

DO YOU REALLY WANT TO BECOME A FALCONER?

INTRODUCTION

There are three common questions asked by people inquiring about falconry:

- (1) What are the regulations concerning keeping a raptor?
- (2) Where and how do you obtain birds for use in falconry?
- (3) What are the details on how to become a falconer?

People asking these questions are usually those who have recently read an article on falconry in a newspaper or a popular magazine. Some of these people may actually have seen a trained bird in flight. Few really know any falconers, however, and most do not have any idea of the time, effort, money, and facilities the sport of falconry demands.

Responsible falconers and falconry organizations almost always try to discourage newcomers to the sport, particularly when their interest is kindled in this manner. Newspaper and magazine articles on falconry are frequently inaccurate, and they tend to stress the sensational aspects of the sport. For example, success in taking game may be grossly exaggerated, and little emphasis may be given the fact that the falconer's chief reward is the beauty of the flight itself, whether successful or not. Flight demonstrations make falconry look easy, but they cannot possibly give any idea of the long hours and hard work the trained raptor represents.

Of all sports, falconry is the only one which uses a trained raptor. Falcons, hawks, eagles, and owls are essential elements of our wildlife. The competent falconer recognizes this and takes care to follow sound conservation principles in pursuit of the sport. However, the casual and uninformed novice, by attempting to satisfy a passing fancy, may do harm in many ways and cast discredit upon falconry itself.

Therefore, before falconers will aid anyone newly attracted to falconry, most will require proof of serious, dedicated interest in the sport. Falconers feel that anything less is not worth bothering with, and that birds which fall into the hands of those who are not deeply motivated should be restored to the wild without delay.

Serious dedication is normally demonstrated by reading anything and everything available on falcons and falconry, by a sincere interest in all aspects of wildlife and the out-of-doors, and by a persistent effort to learn the

fundamentals of the sport, all before any attempt to obtain a bird. Most successful falconers began in this manner, and today's newcomer must expect a similar period of apprenticeship, leading to a reasonable expectation that a bird may be safely entrusted in your care, before help can be expected.

However, if you are convinced that your interest in falconry is more than superficial and are willing to undertake the necessary study before you get a bird, you must then be prepared to fulfill certain additional minimum requirements.

- You must have sufficient time and patience to devote to training and flying a bird. The trained falcon requires an absolute minimum of one hour per day, 365 days a year. A bird in training requires substantially more time. If this time is not available - if school studies or employment interferes - it is far better never to begin.
- You must have the funds to obtain food and the basic materials for falconry equipment, or the time and skill to make everything you need. A hawk in captivity can eat approximately three pounds of fresh meat a week. In addition, leather, metal and lumber and the necessary tools to work with them may be expensive. These are needed for shelters, perches, weathering blocks, leashes, jesses and hood. Other items which must be purchased are swivels, falconer's glove and bells.
- You must provide suitable facilities for keeping a bird in fair and foul weather. Captive hawks and falcons must be protected at all times from cats, dogs and other predators, including humans, as well as, extremes of heat and cold, wind, and dampness. They should be provided a weathering place where they may be kept outdoors in good weather, winter and summer, and an opportunity to bathe.
- They must have a sheltered perch at night and in bad weather, dry and protected from the wind. While raptors adjust well to cold weather, they suffer in the heat, and must never be left in the direct rays of the afternoon summer sun.
- You must have an adequate and reasonable convenient area for flying falcons, or long-winged hawks, need open space, preferably at least a mile across where they may be flown from a position high over the falconer. Curious passers-by, or other interference which could scare a bird, and which might cause it to stray from the sight of the falconer, will make an otherwise satisfactory area unacceptable. The permission of the landowner must always be obtained when flying on private land.

Whether or not you eventually become a falconer, we hope that you will retain a friendly interest in raptors and falconry and in the conservation of our birds of prey. They need your help in eliminating needless persecution at the hands of those who know no better.

