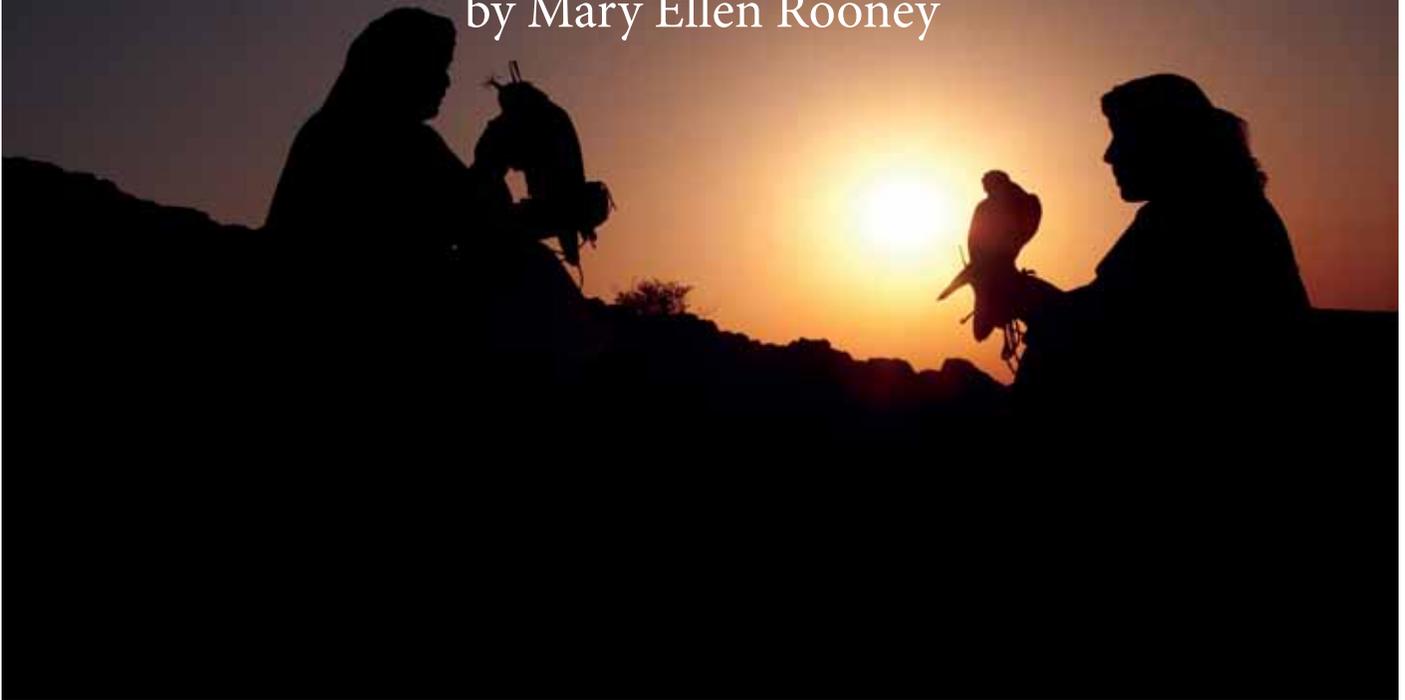




INTERNATIONAL FALCONRY FESTIVAL IN AL AIN: A DOUBLE UNESCO CELEBRATION

by Mary Ellen Rooney



Photos by Rob Palmer

Perhaps more than in any other region of the world, falconry, the ancient art of training and handling birds of prey for the purpose of hunting, has its deepest roots in Arab culture where it is considered a symbol of the region's civilization. It is, therefore, most fitting that the Third International Falconry Festival will be held in Abu Dhabi this year, December 15-17 at Al Ain's Jahili Fort. It is to be a genuine world event with over 70 nations represented. Last November, UNESCO had added falconry to its list of Intangible Cultural Heritage and in July of this year the festival locale of Al Ain was declared by UNESCO to be the Emirate's first World Heritage Site.

Five years ago, the idea of an International Festival of Falconry was born in England following a conversation amongst members of the Hawk Board. The first two falconry festivals were held in 2007 and 2009 near Reading in the UK. Since then, the international gathering has grown into a global convocation. The UAE has been a major contributor to both festivals, supporting the attendance of over 70 falconers from such remote places as the Steppes of Kazakhstan and Mongolia where it believed the 4000-year-old sport was originated.

Although histories of an activity as ancient as falconry are difficult to establish, there is no doubt that falconry embodies Arab culture. In fact, the Holy Koran itself contains a verse that permits falconry as a hunting method.

The good things are allowed to you, and what you have taught the beasts and birds of prey, training them to hunt – you teach them what Allah has taught you – so eat of that which they catch for you and pronounce the name of Allah over it; and be careful of (your duty to) Allah; surely Allah is swift in reckoning.

