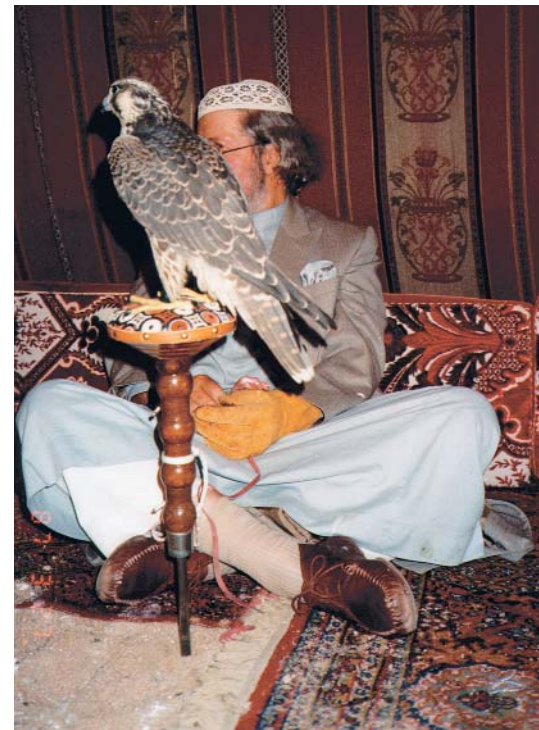




Training

In October and November of each year, Arab falconers bring their newly trapped hawks to the *majlises* (reception rooms) of their respective sheikhs and princes. Many of the falconers are from tribes and families who for generations have looked after, trained and flown the falcons of certain princes and their immediate family. The falconers arrive, like the passing falcons, and stay throughout the hawking season, caring for two, three or four falcons to each man. Each hawk is appraised, measured and discussed. As each is passed from falconer to falconer, it is felt for condition under the wing butts and about the neck. It is unhooded, rehooded and then passed on again, amid much discussion of its qualities, weight, size and worth.



The new falcon, a present for the author.

Suddenly hawks are everywhere—in the bazaars, in cars, at airports and at many of the sheikhs' and princes' houses and palaces. As new hawks are brought in from trapping camps, a team of carefully selected falcons is built up. New hawks are bought, sold and given as gifts. As better hawks are acquired, the princes and sheikhs give away some of the less promising to relatives and friends. Often falconers are sent to distant places—Damascus, Lahore or Cairo—to buy selected hawks; they return full of stories of how successful the trapping season has been, of some outstanding hawk beyond price, and of who has bought what, from whom and at what cost.

A practice that has been observed traditionally, at least in the Gulf States, is the marking of new hawks by clipping some feathers, perhaps the end of the moustache on the left cheek or a piece in the hollow of the back. These marks are unique to particular princes or sheikhs so a lost hawk can be easily recognized.



Abu Dhabi, November 3, 1965: *New hawks still coming in; a big lot of sakers expected. Few peregrines are about as yet but it's still early in the season for them. Some of the hawks already manned and coming well to the fist were introduced to a pigeon. A long line, some 50 yd. [45.5 m] or so, was tied to the pigeon, the other end to the hawks' leash. Some of the hawks were surprisingly uninterested in the pigeon; others killed theirs immediately. If they did so they were given some blood from the neck. The hawks were then called again, using the dead pigeon as a lure, sometimes two or three times, as if to excite them.*

Meanwhile, the hawks' training, begun in the trapping camps, continues at home. When I first traveled in Arabia, a falconer usually looked after only a single hawk. Today some may be responsible for four or five. The division of hawks among the falconers is the cause of much discussion, and great diplomacy, on the part of the sheikh or emir. As new arrivals come in, the hawks are shuffled about between the falconers, who are all eager to train those that show the greatest promise.

Early training

During training, the first priority is to get the falcons to feed. Some may already feed freely through the hood or unhooded, others arrive almost untouched, straight from the trapper's nets. To train them to feed, falconers hold some meat at the hawks' feet as they stroke or tap them; hawks are continually handled during training. If the hawks put their heads down to bite at the nuisance, sooner or later they will bite off a snippet of the meat. The hawks

may throw away these snippets, but hopefully they will eventually swallow one. Once they start to feed, most falcons will continue to take a small crop, unless they are disturbed in some way.

Occasionally a hawk proves to be obstinate and requires more drastic handling. As in the West, if it refuses to eat, the falconer takes hold of its left foot and grips it firmly in his gloved hand, along with a piece of meat. Feeling trapped, the falcon bites at the hand and then is induced to feed. If the falcon does not respond immediately, however, the falconer squeezes its foot a little. Aggressive, wild hawks are usually easier to train than those that sit like statues, doing nothing wrong but equally doing nothing right. An aggressive hawk usually turns into a generous, eager one, quick to learn and enthusiastic at the lure and later at quarry.

Much of the day is spent in firmly handling each hawk in turn. Falconers push their free hand against the hawk's throat as their fingers caress the muscles and body, ending by running down the thigh and leg, teasing out the trouser feathers. This stroking is repeated over and over again until the hawk is relaxed and almost seems to enjoy the caressing. This type of handling is first done when the hawk is hooded and then when it is unhooded. When first feeding the hawk or handling her unhooded, falconers do not look into its eyes as this will worry the bird.

