are as wild as any bird.

Few falcons immediately after capture will sit on the falconer's gauntlet outside in daylight without a hood. Fewer still will eat a full meal under such conditions, but some of the gyrs we trapped in Greenland would. Rather more to the rule is a hissing, biting, clawing bundle of fury. The falconer, through patience and gentleness, will change all that. And here is how.

Upon capture, the falcon is usually hooded and placed in an elastic sock to rest and calm down. The hood, specially selected from a stock of varying sizes, is a light-tight leather cap fitting snugly on the falcon's head. The hood holds an important place in the training of a falcon; it also gives rise to some misconceptions about falconry. But I shall return to the hood in more detail anon.

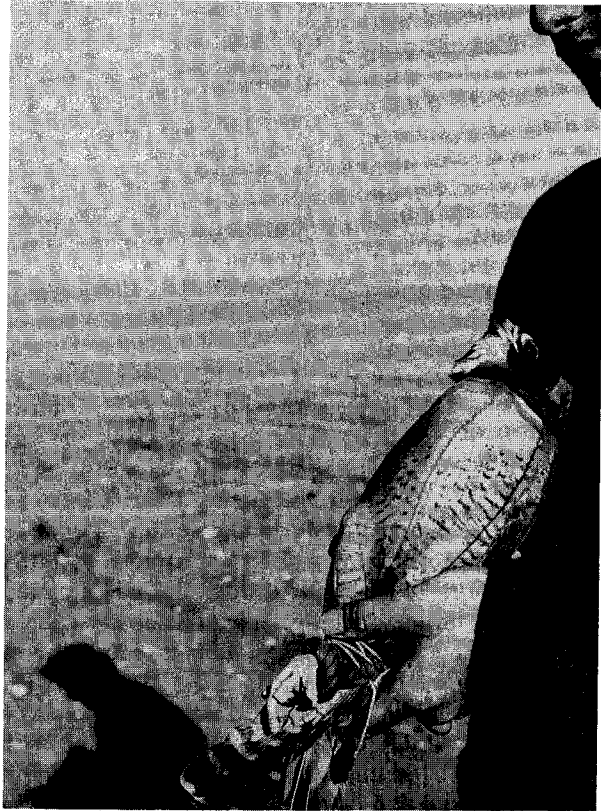
The sock mentioned above can be just that: a stocking, and a lady's nylon stocking serves admirably. If a falconer is careful he will wrap a bit of masking tape about the falcon's feet after placing it in the sock. This will avoid embarrassing and painful entanglements with sharp talons and, even more important, will prevent the falcon from piercing her own feet in the rage of the moment, which could lead to infection and serious consequences.

Since the falcon remains in the sock only a short while and must sit on the falconer's glove or on a perch during its training, a pair of soft leather strips are tied one to each ankle. These thin strips of leather (called jesses by the falconer) are the most important piece of equipment in falconry. They are changed periodically when they show signs of wear, but otherwise they are always with the falcon.

The jesses each have a small slit near their ends, used when slipping the jess through a metal swivel. Through the swivel, in turn, is passed a four-foot leash, which is used to tie the falcon to a block (perch) during the day, or to an indoor perching place at night. The leash and swivel are, of course, removed before releasing the falcon in free flight. Only the jesses remain when the bird hunts.

The hood is an important part of early training in falconry. Hoods are normally made by the falconer himself, although most falconry equipment, including hoods, can now be purchased from several individuals in North America and Europe who have expanded their equipment making for the benefit of other falconers. There is little doubt that most falcons dislike having a leather cap plopped over their heads, at least in the early stages of training. A wild, newly-caught falcon is more afraid of the falconer than the hood, however, so an early start with the hood is far easier than waiting until the falcon has been tamed. Moreover, if the falconer is careful, he will observe one of the cardinal rules of the art: never disturb a hooded falcon. The bird soon learns to tolerate (and sometimes even welcome) the hood, for it means a quiet rest with no threat of being bothered.

A final word on the leather hood: it must fit well but not too tightly; it must be light-tight and not touch sensitive parts around the beak or eyes; it must be light in weight and impossible for the falcon to remove. Finally, the hood is used for only a matter of minutes each day, but those minutes are critical for the falcon's welfare. A hooded falcon is a calm and docile falcon. When riding in an automobile, the falcon will be hooded to avoid the danger of damage to vital wing and tail feathers through bashing against window or door. When in the field she will be hooded until it is her turn to hunt, for otherwise she will waste energy in bating to be free and off on the



A haggard peregrine tiercel placed in a nylon stocking immediately after capture. Haggards are not kept for training, but are banded and released. We "socked" this fellow while awaiting a colleague who had the bands.