The Served Table: Surah 5, Verse 4

While early Arab falconers hunted primarily for food, contemporary falconers, be they royalty or ordinary citizens, keep the practice alive as a cultural legacy handed down from generation to generation. Still, there is a growing urgency felt among Arabs to acknowledge this tradition and ensure that the sport continues to be sustainable. The Emirates are considered models for effective wildlife management in the region. Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and his brother personally oversee ambitious programs through the auspices of the UAE Environment Agency and the Emirates Centre for Wildlife Propagation.

Since falconry often relies on open terrain so a falconer can follow the bird, habitat dictates the way sport is practiced and which birds are best used. This has shaped a variety of styles of hunting with birds of prey. In the deserts of Arabia, the open terrain allows the use of falcons, whereas the steppes of Asia permit the flying of both falcons and large eagles. In forested areas and mixed farmland, as found in much of Europe, Japan, parts of China and the Republic of Korea, birds such as goshawks and sparrow hawks are preferred. Spain provides opportunities to fly both short and long-wing birds of prey according to varying habitat.

The Abu Dhabi festival will feature daily arena demonstrations by distinctive groups of falconers. In the past, these arena events have included falconry of the Steppes of Asia, royal Japanese falconry, South American and Spanish falconry, UAE saluki demonstration and archery and mounted game hunting.

Each day will culminate in a Grand Parade of Nations, a festival tradition that is an emotional and enlightening joining everyone. The Grand Parade of Nations is similar to an Olympics moment when all the athletes enter the stadium en masse. Yet the colorful and richly diverse Parade of Nations at the Falconry Festival is unlike the Olympics in so far as the participants are not competing with one another. Rather, they are linked by the very old union of man, bird and nature. Since falconry often draws people with usually independent personalities who are passionately devoted to a very time-consuming activity, the fact that falconers will gather for an event like this is quite amazing. It's moving to see the possibility of a loving world unified by correct principals that serve the common good among nations. The UNESCO recognition is wondrous affirmation demonstrating something almost impossible given today's climate.



The ethos of the Festival and the spirit of UNESCO intention are to safeguard falconry as part of national culture that includes passing it to future generations. The first day of the Festival (Thursday, December 15) will be totally dedicated to children and school parties. Teachers will be given preparatory material so that students can achieve maximum benefit from the event as well as providing linkage to school curricula.

There will be a three-day falconry conference at the Al Ain Rotana Hotel opposite Jahili Fort. The conference will feature workshops and presentations that will cover every important aspect of falconry, including environmental issues and veterinary care. Abu Dhabi has the largest and most comprehensive veterinary hospital in the world uniquely designed for birds of prey. It is believed that the UNESCO designation will help substantially to draw attention to sustainable use of wildlife resources and support programs to initiate and preserve healthy, open land spaces. The visionary perspective embedded into the UAE environmental/conservation programs actually began with Sheikh Zayed who, despite his extraordinary wealth, loved nothing more than to spend his time out in the desert with camels, falcons, horses and salukis. His highness, founder of the United Arab Emirates, commented on falconry and the sustainability of nature that "It's not what you catch that is important; it is what you leave behind."

Organizers intend to host approximately 550 falconers from around the world during the four days immediately preceding the Festival, affording them an opportunity to live in the desert outside Al Ain. The desert camp will have basic amenities with Bedouin-style tents and campfires so that falconers can participate in manning birds of prey and practice for arena activities. The desert site is primarily for falconers and will not be open to the general public. It will close on December 14th at which time all further activities will be at the Festival site at Jahili Fort.

Since falconry is practiced by so many cultures and in such varied terrains, different rituals have developed. The sport has given rise to a special language finding artistic expression throughout literature, poetry, proverbs, idioms, songs, sculpture and painting. Therefore the festival will exhibit art, photography, music and dance relating to the wider cultural heritages of falconry. Traditional handicrafts, such as handmade jesses, gloves, hoods, leashes and bells will be on view during the Festival. In some instances official specialists in UNESCO Cultural Heritage will judge these displays. Various day excursions are also planned for visitors.

Al Ain, Abu Dhabi's Second City and heritage heartland of the Emirates, has been inhabited continuously since the late Stone Age Period. At the western flank of the Hajr Range, the 1,239-meter tall Jebel Hafit Mountain rises abruptly from the relative flat surrounding red, sand-duned desert as a 13 km glorious backdrop to the city. The neighboring foothills boast over 500 known burial tombs from the "Hafit Period" (3200 to 2700 B.C.)

Diverse archeological troves illustrate the area's strategic importance as a major trading center dating from 4000 B. C. when it first bestrode the best roadways to Mesopotamia and Persia, as well as eastward to the Indus and Pakistani regions offering rest, sustenance and safe haven at its seven oases for millennia. The ancient falaj irrigation system remains functional distributing underground spring water via a network of tunnels that emerge eventually in controlled stone sluices. The title Garden City of the Gulf is well earned. Strict height controls on new buildings to no more than seven floors emphasize the greenery and unique ethnic architecture.

All in all Al Ain with its surrounding combinations of mountain and desert joined with the uniqueness of the forthcoming Third International Falconry Festival this December should prove to be an uncommon and enlightening experience.

Mary Ellen Rooney is a licensed falconer and journalist. She first discovered falconry while on mission for the UN in Kyrgyzstan.