FALCONRY FACILITIES AND EQUIPMENT

Guidelines for Minimum Requirements

GENERAL

The following Guidelines were developed by the Technical Advisory Committee of the North American Falconers' Association (NAFA) for the purpose of insuring that facilities and equipment of prospective falconers meet minimum acceptable standards. www.n-a-f-a.com

The inspection and approval of such facilities will be a prerequisite to being granted a license to practice the sport. These guidelines are furnished to each applicant for a falconry license to inform him of the standards by which his facilities and equipment will be judged.

Wide variations, especially in housing, may be expected. This brochure can hardly include descriptions of all acceptable systems. What are presented, however, are standards covering the more important aspects to be inspected and illustrations of basic principles involved. These are especially important in the case of the beginner. Where the more practiced falconer chooses to make adaptations such are based on experience, and so long as the basic principles are not violated, such adaptations certainly are acceptable even though not specifically included here.

Grateful acknowledgement is given to the NAFA for the use of material and illustrations which they provided, and to Professor E. W. Jameson, Jr. for the use of Figure 4 and 5 as taken from "An Introduction to Hawking", by E. W. Jameson, Jr. and Hans J. Peetaers, Davis, California - 1971.

HOUSING

A trained hawk's housing requirements are simple. The primary need is shelter from direct sun, wind, rain and snow. Dryness, fresh air and an absence of draft are also required. These are conditions that a wild hawk seeks and the closer the falconer comes to providing the maximum levels of such, the more his hawks will benefit in health and comfort. The quarters in which the hawk is to be kept, whether indoors (mews) and out (weathering area), is an area which ideally is set aside exclusively for the birds(s).

1. Indoor Facilities (Mews):

The mews may be a separate building (Figure 1) or a room within a building. Ordinarily, sunlight and ventilation requirements make windows on the south or east exposures most desirable. The size of the mews varies with the species kept and the space available, but a room about eight feet high and square is appropriate for a raptor up to the size of a red-tailed hawk. Here the hawk may be kept loose or tethered to an appropriate perch.

Tethering is very much a matter of individual preference. It is most definitely preferable where more than one bird is kept and is normally mandatory where the sex and species of raptors kept in the same room are different. Accipiters (sharp-shinned, Cooper's and Goshawks) must never be placed free among other birds (including their own kind) as they may kill all others. Even when tied, the wise falconer provides separate mews or partitions his facilities for Accipiters so that in the event of their escape possible disaster is avoided. When in training, raptors are generally tethered.

The Interior of the mews should be severely plain with no beams or ledges to tempt the hawk to fly to a higher perching place. It is a characteristic of the birds of prey to seek higher perches from which to survey their surroundings. Anything that appears to offer a foothold above the hawk's rightful perch holds a hawk's attention. In a well-ordered mews a hawk sits at ease when tethered because there is no other inviting perching place available.

Windows should be protected on the inside by vertical bars or doweling spaced smaller than the bird's width, whether or not birds are kept tethered in the mews. If screen or chicken-wire is desired for additional protection or safety, such should be placed outside the vertical barring at sufficient distance to prevent a hawk free in the mews (intentionally or otherwise), from grasping the mesh and damaging its plumage. This, incidentally, is the reason that bars/dowels are placed vertically rather than horizontally. The mews should be capable of being darkened without interfering with overall ventilation, if fresh wild-caught birds are to be placed in it.

Mews Doors should be secured (by lock if necessary) and should, additionally have some sort of hook or spring so that the falconer can keep the door safely closed while inside. Doors of any mews which open directly out-of-doors should be closed by an additional protective covering, inside or out, to prevent escape of a bird free in the mews (intentionally or otherwise) as the door is opened. Such protective covering can be achieved by a hanging cloth or plastic sheet. If the curtain is placed at an angle inside the mews, it provides the falconer with a small enclosed alcove into which he may step and loosen the outer door behind him before pushing aside the cover to enter the mews itself.