Hooding a falcon



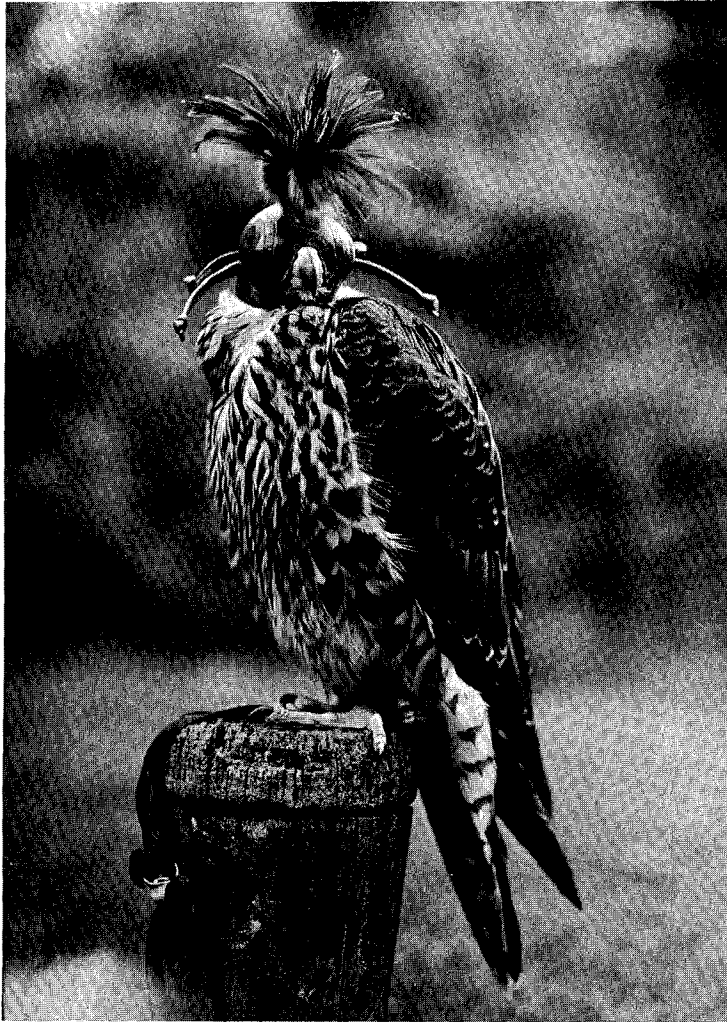
chase. When being shown to strangers, or in subway crowds, or the local pub, it is often handy to be able to hood a falcon; she is thus spared the agony of confronting humans at too close a range. Tame falcons do not mind such human associations at all, but there is a limit. I have had falcons almost gratefully stretch their necks out to be hooded, then tuck up one foot beneath their breast feathers and fall asleep.

The photographs on page 3 show a falcon (tiercel prairie) being hooded. This particular falcon only just tolerates being hooded, but no more.

The falconer now has a bird equipped with jesses on each leg, a swivel, leather leash, and hood. Let me add here that, although there are many modern modifications of the standard equipment (nylon leashes and salt-water tuna swivels), the basic ideas behind the equipment used in falconry have remained unchanged throughout its history. The taming and training procedures, however, have changed somewhat with the times. As modern medicine looks askance at bloodletting and other medieval cures, so have falconers developed their own training methods which depart from the rather more taxing modes of training used by our forefathers.



Trained passage falcons, peregrine falcon (l) and peregrine tiercel (r) sitting hooded on their perch in a station wagon. (Note size difference between falcon (female) and tiercel (male)).



A hooded passage peregrine falcon weathering before her daily hunt.

With a wild-caught falcon there is no question of having to train it for hunting because it knows all about hunting already. The main idea in falconry, therefore, is to tame this wild bird enough that it will tolerate Man at close range. The ideal is to achieve this tameness quickly and to get the bird back on the wing to maintain its flying strength and endurance.

