

Falconry in southern Africa



A working formula for conservation through sustainable use

Falconry is practiced legally, under license in all provinces in South Africa and in Zimbabwe. Provincial falconry policies, which determine the manner that national and provincial laws and ordinances are applied to falconry, are in place or in process in all South African provinces. There are some 160 active falconers in South Africa and about 20 in Zimbabwe. Falconry can be defined as “The art of hunting wild quarry with a trained hawk”. It is considered an art as, in order to practice falconry, one needs a variety of skills and, even then, one must have passion, intuition and aptitude to achieve a measure of success. Arab Muslims believe that it is not acceptable to eat a hare that has been killed by a hound as one should not share a servant’s food. On the other hand, they believe that it is acceptable to eat a hare caught by a falcon because a falcon becomes your partnering the hunt and is never your servant. So the thrill of falconry lies partly in developing a partnership with a fit and “free-flying” apex-predator that will accept the falconer as long as a profitable relationship can be maintained and, partly, in having a privileged and intimate insight into the lives and awesome abilities of these spectacular creatures.

Falconry is administered by provincial falconry clubs that work closely with provincial nature conservation authorities to ensure compliance with the law by falconers. These clubs also ensure that a good standard of falconry is practiced and that high standards of animal husbandry and animal welfare are maintained. Similarly, they set and maintain high ethical standards with respect to hunting and the management of the hawks. These clubs all fall under the umbrella of the South African Falconry Association, which is itself a member of the International Association for Falconry and the Conservation of Birds of Prey (a full member of the IUCN). In order to take up falconry, a prospective falconer must first join the club in his/her province. No falconry bird may be kept without a provincial possession permit and the hunting of prey species must abide by the relevant hunting legislation.

Falconry is learned through a process whereby knowledge and skills are passed down from master to apprentice. There are numerous good books on the subject but one cannot learn falconry by studying books alone. A potential falconer must become an apprentice and have a nominated graded falconer who will take responsibility for him or her. The apprentice is not allowed to keep his/her own bird for at least one year. At the end of that time and on the recommendation of his/her sponsor, he/she is subjected to a written and oral exam and must satisfy the club that he/she has the skill, equipment and facilities to take up a bird of his/her own.

Falconers are graded by their peers according to their level of skill and experience. The falconers’ grade determines the type of birds that they may fly. Birds of prey have been used for falconry, in parts of the world, for almost as long as the horse and the hound have been domesticated. The major difference between these animals is that while the horse and the hound have been bred in captivity for millennia, it is only in the last 50 years that the need to breed raptors in captivity has stimulated the development of the technology to

do this. Traditionally, falcons and hawks have been harvested from the wild, flown for one or more seasons, and released back to the wild. Falconers believe that they borrow their birds from the wild. This privilege is taken very seriously and it encourages falconers to strive for the conservation and protection of wild raptors. Today a significant number of falconers' hawks are captive bred but most of the species used in falconry are present in sufficient numbers in the wild to permit a limited and sustainable wild harvest. This process discourages the trafficking in birds of prey, reduces the number of exotic birds that are flown, considerably reduces the number of birds held in captivity and focuses the falconers as a force for conservation of raptors.

Falconers contribute to conservation by:

- Performing scientific field studies on raptors and game birds, thus contributing to the knowledge of their biology, prevalence and conservation status.
- Contribute to the work of scientists by providing data and field observations as well as skills such as the finding of nests and trapping techniques.
- Falconers contribute to the rehabilitation of raptors through their knowledge of raptor husbandry and through the use of falconry techniques to ensure the survival of these birds on release.
- The experience gained by falconers in the captive breeding of raptors has proven invaluable and there are a number of notable examples, internationally, where falconers have contributed to the restoration of critically depleted populations, such as the North American Peregrine population, the Mauritius Kestrel, the British Red Kite and the British Goshawk population, to mention a few. Falconers in southern Africa have gained experience in this area but we hope that conservation efforts in other areas will avert the need for such dire measures.
- Falconers are well placed to contribute to the conservation of raptors through education and outreach. They can reach a large section of the population by a variety of means such as falconry displays presentations to schools, including the underprivileged, and interactions with farmers amongst others. In this way they transmit their passion for raptors and encourage an appreciation of these creatures that will stimulate our people to value and conserve them.
- Falconers are proud to have an association with the Bird of Prey Working Group of the Endangered Wildlife Trust and to have signed a Memorandum of Understanding with this organization. Falconry is part of our cultural heritage, just as the raptors are part of our natural heritage. The continued practice of falconry will help to conserve and maintain our natural heritage for generations to come. For more information regarding falconry in South Africa, please visit our web-site at www.safalconry.org.za. Prospective falconers may contact the secretary of the South African Falconry Association, Dr Adrian Lombard at lombarda@mweb.co.za and they will be directed to their provincial falconry club.

Text by Dr Adrian Lombard.

For further information: Please contact the:
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