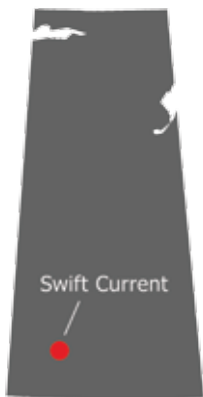




FALCONRY: SKY'S THE LIMIT

Story by *Judith Wright* Photos by *James R. Page*



Falconry is all about wide open spaces and hunting an elusive quarry, grouse: two things that make Saskatchewan ideal for falconry. Simon Skerten, of Stewart Valley, came from the U.K. to Saskatchewan to fly falcons.

"This is the best place in the world to fly the best birds in the world on the best quarry."

In a stubble field north of Swift Current, Simon puts his birds through hunting practice. Holly, a three-year-old prairie falcon, flies at 870 grams, and Cowboy, a peregrine falcon, weighs just 545 grams. Both birds have been trained to the lure, meaning they will be rewarded with bait, and then return to the fist of the falconer. Game-hawking relies on the stoop*. Peregrines are speed hunters, while the high-pursuit hunters, tail-chasing hawks are experts at sharp maneuvers and have massive power. This evening the falcons are taking the bait from a kite. Simon attaches raw meat to the kite line, runs up the kite and secures it to the bumper of his Jeep. When Holly is released, she flies a wide lazy circle before climbing high to investigate. After taking the bait, she stoops head-first for the ground—that breath-taking dive falcons are best known for.

On the ground, she proceeds to eat the bait and, as Simon approaches, she mantels, shielding her prey from other birds with her wings. This is natural behaviour in the wild, but to falconers it can be a sign of mistrust or bad manners. Simon removes some of the bait, and gives the remainder to her as a reward.

Then it's Cowboy's turn to fly. The male peregrine, or tiercel (pronounced tessell), is much quicker and business-like in his flying performance. When he stoops—that tear-drop-shaped plummet to earth—he might reach a speed of two hundred miles an hour. On the ground, his beautiful eyes fix on the prized bait. He has the soft blue-grey plumage characteristic of the haggard, or adult, bird.

Next Simon puts his Britany pointer out into the field. Dog and falcon will hunt together, even though the relationship between potential competitors isn't a natural one. Dog and bird have learned to work together for the sake of the hunt. Each step of teamwork must be polished in sequence. The final step in the seasonal tune-up will be to substitute the baited kite for live quarry on a slough, with a springer spaniel as their partner.

**Stoop: swoop down on a quarry.*



► captions



Falconry: Sky's the Limit

Simon has been flying falcons for over forty years. His life, ever since he was a teenager, has been birds and dogs. His home in Stewart Valley is proof of this: the house is built around indoor dog-runs, weathering areas and resting quarters for the birds. Simon has four trained female springers, three males, and one Britany pointer as part of his falconry team. The birds and dogs not only work together but also sleep together in a special overnight quarters called a mews.

Falconry is relatively new to this part of the world, although the Saskatchewan Falconers Association is the oldest club in North America. In 2018, at the North American meet in Swift Current, only forty falconers took part from Canada and the States. "To put that into perspective," says Simon, "in Canada there may be 500 falconers, including breeders. In Britain there are 32,000."

Falconry through the ages has been reserved for royalty and the gentry. As a young man, Simon had to be "guested" into the British Falconry Club. Here in Saskatchewan he doesn't get much chance to wear his falconry tweeds, "but we do salute the grouse," he says, referring to the tradition of toasting the quarry after a successful hunt.

Falconry was developed to its present level of sophistication by the Arabs. The Bedouin people were the first to practice falconry. There are also depictions in ancient Chinese artifacts. Today, in the United Arab Emirates, falcons and gyrfalcons are raced by the sheiks for "big money."

Traditional falconry focuses on the cooperation between man, bird and dog: the bird and dog follow their instincts, and man is the careful coordinator of the hunt. "It's not about the kill," says Simon, who practices catch-and-release where he can. For him, it's important the bird be evenly matched to the quarry. "The Hungarian partridge is evenly matched with the tiersel peregrine," he says. He doesn't think it is sportsman-like to drive the same quarry several times. "There should be one clean flush."

The observance of good ethics is part of his high standards for the hunt. The falcons return to Simon on the strength of an established bond. Detractors might say the falcon returns because it is hungry, but Simon refutes that, pointing out that these birds are athletes. "You aren't going to run a marathon without being properly trained and fueled."



► captions



► captions

It is rare to rear a falcon or hawk successfully unless you know what you are doing. “Manning,” is the process of training the bird to overcome fear of people and become accustomed to taking food on the falconer’s glove. It takes weeks and months to gentle a falcon; nothing can be done by force or in a hurry. Over time the bird learns to take food under different conditions—beside a busy road or with other distractions nearby—and to leap instantly from the resting block to the falconer’s fist.