Many falconers are overcautious on the taming end; their birds are grounded too long before beginning the hunting life again. Other falconers fly their birds quite wild hoping thereby to keep them closer to their normal hunting state, still rather wary of humans. There must be a happy medium. I prefer a tamer falcon, but I also know from bitter experience what happens when a hawk places her trust in Man. Man often reciprocates with a bash on the head or a load of

buckshot while screaming "vermin". A falcon must be tamed to become used to the approach of her master, especially his approach after the falcon has caught wild quarry.

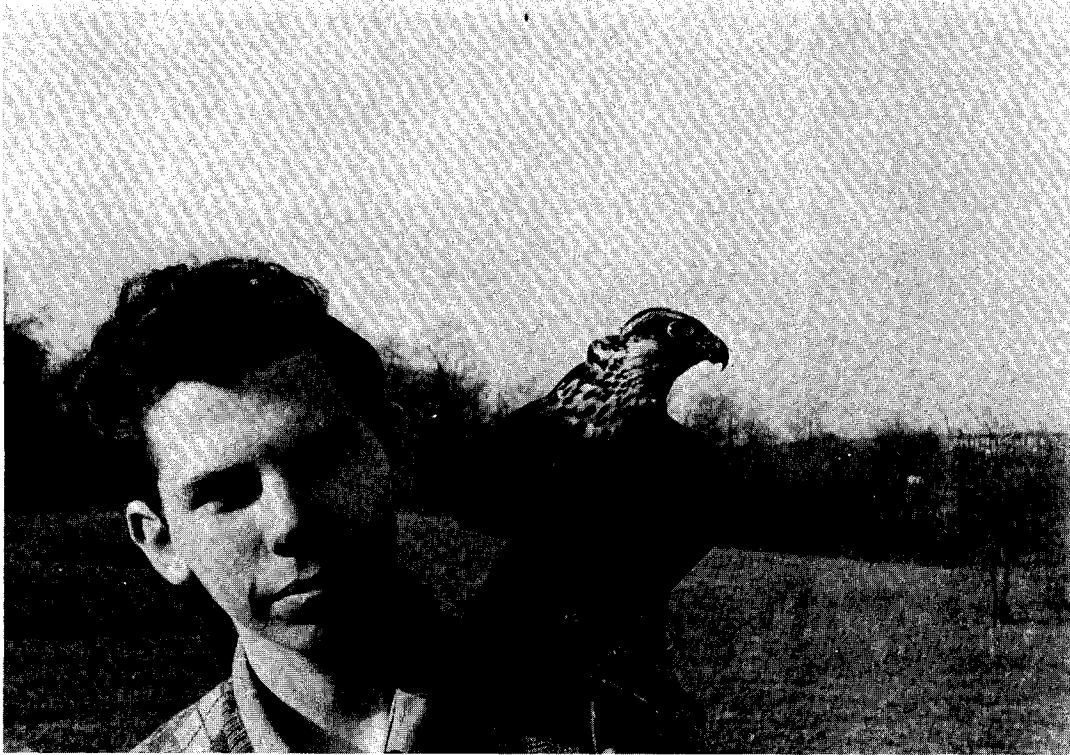
To get a freshly-trapped falcon used to humans, a good method is to carry the bird upon the gloved fist, hooded at first, then unhooded at night or in the dusky hours of early morning or evening. By being carried on the falconer's fist, the wild bird will soon grow accustomed to the strange sights and sounds of the falconer's world. By careful and deliberate movement and by avoiding anything of a frightful nature, the falconer soon wins at least some grudging acceptance from his charge.

During the first few days of taming, the falcon will not readily eat its fill of meat. This is perhaps all to the good, for a slightly hungry falcon is more tractable. The falcon's weight should be carefully controlled; a daily weighing and the feel of breast and leg muscles gives the falconer a good idea about the condition of his bird.

After an initial reduction in weight of up to perhaps ten per cent, many falcons are eventually hunted at their original weight at capture, some slightly less. A big misconception about falconry is that half-starved birds are released screaming at their quarry. If one stops to



Weighing an eyass tiercel prairie falcon (550 grams) before her daily hunt.



Portrait of a young falconer (Carl Schreiber, 1950) and manned peregrine falcon, well into the lure flying stage of training.

think for a moment, it is obvious that the falconer must have the health and well-being of his birds uppermost in his mind. To succeed in flying at wild quarry, the trained falcon must approach the condition of a wild falcon. The trained bird must also remain feather-perfect. The whole secret in falconry seems to be a falcon with a healthy appetite, strong on the wing, tolerant of her gentle master--a bird looking forward eagerly to her daily hunting flights.

