

# HAWKING



PHOTOS THIS SPREAD BY © WAYNE D. LEWIS/CPW



# A LOVE OF THEIR BIRDS IS THE ESSENCE OF HAWKING TO ALL 200 OR SO FALCONERS IN COLORADO. BY LISA BALLARD

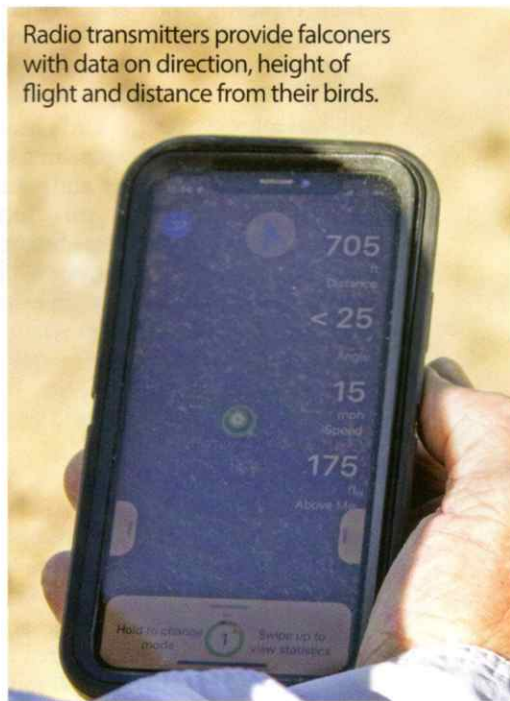
A peregrine falcon with a pheasant hen.



Hoods keep the birds calm.



Radio transmitters provide falconers with data on direction, height of flight and distance from their birds.



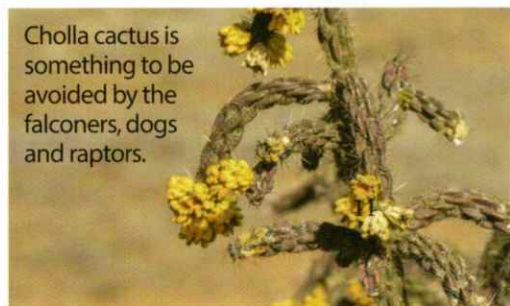
Luna, a Brittany spaniel, is used to flush and retrieve game.



Acer



Cholla cactus is something to be avoided by the falconers, dogs and raptors.



Roger Tucker with Acer, his peregrine falcon.





**THE RED-TAILED HAWK**, with its 4-foot wingspan, swooped toward me, wings set and talons splayed. I steadied myself for impact, forearm raised, heart pounding, but it never came. The hawk slowed to a momentary hover, then settled onto the thick leather glove that protected my wrist and hand. For only 3 pounds, it got heavy quickly, but adrenaline and sheer awe kept my arm up. What a thrill to see such a magnificent bird so close, let alone hold it!

Roger Tucker, President of the Colorado Hawking Club, touched his own gloved hand to the red-tail's talons. The raptor stepped to his glove, perhaps sensing a more familiar spot to rest. He slipped a hood over the bird's head and nudged it onto a nearby perching bar.

A professional zoologist and naturalist, and falconer for over 30 years, Tucker is on the falconry staff of Broadmoor Outfitters in Colorado Springs, one of the few places in the United States where anyone can experience this ancient relationship between man and raptor. He also hunts rabbits, ducks and upland birds, but not with a shotgun. He goes hawking.

### The Raptors

"Hunting with any bird of prey is called falconry, though falcons are 'hawks of the lure,' and hawks are 'hawks of the gauntlet [glove]," says Tucker. "A lot of the language of falconry is from medieval times, when all falcons were considered hawks. However, falcons fly 80 to 90 miles per hour. You don't want them slamming onto your hand at that speed. Hawks go 10 to 20 miles per hour. They're slower, so okay to land on a glove."

Understanding the difference between falcons and hawks is an important aspect of hunting with them. In general, falcons are smaller than hawks, so they tend to take smaller prey, and they hunt differently. Falcons "stoop" (dive) at their target at a high speed, from 70 miles per hour to 200 miles per hour depending on how high it is. They nab prey with their talons, force it to the ground, then kill it with the sharp tooth on their beak, breaking the neck or puncturing the skull.

