



Bob was known as the "Father of Iowa Falconry"

DONORS:

James Roush, DVM and the Elgin family

A Biography – Bob Elgin

Charles Robert Elgin (Bob) was born in Centerville, Iowa on May 21, 1921 to Rae Ursula BeauSeigneur and John Robert Elgin. As a young man, he immersed himself in the woods and valleys of Southern Iowa. He captured and trained a wild Cooper's hawk, sparking an interest in raptors. He contacted Colonel Luff Meredith and the two became fast friends, with Meredith mentoring Elgin in the noble sport of falconry.

During World War 2, Elgin was a commended Non-Commissioned Officer for the Air Force. Enthralled with things that flew, he honed his interest in airplanes while in the military and after the war he owned his own plane.

At 36, Bob married Jane Hill and the couple lived in Chariton, Iowa, above the clothing store owned by Bob's father. They soon moved to Avon Lake where Elgin worked for United Federal. Known as Ranger Bob, he traveled with his raptors to lecture to service groups. Often called Iowa's first falconer, he mentored many others on the sport.

An adventure Bob loved to recall took place in the spring of 1964 when he, Jim Roush and Jim Kimsey traveled to Wyoming to search for Prairie falcons. Using an extension ladder and a frazzled hay rope, the three ascended into eyries high in the rugged cliffs. One site contained babies too young to take. Another held two young males that bolted when Roush appeared, precariously suspended on the frazzled rope. But a pair of females remained, backed into a corner and ready to fight. Jim captured one. They left a baby in each nest so the adults could finish their reproductive cycle and be more likely to occupy the site again. By the end of the trip, all three falconers proudly held a downy Prairie falcon in their arms. According to Roush, "With Bob's help we were able to train and fly them, and it lives in my memory as the trip of a lifetime."

In 1967, Elgin became director of the Blank Park Zoo in Des Moines. He educated himself on the care of exotic animals and built the zoo into a well-respected facility with a large collection of big cats, canines, reptiles, ungulates, elephants, primates, and raptors. Bob practiced adaptation training on these animals, using techniques similar to those he learned in falconry.

Elgin was often featured in newspaper, magazines, and on television shows. He appeared with a jaguar on the Kennedy and Company show, and on the Regis Philbin show in New York City. His handling of many species demonstrated the power of a gentle touch, patience, and understanding.

There were challenges as well. In 1969, Huff, a six foot-long cobra, bit Elgin, nearly killing him. A 160 pound chimpanzee, jealous over Bob's attention to a lion, bit off two of his fingers on Christmas day in 1973. Despite the difficulties, the years Elgin spent as zoo director were some of his happiest. His wife Jane, sons Rob, Joel and Bruce, and daughters Beckie and Shelly, worked alongside him, making the zoo a family affair.

After retiring in 1984 Elgin kept a black wolf named Taurus at his home. Next, came a lovely gyrfalcon named Girl Bird. He also imported Schutzhund trained German Shepherd dogs that he and Jane bred and trained for many years.

Elgin was a skilled fiction and non-fiction writer. His article on falconry appeared in The Saturday Evening Post in 1961. Gourmet magazine published his piece "Hawking Party," about falconry in the Middle Ages. In 1961, Catholic Rural Life wrote a story on Elgin and falconry. He developed a popular treatise, "On the Psychology of the Goshawk," in 1959. He also wrote and produced several films on the zoo and falconry. His two books, *Man in a Cage* and *The Tiger is My Brother*, discussed his life at the zoo. A true Renaissance man, Elgin was passionate about opera, philosophy, politics, good food, an occasional cognac, and most of all, his wife Jane, an artist still residing in Iowa. He stayed in close contact with fellow falconers, including Jim Roush and Jack Stoddard. Granddaughter, Hannah Hartsell, carries on his love of raptors through her work at the Cascades Raptor Center in Eugene, Oregon and at Tuscon's Arizona Sonora Desert Museum.

A loving husband, father, grandfather and friend, Bob is dearly remembered for his wisdom, honesty and devotion to the humans and animals in his care.



Bob and Morticia, a golden eagle

Ode to a Falcon

Rest, fair falcon, on your high neck
Safe from the yellow-eyed eyes of night.
Then, when the sun ascends to greet you
Rouse, rouse in your splendor
Cast into the wind
And ring, ring high into the sky
To where your tiercel waits-on
With pulsing wings.