To continue a description of the early part of training: after the falcon has been hooded and unhooded enough to accustom her to this bit of inconvenience, she is carried by the falconer on his fist. This early carriage and handling, called "manning" by falconers, must attempt to introduce the hawk to every possible situation she will meet at close range in the future. The falconer must realize that he is quite loathsome in the sight of the falcon; his every action must be slow, gentle, persuasive. The falcon in a few days will learn to tolerate the falconer, will eat a meal from his gloved fist, and will permit him to stroke her breast feathers. The falcon at this point is manned, but by no means tame. She must still become accustomed to many strange sights at close range; she must eventually be able to sit bareheaded on her block in the back lawn without constantly attempting to fly into the next county; she must tolerate, even look forward to,

the falconer's approach. His near presence almost always means a tidbit of meat offered between the fingers. It might even mean a bit of carrying on the fist, for there is where the falcon eventually feels most at home. The offering of tidbits is a vital part of training. The falcon soon learns that not only is there nothing to fear at the falconer's approach, but that everything about his approach seems to mean food, if only a tiny morsel of meat.

Taming can often be a matter of years. But of course the falcon is flying free within weeks of capture. To get a bird on the wing as quickly as possible is the most important part of training. After learning to put up with the falconer and his funny-looking face and strange clothes, the falcon is encouraged to hop to the falconer's gloved fist for food. The falcon already knows that the falconer's presence means food, for she has received occasional tidbits from his outstretched hand and eaten her daily meal while on his fist. Now there is the falconer's fist with that enticing meal of meat just inches from the falcon on her perch. Some birds will hop the short space to their meal without hesitation, but more often it takes a matter of minutes or more before the falcon gets up enough courage for this first step. Coming toward Man is the very antithesis of a wild animal's behavior, but once the falcon learns that the short jump onto the falconer's gauntlet means dinner, she quickly comes to him at ever-increasing distances. At this point the falcon begins to become really tame, probably because her natural reaction to flee has been supplanted by actually going to that which she would normally fear. And such action, against her wild nature, had not resulted in anything fearsome--to the contrary, she has been rewarded with a fine meal each time.

Although the initial jump to the fist may have been only a few inches, the falcon is soon coming the length of the leash. At this stage the falcon is fed from a freshly-killed bird or from a meat-garnished, artificial bird or "lure". The falconer holds the lure in his gloved fist; after the falcon has flown to the glove and has had a few mouthfuls, the lure is thrown upon the ground. Most keen falcons will immediately pounce from the falconer's fist to the lure. From that time on the falcon is called to the lure and not to the falconer's glove. A lure swung in the air is quite visible to a falcon high in the air whereas the falconer's fist may not be.

To increase the flying distance to the lure and to insure that a new falcon will not head over the hill, a light line or "creance" is attached to the swivel to replace the leash. If a keen falcon comes immediately to the lure from a good distance (say 50 yards or so), the creance may be dispensed with the first day. The falcons I have trained have been flown on a creance once or twice, and perhaps once the following day after which they are flown free. Flying a bird free for the first time (usually three or four weeks after capture) is obviously an exciting occasion. I am sure every falconer relives that same pang of uncertainty every time a newly-trained falcon is flown free the first time. If training has progressed as it should with repeated calls to the lure from ever-increasing distances, there is really little risk of



Lure flying an intermewed peregrine falcon in the Black Forest of West Germany, 1957.

losing a falcon on this first free flight, unless the wind is gusting or the day particularly warm or the falcon overfed. Under such conditions it is best to wait until another day.

The real risk in losing a falcon is after hunting begins and the bird is ranging a bit farther afield or chases far away in a determined effort to catch her prey. Hunting is the ultimate aim of falconry; but because of space, terrain, and local laws, many falconers fly their birds to the lure only. For the first several days of free flight, the falcon is called off a perch or assistant's glove to the lure, which is swung in the air. The falcon is allowed to take the lure, preferably in the air but usually on the ground at first, and it is then allowed to eat a good meal. On the next day the lure is again swung in the air. The falcon zooms in after it, but the falconer twitches the lure away at the last second. The falcon normally banks up and around looking for her meal and is then given the lure. This process is repeated and the falconer jerks the lure away several times in succession just before the falcon can grab it. In this way the falcon is exercised; the number of "stoops" to the lure may reach 50 or more--or until the falconer's arm gives out. Gradually, strength and endurance are built up in the falcon.

