

NEOTROPICAL RAPTORS

**Proceedings
of the
Second Neotropical Raptor Conference
Iguazú, Argentina, 2006**

**Edited by
Keith L. Bildstein
David R. Barber and Andrea Zimmerman**

**Hawk Mountain Sanctuary
Raptor Conservation Science Series No. 1**



Preferred citation:

Bildstein, K.L., D.R. Barber, and A. Zimmerman. 2007. Neotropical Raptors. Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, Orwigsburg, Pennsylvania, USA.

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Published by:
Hawk Mountain Sanctuary
1700 Hawk Mountain Road
Kempton, Pennsylvania 19529 USA
www.hawkmountain.org

Manufactured in the United States.

ROLE OF FALCONERS IN NEW WORLD RAPTOR CONSERVATION AND THE LAW

*Frank M. Bond, Simons and Slattery, LLP, P.O. Box 5333,
Santa Fe, NM 87502-5333 U.S.A.*

Abstract

Falconry has played a significant role in the conservation programs, legal protection, and ethical considerations relevant to birds of prey in Canada, the United States, and Mexico. From leadership roles in government agencies to advancements in technology and propagation techniques, falconers have played a major role in bird of prey legal protection, conservation and restoration programs, and the general concern for raptor welfare. New World falconers have expanded their "sport" to yet a higher level in its significant role in raptor conservation. They have provided the essential leadership for everything positive done on behalf of raptors.

Neotropical Raptors (Bildstein et al., Eds.) 2007. Pages 193-203.

EL ROL DE LOS CETREROS EN LEGISLACION Y CONSERVACION DE LAS RAPACES DEL NUEVO MUNDO

Resumen

La cetrería ha jugado un significante rol en los programas de conservación, protección legal y en las consideraciones éticas relacionadas con las aves de presa en Canadá, Estados Unidos y México. Desde posiciones de liderazgo en agencias gubernamentales hasta progresos en las tecnologías y técnicas aplicadas para propagación de aves rapaces, los cetreros han tenido un rol destacado en la protección legal, conservación, programas de restauración y bienestar de estas aves. Los cetreros del nuevo mundo han llevado su "deporte" a un nivel muy alto e importante en cuanto a su rol en la conservación de las rapaces, aportando un liderazgo esencial en muchas acciones que benefician a las aves de presa.

Introduction

Today, Canada, the United States, and Mexico have one of the largest concentrations of falconers in the world. The practice of falconry in North America dates back only to mid-20th century, by comparison to the age old traditions of Asia, Europe and the Middle East. However, with the fundamental contributions, the level of sophistication, the advancement of technology, and the recognition in law, falconry in North America rivals all other parts of the world for its relevance to society, its contributions to conservation and science, and its importance to the cultural pastime of falconers. Therefore, like many other nations and regions, falconry and the falconers of North America deserve recognition for their important contributions in the protection, conservation and restoration of birds of prey.

A Brief History

While there are some interesting early references to falconry particularly in the U.S. and Mexico, as researched and described below by Kent Carnie, falconry did not gain a practical foothold into North American society until the mid-20th century.

Falconry in colonial America

The nature of those early American settlers, and their struggles to establish themselves, certainly militated against the practice of falconry. Despite their desperate struggle just to survive, we do find at least one record of falconry among initial settlers (Morton 1637). In June 1622, Thomas Morton, an attorney, arrived in New England for what was to be a 10-year residence. In his writings, Morton was the first of the colonists to give any attention to the hawks except as fearsome birds of prey. Morton further describes the "hawkes" he encountered as the "*Fawcons, and tassell gentles*", "*Goshawkes and Tassels*", and also "*Marlins*" and "*Sparhawkes*."