Hawks rely on their strength and agility to grab and kill with their talons.

Bonny, a red-tailed hawk, gets ready for a rabbit hunt.



What's more, hawks are native to a variety of habitats, including woodlands, desert, plains and mountains, whereas falcons mainly favor open areas like agricultural fields and rangeland.

"Birds used for falconry are fully flighted and could live in the wild," says Tucker. "In Colorado, the three most common native birds we use are the red-tailed hawk, goshawk and Cooper's hawk, due to their hunting abilities."

According to Tucker, red-tailed hawks, the largest of these three raptors, are relatively easy to find, train and maintain. They are mainly used to hunt rabbits or squirrels, though they can also hunt pheasants. Goshawks and Cooper's hawks are good at catching ducks and upland game birds, like pheasants and quail, though Cooper's hawks, the smallest of the three, are high strung, so more challenging to train. Midsized goshawks are

easier to handle than a Cooper's hawk and can be caught in the wild or captively bred and purchased for falconry.

Tucker uses a red-tailed hawk for rabbits and pheasants and a peregrine falcon for ducks and sharp-tailed grouse. "In Colorado, the most popular falcons are peregrines, because they are dependable, but there are limited numbers of them," he says. "In 1973, they were listed as endangered, so we started using prairie falcons instead. The problem with prairie falcons is they will do anything that works. They might go high and dive fast like a peregrine, or they might chase a bird to the horizon; then they end up really far away."

Tucker also mentions American kestrels and merlins among the other Colorado raptors used in falconry, but they are small and only useful for hunting the smallest game birds, specifically quail. There's also the problem of habitat. Quail use thick brush for cover. Falcons like open grasslands. A dog helps; however, dogs are a bird's mortal enemy. Getting a raptor to accept a dog as a hunting partner is a critical part of the bird's training, but not the first part.

### Training

Becoming a falconer is a commitment that starts with passing the Colorado Parks and Wildlife falconry test, which covers not only falconry regulations and practices, but also the biology and ecology of raptors. After passing the test, you need to find a sponsor and build a mews (place to house your bird). After your mews passes a state inspection, then you receive an apprentice license and are ready to work with your sponsor to capture your first passage (wild) bird, either a red-tailed hawk or American kestrel, and begin training it.

The first three to five weeks with a new bird focuses on teaching the bird that you are its food source and that, on signal, it will be rewarded with something it likes to eat, like chunks of rabbit. The next step is dragging a chunk of rabbit fur or a dead rabbit through some brush, tempting the raptor to grab it.

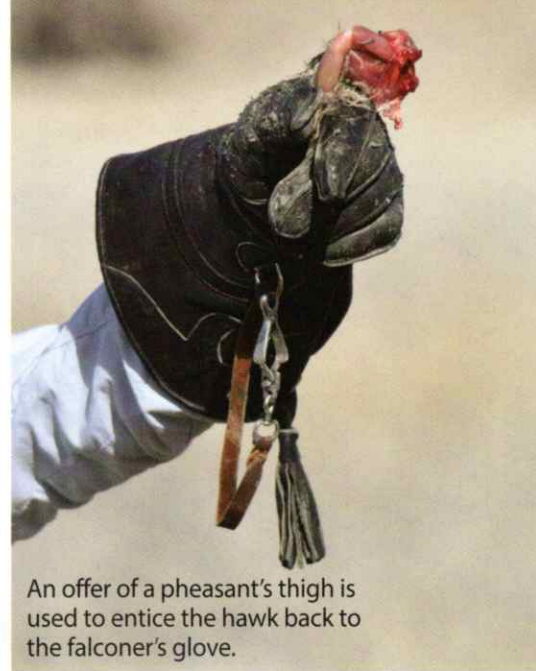
"The bird already knows that rabbit tastes good," explains Tucker. "If it catches something, it's the bird's version of Thanksgiving dinner. It's a bigger reward than coming to glove if nothing is moving."

Then, it's time to introduce a dog, carefully. At first, the dog is made to sit 12 feet





Bells are used to help locate a bird while hunting.