Call by name

When handling a new hawk, Arab falconers continually call to it, using its name over and over again. Today some new names—Petrol, Dollar, Zizoom and others—have joined the list of traditional ones—Mansour, Gerah, Meshur, Dhib, Nimran and others—but the traditional names are used over and over again.

As Taymur Mirza wrote in 1868 in the *Baz-Nama-Yi Nasiri*:

Should a passage falcon [saker] with sealed eyes come into your possession ... fit her with some suitable name such as Sultan, Zargham, Faris, Shabib, Habib, Mahbub, Shahab, Badran, etc. Next fit her with an old hood that is soft and easy, one that will not, by hurting her eyes, make her hood-shy. Let her remain 'sealed' under the hood for three days. Every day when you feed her call her name. On the third or fourth day, i.e., as soon as she has learnt to feed freely, which she will show by searching eagerly for food when you mention her name, unseal her eyes about two hours to sunset, and then rehood her. Call her name, and when she bends her hooded head in search of food, give her a mouthful or two. Then stroke her on the breast, the thighs, and the wings, and again remove the hood that she might see daylight, and quickly replace it. Continue this treatment until half an hour before

sunset. Then set her down and leave her until after the evening prayer. Then again take her on the fist and sit near the lamp, with your back to the wall, so that none may come behind you and your hawk. (p.94)



Pakistan, 1967: *Ahmed bin Amran came to my tent in the evening—we had a long chat about training. Bin Amran sets great store by the hawk being taught to know its name. This, he says, is of great importance with sakers, less so with peregrines. To illustrate how well his saker Mansour knows her name, he placed her hooded on the ground beside her perch, then shouted her name. She immediately ran toward him to the full length of her leash, then jumped in her attempts to get to him. Once excited she would indeed come to almost any shout, but if calm would only take notice of her own name. This saker, trapped in Syria, took five houbara today but will only take them in the air, stooping behind them and coming in from underneath to bind to the houbara.*



A very large peregrine.

But the *Baz-Nama-Yi Nasiri* notes that it is not necessary to teach the peregrine to recognize its name:

For if you taught her to recognize her name like a passage saker, and call her by it when she is hooded, she will bate with her claws convulsively in the glove—It is sufficient to teach the shahin to come to the luring call.

Generally, however, falconers do talk to their hawks as they approach them, calling their name before touching them. This attracts their attention and, if they are hooded, they are not surprised by being suddenly touched. It is surprising how many people want to stroke a hooded hawk and then seem surprised that it jumps when touched.

Every precaution should be taken to ensure that the hawk is not frightened. This is the topic of many stories that are told around the campfires. One such story goes as follows:

To save his hawk from startling in alarm
He seized the child and thrust him 'neath his arm,
And pressed tight and tighter in his dread,
He killed the boy by crushing upon his head.

The above story is based on a falconer named Sayyid Adham, who, while manning a fine passage saker, tucked his two-year-old son under his arm to stop him from frightening the falcon, which was quietly preening its feathers unhooded for the first time. Later, after rehooding the falcon, the falconer found that his son had suffocated.



A passage falcon from Iran.

Training continues

Great importance is placed on the early stage of manning. If the hawk feeds freely through the hood in early training, it is important not to delay too long before feeding her unhooded. A hawk that is fed day after day through the hood soon develops the trying habit of biting at the glove or jesses whenever hunger strikes or when a slight noise or movement convinces it that it is feeding time. Some hawks that have been kept too long in a trapping camp or at the home of the hawk dealer acquire this annoying habit.

It is better to unhood and rehood a hawk that has not been sealed in the middle of its meal. Its attention is then on feeding and it will very often continue feeding even after an initial look round. But, it is best to rehood the hawk before it has satisfied its hunger. Once well fed, a hawk is likely to be at its most restless. If rehooded, it continues feeding until satisfied and then remains calm and unruffled.

Well-manned hawks

Although at one time it was regarded as almost essential to carry hawks in training in the *suq* or bazaar to accustom them to the noise and bustle of their new life, now the carrying and manning is usually done around the house or tent. Sitting quietly by the hawk on its perch, the falconer does not frighten it by towering over it.

With concentrated manning, Arab hawks, particularly sakers, become extremely tame. Soon they rouse, preen and even sleep with head under wing amid the bustle and activity of an Arab house. Each hawk soon learns its name and its own perch, and by repeatedly jumping to the fist for snippets of meat from the perch, the ground, or the knee or lap of the falconer, it associates its name and the falconer's call with reward. As they become accustomed to their new regime, the falconers will often unhood them before lifting them from the block. Soon they will freely step to the fist for the accustomed meal.

The Arabs say that a falcon beats out the dust (Arabic: *ya tel na fad*) when it rouses. As a falcon sits on its perch or on the glove, it can be encouraged to rouse by pulling at its leash. When holding the hawk on the fist, it is wise to lay the perch on the ground or tuck it under the leg so that the hawk is not tempted to jump to it, as it is higher than the fist.

An Arab falconer considers a hawk well manned when it rouses and preens unhooded on the fist, as is noted in the *Baz-Nama-Yi Nasiri*:



Being manned, a haggard lanner.