The Floor of the mews should be constructed so as to facilitate cleaning. A layer of gravel or sand is excellent as these materials absorb moisture. The items must be washed occasionally for cleanliness. A covering of straw, hay, sawdust, or similar material is not normally acceptable as these materials retain moisture and provide a medium favorable for the growth of pathogenic fungi and bacteria dangerous to the bird's health.

Although numerous variations in a captive raptor's housing may be appropriate under given circumstances, bird cages of the "pet-store-variety" or other such enclosures are totally unacceptable, as are any facilities which do not afford the bird proper space and /or protection.

2. Outdoor "Weathering" Facilities:

Most falconers prefer to place their charges out-of-doors for sunning, etc. (called "weathering"), weather permitting. The birds are placed on appropriate perches on some soft, resilient surface. A thick heavy lawn can be excellent. This surface should be cleanable, or in the case of a lawn, the perch moved frequently enough to prevent soiling the area beneath it. Soft sand, although appearing ideal, should be avoided; it is inclined to get between the bird's legs and the jesses and cause abrasion of the skin. Perches must be located so that birds are not exposed to direct midsummer or mid-day sun without shade also being available. Any site where birds are to be weathered must be protected to prevent the raptors from attack by dogs or cats and from undue disturbance by strangers or children. For this reason a weathering site normally should be protectively fenced. Without such fencing, NO bird should be weathered unless under the immediate and continuous supervision of the falconer.

The size of the weathering site is dependent upon the length of the restraining leash. Each bird normally requires an area approximately 8x8 to 10x10 feet to prevent its body or wings from touching the enclosing fence or other birds. In many areas, attacks by wild predators (mammals or birds) on falconers' birds are not uncommon, even in relatively built-up suburban areas. This is especially true of attacks by wild owls on birds left out overnight. In areas where wild predators may constitute a problem, a totally enclosed weathering site, i.e., a site such as described above plus overhead protection in the form of wire or netting becomes extremely desirable if not mandatory. This overhead wire or netting must be high enough (6-7 feet) so that the bird may not touch it when at the end of its leash and so that the falconer can comfortably work inside the enclosure. As in any weathering site, the bird should not be able to touch the peripheral fencing or any other raptor in the same enclosure.

NOTE: A bird is NOT placed free in such an enclosed weathering site, but rather is tethered by leashes on normal outdoor perches.

EQUIPMENT

Mandatory prior to Acquisition of a Raptor:

Glove:

Some type of pliable leather glove is a necessity (one hand--usually the left-only). For smaller species of raptors a light leather gardening glove is sufficient; for larger species, an all-weather welder's glove is appropriate.

Leash:

Varies in size and type depending on the species of raptors to be used. A thirty-inch leather bootlace is appropriate for a kestrel; a sixty-inch leather leash (1/4 to 1/2 inch wide, 1/16 to 3/32 inch thick or a 3/16 inch nylon cord with the ends burned to seal them) is adequate for a bird the size of a red-tailed hawk. A knot (called a "button") tied in the end is necessary to prevent the leash from slipping through the swivel. Figure 5(g) shows the means of making the "button."

Swivel:

Several types are used. The classic "Figure 8" swivel may be purchased from this manufacturing hawking equipment or a heavy-duty fishing swivel may be used. The larger the bird, the larger the swivel that is required. The swivel is used to attach the leash to the jesses and to prevent twisting of either or both. The commercial "snap" or "dog leash" spring swivels should never be used in tethering a bird to an outside perch. They simply cannot be trusted!

Jesses:

These are soft strips of tough, thin leather, one fastened to each leg of the captive raptor. Overall lengths of 4-6 inches for a kestrel or 8-10 inches for red-tailed hawks are appropriate. Jesses are fitted and placed immediately upon receipt of any raptor. Traditional jesses are shaped and attached as shown in Fig. 4. Another form called "Aylmeri" jesses consists of a "cuff" and jess for each leg. The leather cuff is placed around the leg and its ends held together by a grommet. The jess is passed through the grommet and its slitted end is then attached to the swivel as are traditional jesses. The use of "Aylmeri" jesses definitely is to be encouraged. Not only are they more efficient, but an escaped bird readily looses (or removes) the jesses, leaving it far less encumbered than with traditional jesses.

