



KATOWA

Falcons and Falconers

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Reflections on an ancient relationship between man and bird

A pair of peregrines lives near our home in far northeastern California. There's a little spot across the canyon where my wife Terry and I have a clear view of the open grassy ledge. Winter often stays late here, and yet there they are, incubating in late March. Picture a little dark lump there in the snow, all day and all night with a pair of golden eagles just a quarter-mile away and great horned owls. And still, there they are, those two crazy falcons, no matter what, wedging themselves into that place, despite all their adversaries, claiming it as their own. Raising young.

The tiercel likes to sit in his snag on the cliff top, and occasionally we see him soaring over the valley, or shooting across a rice field chasing who knows what, his life a mystery. Most of what he does cannot be witnessed, and so we can only infer one astonishing adventure after another in the vastness of sky and landscape, the proof of his capability in the bundles of food he casually sails in with as if it were no big deal. He's cool.

She, on the other hand, is almost always around her eyrie, and for obvious reasons. I happened to be on top of her mountain last spring when she was doing violence to one of the golden eagles. Look out! The latter may have tried to pick off one of her fledglings, or she might have just imagined it, but she was furious, flashing upwards and downwards, nonstop angry cacking, her sails in almost constant deflection. Stoop after rapidly succeeding stoop, trying to strike him out of the sky, her wings almost shimmering sometimes, him flinching at the last split second, trying to flip over to avoid her—and her him—by an inch or two each time. She finally connected and sent him gliding on stiff, uncertain wings down toward a small cliff on the other side of the canyon where he may have crash landed. I couldn't tell.

But the tables could so easily have been turned—he so deceptively quick, she so dangerously close. Talk about life in the fast lane—life on the edge. Not cringing sparrowlike by fate's necessity, but confidently pushing fate's envelope. Peregrines are not some material metaphor for life; they are its bold embodiment, everything making perfect sense within the physical and behavioral makeup of the living organism—and one with an entirely different genetic program than our own, a genetic nation with its own set of natural inclinations, exquisitely fine-tuned to life as an aerial predator.

I could go on about those two, but I'm just stating the obvious, or what I hope is obvious. Peregrines and all the birds of falconry are nature's superstars, and we are their humble fans. Sure, we are appropriately moved when we watch the wide receiver leap and twist and stretch to snag a football in his fingertips, though he barely exceeds two dimensions, so bound is he in gravity's grip. And even our best pilots in our finest aircraft are cumbersome compared with falcons and hawks, and will always be so, because humans cannot tolerate the size-proportional G-forces that



would accompany comparable feats of agility. To raptors, such feats are nothing. They live spectacular lives in three full dimensions. They see details much more clearly, react far more instantaneously to changing juxtapositions. They strategize with the deep wisdom of their heredity and experience. They patiently wait preening for hours on their cliff tops for just the right moment; they quietly sleep in the recesses of stupendous windy crags which, by the way, they own outright, mountain and all, by sheer force of will. We falconers are their modest, earthbound sidekicks. Well, perhaps not always so modest . . .

And what about all those just-fledged juvenile peregrines right off the DNA-RNA-protein assembly line with their matched sets of brand-new jet engines they don't know what to do with? There are four eyases this year, and all appear to have "made it," at least to the point of chasing mom and dad around all over the place, whining and complaining. But then let's reflect on what any one of these brats will have become five years down the line, a tiercel, say, with tens of thousands of successful and unsuccessful high-speed, complicated chases under his belt—constantly having to worry about owls and eagles and red-tailed hawks or flying into something. Or not worrying, but

still running the risk of eating a fresh bit of carbamate insecticide or failing to cast up a #8 lead shotgun pellet after a meal of mourning dove. Fate willing, though, in those five years our tiercel will have become a superbly confident, gritty, self-assured master of spectacular precision aerobatics, a melding of jet engines and mind. And he will likely be other things as well—a love-smitten enthusiast, a gentle incubator, a bringer of food, a protector, as the cycle begins anew. All that and much more (round trip to Argentina anyone?) is what that pound-and-a-half of peregrine tiercel really is.

So, what are we thinking as falconers? And what were those English country gentlemen thinking in the 1800s when they hawked grouse and partridge and wrote those books? Perhaps we should go even farther back to see things clearly. Picture an experienced man with a nocked arrow just at daylight creeping toward a flock of noisy mallards, his family behind him, watching and earnestly hoping for his success. The ducks rise as he draws his bow, and though his arrow looks good, it barely misses, and he chides himself bitterly for his mistake as the ducks rise beyond his reach. Just then, a familiar whooshing drowns



the noise of duck wings and quacking, and in that instant, he sees the blur of a falcon strike a brilliant drake in passing, then quickly seize it on the ground. The man waits only a moment then charges across the creek to drive the falcon from her prize.

That night at the fire, he reflects upon the god-like falcon, the miraculous being whose powers so transcend his own that he could not even dream of aspiring to them. Or could he? Could he contrive to make friends with one of these sky hunters, to be her partner so that each is satisfied? Well, obviously, yes. And it is easy to imagine what happened—trial and awkward error, lessons learned, knowledge accumulated, skills developed, and finally a blossoming, passed on generation after generation toward a heyday, a period of cultural obsession, of almost universal celebration. Then an ebbing with the age of firearms and grocery stores, and needs reassessed. But here we are still, a remnant of those days, a contemplative few whose needs can only be met by hawks and falcons—an admiration that cannot be brushed aside. There is something about those birds so esteemed and so closely paralleling and fulfilling of our own wild hunter instincts that we cannot let go. Gage Earle Freeman said it well in his 1869 book *Practical Falconry*:

"There is no flinching with the falcon, no seeming to slacken the pace as though she were afraid to injure her foot with the blow; but there is downright, headlong, rapid, earnest, brave, honest, mighty chasing—there is the very character of commanding power in every hiss of her rushing bell, and in every stroke of her glorious wings . . . It is she to whom the winds are nothing, the hail nothing, the lightning on the mountains nothing—all these she defies; but man is her master, and I have seen her go out furiously at his bidding, or come down gently to his feet, out of the very clouds of heaven."

We do not train hawks to do the things they do. They do them quite well without us. The falcon is no arrow aimed at quarry, no extension of our capability, and certainly no commodity of our making. She is a near-perfect being unto herself, entirely unto herself. We do not extract her from nature and make her what she is not. Instead, we persuade her with gentle skill that she may trust us and share her life with us. That is the best we can do.

Falconry is entirely different from all other forms of hunting; it is the largely passive celebratory participation in a richly natural process. Let us take care that it shall always be so. ■