But lure flying a falcon has another function and that is to call the falcon back after an unsuccessful chase or if for some reason the falconer wants his bird to return. It is an exhilarating experience



Passage peregrine falcon before flying up to "wait on".

the air and releasing slow pigeons when the falcon is at good height above the field soon teaches the falcon that success in hunting will only come when she is high in the air.

Eventually the falcon when released will mount up in the air in ever higher circles above the falconer to "wait on" until he is able to flush game for her. The falcon, after climbing to optimum game height and waiting patiently high above the falconer, was said in olden times to be in her "pride of place".

Use of good bird dogs is almost an essential for successful game hawking--either dogs which will hold a point or those like the Springer spaniel which will quarter and flush game without pointing. The teamwork between dog and falcon is a thing of beauty, fascinating to watch. At the falconry field trials of the German Falconers' Club (DF0) in autumn 1966, I saw a German short-haired pointer hold a point for 23 minutes until it was determined that everything was ready: the falcon was in correct position, the camera men as well placed as possible, and

to have a falcon high in the air appearing no larger than a swallow and in the next instant having it swoop in to land on the lure at one's very feet.

Excessive use of the lure will often keep the falcon close to the ground looking for a meal near the falconer. But falcons do their most effective hunting in vertical dives from heights of 200 feet or more. The next step in training is, therefore, to induce the falcon to mount high in the air and to circle above the falconer or his hunting dog.

Some falcons will circle at hunting height, or "wait on", without being trained for it. If the falcon keeps low to the ground near the falconer, always looking for the lure, a fast-flying barn pigeon is released when the falcon is low in the air. The pigeon will probably outfly the falcon with ease; if not, you have a very good, low-flying falcon! After an unsuccessful chase the falcon will often return to the falconer at a good height. At this point a slow pigeon is released, the falcon dives down and perhaps makes an easy kill. Repeating the process of releasing fast pigeons when the falcon is low in

the guests made aware of what was happening. Then the flush was made and a cock pheasant killed instantaneously by the stooping peregrine trcel. The trcel belonged to Dr. Christian Saar of Berlin, perhaps the best trainer of falcons in the world. It all looked so easy, a truly professional performance.

Few falconers are fortunate enough to be able to have all five requirements necessary for successful flying with the long-winged falcons: time, terrain, game, dogs, and good falcons. The classic flights of falconry are therefore available to a limited few. Some falconers fly their birds on feral pigeons, some on smaller game such as rooks, crows, and magpie, and the like. The latter flights can be as exciting and probably more demanding than flights on grouse and pheasant. Rook and crow-hawking requires a technique all its own. Magpie-hawking needs a crowd of beaters to flush the wily magpie from its shelter in hedge or tree, and to discourage a hasty escape route when the falcon has momentarily drifted to a far end of the field and is not well placed for the kill.

Terrain is perhaps the most important factor for success in flying falcons at wild game (given the presence of at least a reasonable amount of game). Our mid-western states and the rolling prairie extending north into Canada are the best areas for flying the long-wings.



The team: "Blondie", a passage peregrine falcon, and my old Springer spaniel "Paddy of Woodland Glen".



A falcon "rousing" (shaking all feathers) during the daily preening session.

