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## THE LURE OF FALCONRY

BY MARY ELLEN ROONEY

May 22, 2012 | 18 Comments



Mary Ellen Rooney with European Eagle Owl

*Mary Ellen Rooney writes on a diverse range of subjects, from graphic design to pond fishing in southern Bohemia. She first discovered falconry in the late 1990s while on her second mission for the United Nations in Central Asia. Some years later she acted on the promise she had made to “do it myself someday.” This is the first in her series of posts on a sport that enthralled a woman in her mid-sixties—and the adventures leading up to her hard-won accomplishment: becoming a fully licensed falconer at age 70.—Ed.*

I can see him still. It's a Sunday in the late 1990s, and I'm on mission in Kyrgyzstan. The figure on horseback descends a distant foothill in the Tien Shan Mountains. He sits his horse naturally, easily, in what by now I know is a wooden saddle atop the colorful Kyrgyz-designed felt blanket. He is wearing a traditional nomad's black and white herder's hat. As he nears, I note that he carries something on his left 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. In literature, these images are called *eidetic*. They live deep within a writer's consciousness and are what prompts the artist to tell the same story (like the Ancient Mariner) over and over in a thousand different ways.

It is my second assignment in this region, and I've 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.” It's the only location in which I have been consistently able to sing harmony by ear. Over time I have become acquainted with some nomadic families currently residing here, and have often been invited to spend Sunday afternoons singing with them. Such voices, such pitch, such hospitality. This place was indeed heaven for me, and there are many

memories to tell of the magic I found there.

When touching the mystical, time is anything but linear, and the effects of one moment may ripen and surface whenever and wherever. Thus one afternoon around Christmas 2007, back in the States, during a luncheon in Manhattan 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 I had unconsciously carried since I had first viewed that falconer in Central Asia.



**Mary Ellen Rooney in Balboa Park, San Diego, with Harris Hawk. She spent a day at the park with a member of the California Hawking Club who brought his hawk.**

This pursuit is convoluted—much like seeking an advanced degree, with the added difficulty that one's teachers are so often geographically remote. The raptor lore to be acquired is limitless—husbandry, housing, hunting, and field craft are merely introductory courses. One must also climb over a modern-day bureaucracy that views the falconer, practitioner of a 4,000-year-old art, as akin to the firearm-bearing hunter of today.

As with so much bureaucracy, illogic flows freely and amusingly in hunterdom. For example: Since it is the bird that does the hunting, it is the bird that should be attending Hunter's Education Classes. The falconer is actually a facilitator who loves nature and this ancient sport.

The 10-hour Hunter's Education course is mandatory before any hunting licenses are issued. I have the credential now, and I actually enjoyed the class where I learned about methods new to me, such as bow hunting. In a class of 40 licensed hunters-to-be I was the only falconer. Two other women were also in my Staten Island class, one from the New York City Fire Department and the other an EMT practitioner. Among the 4,000 licensed falconers in the US, a mere 400 are women.

I've required an outdoor sport for some time. Being 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 out the needed space. I've found it on the desert, in some mountains, and always on the ocean. I chose falconry as a pathway sport because it could lead me to places that are less and less available in this crowded, noisy twenty-first century. I want silence to hear the wind—and yes, wingbeats will do!

*To be continued in July. Next installment: "Going Global," reaching back to falconry roots in Kyrgyzstan and becoming acquainted with a rarefied global community.*

**ELIZABETH LARA**

May 22, 2012 at 1:12 pm

This is an amazing story – the writer is clearly undaunted by the challenges of the sport. The opening paragraph is so haunting that I felt myself standing there with her in those mountains in Kyrgyzstan.

[Reply](#)

**CICELY WOOTAN**

May 22, 2012 at 10:31 am

Very interesting piece – I can't wait for the next installment!

**DANA**

May 23, 2012 at 11:02 am

This is such an elegant and eloquent piece. I admire the warmth of your voice, and I look forward to reading the forthcoming installments!

[Reply](#)

**WALLACE C. ROONEY, JR. M.D.**

May 23, 2012 at 10:49 am

Superb! It's great to see you spread your wings so wide.

[Reply](#)

**JEAN MCILWAIN**

May 23, 2012 at 9:51 am

Knowing the author and her enthusiasm for her sport inspired my family to try falconry in Ireland when we had the chance. We loved that unforgettable experience. Looking forward to the next installments of her article.

[Reply](#)

**JOHANNA**

May 23, 2012 at 9:47 am

Looking forward to part 2!

[Reply](#)

**NINA WOOTAN**

May 22, 2012 at 8:55 pm

This was an amazing piece, I can't wait to hear more about her journey in the next installment

[Reply](#)

**DAN PARADIS**

May 22, 2012 at 7:19 pm

Very neat Reggie ! See you in June...your Harris Hawk is in top shape and flying like an Ace !

Dan xxx

[Reply](#)

**BARBARA SHIPKA**

May 24, 2012 at 8:09 pm

How fantastic! To follow such a dream! I'm truly inspired.

And I admire, respect, and aspire to how you are modeling dreams-come-true-at-any-age for all of us.

Perhaps that is one of the 'new' definitions of elder in a time when, for many of my friends and colleagues anyway, retirement is obsolete.

Carry on! On behalf of all of us who are 'coming of age.'

Reply

**TRUDY ENLOE**

May 24, 2012 at 6:12 pm

Fantastic article, Reg, and I can't wait until the next installment! I'm very inspired to hear how you have carried through on your vision and I admire your tenacious Spirit. How often do we actually pursue what has grabbed our attention at a more subtle level of experience—one that compels us to understand something higher and deeper in the/our human experience? I applaud you!

Reply

**MARILYN HAZELTON**

May 24, 2012 at 8:50 am

Reggie, This is wonderful! I feel that I was with you in the Tien Shan mountains, taking part in an ancient ritual and sport. I love the path of your article through experience and reflection, and your ending sentence : "I want silence to hear the wind—and yes, wingbeats will do!" Wow!

Reply

**BARBARA WAFEL**

May 23, 2012 at 6:01 pm

This is a fascinating and inspirational piece about following a dream at any time in one's life.

Reply

**MARSHA HOWARD**

May 23, 2012 at 1:10 pm

Inspiring! Looking forward to more of your posts.

**JOAN MARE**

July 19, 2012 at 9:03 am

O Happy Day! I turned 56 in Feb., took the test in May, passed, and will be trapping my first red tail hawk in September! Whoot! Whoot! So glad to find you here on the net! Please, if you have the time, write a book on your experiences from the female perspective. I LOVE your voice!

Reply

**MARILYN GILCHRIST**

June 1, 2012 at 4:15 pm

So this is what Joseph Campbell means by "following your bliss!" Great story. I look forward to the next one, Marilyn

Reply

**STEPHANIE DOUGHERTY**

May 30, 2012 at 3:27 pm

Fabulous achievement- makes me want to take up falconry as well! Love the article and the style. Thank you.  
Stephanie

Reply

**BILL CASS**

May 25, 2012 at 3:42 pm

Falconry. The UN. Central Asia. Wise Women. Mysticism.  
Grandchildren. Hunting. Education. Oceans. Mountains.  
Deserts.