

The Falconer's Greatest Assets



As children, we are taught that there are two categories of literature: fiction and nonfiction. Like most kids, I thought everything belonging to the latter category was to be considered gospel. As I got older I began to realize that there was a good deal of misinformation out there, in print and otherwise. Many falconers have benefited from the written words of those falconers who graciously enlightened us by sharing their experiences in letters, books and magazines. By the same token however, I believe that if we are not careful, we can rely too heavily on others and their interpretation of events to dictate our reality. This situation has the potential to stifle our creativity and stunt our growth. Even as I write this book, I am sure there are those who have had differing experiences and drawn conclusions that, in some ways, contrast those of mine. Nonconformity of thought is a fascinating aspect of falconry and part of the attraction for me. There isn't one rigid path to which one must adhere. Falconry is an art that lives and breathes and is practiced by many diverse cultures and individuals. As our personal knowledge in the art grows in relation to our experiences, we begin to comprehend the relevance of that which we've read. Likewise, in some instances we detect contradictions and discrepancies. Through experimentation, trial and error, we begin perfecting that which works for us and

eliminating those practices that do not. Our own philosophies develop and opinions emerge.

Falconry is a cerebral affair requiring a degree of intellect and an eye for detail. The falconer's ability to comprehend the workings of the raptor mentality is what makes training possible. Thus, the greater our understanding of raptorial thought processes and instinctive inclinations, the more effectively we may construct training protocol.

Falconry is also an ancient art that is steeped in tradition. However, I believe that at times a traditionalist approach becomes an impediment. I was recently surprised to find that there are still some purists who shun the use of telemetry. While this seems absurd to me, presumably the inclusion of such modern technology is an unwelcome intrusion of something sacred to traditionalists. So long as they fly indigenous species only, who could condemn them? Nonetheless, anything, whether it be traditions, assumptions or preconceived notions, that prevents us from exploring alternatives or broadening our perspectives has the potential to limit our progression on all levels. An open mind cultivates innovation, helping us to envision creative solutions to behavioral hurdles and explore untapped potential. I believe training hawks requires a certain amount of creativity and flexibility. As trainers we are not building model airplanes, we are molding minds and developing skills. Raptors are hatched with the necessary physical and psychological characteristics required to be successful predators. Falconers merely shape the bird's rudimentary thoughts and behaviors to make falconry possible. I have come to realize that the biggest obstacle the game-hawk is likely to encounter on the path to perfection is the falconer himself. It is up to us as falconers to develop techniques that don't prevent our game-hawks from reaching their full potentials, and our greatest assets in regard to this endeavor are our experience, knowledge and intuition, working in combination.

The longer we practice falconry, the more experiences we acquire and the deeper the depth of our knowledge. Experiences become more meaningful if we diligently engage in observation. Observation is not just spending time in proximity with

something, but actively analyzing that which is being observed. Observation is a skill; the more we practice, the better at it we become. One of the finest falconry books ever written is not coincidentally titled *Observations on Modern Falconry*. The author, Ronald Stevens, obviously recognized the importance of observation. The more time spent monitoring and examining raptors, the clearer the information flows from hawk to man, like second nature. The more intimately we know individual hawks, the easier it becomes to understand just what they are doing and exactly why they are doing it. The same can be said of child rearing. I never cease to be amazed by the things that parents will do in regards to their children, such as the types of behaviors they will reinforce and unwittingly reward. The child wants something, initially the parent says “No.” The child acts out in defiance (negative behavior), the likes of which include breath holding, stomping, yelling, tantrums, etc., all designed to soften, embarrass, guilt or frustrate the parent into giving in. These events are not random—they are devised and are the culmination of previous episodes during which the parent helped teach these skills to the child. The child would not behave in this manner if the end result was a negative experience. The child behaves in this fashion because it works! In the end the parent acquiesces and the child gets what it wants. These early lessons occurring during the most formative years of an individual’s life are not shucked off with the onset of adulthood. Rather, these lessons act as a roadmap, guiding the individual through the course of his or her life. In this case the message is simply, “be an ass, you get what you want.” This analogy is very relevant to falconry—if you really want to mess up your training then positively reinforce a negative behavior. If a falconer is not carefully observing situations and monitoring his own behaviors, he may unwittingly reward negative behaviors or fail to reinforce positive behaviors.

Virtually all the chronic behavioral problems seen among falconry birds can be traced to falconer error. Problems with biting, footing, hooding, screaming, raking, etc., become chronic only if they serve a purpose. Sometimes the cause of a problem is blatantly obvious. Take for example, biting and

footing maliciously directed at the falconer's hands. Some raptors bite handlers any chance they get. This aggression is typically an exhibition of fear and can be traced to inadequate manning, along with a healthy dose of positive reinforcement. The first time the falcon bites your hand and you pull away, the bird has achieved its desire—to rid itself of your hand. Now the precedence has been established and you can count on the falcon biting your hands as a means of ridding itself of them again. If a hawk foots the handler while feeding on the glove it is an act of aggression usually stemming from possessiveness. Of course, being footed by a large hawk is quite painful and an excellent example of the type of behavior that is preferably preempted, especially since raptors do not respond well to negative reinforcement. Starting with the very first meals eaten in the presence of the falconer, the hawk should be familiarized with having the trainer's hands in close proximity to its food. If the hawk looks "iffy," a feather or stick can substitute for the hand initially. In very short order the hawk accepts that the hand is of no threat to itself or its meal and that there is nothing that it can do to make it go away anyway, so it learns to see the hand as nothing more than a mild distraction at worst. Thus, the hawk is properly habituated right from the start.

