

Hawk Chalk

The Newsletter of the North American Falconers' Association



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REFLECTIONS: FALCONRY 2009

BY MARY ELLEN ROONEY

One afternoon around Christmas 2007, during a luncheon with some family members, I turned to my 5-year-old grandson, waiting till others were out of earshot, and said: “Derek, you know what I want to do?” He gave me his full attention. “I want to get one of those big birds on my arm and fly him.”

“Grandma, that’s really cool. I think you should do it,” agreed my generous-hearted grandson. “Just don’t tell Alphonse, your cat.” After that declaration I embarked on becoming a licensed falconer, a dream unconsciously carried since I had first viewed that falconer in Central Asia.

I can see him still. It’s a Sunday in the late 1990s on mission in Kyrgyzstan. The figure on horseback descends a distant foothill in the Tien Shan Mountains. He sits his horse naturally in what I now know is a wooden saddle atop the colorful Kyrgyz-designed felt blanket. He is wearing a traditional nomad’s black and white herders hat. As he nears, I note he carries something on his arm. It is a huge bird that eventually he releases. My concentration at this instant is so complete that time stops, yet lasts forever. I will be able to call up this image indelibly clear, like a fresh etching, evermore. The moment enters my being connecting with something already there, waiting for just this time to be.

It was my second assignment in this region and I’d come to know the magical Tien Shan Mountains. There’s something transcendental in these hills, which probably accounts for their being called “Mountains of Heaven.” Over time I became acquainted with some nomadic families residing there and had often been invited to spend Sunday afternoons singing with them. This place was indeed heaven for me.

I’ve required an outdoor sport for some time. Having been born and raised next to the Atlantic Ocean created a profound ache in me for vast, virgin and unowned space. Thus imbued, one is marked forever and seeks it out. I’ve known it on the desert, in some mountains and always on the Ocean. I chose falconry as a pathway sport because it could lead me back to that place in myself. This pursuit has been convoluted, much like seeking an advanced degree with the added difficulty that one’s teachers are so often geographically remote.

In November 2008, after an intense, obsessive year of studying and training to become a licensed falconer both in Quebec, Canada and the U. S., I joined NAFA. By then I had landed one quarry (a pheasant captured by a Harris’s Hawk in Quebec) and the promise to watch a master falconer trap a Red-tail Hawk. Although I had built my own bal



PHOTO COURTESY OF M.E. ROONEY

A Kazakh falconer with his golden eagle.

chatri, I was in no hurry to handle an hysterical hamster or a furious raptor entangled in filaments without first watching a master.

In addition to a great decal for my car, NAFA membership brought access to the website, *Hawk Chalk* and *The NAFA Journal*. Captured by Mike Dupuy’s article on the annual general meeting of the International Association for Falconry and Conservation of Birds of Prey (IAF) in South Africa, I wanted to widen my knowledge to include conservation of birds of prey and their quarry and also needed to meet other falconers. We are all rare birds with a lot of geographical space among us. The article revealed that IAF would be meeting again at the Second International Festival of Falconry in Berkshire, England in July of this year (2009).

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Since I have a home in Quebec, a hop to England from Montreal during the summer was doable. When the festival website disclosed that falconers from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan would be participating, that clinched it. I had to complete that circle.

I packed my glove and a pair of light boots just in case there was an invitation to go hunting while in England. The luggage also contained copies of the permits and hunting licenses acquired both in the U.S. and Canada, including a hunter's education course conducted with the bow hunters of Staten Island.

The Festival was beyond my wildest dreams. I felt like a soaring bird that, as it flies higher and higher, gains a wider and wider view. All was there: falconry for more than 4000 years with a presence from Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan (where it is believed this ancient sport began) to this day where 55 countries were represented on the fabulous Englefield Estate location in Berkshire. The following are some impressions from this three-day event.

On the first (preview) day, lo and behold there was Nick Fox, whose video series I had watched over and over again. Hesitatingly, I told him how much his falconry education series had meant to me. It was like meeting a movie star. To me, Nick Fox is the Jacques Cousteau of falconry. He laughed quipping, "When I started this I had dark hair." I told him I had a wonderful colorist in Quebec City but the trouble was that once you started you had to keep it up. Later I would see him ride in the arena with the Northumberland Hunt Club that had intrigued me with videos of crow hunting at Hadrian's Wall.

That afternoon, following my heart, I sought out the Kyrgyz tent. I stayed a long time, shedding a few tears behind my sunglasses. Language was still a barrier. My Russian isn't that great and it had been a while yet I basked in the comfortable, warm memory of the Tien Shan Mountains.