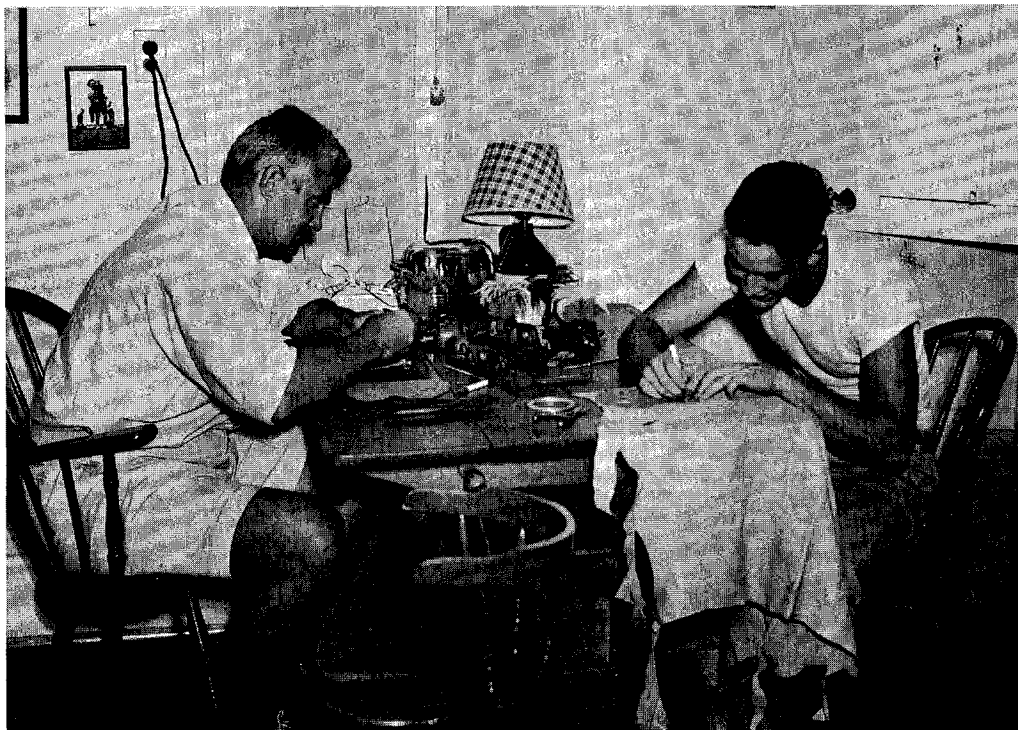
After a successful kill, the falcon may be fed well, or gorged, if it is not to be flown again that day. More often the falcon is given a small reward of meat, for like most humans she will not work if she is too well fed and has no appetite.

Falcons are always fed fresh, raw meat, preferably freshly-killed birds or small mammals. The ideal food is what the falcon would be taking in the wild. Trained falcons need not only meat but bones, feathers, even heads and feet of their prey. Health is assured by trying to match natural conditions.

Since weather conditions in the wild prohibit daily hunting at times, a trained falcon can well miss an occasional meal--and may even profit by doing so. The falcon's metabolism can also be adjusted to good meals every two or three days with little in between. The falcon probably benefits from a full gorge occasionally. A bird in good condition, well advanced in training, can probably be flown with good appetite the day following a full gorge, but it may be unwise to fly at such times. A falcon with full strength in flight, but with a healthy appetite is the ideal in falconry.

I have so far been talking about the training of the falcons or long-wings. The training of the short-winged hawks differs in several marked ways, although the basic principles are the same regardless of the type of raptor trained. The short-wings (goshawks and other accipiters) are flown directly from the hawk's fist to hunt their prey. They are carried on the fist through field and mixed woodland and are usually allowed to fly off at will. The assumption is that they can more quickly see whatever prey is about than can the hawk.

The flights with short-wings are usually shorter and more direct than the classic waiting-on flight with falcons. Short-wings are hunted over fields with various protective cover such as bushes and



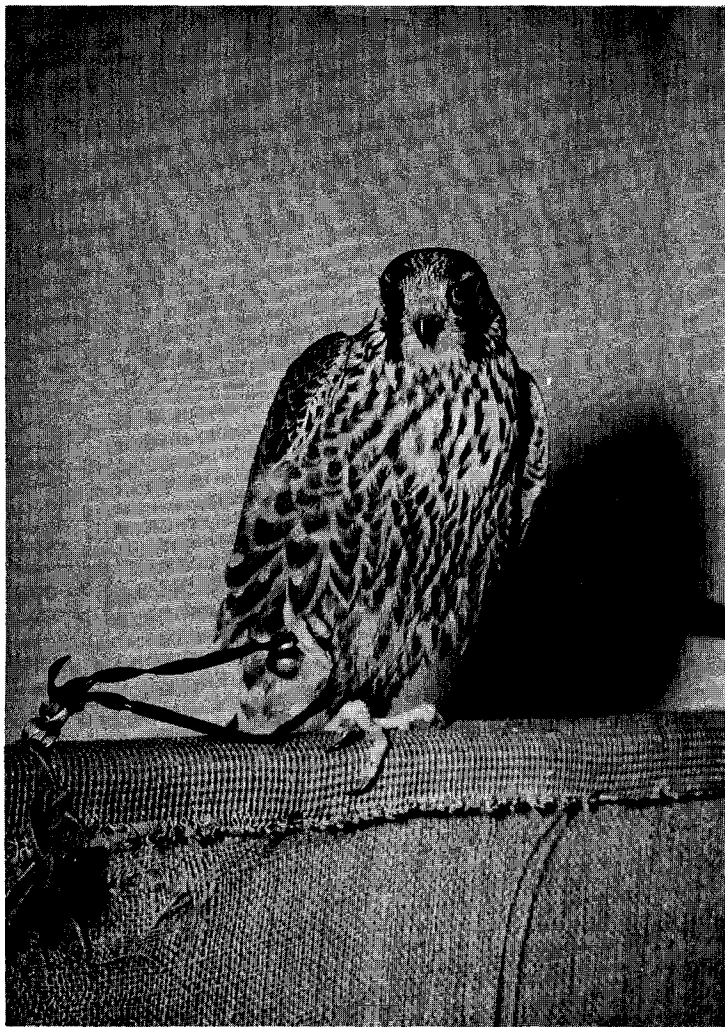
In a falconer's kitchen: making hoods and other equipment before a trip to Greenland, 1951. Corny McFadden (l) and Bob Jordan (r).

