

Words by Ron Toft



NAME

DR NICHOLAS FOX

OCCUPATION

FALCON BREEDER

DR NICHOLAS FOX (60) WAS ONLY SEVEN WHEN HE BECAME INTERESTED IN FLYING BIRDS OF PREY AND MADE HIS OWN FALCON HOOD, although he didn't get into the sport in a big way until he was a teenager.

His first bird was a wild kestrel. "It was given to me after being found abandoned. It became very tame and I flew it for a summer until I returned to boarding school. I left the kestrel with my brother, after which some sort of disaster befell it."

Dr Fox's next bird was a goshawk. In the decades that followed, he kept all manner of falconry species.

"When I started flying birds, I lived in the countryside. There was precious little reading material available about falconry in those days. I didn't even meet another falconer until I was 19. I don't really know what initially sparked my interest – I was always just into it. Although no-one else in the family flew birds, I think falconry must have been in my genes somewhere!"

Today, some 45 years after starting to fly birds regularly, raptor biologist Dr Fox is a highly regarded falconry breeder and consultant, director of Carmarthen, Wales-based International Wildlife Consultants (UK) Ltd, and a vice-president of the British Falconers' Club. As if that wasn't enough, he runs Northumberland Crow Falcons (the UK's oldest mounted falconry group), has written several books – including the best-selling *Understanding Birds of Prey* – and has produced 16 films on birds of prey and one about animal welfare.

"There are many different aspects to falconry," he told me. "For a start,

CONTACT

INTERNATIONAL WILDLIFE CONSULTANTS UK (LTD),
PO Box 19, Carmarthen
SA33 5YL, Wales, UK.
www.falcons.co.uk

→ Every year, falcon beauty contests and demonstrations take place at the ADIHEX exhibition in Abu Dhabi.



the sport doesn't have any rules! If you play golf, you intend staying on the course and returning home for tea. Falconry, however, isn't like that. Nor can you put falconry away in a cupboard, like you can golf clubs. When you are a falconer, you are as committed to birds as parents are to children."

Falconry, Dr Fox says, is not just about flying birds, exciting and challenging though that undoubtedly is. "It covers leatherwork, aerodynamics, breeding, biology, and so on. There are lots of things to maintain your interest."

Dr Fox is involved in a variety of falconry, conservation, research,

and farm management activities, the key one being the commercial breeding of falconry birds on his 280-acre farm in rural South Wales. At any given time he has around 250 raptors. The number of birds roughly doubles during the spring and summer breeding season.

International Wildlife Consultants breeds gyrfalcons, peregrines, saker falcons, and hybrids mainly for the Arab markets, but also has clients in the UK, mainland Europe, and Japan. For the past 27 years, Dr Fox has also kept a colony of New Zealand falcons, which he has managed on a part-research, part-consultation basis.

"We've reintroduced red kites since 1987. Once down to only 25 pairs in the UK, we received surplus kite eggs from doomed nests, hatched them, and returned the chicks to the wild in Wales and then England," Dr Fox continues. "Now they are flourishing in the wild in the UK and we have been able to relax."

The dashing peregrine – one of the three most popular falconry birds bred by International Wildlife Consultants – is the planet's fastest bird, the approximate terminal velocity of its plunging 'stoop' being a staggering 300kph (186mph), according to Guinness World Records.

At the height of the breeding season, which runs from March through to June/July, five permanent staff and a varying number of part-time interns are kept extremely busy on Dr Fox's farm looking after as many as 500 birds at various stages of development.

Raptors – birds of prey – instinctively know how to fly. But it takes the experience and expertise of a falconer to harness and develop the innate flying skills of an individual falcon or hawk and turn it into a well-trained bird that is a pleasure to fly and a delight to watch. Falconry requires patience, consistency, and an understanding of the aptitude of birds. Climate can also affect how well birds perform. For example, British peregrines are more suited to and work much better in the British climate than, say, African peregrines.

"The birds don't leave until their feathers are hard. There's also a lot of paperwork to be sorted out for each and every shipment. We flew out another 30 or so birds to the Middle East only

FALCON FORUM

DR NICHOLAS FOX IS FOUNDER OF THE MIDDLE EAST FALCON RESEARCH GROUP

– a forum for research biologists, vets, and falconers with an interest in falcon conservation and sustainable falconry in the Gulf States. Activities include survey, research, and wildlife management studies.
www.mefrg.org



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FESTIVAL OF FALCONRY

THE THIRD INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF FALCONRY

will be held at Qasr Al Sarab, in the western region of Abu Dhabi, UAE, on December 16 & 17, 2011. In addition to traditional falconry, there will also be a scientific conference, photographic and arts and crafts competitions, music and dance, arena events, and excursions.
www.falconryfestival.com

→ The gyrfalcon is the largest of the falcon family and is favoured by falconers in Saudi Arabia.

