

The Piedmont sky is a luminous winter blue this morning, but right now I'm focused on only one piece of it. From his distant perch in a tree, Bullet flies like - - well, a bullet - straight at me, closing with the power and laser-like purpose of a hungry raptor to devour the tidbit of raw meat on my upheld glove. This is one of the defining moments in the ancient sport of falconry - calling a wild bird in training *to the fist*. Bullet is my first falconry bird, an immature or *passage* male red-tailed hawk.

Falconry, in a nutshell, can be defined as hunting wild game using trained birds of prey. Of course it is much more than that to the many enthusiasts determined to partner with a hawk or falcon to hunt quarry in its natural state. Both a passion and a lifestyle, falconry is an art with roots that stretch back almost four thousand years, long before the invention of firearms.

When people think of falconry, many think of lords and ladies, Knights of the Round Table, or Arab princes. And indeed, during medieval times few but wealthy nobleman could afford to keep and fly birds of prey. Today, however, tens of thousands of men and women from all walks of life take part in falconry around the globe, nearly seven thousand in the United States alone. Here in Virginia, the Virginia Falconers Association (VFA) is comprised of over a hundred individuals who are dedicated to preserving hawks and falcons through practicing and teaching this very special hunting art.

While one needn't be of royal blood to take up falconry, the price of entry remains steep. Not necessarily in dollars and cents, but in commitment and time.



## PARTNERS IN THE HUNT FALCONRY IN VIRGINIA

By Andy Straka



Photo courtesy of Lee Chichester.

All birds of prey are considered protected species. Strict laws for working with birds of prey make falconry the most heavily regulated field sport in America. Both state and federal permits are required to possess falconry birds. In order to

obtain the necessary permits, the potential falconer must build the proper facility for housing a hawk or falcon, acquire all the necessary equipment, undergo and pass an inspection by a state biologist, and pass a comprehensive examination on basic raptor veterinary care. Most importantly of all, an aspiring falconer must locate and develop a relationship with an experienced falconer willing to serve as a sponsor/trainer during the two year apprenticeship permit phase.

The apprenticeship system works well. A sponsor teaches and coaches the new falconer, and helps insure that the newcomer is making the commitment to properly manage a hawk. My own sponsor, Mike Garst, for example, is a master falconer with nearly ten years of experience who has successfully flown and hunted with several different hawks and falcons.

From September to January, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, which oversee falconry in the Commonwealth, allow legally permitted apprentice falconers in Virginia to trap a first-year red-tailed hawk, red-shoulder hawk, or kestrel, and attempt to turn it into a falconry bird. In the wild approximately seventy percent of these species die in their first year of life. Numerous studies have supported the fact that by helping to insure more of these birds' survival such trapping has no impact on wild populations.

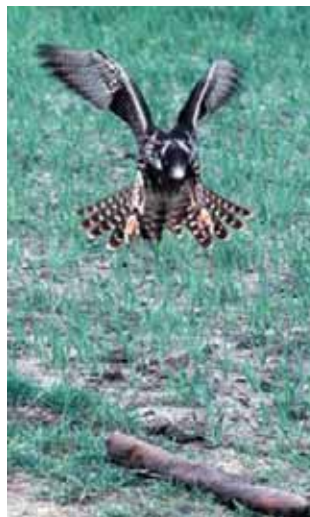
Once falconers gain more experience and obtain their general class permits, they are then also permitted to work with a wider variety of birds of prey. Some of the other species employed by falconers in North America include Harris' hawks, goshawks, Cooper's hawks, broad-winged hawks, merlins, peregrine falcons, prairie falcons, saker falcons, gyrfalcons, various species of owls, and even, under special

circumstances and with advanced training and additional federal permits, golden eagles.

Not all of these birds make ideal hunting partners for the type of terrain and environments available here in the Commonwealth. But a wide variety can be seen in action at one of two VFA sponsored meets, held annually in January and February.

What kind of game do falconry birds hunt? Ground game, such as rabbits and squirrels, are generally the purview of those falconers hunting with hawks, also known as *shortwings* or *broadwings*. Flying game – ducks, quail, pheasant, and the like – are typically hunted by the speedier but smaller falcons, also known as *longwings*. There are exceptions to these generalizations, however. Some well-trained red-tailed hawks, given the right conditions, have been known to take ducks, for example. Due to the predominant habitat in most of Virginia, the absence of sweeping plains with long sight distances favored by longwings, most Virginia falconers fly some species of hawk.

Besides hunting with different species of birds of prey, falconry can also offer a wide variety of hunting experiences. A number of falconers add trained dogs to the mix, especially for flushing ground game. The combination of hawk and canine working together to stalk quarry is something to behold. Harris' hawks have also become very popular with falconers, not only because of their hunting prowess, but their social nature. They are the only species of hawk that will hunt cooperatively with one another, thus making it possible to form hunting parties where two, three, or even more hawks might be flown together. An increase in captive breeding of various species of hawks and falcons in recent years has also



Author and Bullet

led to the availability of a wider variety of falconry birds, and the use of telemetry technology for tracking falcons has markedly decreased the incidence of lost falconry birds.

It is difficult to overstate the hypnotic power of a bird of prey on the fist or the thrill of partnering with these magnificent creatures in the hunt. As centuries-old falconry techniques continue to be passed on to each succeeding generation

of falconers, this wild and beautiful resource should remain available for everyone's enjoyment for many centuries to come.

*Andy Straka is the Anthony, Shamus, and Agatha Award nominated author of three private detective novels featuring fictional Charlottesville-based private eye and falconer Frank Pavlicek. His latest book is COLD QUARRY (Signet- Penguin Group 2003).*

**For more information on falconry, visit the following websites:**


North American Falconers Association  
<http://www.n-a-f-a.org/>

Virginia Falconers Association  
<http://vafalconry.swva.net/>

Andy Straka  
[www.andystraka.com](http://www.andystraka.com)

**For Virginia permitting information, contact:**


Diane Davis  
 Permit Division  
 VA Dept. of Game & Inland Fisheries  
 PO Box 11104  
 4010 W. Broad Street  
 Richmond, VA 23230  
 804-367-1076  
[ddavis@dgif.state.va.us](mailto:ddavis@dgif.state.va.us)




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