By way of his qualifications regarding hawks and hawking, Morton recounts "*having bin bred in so genius a way, that I had the common use of them in England.*" Modern American ornithologists value Morton's observations, because he was more than casually experienced with the birds. Further, he had brought to the New World "*whoods, bels, luers, and all things fitting.*" Having a desire to try his hand with those birds locally available to him in his new home, Morton "*at my first arrival in those parts practiced to take a Lannaret, which I reclaimed, trained, and made flying in a fortnight, the same being a passenger at Michuelmas.*" Obviously, this "Lannaret" was a male tundra Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus tundrius*).

Subsequently, "*in the 1650's Jan Baptist sent back to Holland for his falcon, and flew her at quarry in the Hudson Valley, where she was 'king' of the New Netherlands*" (unidentified author in Spofford 1942).

An early illustration of falconry in the colonies is, of course, De Bry's classic engraving of colonial sport, which accompanied his rendition of Captain John Smith's account of the early (circa 1619) discoveries in Virginia. Pictured in the illustration are one falconer (with a hooded goshawk [?]) on a horse, another walking with a hawk on his fist approaching a hawk bound to a heron (?) on the ground, a third falconer with his dog is luring, and a fourth falconer is approaching a falcon or hawk on the ground on it's quarry. Although clearly illustrated, there is much about that illustration that raises skepticism. Despite all the claims of accuracy in De Bry's art (Alexander 1976), it would appear that the engraver's imagination, or at least local experience, far exceeds Smith's actual text.

The first tangible evidence we have that hawking may have been practiced is in the wording of an unpublished deed signed by Lieutenant Governor William Gooch of Virginia, on 25 July 1746, "at Williamsburg" (AAF 95-66). That deed in the Roanoke Valley of Virginia explicitly conveys all rights to "Hunting, Hawking, and Fishing."

Falconry and the Spanish conquest

Even farther south, there is an allusion to the hawk trained by one of Cortes' captains early in their stay in the Valley of Mexico--an incident that would qualify it as falconry in "Colonial America." Of all those early Europeans in North America, falconry might most logically have been found among the Spanish in Mexico. If Cortes and his Conquistadors were more adventurers than nobility, certainly once in power

they would have behaved similar to the nobility with which they were familiar. Falconry, on the wane in Spain, still represented a legitimate and "noble" pastime for these nouveau elite in Mexico.

Among these noble activities, falconry was perhaps the most important one. Medieval lore got a new impetus in America, just at the time that falconry was quickly becoming out of fashion in Europe. The first Viceroy of New Spain, Luis Velasco, had a falcon so tame, the story goes, that he rode with the bird unhooded on his fist. Velasco also had neblies (Peregrine Falcons), sakers (perhaps Prairie Falcons [*Falco mexicanus*]), and haliets (*Micrastur* spp.). His son, Luis de Velasco II, employed a royal falconer to look after his birds.

Another account provides an early (1609-1617) description of Spanish post-conquest activities in Peru:

"When not engaged in warfare, many soldiers of noble blood avoided idleness by trading for Indian textiles and coca in Potosi. Llamas were used to carry these burdens, and the round trip required four months. Many of these men liked to accompany their possessions; and, since their llamas moved slowly, they would provide themselves a pair of hawks [emphasis added], some retrievers and greyhounds, and harquebuses so that during the day they could separate from their herds and hunt. They would overtake their llamas again at nightfall, often bearing with them a dozen partridges, a deer, guanaco or a vicuna... These journeys were really more of a diversion and an excuse for hunting than a matter of commerce, which to a noble Spaniard would be more degrading than idleness" (unidentified author in Varner and Varner 1983).

Included in the latter work is an illustration from Poma de Ayala, believed to have been written between 1583-1613. This portrait clearly depicts a local hunter with both dogs and a "falcon." Poma de Ayala, describing post-conquest Peru, indicated:

"the Indians, in order not be lazy and slothful or gamblers and thieves, became hunters of doves, deer, and other animals and that they used firearms, arrows, slings, lassos, traps, falcons, and hunting dogs."