WILD
BREED

AL KHUDAIRA

FALCONRY BIRDS are being bred in state-of-the-art facilities at Al Khudaira Farm, 65km north of Doha, Qatar. The aim is to produce captive raptors every bit as good as wild ones to reduce the demand for wild-caught birds.

www.alkhudaira.net



VINTAGE FLYING

BIRDS OF PREY ARE
FLOWN NOT JUST FOR
PLEASURE

in falconry but also to prevent other birds from eating crops and threatening public safety at places like airports. Wine-makers have used everything from nets and foil to loud bangs and decoys to prevent birds from eating their grapes. But in the world-famous champagne-making region of northern France, viticulturists have discovered that falconry birds such as Harris hawks are the best way to keep starlings, blackbirds, and thrushes away from vineyards ahead of the annual harvest.

yesterday. We've only a handful left. That's virtually it now for this year."

Falconry and related work undertaken by Dr Fox and his colleagues takes many forms and involves flying all over the world.

"For example, we have just signed a memorandum of understanding with the government of the United Arab Emirates, the Emirates Falconers' Club, and Mongolia's Ministry of Environment to erect 5,000 artificial nests in Mongolia for saker falcons to increase the wild populations of this species.

"We also conduct falcon surveys, track migrating falcons using satellite transmitters, and undertake taxonomic studies using DNA."

One new piece of research involves decoding the genomes of peregrine and saker falcons. "Until now, this has only been done for two other birds – the domestic chicken and zebra finch."

In complete contrast, International Wildlife Consultants has made a submission to UNESCO, on behalf of 12 countries – including the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia – to have falconry officially recognised as part of the world's intangible cultural heritage.

"It is now being realised that as well as tangible cultural heritage, which includes the pyramids and things like that, there is also intangible cultural heritage, such as music, dance, and other things, some of which are gradually dying out," explained Dr Fox.

"We have put forward falconry as being part of the world's intangible cultural heritage and are expecting an announcement in Nairobi in mid-November at the next conference of the various parties."

International Wildlife Consultants also organises the International Festival of Falconry, the third such event taking place in the United Arab Emirates in December 2011.

"We are very, very busy," said Dr Fox. "I've only just returned from Abu Dhabi. I was due to head off to Morocco 20 minutes ago, but I am not going now because I can't get back in time to fly to Greece on Sunday morning." Falconry, says

Dr Fox, is just as popular in the Middle East as it has ever been. "There is always something to be done. Touch wood, our work hasn't been affected by the recession."

Looking to the future, Dr Fox says he "enjoys fresh challenges. After all, nobody wants to do the same thing again and again. There is always something coming up in the Middle East. They certainly keep me busy!" 🦅



HOODS ARE AN ARAB CONTRIBUTION TO FALCONRY, and each individual hoodmaker puts his own stamp on them with original designs.

HOOD MAKERS

David Masters of Fox Falconry makes all his hoods from the finest quality British veg tan (vegetable-tanned) tooling calf skin, which is airbrushed with the colour of dye required. Hoods cost from US\$47.50.

1 THE DUTCH HOOD is made from three pieces of leather with a rolled edge of snake or lizard skin around the bottom of the hood; a very old and traditional style with very slight modifications over many years.

2 THE KAZAKH HOOD is a slip-on hood made from one piece of leather; a very traditional hood and still used a lot in Kazakhstan. It is mainly used for eagles but is now being used more for a lot of the larger hawks.

3 THE ANGLO-INDIAN HOOD is made from one piece of leather, which affords a comfortable fit for most birds of prey, and is considered a general-purpose hood. www.foxfalconry.co.uk



Japanese master, **KAZUHIKO SUGISAKI**, describes himself as a falconry equipment inventor and hood-making artist, who is known for his ornate and intricate designs.

4 THE JAPANESE-STYLE DUTCH HOOD is made of calf skin and Japanese paper.

5 THE DUTCH HOOD DECORATED WITH FEATHER PLUMAGE AND PYTHON SKIN displays the feather plumage from heron, pheasant, and guinea fowl. Around US\$120–200. www.7ocn.ne.jp/~falconoi



6 For several years, goldsmith **TIROLER GOLDSCHMIED** in South Tyrol, Italy, has not only been designing jewellery, but also an exceptional folk costume and hunting garb collection, which can be personalised on request. The company developed the process and tools to decorate falcon hoods with jewels flush with the leather, and to refine them with individual engravings. Every hood is a one-of-a-kind piece and designed according to individual ideas: handwritten signatures, personal initials, or a coat of arms can be engraved on diamond-studded falconry hoods. The well-known artisan Giancarlo Pirrotta makes the falconry hoods from the finest materials, while Tiroler Goldschmied refines them with unique gemstones, 'underlining the grace and magic of hunting and falconry'. Prices range from US\$5,500 to over US\$55,000. www.tirolergoldschmied.it/falconry

