

Falconry

The Sport of Kings



Falconry, as defined by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services is “the field sport of hunting with a trained raptor.” Those who practice this time-honored sport are some of the most dedicated of sportsmen, devoting hours a day to the care and training of their birds. Exactly where and when falconry originated is still unknown. There are depictions in drawings of people hunting with hawks that date back 4,000 years. It became popular in Asia around 400 BC and made its way into Europe by mid-800 AD. It was then practiced by Kings and noblemen where it became known as the “Sport of Kings.”

The greatest impulse that was ever given to the sport in Western Europe was derived from the returning crusaders of medieval times. Many crusaders had become acquainted with the Asian falconers and their training methods. Amongst such Crusaders was the emperor Frederick II who brought back with him some Asiatic hawks and their trainers. He declared that falconry was the noblest of all arts. From that time on, for more than 400 years, falconry flourished in Europe as a fashionable sport amongst all classes.

Falconry reached its peak during the Renaissance and was practiced by every class and society. However, one’s social standing greatly influenced the bird one was allowed to possess. Eagles and the peregrine falcon were reserved only for the King. Meanwhile, yeoman enjoyed less aristocratic goshawk and sparrow-hawk as suppliers of wholesome delicacies for the table. Even the peasant was not forgotten and was allowed to train and fly the small but graceful kestrel.

Some rulers had their favorite birds brought with them into the battle so they could take a break from war to go hunting. Henry VIII was thrown into a ditch and nearly drowned when his leaping-pole broke while trying to follow his hawk. Catherine II of Russia was wonderful at falconry and she especially delighted in flight with Merlins.

Falconry was struck a devastating blow when the shotgun was invented. It was found that you could bring home more game to the table in less time at a fraction of the cost.

People who practice falconry today love watching a stooping (diving) falcon plummet 2,000 feet toward the earth one of the most impressive sights in nature.