Bells:

These are especially made for falconry and are small, light in weight with a loud tone. They must be purchased from those manufacturing hawking equipment (commercial "Christmas jingle" bells are not suitable). Bells should be affixed immediately upon receipt of the bird, either on the anklet or with a small piece of leather called a "Bewit". Bells provide a useful "signal" when something causes even an untrained raptor to move about unduly. In the field, they assist the falconer in locating his bird when it is out of sight, and serve to warn hunters that this is a captive bird. Normally two bells, each with a different tone, are used. Unfortunately, bells suitable for small species such as Merlins, Kestrels or Sharp-Shinned Hawks are very difficult to obtain.

Bath Pan:

A large, shallow pan, tub or cut-down wooded barrel, 3-6 inches deep with a diameter several inches longer than the length of the bird (at a minimum). This provides both drinking and bathing water and should be cleaned and the water changed frequently (at least weekly and more frequently in hot weather). If the bird is kept free in the mews, the bath pan may be installed therein; otherwise the bath is provided outside when the bird is weathering.

Scales:

Traditionally, the falconer has judged his hawk's condition by the amount of flesh on its breast (sternum) and thighs. This judgment is a difficult one, especially for the beginner. Additionally, a lean hawk need not be hungry and a fat hawk may, in fact, have an excellent appetite. The falconer seeks the ideal medium between the two to keep his bird in the best of condition, just as does the prizefighter. The best and safest method of determining the amount of food to be given to achieve such condition is to weight the bird daily. Beam or balance (as opposed to spring) scales are preferred. Scales should register in grams or 1/4 ounce graduations.

Outdoor Perches:

- (a) Ring Perch. This perch is used with birds which normally perch on tree limbs, i.e., the Accipiters and Buteos. For the perching portion of the ring a cross section of about one inch is appropriate for small hawks, two inches for larger species. The overall diameter is generally about 12 inches. That portion on which the bird perches should be covered with a fabric such as canvas or carpeting.
- (b) Block Perch: This type is used for the falcons as they normally perch on flat surfaces. Diameters vary, normally from 4 to 8 inches, depending on the size of the bird. The top diameter must be sufficiently broad to prevent the two jesses from "straddling" the perch (slipping over both sides simultaneously).

Indoor Perches:

- (a) Screen Perch This perch is appropriate for use with all raptors used in falconry and is the only perch described in this brochure suitable for use by more than one raptor simultaneously. It consists of a horizontal bar over which a strong cloth such as burlap has been draped. This bar is fastened at chest height to the walls of the mews or to upright posts. The cloth should hang down at least three feet on both sides of the bar and be fastened to a second lower bar either attached to a second lower bar either attached to the mews walls/upright posts or swinging free. The upper (perching) bar is normally padded with carpet and should be long enough so that the bird can reach neither the ends nor any other birds tethered on it. Caution should be exercised in the use of this type perch. It should not be used for recently trapped or sick (weak) raptors and no raptor should be left unattended on a screen perch until the falconer has ascertained that the bird is capable of regaining the perch after attempting to fly from it.
- (b) Round Perch: This perch is also suitable for all raptors. It is shaped very much like a large garbage can. As in all perches described, its size depends on the species of raptor for which it is intended. A goshawk uses a round perch about the size of a 55-gallon drum on end, with other species requiring proportionally smaller sizes. The sides and top rim (perch) are padded and the bird is tethered to a swivel arrangement in the center of a horizontal platform below the surface of the top of the perch.
- (c) Shelf Perch: The shelf perch is most appropriate for use with the falcons and normally consists of a shelf approximately 1x2 ft. with a padded edge. All exposed edges and corners of the shelf must be rounded and smoothed so as not to inhibit leash movement. The shelf is mounted projecting from an inner wall or inside corner of the mews. A shelf perch is normally used in combination with a block perch set in/on the mews floor beneath so as to give the bird a choice of perches. The leash is either tethered to the block in the normal fashion with its length allowing access to the shelf, or to an eye-bolt at the base of the wall beneath the shelf, the leash length then providing access to either shelf or block. In the latter arrangement care is required that the leash is not so long as to allow it to become entangled around the block.

