

The Harvest of Wild Raptors by Falconers. A Practical Exercise in Sustainable Use to Encourage Conservation.

Traditionally, falconers have relied on the procurement of wild raptors to supply their needs for hunting birds. Indeed, this situation has persisted until developments in breeding technology allowing the ready availability of captive bred birds over the past thirty years. The development of this technology was sparked by the dramatic crash in peregrine falcon populations, primarily in the northern hemisphere, linked to the use of organo-chlorine pesticides. The epidemiology of the peregrine population decline was initially, poorly understood and, erroneously, over-harvesting by falconers to supply a presumed lucrative and illegal back market in the Middle East was deemed to be the cause. This was not the case and little evidence was ever produced to support the allegation.

Falconers have been in the forefront of the effort to restore the population of peregrines and other raptors decimated by pesticides. Most dramatic were the efforts of the Peregrine Fund in North America, started by falconers and using falconry birds as the initial brood stock. Here thousands of captive bred falcons were released back to the wild in an effort which has proved so successful that the North American Falconers are once again, permitted a wild harvest. This effort was mirrored, but less lauded, in other parts of the world. These efforts would include the restoration of the Northern Goshawk in Britain where it was extinct and attempts to re-establish the population of tree-nesting peregrine falcons in Germany and Poland.

Falconers were the first in Britain to notice the dramatic decline in the breeding successes of wild peregrines and this is recorded in articles in "The Falconer", journal of the British Falconry Club, in the late 50s. At that time, falconers were granted licenses to take wild peregrines by special dispensation. The falconers in Britain took an ethical decision to relinquish their wild harvest and not take up their permits until normal breeding was restored. Evidence exists to show that the population of Peregrine Falcons in Britain is currently better than ever in the past. Similarly the Northern Goshawk is again considered to be a threat to pheasant stocks and is being shot by gamekeepers. Despite the evidence, falconers in Britain, unlike their counterparts in diverse countries such as the USA, Ireland Germany and, indeed, South Africa are not permitted a wild take, principally through fear of a "green" outcry. Privileges once lost are seldom recovered.

One could possibly consider hawks to be among the oldest domesticated animals, along with dogs and horses, although they continued to breed in the wild. The Saker Falcon has been used by falconers for well over 2 thousand years, making this one of the oldest relationships between man and wild animal. In the Middle East, Sakers have been trapped, traditionally, when south-bound on their autumn migration. They are then used by Arabic Falconers to hunt through the winter and are released in spring to travel north with the migration once again. These traditions have been altered with the oil wealth of recent history. Sakers may now be retained through the summer in air-conditioned mews. On the other hand, captive breeding has given the modern Arab falconer the

choice of exotic and hybrid falcons which are more exciting than the wild-taken Sakers. A dramatic decline in Saker Falcons has been noted in recent years. Once again, falconers find themselves in the forefront of the list of suspected causes. Some blame may be apportioned to possible over-harvesting and disturbance in the central Asian breeding grounds. While not attempting to defend the excesses of modern Arab falconers, I believe that it serious disservice if facile explanations were accepted to placate “green” critics and other very real potential causes for this decline were to remain uninvestigated. The serious impact of the environmental degradation of the Saker breeding grounds, the loss of their quarry base in these breeding grounds, as well as the impact of electrocutions by hazardous power-lines through the flat and treeless expanses of central Asia, all needs urgent consideration.

With this background of international concerns, the falconry fraternity in South Africa also faces criticism of their wild harvest. There are about 150 active falconers in South Africa, who will fly one or, occasionally two birds at a time. Our wild harvest is limited, annually, to a total of some 30 birds of a variety of species. The criticism would appear to be based on two grounds:

- 1) Aesthetics. There is a perception that, because raptors are special and admirable creatures, they should not be subject to the same conservation considerations as other forms of life. While falconers will hardly quibble with the respect or reverence afforded the birds of prey, we would deny that special ethical consideration differentiates them from other forms of life. A limited and sustainable harvest is acceptable, particularly as we do not seek to kill these creatures and our intervention probably allows more to live.
- 2) Conservation Considerations. There is a pervading belief that all raptors and, following the DDT scare, particularly the peregrine falcon are rare and endangered to the extent that any sort of harvest may turn the tide and tip their populations toward extinction. As apex predators it is prudent to be concerned about their conservation status and monitor their populations. While it is certainly true that some species of raptors are in danger of extinction, this does not apply to those raptors that are popular falconry birds. Indeed agricultural practices which have resulted in a burgeoning population of pigeons and doves have produced a dramatically increased food supply for these birds.