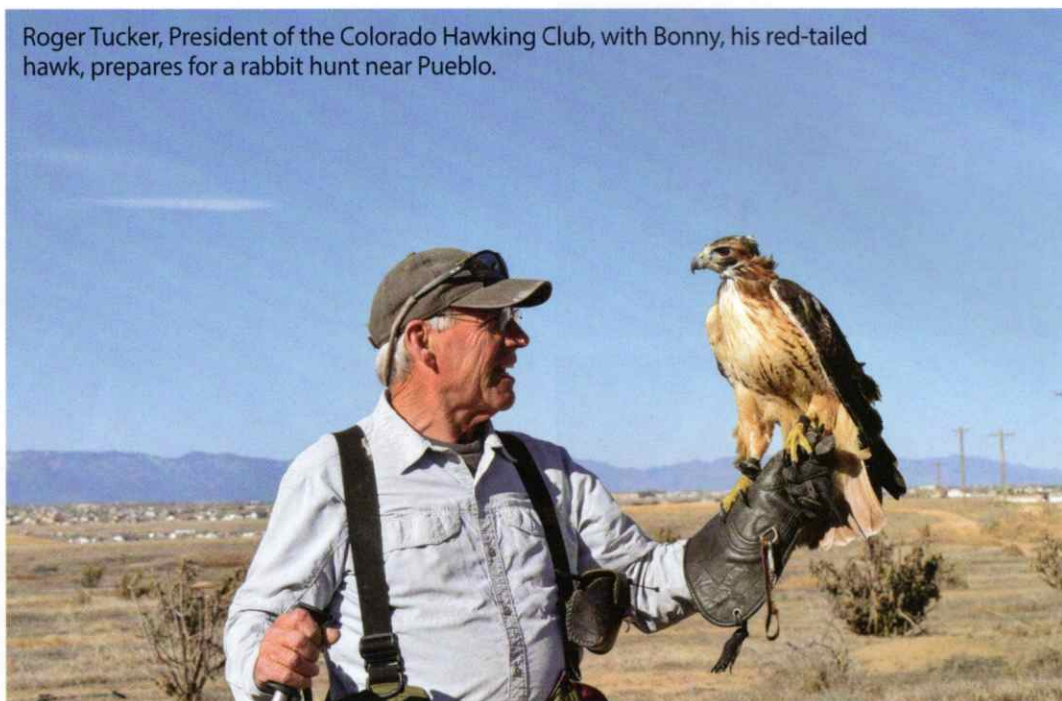
An offer of a pheasant's thigh is used to entice the hawk back to the falconer's glove.



The radio transmitter is used to track the birds.



While hunting, hawks will find a high perch and wait for prey to be flushed.



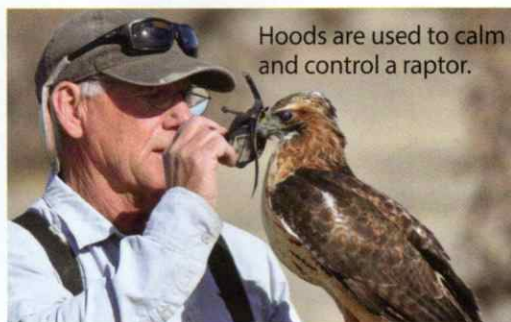
Roger Tucker, President of the Colorado Hawking Club, with Bonny, his red-tailed hawk, prepares for a rabbit hunt near Pueblo.



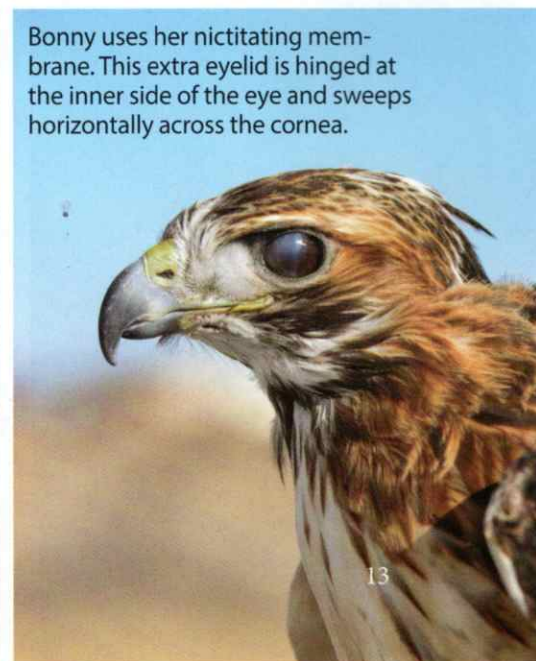
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Bonny uses her nictitating membrane. This extra eyelid is hinged at the inner side of the eye and sweeps horizontally across the cornea.