Saskatchewan conservation officers sometimes transfer birds to competent falconers such as Simon so the birds can be released to the wild when they are healthy again. A well-trained falcon that is in good condition will survive very well when returned to the wild. “These birds are far from domesticated,” says Simon, a fact which makes the falcon’s cooperation with man all the more remarkable.

The hunting season for falconers is August 15 to end of February; it’s regulated by the same provincial licensing laws as other game hunting. This year will be Holly’s third year hunting and Cowboy’s fifth. The annual Saskatchewan Falconry Meet in Swift Current occurs early in October. At a local motel, a temporary “weathering” area has been set up for the birds. A modest turnout of falconers huddles in the parking lot, sheltered against a keen north wind. Wearing camouflage, they look much like hunters everywhere—except for the canvas apron for organizing gear: falcon hoods, whistles, bait, lure lines, and telemetry accouterments for tracking the birds.

The temperature is hovering at zero, but that won’t be a problem for the birds. Although peregrines are migratory birds, they will gladly hunt in arctic temperatures for short periods. Our small convoy of trucks sets out. Simon says the hunt will be a difficult today because



Falconry: Sky's the Limit



caption



caption

the crops are still in the field. The “Huns”—Hungarian partridge, the real prize—will be hard to spot. We’re looking for fields with dugouts and ducks. The fields must be free of electrical lines that can be hazardous to the birds. The hunters must have permission to hunt on the land. Simon and I are in Simon’s Jeep with six-year-old Ice, a Springer spaniel. Beside the crate, next to the telemetry box, a hooded Cowboy roosts on a carpet-covered cadge-pole. Cowboy has a miniscule radio bracelet on his leg so Simon can track him if he flies away.

Cowboy is “keen” in appetite but not “sharp”—if he is too hungry he will stay too close to the falconer and not hunt like a falcon. “It’s a very fine balance to keep,” says Simon. “Weight makes for a good or bad falconer.” More weight on a bird can mean more independence, and the bird may wander, but it will fly stronger and faster.

Falconers prefer to hunt with birds who hunt as they would in the wild—as naturally as possible, without the human interference. Simon is a bird conservationist, and reports annually to Fish and Wildlife, as do most falconers, with tallies of numbers and species counted. For many summers he has taken part in eyrie hole-digging—replicating the eyrie holes that prairie falcons use for nesting. The technique was pioneered by Saskatchewan biologist Richard Fife in the ‘60s, and involves rappelling down cliffs on the South Saskatchewan riverbank. Hole-digging accounts for the substantial increase in the prairie falcon population. Peregrines, too, have made a recovery since DDT (a pesticide) was banned in the province. Simon has counted grouse for eight years and he says the population is steady, but there is no increase of upland game birds. “Upland birds rely heavily

on cropland. If cover is ploughed up, there’s no shelter,” he says. He attributes poor numbers to loss of habitat and the widespread use of pesticides.

We’ve driven for more than an hour, scanning the sloughs with sitting ducks and driving through stubble fields. When a slough with ducks is spotted, the trucks stop and one of the hunters puts his three-year-old peregrine falcon, Hiermone, up in the air. Hiermone gains height and circles above the ducks in a zigzag pattern; she is momentarily confused by the flock. When she goes into a stoop there is barely time to see what happens: suddenly, both she and the quarry are in the slough.

Luckily, she recovers quickly and is up again. Her handler calls her back with the whistle and lure and there is a small flurry of excitement as the hunters gather to compare notes and offer comments. Soon we are back on the road again. Long shadows gather and the gold and green of the fields turn to grey. In the hollows, the round bales still show a lick of snow, and the moon is starting to rise. It’s beginning to look like Cowboy and Ice won’t hunt tonight.

But then—“Huns!”

Abruptly, Simon halts. Out of the Jeep, he flips on the telemetry box; in less than a minute the dog is released and Cowboy is on Simon’s fist. In one swift motion Simon removes Cowboy’s hood and launches the bird upwind of the quarry. Cowboy rises, flying away from the grouse to gain height. He soars above us to about 300 feet.

As the bird climbs, the dog begins quartering in the long ditch grass. Simon moves down the road, the whistle between



caption

his lips. Our eyes are trained on the sky. The quarry has lifted, the hunt is coming together. Cowboy locks the birds and holds the air.

But the quarry has flown to cover. Ice does not put them up again. It is not a clean flush. Simon casts the baited lure to call the bird back. Cowboy is reluctant to land. When he does, he skips quickly to Simon and leaps to the fist. Simon

digs in his vest to reward the bird. Cowboy gets a treat for effort. The hunt is over for today.

It's been an impressive show of coordination: dog, bird, man, quarry, weather, wind and season. It is patience, timing, nature at its finest—a challenging choreography. Ice, Simon and Cowboy return to the Jeep. It's been a good hunt, and Simon is grinning. 🌻