Raptors are very habitual organisms. This works well for the falconer provided the hawk is forming good habits only. Continual observation allows falconers to recognize events, behaviors, mannerisms and trends as they happen and predict them before they begin. Interpreting and evaluating that which we have observed illuminates strengths as well as flaws in our training/hawking regimen. Mentally recording the day's events (and journaling) provides necessary decision-making data. This data becomes more useful through active contemplation. Information is a tool and, like any tool, is only productive when in use. Often at night, I lie awake in bed reflecting on the day's flights, assessing how things went for each hawk and correlating recent performance trends. I can then construct a plan for the following day, suited to meet the needs of each individual raptor. By anticipating tomorrow's slips based on today's performance, I can help ensure that the hawk is being managed as

efficiently as possible. This pre- and post-flight analytical process is extremely useful to a falconer with an agenda, some sort of criteria or aspiration.

Without a critique of the previous flight it is difficult to make directional changes in flight style. If a falcon has had bad luck or poor slips for a day or two I'll make a point of providing a superior slip the next time out. If a falcon has been pounding easy duck slips and is high on confidence, I may plan for a more difficult slip the next day to broaden her horizons. If a falcon became bored and strayed today, I'll be sure to serve with experience tomorrow. Conversely, if the falcon's pitch plateaued at a sub-standard altitude today, I'll make a point of keeping her on the wing tomorrow until she ascends to a pitch I'm satisfied with. Determining the night before what type of slips I'm looking for allows me to plan which areas I should be traveling through during my search the next day.

Sometimes the hawk behaves in a manner that appears unexplainable on the surface and we become perplexed. Fortunately, for every question there is an answer somewhere. One way or another, the information is there; the raptor is telling us what we need to know in order to solve the riddle. Projection is the tool of choice to solve the puzzle, and it is the falconer's ability to project (more than anything else) that reflects his abilities as a trainer. Projection is a process of moving beyond ourselves through mental imagery. We take on the persona of an object that we want to better understand. Through projection we think like a bird because in essence we are the bird. Projection is extremely beneficial because not only does it make it possible for us to ascribe meaning to the behaviors we have witnessed, but also projection helps us conjure ideas and tactics to shape or reshape desired behaviors. The more sentient we are toward our hawks, the easier it becomes to project ourselves into them.

A natural byproduct of projection is intuition, which is a sort of instinctive knowledge. During these quiet moments of introspection we are primed to receive information, a thought, an epiphany, a breakthrough. There is a fuzzy area between focus and a blank mind, a sort of relaxed concentration or meditative state. I seem to hit this state most often at night, during

the transitional stage between wakefulness and sleep. If I have successfully swept the clutter from my mind, I sometimes access an all too infrequently used portion of my brain and occasionally receive insight or perhaps clarity on a previously convoluted issue.

My work often takes me on the road, lecturing in metropolitan areas for several days at a time. Afterwards, I anxiously head home, watching the city dissipate in the rearview mirror, my soul yearning for the solitude of the forest. Peaceful time spent among the trees restores a sense of balance and can be very inspirational, providing an excellent opportunity for me to seek answers to questions and hopefully receive pristine images in return. Sometimes intuition arrives at less serene times and locations, such as while in the shower or watching television. It is likely that each of us receives intuitive guidance in our own unique ways. The important thing is to realize that we are all capable of channeling this positive energy and benefiting from it. Utilizing an intuitive approach to raptor management and life in general allows us to envision productive methods and solutions that may have otherwise eluded us.

Establishing criteria and setting goals are other tactics that falconers can benefit from. There is a natural evolution that takes place among falconers. Initially we are happy just to have a hawk and ecstatic if it doesn't fly away. Through small increments we progressively perfect our methodology and our art, setting ever-higher standards. In so doing, we continually achieve an elevated falconry experience and sense of satisfaction. It is equally important that we recognize goals as they are fulfilled and not minimize each milestone achieved. Wanting more is a part of the human psyche and can be the driving force behind perfection. This mentality is a double-edged sword, in that it can indeed encourage us to practice outstanding falconry, but if we are not careful we may find ourselves eternally unfulfilled due to some perceived or imagined flaw in the hawk's performance. Falconry is the epitome of an emotional roller-coaster capable of eliciting extreme highs and lows in short order. When falconry is good, it's damned good; when falconry is bad, it's just damned. With such an emotional investment

riding on wings and a prayer, sometimes we lose sight of falconry's primary function. Above all else, falconry is a discipline to be enjoyed. In the most fundamental of ways, the most successful falconers are those who find the most pleasure in whatever falconry they choose to experience. It would be foolhardy to go to such great lengths, exerting such effort in the pursuit of falconry and not enjoy the scenery along the way, even when things aren't great. It would be absurd not to savor the good times. Nonetheless, I find that I must periodically remind myself to live in the moment and revel in the spectacle unfolding before my eyes. Some of the happiest moments of my life are those in which I sit alongside the falcon and dog after an awesome flight, engulfed in the here and now.

Occasionally I remind myself to completely appreciate each game-hawk I fly. Even the greatest of game-hawks are temporary—we would be wise to delight in them while we can. Relatively few genuine game-hawks live to a ripe old age and die from natural causes, though many live longer than their wild counterparts. Game-hawks are exposed to so many potentially deadly elements in the field. The loss of a well-loved game-hawk is always difficult; to lose such a bird through falconer error is even tougher as we compound the grief with a healthy dose of guilt. Life presents ample opportunity for us all to make mistakes. The hard truth of falconry is that due to its very nature, it is unforgiving of all but the smallest mistakes, and sometimes even those will spoil the entire day, if not the season. Avoiding mistakes is crucial, nonetheless making some mistakes is inevitable. Learning from mistakes is essential. No mistake should be a total loss because they all offer the gift of enlightenment if we choose to learn from them. To not learn from a mistake is a tragedy in and of itself and leaves us destined to stumble on the same barriers over and over.