The falconers from central Asia hunt almost exclusively with golden eagles. A man from Yorkshire appeared with his own eagle for them to use for demonstration purposes. My heart turned over. One of the falconers, Zarnaev Sagymbai invited me to come to Issykul to join a hunt in the fall. I know Lake Issykul very well. It is a beautiful place. I am not sure I can ride a horse there for four hours though.

The two-day event had plenty to see and do, including: 20 falconers' camps set-up for visitors, a Steppe Village, a Medieval Village, archery events, horses, multinational exhibits of heritage



PHOTO COURTESY OF M.E. ROONEY

Falconers with their hunting companions at an International Falconry Festival.

art and conservation, seminars, workshops and arena events. The whole thing was beautifully run on the gorgeous Benyon Estate in Reading. The English Hawk Board coordinated amazing details which included rounding up raptors for foreigners to use and an amazing group of falconry species available for viewing in the weathering area.

There is a vivid image of an impressive contingent from Abu Dhabi where I learned a lot about Arab falconry and their famous hunting salukis. Salukis are never called dogs because as such they wouldn't be allowed to enter the tent. The sun comes and goes with short bouts of rain. Older Englishmen with their walking sticks pass by. I've never understood walking sticks. I ask someone in the Arab Cultural Heritage booth for a hat to shield me from the sun. Years of sailing have left me with chronic skin cancer. Suddenly I receive a bag of goods weighing nearly five pounds. Arabs love to give. I sign the book supporting the UNESCO initiative.

Falconry has a powerful place in Arab heritage. The UAE has

sponsored much of this International event making it possible for a number of remotely located

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PHOTO COURTESY OF M.E. ROONEY

Mary Ellen Rooney holds a European eagle owl.

falconers to be here.

For the past three years the international falconry community has been pursuing UNESCO recognition of falconry as an element of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). Applying for the inscription has involved a vigorous effort of three primary NGO's: IAF, CIC (global game and wildlife conservation community), FACE (Federation of Associations for Falconry and Conservation of the EU). The result of the focused project is "Falconry: A Living Human Heritage," the largest nomination in UNESCO history which finally was signed in Abu Dhabi at the end of August 2009. Generally submissions for ICH recognition are performed by one party, occasionally two or three. In the case of the multinational nomination of falconry, 12 countries (five European, five Arabian and two Asian) with the support the three International NGOs and other national organizations joined together. A final decision will be reached in May 2010. If the inscription is successful it should give teeth to worldwide conservation efforts and protection for birds of prey (and their talons).

Countries that ultimately signed the application are: Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Korea, Mongolia, Morocco, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Slovakia, Spain, Syria and the United Arab Emirates. In these times when global cooperation is evasive and power politics and bureaucracies are so obstructive, this submission is truly remarkable. It's almost as though the traits for becoming a successful falconer were utilized here to their fullest:

discipline, patience, persistence and perseverance. An instinct for hunting quarry doesn't hurt either when dealing with such an unwieldy crowd. The definitions required in UNESCO submission are difficult for one country to but to have 12 countries with very different environments agree on the language, it boggles the mind and speaks volumes for the unifying force of falconry. The inscription submission certainly created dialog among cultures.

Somebody got it right a long, long time ago, particularly since the methods of training and making of materials have changed so little in 4000 years. I've always liked old technologies that endure. I once taught English at a pond fishing school in the Czech Republic and loved that the engineering technology conceived long ago was working just fine today.

While at the festival I realized once again that our environmental problems are the same as those in other countries. Open space for falconry is disappearing everywhere. In UAE it is the Houbara that are threatened by rapid development and urbanization. Falconry and preserving habitats so designated as intrinsic to cultural identity will be strengthened through UNESCO.

At the closing ceremony of the Festival, following the final parade of 55 nations, Nick Fox summed up the UNESCO initiative and the global perspective of falconry "We are hopeful about this designation which includes 12 countries. UNESCO now realizes there are more than stationary physical presences that uniquely link us to the past, make us who we are and are worth preserving for future generations."

"The gathering here this weekend and the presentations of this field sport in all its facets has shown that and we pass the banner to the next generation to carry forward the art with love and dedication."

I recently realized that I was born under a fly-way and throughout my life I have always lived under one. This is either odd or very logical. It may be the reason that, despite the logistical hurdles, I continue to pursue this age-old sport. Falconers may be few in number but we are a passionate, driven bunch. Perhaps we are the kind of people who can and will have some positive effect on the grim situation in which the world finds itself.

In England I was awestruck to see red kites where they had been extinct for generations and only recently had been reintroduced by a release program. Now they are plentiful. What a beautiful, small miracle.

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