

# SEA ISLAND LIFE

SPRING/SUMMER 2015

**SETTING SAIL**  
HOBIE ALTER'S  
SEAFARING LEGACY

**THE NEW  
MOONSHINE**  
WHITE LIGHTNING  
STRIKES AGAIN

**HAUTE CAKES**  
CREATIVE  
WEDDING  
CAKE DESIGN



**Social**  
**CREATURES**

DOLPHINS IN GEORGIA'S WATERS

A photograph of a pheasant in flight, captured mid-air with its wings spread wide. The bird is positioned in the upper right quadrant of the frame. The background consists of a dense forest of tall, thin trees, likely pines, with a soft, slightly hazy atmosphere. The foreground is a field of dry, golden-brown grass.

# BIRDS *of* PREY

FALCONRY LENDS A UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE ON WILDLIFE FOR  
AVID HUNTERS AND OUTDOOR NOVICES ALIKE.

BY JOE RADA

**A** peregrine falcon glides above a brushy field at forest's edge. The crow-sized animal's blue-gray back, brown-and-white barred breast and legs, black head and white throat are a blur as it spirals gracefully upward, gaining 1,000 feet of altitude, becoming a mere speck against the clear blue of a morning sky. Changing course with a few agile flaps of its 3-foot wingspan, the bird of prey suddenly dives straight downward, wings folded tight, a feathery missile reaching speeds in excess of 200 mph. With stunning power and accuracy, it strikes a startled pheasant making a too-late attempt to rise and flee.

A man and a dog head to the spot where the falcon positions its body possessively over the dispatched pheasant. The falcon leaps to a leather glove on the man's outstretched fist in a brief rush and accepts a piece of prepared quail meat from an earlier hunt as reward for a job well done.

Few people forget such eye-widening moments once they experience falconry firsthand. In addition to witnessing a trained bird of prey, falconry interests expert hunters and novices because of the partnership between human, dog and raptor—any predatory bird including owls, eagles, hawks and falcons. The professionals who train these birds, called falconers, help to create a sporting experience people seek out at hunting clubs where the ancient art is seeing a resurgence.





Hoods prepare goshawks for the hunt.



Guests and members partner with dogs and raptors on hunts for squirrel, pheasant and quail.



Left: Sea Island provides falconry necessities; right: Birds of prey also help control pest populations.

### Hunting With History

This style of hunting dates back 4,000 years. Artistic representations of human-raptor interaction appeared in ancient Mongolia, China, Japan and Egypt. Falconry likely came to Europe with migratory and invading nations, and hunting with raptors grew into a status-symbol sport among medieval European nobles. This privileged group had the time, money and land to pursue the pastime.

Arabian falconry was well developed by the 13th century, when Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II led crusades into the Middle East. Impressed with what he saw, Frederick II wrote a treatise widely considered the first comprehensive book about falconry.

Europeans are credited with spreading falconry to the New World. Early attempts at the practice in the west include Spanish conquistadors hunting in Mexico and rumors of pilgrims in the American colonies who augmented their food supplies with the spoils of raptor hunts. It would take centuries for falconry to find popularity in America, especially with the rise of hunting with improved firearms.

In 1920, *National Geographic* published an article—"Falconry, the Sport of Kings"—which

inspired modern interest, but the revival of falconry was not immediate. Rather than gaining the attention of hunters, the article piqued the interest of historians, wildlife experts and other enthusiasts who were drawn more to possessing the regal-looking raptors than to the act of hunting. By 1959, the number of known North American falconers totaled less than 200, but, with the founding of the North American Falconers Association (NAFA) in 1961, that number has grown to about 4,000 recognized falconers across the U.S.

From a tradition once associated with invading armies, playboy nobility and huntsmen seeking sustenance, falconry has found a place with today's hunters. The modern era mingles sporting with conservation, and falconers engage in the practice in natural areas where prey abounds and raptors can hunt while maintaining the balance of natural ecosystems.

### A Comeback Story

Sensitive to the equilibrium between predator and prey, falconers and scientists noticed a sharp decline in wild raptor populations, especially peregrine falcons, in the mid-1960s.

The culprits behind the phenomenon were



A French representation of falconry from 1840

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After a dramatic decline, raptor populations have recovered, thanks in part to falconers who advocated a DDT ban and artificial insemination in captive birds.

decades of wholesale shooting, the destruction of habitats and the extinction of passenger pigeons (common raptor prey). Additionally, the widespread use of pesticides, particularly DDT, in agriculture weakened the birds' eggshells. As a result, many incubating eggs were crushed in nests, and few offspring survived. In 1975, it was estimated that the population had declined by approximately 90 percent of what it had been just 30 years prior.

"Many species of raptors were impacted by DDT, including ospreys and bald eagles, but peregrine falcons were nearly wiped out," says Steve Hein, founder and director for the Center for Wildlife Education at Georgia Southern University and a member of NAFA. "The falconry community joined the effort to ban the pesticide and pioneered artificial insemination in captive raptors. Thousands of captive-bred peregrines were successfully released into the wild to increase their population."

In addition to chemical bans and legal protections, nature's ability to adapt has contributed to the recovery. Although urban development has destroyed some of their former dwellings, falcons now nest on high-rise buildings, electrical power pylons, bridges and other man-made structures.