High above the clouds,
On his blue wings
The tiercel luffs into the wind
To greet you
And you dance with him
Pirouetting, falling, lancing high
Through the vastness of Being,

Knowing in your joy
A oneness with the sky
And the endless, eternal
Love of living.

by Charles Robert Elgin, a Scottish Falconer



BOB MADE MANY CONTRIBUTIONS TO OUR SPORT.

In the early days, he established connections with European falconers, was able to import hoods and bells from Richter in Germany, and ultimately created avenues for the importation of European Goshawks for American falconers.

THE JOURNEY WEST AFTER FALCONS

Sometime around 1964, another young falconer, Jim Kimsey, and I made plans to go on a falcon acquisition expedition to Wyoming. We were very happy our mentor, Bob Elgin, was going to accompany us.

Jim had bought Prairie Falcons from a character named "Doc Groom" from Lame Deer, Montana. They were quite expensive, a whole fifty bucks. Kimsey did some research, and discovered that there was a nesting population of Prairie Falcons near the Wyoming/Colorado border west of Pine Bluff, Nebraska. One fine spring day, the three of us piled into a car, with ropes in the trunk and an extension ladder on the top, and headed west.

We followed the Platte River across Nebraska, the route of many pioneers. There are stories of the pioneers moving westward along the south bank, followed by Pawnees on the north bank. The Pawnee would occasionally "moon" the interlopers, an insult quite tame compared to what was to follow for them. But for us, in the late 20th century, it was smooth sailing along a good highway without a Pawnee in sight.

Spirits were high. There was much camaraderie and talk of hawks, falcons, and the "old days" when falconry was just beginning in America. Bob, our mentor, told us stories about his mentor Col. Luff Meredith. He told us about the split between the old falconry club and those members who formed the new one, and the fiery passions involved with deciding the future of falconry in our country.

We watched the country change from corn, to wheat, to sagebrush as we finally arrived in southern Wyoming, where we were to search for Prairie Falcons. The country was one of flatlands, with mesas and buttes which had steep cliffs between thirty and a hundred feet high. It was on these cliffs where we searched for falcons.

Our strategy was to split up, each walking along the rubble at the base of a cliff, looking for the telltale "whitewash" (aka bird poop) streaking down from a ledge or pothole. Upon finding this, we would then observe, quietly, for the appearance of a bird of prey. If it proved to be a Prairie Falcon, we would re-convene and discuss our finding. We were able to locate a number of active eyries. We found

one which seemed safe for us to climb into with ropes, and another which was accessible with an aluminum extension ladder. By the time we had located the eyries, it was getting toward dusk, so we decided to camp overnight and go out in the morning.

Sunrise found us trekking across the prairie, two guys carrying a ladder and one carrying an old frazzled hay rope we brought from a barn in Iowa (a modern rock climber would shudder at the thought).

Jim Kimsey, who had the courage of a lion and the strength of a gorilla, climbed down the rope into an eyrie, and discovered that it had baby Prairies, but they were much too young for us to take; we were looking for large downies. So he left them in place.

At the next eyrie Kimsey lowered me on the hay rope into an eyrie with large downies in it. In fact the male babies were able to fly, and they bolted out of the pothole when I showed up. The females were backed into a corner, and clearly ready to fight for their lives. A female was taken from here.

We then located an eyrie which was accessible with the ladder, somewhat unstable and the top swaying around in the wind. We were able to get a couple of young falcons from there.

Bob, being the senior member of the expedition, and having a lot more brains than the two young goofballs he was with, kept urging us not to take such chances. We of course were too dumb and impetuous to listen to his voice of reason.

We made sure there was one young left in each eyrie, so the parents could finish their reproductive cycle by fledging young, and so be more likely to occupy this site next year. With a downy Prairie Falcon chick for each of us, we made our way back to the car, after an encounter with an extremely miffed rattlesnake.

The trip back to Iowa was triumphant. There were no known falcons nesting in Iowa at that time, and we later found out that Peregrine Falcons were nearly extinct throughout most of their range, so our new babies were very prized by us. With Bob's help, we were able to train and fly them, and it lives in my memory as the trip of a lifetime.

Jim Roush

