

What is Falconry?

Falconry can be defined as the taking of wild quarry in its natural state and habitat by means of a trained raptor. This ancient art is a very demanding endeavor, requiring a serious dedication of time and energy from the falconer. Here's an overview for those who want to know more.

Do You Really Want to Become a Falconer?

Thank you for your inquiry into falconry. You may have recently read about this ancient art in a book or periodical, learned about it through television or radio, perhaps a movie, or may have even seen a trained hawk in action. Whatever the case, you were obviously impressed enough to want to learn more about the sport of falconry, and we appreciate your interest.

Few people thrilling at the brief, intense magic of a trained hawk in flight realize the intense demands placed upon one who aspires to be a falconer. Even fewer are willing to make the necessary sacrifices.

Time

Falconry is not an "overnight" achievement. **Becoming a Master falconer takes at least seven years; finishing your apprenticeship alone will take at least two.** Your hawk requires a significant amount of time, every day, 365 days a year, and a bird in training requires substantially more time. Raptors, unlike a rifle or a bow, cannot be hung on the wall and forgotten until the next hunting trip. And you might be ok with this time commitment, but is your spouse ok with it? Your kids? Your career?

Effort and Ethics

Of all sports in America, falconry is the only one that utilizes a trained wild creature. Falcons, hawks, eagles and owls are essential elements of our wildlife. The competent falconer takes care to follow sound conservation principles in the pursuit of the sport. Even though the federal government's environmental assessment states falconry has "no impact" on wild raptor populations, a careless, uninformed individual, attempting to satisfy a passing fancy, can do great harm to one or more birds and cast the shadow of discredit on the sport of falconry itself. Most falconers, therefore, before they will agree to help anyone newly attracted to the sport, will require evidence of a serious, committed interest in falconry. They just don't have time for anything else.

Permits

Because all raptors are protected by state, federal, and international law, all potential falconers must obtain necessary permits before obtaining a hawk or practicing falconry.

This can take quite a while, since it includes taking a written falconry exam and getting the appropriate signatures. In some states, hunter education courses are required before you can get your hunting license. If you can't keep your paperwork straight, even in quintuplicate (five copies), don't consider falconry.

Money

Most people immediately think of the cost of acquiring a hawk, but the price of the bird is only the beginning. You must be able to cover food, shelter, equipment, veterinary costs, permits and fees, and travel. To keep it healthy, you must feed your raptor only fresh raw meat, preferably the exact same whole birds or mammals they would catch on their own. Housing and equipment requirements are mandated by state and federal law; they require not only buying raw materials, but skill in working with these materials. (And you will be inspected before you are permitted to acquire a hawk.) Most falconers also spend considerable amounts of money on books as a source of vital information and enjoyment. You will have to pay permit and license fees as well. Travel adds up fast, too; obtaining a hawk, visiting other falconers, training and hunting can put literally thousands of miles on your car.

Access to Land

You must have permission to enter adequate and convenient locations in which to fly a hawk and there must be appropriate game available. The falcons require wide open expanses of land where they may be flown high over the falconer, while hawks and small accipiters can be hunted in smaller fields or farms. Gun hunting, roads, or power lines may render an otherwise suitable location unusable because of the potential threat to the hawk.

Personality

Are you sincerely interested in all aspects of wildlife and the out-of-doors?

How badly do you want to learn? Are you ready to start at the bottom of the totem pole...and stay there for two or more years?

Can you listen to and follow other people's advice?

How's your patience and pain tolerance? Raptors bite. They also can grip or rake you with their powerful feet and needle-sharp talons.

How much have you already read? What groups or list serves do you already belong to? A serious commitment to becoming a falconer is often evidenced by a ravenous appetite for books or online information.

Can you hunt? Not do you know how, which is a challenge in itself, but are you emotionally prepared? Falconry is sharing your life with a creature that has evolved over millions of years to do one thing -- kill.

After investing all this time and effort, do you really understand that, at any moment of free flight, your bird can choose to simply fly away?

This is just a brief overview. It's not meant to be discouraging - but it is meant to make you realize that art and practice of falconry is months and years of hard work punctuated by brief moments of pure exhilaration and joy.

If you feel you are ready to get serious, the next steps are to contact your local wildlife agency (state or provincial game department) for a falconry packet, join your local falconry organization, and join NAFA.

Whether or not you eventually become a falconer, we hope that you will retain a friendly interest in birds of prey, their conservation, and the ancient art and sport of falconry.

[This document was adapted, and used with permission from the North American Falconers Association, Feb. 8, 2006 (NAFA, <http://www.n-a-f-a.org/default.htm>)]