

Reflections: Falconry 2009

During lunch with family members around Christmas 2007, I turned my grandson, and said: “Derek, you know what I want to do?” He gave me his full attention. “I want to get one of those big birds on my arm and fly him!”

BY MARY ELLEN ROONEY*

“Grandma, that’s really cool. I think you should do it, just don’t tell your cat.” After that declaration I embarked on becoming a licensed falconer, a dream unconsciously carried since I had first saw a falconer in Central Asia.

I can see him still. It’s a Sunday in late 1990’s Kyrgyzstan. The figure on horseback descends a foothill in the Tien Shan Mountains. He is wearing a traditional nomad’s hat. As he nears, I see something on his arm. It is a huge bird that he eventually releases. My concentration at this instant is so complete that time stops, yet lasts forever. The moment enters my being, connecting with something already there, waiting for just this time to be.

There’s something transcendental in these hills, which probably accounts for their being called “Mountains of Heaven.” Over time, I became acquainted with some nomadic families residing there and had often been invited to spend Sunday afternoons singing with them. This place was indeed heaven for me.

I’ve required an outdoor sport for some time. I chose falconry as a pathway sport because it could lead me back to that place in myself. This pursuit has been convoluted, much like seeking an advanced degree with the added difficulty that one’s teachers are so often geographically remote.

In November 2008, after an intense year of studying and training to become a licensed falconer, I joined NAFA. By then I had landed one quarry (a pheasant captured by a Harris Hawk in Quebec). Although I had built my own bal chatr, I was in no hurry to handle an hysterical hamster or a furious raptor entangled in filaments without first watching a master.

Apart from a decal for my car, NAFA membership brought access to the website, Chalk Talk and The Journal. I wanted to widen my knowledge to include conservation of birds of prey and their quarry and also needed to meet other falconers. An article revealed that IAF would be meeting at the Second International Festival of Falconry in Berkshire, England in July 2009. When the festival website disclosed that falconers from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan would



be participating, that clinched it. I had to complete that circle.

The Festival was beyond my wildest dreams. I felt like a soaring bird that, as it flies higher and higher, gains a wider and wider view. All was there: falconry for more than 4000 years with a presence from Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan (where it is believed this ancient sport began) to this day where 55 countries were represented on the fabulous Englefield Estate location in Berkshire, England.

On the first day, Nick Fox, whose video series I had watched over and over appeared. Hesitatingly, I told him how much his falconry education series meant to me. It was like meeting a movie star.

That afternoon, following my heart, I sought out the Kyrgyz tent. I stayed a long time, shedding a few tears behind my sunglasses. Language was still a barrier, but I basked in the warm memory of the Tien Shan Mountains. One of the falconers,

Zarnaev Sagymbai invited me to come to Issyk-Kul for a hunt in the fall.

The two-day event had plenty to see and do; the whole thing was beautifully run on the gorgeous Benyon Estate. The English Hawk Board coordinated amazing details which included rounding up raptors for foreigners to use and an amazing group of falconry species available for viewing.

For the past three years the international falconry community has been pursuing UNESCO recognition of falconry as an element of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). Application has involved the efforts of three NGOs: IAF, CIC and FACE. The result of the project is “Falconry: A Living Human Heritage,” the largest nomination in UNESCO history, signed in Abu Dhabi last August. A final decision will be reached in May. If successful, it should give teeth to worldwide conservation efforts and protection for birds of prey.

In times where global cooperation is evasive and politics and bureaucracies are so obstructive, this submission is truly remarkable. It’s almost as though the traits for becoming a successful falconer were utilized here to their fullest: discipline, patience, persistence and perseverance.

At the closing ceremony of the Festival, following the final parade of 55 nations, Nick Fox summed up the UNESCO initiative and the global perspective of falconry: “We are hopeful about this designation which includes 12 countries. UNESCO now realizes there are more than stationary physical presences that uniquely link us to the past, make us who we are and are worth preserving for future generations.”

Falconers may be few in number but we are a passionate, driven bunch. Perhaps we are the kind of people who can and will have some positive effect on the grim situation in which the world finds itself.

In England I was awe struck to see red kites where they had been endangered for generations, only recently having been reintroduced. Now they are plentiful. What a beautiful, small miracle!

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