

## DISAPPEARING OF A ROYAL ART: Falconry or Hawking

Compiled by: Raju Vyas, Sashwat Apartment, BPC-Haveli Road, Nr. Splatter Studio, Alakapuri, Vadodara 390007. razoovyas@hotmail.com



Photo 1: A trained falcon: The best high-demanding bird of prey for the falconry worldwide is known as Peregrines *Falco peregrinus*.

(Photo Credit: Raju Vyas).

Falconry or hawking is a royal game that has disappeared entirely from India as many species of raptors have vanished from their habitats (See: SolB 2023) (Photo 1). However, I briefly introduce this subject based on an attentive compilation of the published literature. Classified as a hunting sport, falconry refers to hunting birds or mammals with the help of trained birds of prey. Whether practiced for its original purpose to obtain supplementary food or, as is the case almost exclusively today, for sport or recreation, falconry is considered an art of ancient origins (Freeman 1869).

Few raptorial bird species are suitable for falconry as they sport a naturally aggressive hunting style, namely Short-winged Goshawks (*Accipiter gentillis*) and Sparrow-hawks (*Accipiter nidus*), which are best suited for hunting in the woods, along with the long-winged falcons, principally the Peregrines *Falco peregrinus* (Photo 2), the Gyrfalcon *Falco rusticolus*, the Saker Falcon *Falco cherrug*, and the Merlin *Falco columbarius*. In some parts of Central Asia and Kazakhstan, Golden Eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*) are traditionally used to hunt smaller fur animals, such as foxes. Arab falconers favor the long-winged

falcons in pursuit of an ancient art that represents links with a way of life that has changed in the upheavals of massive social and economic change (Michell 1900).

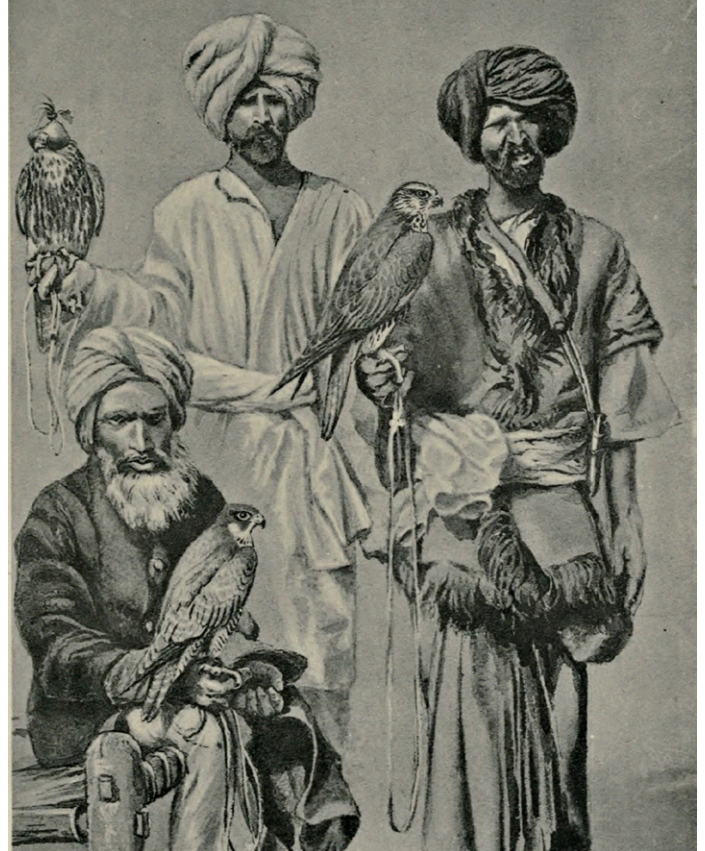


Photo 2: A group of Indian falconers with its favorite special falcons as Sakers (*Falco cherrug*) and Peregrine (*Falco peregrinus*)

(Photo Credit: D.C. Phillott, after James, Edmund Harting, Bibliotheca Accipitraria).

The geographical origins of falconry are yet to be discovered, but there is good reason to believe that the sport might have originated in the Middle East. It is believed that the earliest evidence of falconry was found on an Assyrian bas-relief from the period of Sargon II from 722-705 BC (Epstein 1943). Traditional Arab falconry (*qans*) necessitates the development and successful completion of three different but complex tasks: trapping, training, and hunting, the skills for each of which have been honed through countless generations of people that were as much a part of the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula as their prey (Photo 3).

