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Hot Tips



Birds of play

WILDLIFE

Spread your wings, conjure your inner Harry Potter, and roam with raptors on Vancouver Island as you learn the ancient art of falconry, or hunting with birds.

BY CORI HOWARD • PHOTOGRAPHY BY DEDDEDA STEMLER

Birds of play
 Spread your wings, conjure your inner Harry Potter, and roam with raptors on Vancouver Island as you learn the ancient art of falconry, or hunting with birds
 By Cori Howard with photography by Deddeda Stemler

I AM FACE TO FACE WITH A SAKER FALCON. Its tiny head is shrouded in a black leather hood, so I can't see its eyes. What I can see are a million shades of bronze and copper in its thick mane of feathers. I see a curved beak, eight sharp talons and a downy white chest marred by a single drop of blood. I don't know where the blood has come from, perhaps its last meal, which, at the Pacific Northwest Raptors Visitor Center, north of Victoria, usually consists of dead chicks and quail.

The form-fitted hood calms the bird, which is not frightened of what it cannot see. And the bird's calmness, in turn, calms me. My confidence grows and my heartbeat slows as this creature, Horus, beguiles me. It twists its neck sideways, as if to examine me. And it almost seems to bow, as if to show respect. Then it takes a slow, solitary step up my arm, which is cloaked, as is Horus, in black leather.



Author Cori Howard (left) receives a falconry lesson from student biologist Roxanne Tripp and Horus, a saker falcon. (Photo: Deddeda Stemler)

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There are layers, barriers, between us: leather, the wild, the desire for raw flesh. I don't feel like myself. Standing with this bird on my arm in the dappled summer sun, I feel rather like a Middle Eastern princess and imagine myself in the saker's homeland far across the Atlantic, from the Siberian taiga to the deserts of Middle Asia and Tibet. Horus, however, has never known freedom. This saker was bred right here on Vancouver Island. It has never flown free over the Mongolian steppes.

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THE FIVE PEREGRINE FALCONS
PERCHED on the centre's terraced lawns have also been bred in captivity.

Sometimes, they get excited or irritated and try to fly off, only to be ungraciously pulled back down to their perches by short ropes attached to their legs. They are used to the ropes and to people, like me, who occasionally squat down beside their pedestals and say, "Step up."

Those are my first instructions in the art of falconry. I am on a half-day course at the raptor centre, the first such place on the West Coast. Although it does rehabilitate some wild birds of prey, the centre's focus is raising and training captive-bred birds for education and for hire — to hunt pests at airports and landfills.

But it's the sport of falconry that draws most people — to conjure their inner Harry Potter and bond with the birds.

My next lesson is in picking up Horus, taking the leather straps tied around its feet and wrapping them around my gloved fingers. I untie the slip-knot in the rope attaching it to its pedestal and tie another knot onto the metal ring on my glove — all with one hand, while Horus perches on the other.

I preen and puff and walk around with the hooded falcon on my arm, "manning" it, as it is called. Though falconry is, historically, a male domain, almost everyone here is female. The centre is run by wildlife ecologist Gillian Radcliffe. The head falconer is a woman, and Radcliffe's mother and two daughters also work here.

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In the Arab world of a thousand years ago, not only were falconers men, but the saker was king. Today, the saker population is in decline, due in part to poaching and illegal trade, agricultural pesticides and global climate change, which led to the extinction in the 1980s of its preferred squirrel prey, the red-cheeked souslik.

As I explore the grounds, I am introduced to Oprah, an injured wild osprey that is unable to fly properly. In a separate area

FLIGHTS OF FALCONRY

To practice the sport of falconry in most provinces, you'll need a smallgame hunting licence and you may have to complete an apprenticeship with an experienced falconer lasting about 15 months to two years. Many falconry centres offer courses of various lengths for anyone interested in learning the basics of the medieval craft.

- **Pacific Northwest Raptors** just outside Duncan, B.C., hosts spring break and summer camps for kids. Family activities include daily flying demonstrations, a walk with a falconer and courses ranging from a half day to five days. The centre also offers educational programs in schools of various levels.

(250) 746-0372;
www.pnwraptors.com

- **The Canadian School of Traditional Falconry** based in Tottenham, Ont., offers starter courses of two days and international courses lasting five days. A new "falconry day" allows the merely curious to shadow a master falconer.

(905) 936-1033;
www.falconrycentre.com

- **Central Ontario School of Falconry** in Kilworthy, Ont., provides bird sales, as well as boarding for birds of prey and bird-dog training. Falconry courses with master falconer Matt Lieberknecht run from Monday to Friday or from Friday to Sunday over two consecutive weekends.

(705) 689-2229;
www.matt-thebirdman.com

- **Golden Creek Bird Farm** in Severn Bridge, Ont., just north of Orillia, offers beginner's courses on the first Saturday of each month. The farm also hosts wildlife artists and provides birds for nuisance control and entertainment at fairs and school events.

(705) 689-9121;
www.goldencreekbirdfarm.com

- **Quebec Traditional Falconry Centre** in Saint-Narcisse-de-Beaurivage, Que., near Québec, provides instruction to professionals, including wildlife officers

are the screeching hawks. They keep trying to fly off their pedestals without any memory, it seems, that a rope will jerk them right back.

Behind the hawk area is what Radcliffe jokingly calls the jailhouse block, and it does look a bit like a prison. In it are a barn owl and two babies. Further away, there is a large breeding aviary housing a couple of red-tailed hawks. Another cage holds an injured raven and a falcon, dubbed Crash, that flew into a boat. Overhead, wild eagles, turkey vultures and dozens of swallows dart in and out of the trees, protecting their territory, laughing at the caged birds below.

In an open meadow beyond the cages, the centre hosts daily flying demonstrations. This is where Radcliffe puts on her show. Wearing a black leather jacket and jeans, she offers the crowd a brief history of falconry and sets the record straight: "There are no vegans here. These birds are strictly meat-eaters." And with that, she pulls a dead chick from her belt pouch, puts it between the fingers of her black glove and calls out to Manwe, a juvenile bald eagle. It swoops through the trees and lands on a big wooden perch, examining Radcliffe's offering. The bird seems ambivalent to the gathered crowd, cock head, checking things out.

Next, Roxanne Tripp, a student biologist from McGill University, steps up to a great horned owl. She holds a dead mouse in her gloved hand, and the owl flies, silently, to its dinner. It has one wing open as it eats, as if putting its arm around Tripp's shoulder.

"I can sit and look at a bird all day," says Radcliffe. "It is an incredible marvel of biological design. I feel privileged any time I hold one. It's uplifting."

In the field, she gently throws the squawking Ronnie Hawkins and the screeching Ed Harris into the wind, demonstrating how to cast the hawks off her arm. The Harris Hawk brothers seem more interested in fighting with each other than flying. And when Radcliffe gets them separated and back up into the trees, they are reluctant to come down for their free lunch. Dead chicks again!

I put my body into the proper pose — arm outstretched, facing sideways. I have not one but two dead chicks in my hand, and still the hawks don't come. Radcliffe blames the wind. When she tries it herself, however, they soar down, obedient, faithful. No wonder she is so taken with them. Awe replaces fear as I stand waiting, willing the birds to come.

Cori Howard is a producer with CBC Radio's "Sounds Like Canada" in Vancouver. Between Interruptions, her anthology on motherhood, will be published next fall. Victoria-based photojournalist Deddeda Stemler has been published in Time and The Globe and Mail

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professionals, including wildlife officers and veterinarians, as well as recreational falconers. Courses range from one to four days.
(418) 475-4134;
www.centredefaconnerie.com



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