Falconry in the 20th century

Colonel R. L. "Luff" Meredith is recognized as being the "father" of American falconry (Meredith 1999). A number of young men in New York City, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C. gravitated toward him. Among the notable figures, were Dr. Robert M. "Doc" Stabler, Alva Nye, Frank and John Craighead, and Halter Cunningham. In the 1940s, they formed the Falconers' Association of North America, which published seven high quality journals until it ceased due to the World War II.

These men possessed the traditional bird of falconry, the Peregrine Falcon. The peregrines were taken from local eyries of the now extirpated population known as the "Rock anatum." Falconry for them, in those early years, was mere possession of hawks, because they did not advance to the stage of hunting game until later. Their countryside was not suitable for longwing falconry. Even though Meredith had visited British and European falconers, and the Craigheads spent several months hawking and hunting with an Indian prince (Craighead and Craighead 2001), actual hawking for the most part escaped these men as the next logical step after training a bird. There were, however, early exceptions in the West and Canada. In Idaho, World War II veteran, Morlan Nelson began hawking with his Golden Eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*), Prairie Falcons and Peregrine Falcons. Frank Beebe recorded early successful hawking in British Columbia. In the 1950s, John Campbell emigrated from Scotland to Alberta where he became a successful early game hawker on his ranch in Black Diamond. At

about the same time Tom Cade was finishing his graduate studies in California and Alaska and was beginning some initial game hawking.

In the 1960s, after the founding of the North American Falconers Association (NAFA), true game hawking exploded across the continent. By then the ubiquitous Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) had become a mainstay for the rabbit hawker and a decade later the Harris's Hawk (*Parabuteo unicinctus*) was "discovered," and is now the species of choice for the majority of falconers in North America and Europe.

In Mexico, Guillermo José Tapia was the president of the Asociación Mexicana de Cetrería, formed in the 1940s. Its existence is confirmed by a letter in The Archives of Falconry dated 23 December 1951 from Mexico City addressed to Dr. Robert Stabler mentioning other members, including Col. R. L. Meredith, Gilbert Blaine (Great Britain), Otto Kals (Germany), and Peter Asborn (USA). The association disappeared leaving no other trace.

Later in 1964 when Roberto Behar became involved in falconry, he had the opportunity to travel and contact international falconers such as Renz Waller (Germany), Kinya Nakajima (Japan), and Félix Rodríguez de la Fuente (Spain), whose treatise, *El Arte de Cetrería*, became the leading falconry text for falconers in Latin America (Fuente 1965).

In the 1980s, the number of Mexican falconers increased because of their introduction to falconry by a popular television advertisement for "brandy" depicting a Harris's Hawk flying to the fist. By the end of the 1980s there were 200 falconers in 10 organized groups.

North American Falconry Organizations

The North American Falconers Association (NAFA) is, perhaps, unique in the world, because it represents individual falconers from three nations. NAFA was founded in 1961 in Colorado by well-known falconers, Harold Webster and Frank Beebe (of Canada) along with many others (Cade and Burnham 2003). Mexican falconers were added to the membership in the late 1990s. Besides the regular voting members of the three nations, NAFA has non-voting associate member organizations, which are the local, state, and provincial falconry clubs, and many foreign members. Generally NAFA's membership is between 2,000-3,000 falconers and associations. NAFA also is known for its publications: *Hawk Chalk*, a newsletter that is published three times per year, and *Journal*, a larger glossy publication with articles on the sport and related activities that is published annually. NAFA has an annual field meet that is attended by 300-400 falconers. In the early days the meets were held for several years in South Dakota, but for the last 20 years the meets have rotated among Colorado, Texas, Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Utah. NAFA members and guests attend these meets from nations throughout the world.

All of the state clubs affiliated with NAFA have annual meets and other social activities throughout the year. The California Hawking Club is particularly significant because its annual meet, often held in Bakersfield, California, has similar attendance as the NAFA meet. There are approximately 600 falconers in California alone.

Canada has falconry associations in virtually every province where falconry is permitted. Canadian falconers meet each year in October in Alberta arranged by the Alberta Falconers Association.