The Peregrine falcon, in South Africa, is listed as endangered as a result of the devastating reduction in population numbers, globally, some 40 years ago. While they were probably less affected in Southern Africa, than elsewhere and there are now more peregrines in South Africa than ever previously. This is well documented and can be readily observed as not only are the traditional cliff nesting sites occupied, but they are also to be found nesting on high-rise buildings in cities and on the walls of quarries. A similar population increase has occurred with Black Sparrowhawks which use exotic Gum and Pine plantations for nesting and this is particularly noticeable in the Western Cape where there has been a significant extension of the range of these magnificent birds. Habitat change with exotic trees and an increase in the prey supply has similarly benefited African Goshawks and Rufous-Chested Sparrowhawks.

South African Falconers have bred Peregrine falcons for many years and, indeed produce a surplus which are released to the wild. Black Sparrowhawks, Rufous-Chested Sparrowhawks, Gabar Goshawks, African Goshawks, Red-necked falcons, Lanner falcons and Jackal Buzzards have all been bred in captivity.

Never-the-less, in most provinces, falconers are still permitted a limited wild harvest of suitable raptors which is entirely sustainable. Falconers are very jealous of this significant privilege which has positive benefits. These include:

- 1) The wild harvest encourages falconers to be active participants in the conservation effort and contribute in a variety of ways to the conservation of raptors and also to the conservation of gamebirds and to the preservation of the environment.
- 2) The accessibility of wild birds for falconry keeps the sport within the reach of younger and less affluent falconers as captive bred birds are not inexpensive and we would risk seeing this activity becoming the preserve of the wealthy to the detriment of both the sport and the conservation effort
- 3) Controls which are applied to members by falconry clubs to ensure that good standards of husbandry and good ethical standards are maintained become more difficult if birds are privately owned.

There are also a number of negative effects which would result from the loss of this wild harvest.

- 1) Captive breeding encourages the trading in birds of prey and this is an area which we have striven to limit and discourage for obvious reason.
- 2) Loss of the wild harvest would not only reduce the incentive for falconers to contribute to the conservation effort but would also actively inhibit them as it has in other countries where the wild take is prohibited. For example, activity by falconers at nest sites in this situation would lay them open to accusations of nest-robbing and laundering of birds through breeding operations.
- 3) The use of exotic and hybrid raptors for falconry in South Africa is very limited and of negligible impact on the environment. Experience elsewhere in the world has shown that the use of these birds dramatically increases when the wild harvest is not permitted.
- 4) If all falconry birds were to be captive bred there would have to be a large increase in the number of breeding birds held in breeding pens. What is seldom appreciated is that the ultimate fate of a falconry bird is release back to the wild. For example, Lanner falcons are normally trapped as “passage” or immature birds; they are flown for one or two seasons and released. We see the wild harvest, in essence, as the borrowing of birds from nature and their ultimate release, in fine hunting condition, is a highly satisfactory outcome.

Experience in the captive breeding of raptors is laudable and availability of captive-bred birds is an asset to the falconry community in South Africa. While the threat of the loss of our wild harvest persists, captive breeding is here to stay. None-the-less, the principle of a sustainable harvest of wild creatures is widely accepted in Nature Conservation and is enshrined the principles of the Convention on Biodiversity. I would plead with reasonable people who are concerned with the conservation of our wildlife to look with

sympathy on the falconers' limited wild harvest and, in so doing, encourage the continuance of our art and the conservation of South Africa's raptors.

For more information, please visit our website at www.safalconry.co.za .

Dr. A. Lombard

Member of the Advisory Committee, International Association for Falconry.
Secretary, South African Falconry Association.