"These places emulate the canyons, cliffs and tall trees of their natural habitat," Hein says. "They thrive in nearly every major city in their former range, feeding on an abundance of feral pigeons."

Hein, who has spent decades studying wildlife and 27 years as a master falconer, calls getting peregrine falcons removed from

## OPEN SEASON

From mid-October to mid-March, guests and members at Sea Island can experience falconry with three different birds of prey in a single morning. Broadfield, A Sea Island Sporting Club and Lodge, encompasses 5,800 acres of forests and fields where hunters can find deer, quail, pheasant, turkey, hogs and other game. Three years ago, the hunting program welcomed hunting with raptors to the list of ways that guests and members can enjoy the great outdoors.

"This is the real deal, hunting with birds of prey doing what they do naturally, but working alongside people and pointer dogs," says falconer Jon Kent, Sea Island's director of outdoor pursuits. "A bird-watcher might spend thousands of hours waiting to see something like this happen from a distance in the wild, but we let people see it close-up every day using trained raptors."

A typical hunt starts with a Harris's hawk plucking squirrels from tall trees and "helicoptering" them to the ground to trade for a piece of easier-to-eat prepared meat from the falconer.

Next, participants partner with a goshawk or Cooper's hawk and a pointer dog. As the human and dog flush quail out of the brush, the airborne hawk picks one from the flock to catch in midair. The hawk's human counterpart offers some prepared meat to trade for the fresh catch before the hunting party repeats the procedure of stirring up grounded birds in the final phase of the hunt. At this stage, the aim is capturing pheasant, and the predator is a peregrine falcon.

During these hunts, guests don the falconer's thick leather glove and experience the thrill of having a trained raptor alight on an outstretched hand.

"All kinds [of people] are drawn to this, from experienced hunters who haven't hunted with birds to people who don't hunt or even get outdoors much," says Chris Kennedy, a Sea Island falconer. "If a hunt doesn't go perfectly, ... everyone still has a great time walking in the woods and watching the birds and dogs work."



Cooper's hawk



Goshawk



Harris's hawk



Peregrine falcon

endangered lists the greatest comeback of any species in the U.S., a feat accomplished with considerable support from falconers.

### Sea Island's Hunters

That comeback has allowed the 4,000-year-old tradition to thrive today, with many state parks and hunting clubs offering the chance to learn about and interact with the animals. Sea Island has created a haven for raptors where falconers lead hunts for guests and members of all experience levels. Hein developed Sea Island's falconry programs that take place at Broadfield, A Sea Island Sporting Club and Lodge, and provides all the birds of prey involved.

Although Sea Island hosts raptor-led hunts during fall and winter, guests and members are invited to learn more at year-round workshops, where they can get eye-to-eye with the creatures and learn about the art and history of falconry.

When the winter hunting season ends, the birds of prey begin their summer jobs. From March to October they help control the population of pesky boat-tailed grackles and other birds that disturb guests at outdoor eateries by simply standing watch. The birds are handled by Sea Island's falconers, who are happy to answer questions from curious onlookers.

"Just like trained raptors are used at airports and vineyards to control nuisance species, these birds of prey ensure that diners are able to enjoy their meals," Hein says.

Jon Kent, director of outdoor pursuits at Sea Island, oversees the falconers at Broadfield. "Hunting is instinctual, so we don't teach them that. ... The hard part [of training] is getting the birds to come back, to land on the glove, to trade fresh catch for a piece of prepared meat—usually something they caught during an earlier hunt," Kent says. "The training is all food-associated and reward-based. It can take



Hunts with falconers and Sea Island birds of prey can be tailored to guests of all skill levels.

months for some birds, a year for others."

With the work of falconers like Hein, Sea Island has created an environment where people can learn about an age-old hunting partnership while seeing the birds' skills in action. "It's a falconers' retreat where anyone can experience falconry and gain insights into the lifestyle of falconers," Hein explains. "It allows

people a privileged point of view of nature."

Seeing people enjoy falconry experiences makes all the time that Kent and the falconers spend with the birds worthwhile. "We put that leather glove on a person, let a Harris's hawk or a peregrine falcon land on it [and] people love that," he says. "Just being around these awesome birds is amazing." ○

## TAKING FLIGHT

Jim Ozier, wildlife biologist from the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, explains that two subspecies of wild peregrine falcons, the eastern anatum and the tundrius, migrate along the East Coast every autumn and spring. Peregrines enjoy the warm temperatures of summer year-round by migrating from Canada to South America as the seasons change between the two hemispheres, flying through Georgia on both legs of their semiannual journey.

This migratory pattern lends ornithologists and wildlife enthusiasts a unique opportunity at Sea Island. "Your best chance of seeing migrating peregrine falcons at Sea Island is on beaches and in salt marshes," says Jon Kent, falconer and director of outdoor pursuits for the resort. "They also perch in trees along beaches, fields, marshes and rivers."

Other raptors that migrate through Georgia include merlins, bald eagles and hawks. "Spotting any of them is a treat, but seeing a peregrine hunt is the best," Kent explains. "The peregrine is the king of the birds of prey and absolutely fascinating to watch." Keen observers may spot peregrines spiraling overhead then diving straight down at speeds of more than 200 mph—they're the fastest birds on Earth—to take grackles or quail by surprise.