trees, so that the flight with a goshawk, for example, is usually of no more than a few seconds' duration before the prey has either been caught or has reached protective cover. Short-wings are flown not only directly from the fist, but also are called back to the fist again after an unsuccessful flight, although the lure may be used occasionally.

Falcons, like most birds, renew their feathers each year through the moulting process. This usually begins in late spring and may continue over a period of months. Many falconers do not fly their birds during the moult, but will put them up in a vacant building or room to drop their feathers in peace. The birds are usually given a generous and variable diet at this time so that the strength of new feathers may be assured. Some falconers fly their birds throughout the moult since this corresponds with summer and vacation time.

Falconry, as I have intimated in earlier letters, is a demanding hobby. Aside from the outdoor skills it requires, falconry places demands in equipment making, preparation of trapping gear, and the work involved in providing a suitable shelter for the hawks. So time-consuming can all this become that many a neophyte has wondered in exasperation if he doesn't have a tiger by the tail instead of a falcon. But the time spent has its rewards in being able to observe at close range some of the most exciting animals we are heirs to.

What about keeping wild birds in captivity? Is it cruel as some people have suggested? I cannot answer the question objectively for I have never been able to get the falcon's answer to the question. Well-trained falcons, flown daily in challenging flights at wild quarry, falcons in feather-perfect condition with a healthy bloom to their plumage, falcons flying in obviously robust condition with but two thin strips of leather and perhaps a bell on each leg to show they are trained, lead an idyllic life by my way of thinking. (Bells facilitate locating a falcon after it has made a kill.) Of course, some folks will say "what a shame to keep the bird tethered", but my reaction would be to ask about all other captive animals: over-fed apartment house dogs straining and choking at the leash as they pull their masters about the park in a Sunday morning contest; caged birds, other cooped-up pets, horses in bits and blinders stalled for most of their lives--all should be considered. Compared to most of these examples a trained falcon leads a regal life. He flies free almost daily (depending upon weather) so that he could well quit the scene if it were not to his liking. Consider the daily routine, which in the final analysis is not far different from life in the wild, except, unlike in the wild, a trained falcon is fed regardless of luck in hunting. Many falconers fly their birds early in the day. Wild birds probably do the bulk of their hunting in early morning and then sit out most of the remaining hours of daylight. Wild birds admittedly spend more time on the wing than trained ones, but one must also consider that a wild falcon migrates long distances each year and has a hungry family to provide for each spring. (Some trained falcons also migrate and are lost forever, much to the chagrin of their host!)



In the hawk house or mews: shelter at night
or on stormy days.

The trained bird has a roof over its head at night and shelter to protect it from violent rain, wind, and snow by day. Most falconers, if they were brave enough (or foolish enough), would discover that if they untied the falcon perching on its block in the back garden, it would make a beeline for the hawk house and its favorite roost. Falcons dislike exposure to wind and will seek a sheltered corner in the wild.

Trained falcons, in summary, are fed, cared for, exercised, and sheltered. In time, they may even be induced to breed in captivity. Things look promising on that front right now.

I am not at all sure that one could train a falcon after reading this letter, but space prevents recording the myriad details necessary for successful training. Only so much can be learned from written words; the vital techniques come through experience.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "W. G. Mattox".

W. G. Mattox

Received in New York July 11, 1968.