The traditional season for falconry starts in the Autumn (now it is changing), around October each year, when the cooler weather conditions welcome the first batch of the first migrating falcons, moving south from their northern breeding grounds in the Arabian Peninsula. Trappers congregate in

## Falconry....

camps at critical points along the migration paths to lure and trap falcons using a variety of baits, including songbirds, pigeons, and small mammals, and traps such as the Bal-Chatri Noose Trap. The traditional falconer uses various traditional equipment and types of furniture for trapping birds of prey (Photo 4). Also, the use of traditional various types of equipment (handmade) and preparation of the furniture for the birds of prey (specific species and age) is an art and a kind of practice for an expert falconer (Vyas 1999), without such special knowledge about it, the falconer would be zero in the falconry. However, falconers use desired to train various species of falcons, the most sought-after ones are the Saker falcon (*saqr*) *Falco Cherruq* and the Peregrine *Falco peregrinus*, with the more prominent female saker (*al hurr*), and peregrine (*shahin*) being preferred over the rest (Photo 5).



Photo 3: Two Arabian falconers in traditional outfits with their Lanner falcon (*Falco biarmicus*) (after James, Edmund Harting, Bibliotheca Accipitraria).

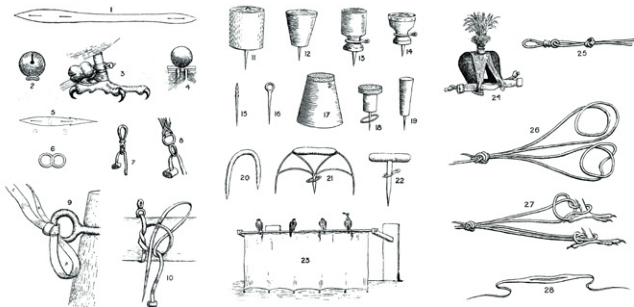


Photo 4: Illustration of traditional falconers using various hand-made equipment and types of furniture for trapping birds of prey.

Training of falcons begins immediately in the trapping camps where the priority is to accustom them to being held and entice them to feed by offering them scraps of meat while being handled. As opposed to the European falconers, who took 50 days to train a wild falcon, the Arabs could get a bird ready in only two weeks because they were never separated from them (Thesiger 1999). The trainer (*saqqar*) would talk to the falcon, stroke their feathers, and hood-unhood (*burga*) them. The falcon quickly learns to fly to a lure (*tilwah*) made from the wings of a prey species, and this lure may be used to entice the falcon back after every flight.



Photo 5: The illustration of an Indian falconer with a trained Shaheen Falcon *Faloc peregrinus perginator*

In a typical falconry trial, a trained falcon would be unhooded and launched, quickly sighting the fleeing prey and starting its pursuit. The thrill of pitting a Saker Falcon or Peregrine Falcon against a Houbara Bustard (*Chlamydotis undulata*) is that these slender falcons ordinarily would not tackle a bird the size of the bustard but must be trained to do so. The falcon will stoop on the Houbara, knocking it to the ground but seldom killing it with the first strike. The falconer will then race to the spot to retrieve the falcon, feeding it some tasty morsel from the Houbara, such as its brains (or, usually, they killed a

pigeon before and moved the falcon away from the dead Houbara by giving it some pigeon to feed upon). The falconers were mindful not to want the falcon to get used to eating Houbara while hunting before hooding the falcon. Traditionally, at the end of the hunting season, coinciding with the arrival of spring during March or April, the trained falcons were released back into the wild, presumably allowing them to return northward, back to their breeding areas after a foreshortened but eventful migration.

### References

- Epstein, H. J. 1943. *The origin and earliest history of falconry*. Isis 34(6): 497-509.
- Freeman, G.E. 1869. *Practical Falconry*. Published by Horace Cox, London. 89 pp.
- Michell, E.B. 1900. *The Art and Practice of Hawking*. Methuen Co. 26 Essex Street, W.C. London. 291pp.
- SolB 2023. *State of India's Birds, 2023: Range, trends, and conservation status*. The SolB Partnership. 119 pp.
- Thesiger, W. 1999. *Crossing the Sands*. Motivate Publishing, London—176 pp.
- Vyas, R. 1999. Shikari Pakshio ni talim - Bajdari. *Shrushti* 24: 24-25. (In Gujarati). □