Optional Equipment:

Lure: This is a padded leather device, ordinarily covered with the wings or fur of the intended quarry (a fresh individual of such quarry will also frequently suffice as a lure). The lure is used to call the bird back to the falconer after an unsuccessful flight or for exercise. It is garnished with meat attached by short strings (unless the actual quarry is used). A four to six-foot line fastened to the lure allows the falconer to swing it in a large arc or circle, making it more visible and attractive. A raptor may or may not be trained to come to the lure. Such training, however, has much to recommend it since, in essence, it constitutes a safety measure. A raptor will often come to a lure when, for one reason or another, it is reluctant to come to the fist.

Hood: The hood is used to blindfold the raptor to keep it calm during handling and transit. Hoods come in a variety of shapes and designs but the most important factor in any hood's suitability is its proper fit. The edges of the beak-opening should not rub or chafe the soft parts around the bird's beak, nostrils or mouth. The interior of the hood must not touch the raptor's eyes (as revealed by moisture inside the hood when removed) and the portion of the hood passing under the raptor's "chin" must not be so tight as to be constrictive.

Telemetry Radio telemetry is used by many falconers to track their birds in the event that they wander out of sight. It is almost mandatory when flying a large falcon. The system consists of a small battery-powered transmitter and antenna which is attached to the bird's tarsus or mounted onto the tail. When activated, the transmitter sends a signal to a receiver, which is held by the falconer. The receiver is moved back and forth, and the position of the falcon may be triangulated by listening for the volume of the beeps emanating from the receiver. Telemetry allows a raptor to be located even if it has flown several miles away.

FOOD

An adequate and reliable supply of proper food is as important to the falconer as are considerations of shelter and equipment. Although the proper type and amount of food varies considerable with the species of raptor, the time of year and stage of the bird's training, there are certain basic principles that apply in all cases. The best food for any raptor is natural food which should make up the principal proportion of the diet. The best and most appropriate examples of such a natural diet are English sparrows, feral pigeons*, starlings, mice and rats. It is unlikely that the falconer can shoot unprotected birds or animals in sufficient numbers to provide a continuous and reliable supply, even for one hawk. Caution: Ingestion of lead shot in birds or animals killed with a shotgun may cause lead poisoning in raptors.

Day-old cockerel chicks raised to 4-6 weeks old or Pharaoh/Couturnix quail may be raised by the falconer and make useful replacements for wild varieties of natural foods. Such replacements should also be considered where unprotected wild birds/animals may contain dangerous levels of chemical sterilants, pesticides and/or other poisons. A supplemental food supply such as butcher's meat/chicken parts should be available though such should be used only as a temporary expedient for the food items previously enumerated.

Vitamin and mineral supplements (such as VitaHawk.) are an important part of a captive raptor's diet, especially if fed more than occasionally un-natural foods. Use of such supplements should be undertaken only after determining proper types and dosages from an experienced veterinarian (since, for example, some synthetic vitamins can prove harmful to raptors, as can some supplements containing iron).

*There is some question as to the advisability of feeding raptors pigeons unless considerable care is exercised. Both wild and domestic pigeons are commonly infected with *Trichomonas gallinae*, a protozoan which causes a disease of the mouth and tongue in raptors which is frequently fatal and difficult to treat. Any pigeons used as food for captive raptors should have the head and crop removed and be allowed to cool for at least one hour (preferably longer) after death.