Hoods are used to calm and control a raptor.





Peregrine falcon with Broadmoor Outfitters in Colorado Springs.



Harris' hawk



Harris' hawk talons



Frozen raptor food

#### FALCONER FACTS

In 2010, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared falconry an "intangible cultural heritage of humanity." Falconry originated in central Asia about 4,000 years ago. The earliest known falconer in North America was a member of Christopher Columbus's crew, who hunted in what is now Haiti.

#### FOR MORE INFO

**Colorado Hawking Club:** [coloradohawkingclub.com](http://coloradohawkingclub.com)

**CPW Special Licensing:** [wildlife.speciallicensing@state.co.us](mailto:wildlife.speciallicensing@state.co.us), 303-291-7143



Harris' hawk with hood

Colorado Outdoors



away from the bird on its perch as the handler feeds the bird. After the bird gets comfortable, the distance to the dog shortens to 10 feet, then 8 feet and so forth until eventually the bird stands on the ground near the dog. Through the entire process, the dog is under tight control.

"The bird learns that seeing the dog means getting food," says Tucker. "The hawk learns to tolerate the dog and eventually keys off it. It takes careful planning and rewarding for the right behavior because it's extremely hard to overcome a mistake, like if the dog lunges toward the bird."

For rabbit hunters, the most common dogs used by Colorado falconers are dachshunds, beagles and Jack Russell terriers, which will go into dense brush and force a rabbit to move so the bird can see it. Pointing breeds, like setters, pointers and Brittany spaniels, work well for upland birds. No dog is needed for waterfowl, though Labs and other retrievers can swim out to flush ducks. Regardless, dogs are not used by falconers to retrieve because the raptor has the game.

## Hunting

Ducks are a common target in Colorado, and something Tucker loves to hunt with his peregrine falcon. "I look for ducks on small ponds, the little ones that cows drink out of, then park a quarter-mile away," he says. "I put the radio transmitter [collar] on my falcon, remove the jesses [straps that tether the bird's feet] and take off its hood. She takes off and works her way higher and higher into the air. Once the ducks see the falcon, they won't take off. Then, we rush the ducks, yelling and screaming. The ducks are more afraid of us than the bird in the air, so they fly. Then the falcon stoops and brings one of them to the ground."

Once the duck is down, Tucker does a bait-and-switch with the bird, typically with a pheasant leg. He holds the pheasant meat in front of the bird, which steps off the duck to eat the meat. Tucker puts the duck in his vest and picks up his bird. "She gets her reward, and I get dinner," he chuckles.

In addition to being a licensed falconer, hunting with a raptor also requires the same license for the game you wish to hunt. Hunting migratory birds follows the same season and bag limits as hunting with a shotgun, however, falconers seeking upland birds and small game

Acer, the peregrine falcon, enjoys a reward after a hunt.



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have a much longer season, from September 1 to March 31 in Colorado. That said, they are not stuffing their freezers full of pheasants and rabbits.

"I have a good red-tailed hawk and hunt her a lot, but in six months, I might bag 15 rabbits," says Tucker. "Birds miss about 90 percent of the time, regardless of the prey. Rabbits are good at dodging, and ducks are good at ducking. Most of the time, I'm happy catching one rabbit per week hunting five days per week. In two weeks, I could bag more pheasants with a shotgun than in six months with a hawk. It's almost impossible to reach a daily limit."

## Conservation

Like all types of hunting, one of the challenges of hawking is finding game afield, but falconry is more about the rapport with your raptor than the quantity of game you bring home to eat. "It's such a dynamic feeling when your bird flies back to you and goes home with you," says Tucker. "It's about the relationship, except it's a raptor!"

A love of their birds is the essence of hawking to all 200 or so falconers in Colorado. It has to be. Training and maintaining a raptor is a daily, year-round, multidecade commitment. You can't simply wipe it off and put it away after a hunt. It is this intimate connection between falconers and their birds of prey that saved many raptor species, particularly peregrine falcons, from extinction during the 20th century.

During the 1960s, falconers were among the first to notice a decline in the number of peregrines and other birds of prey, and then were wrongly blamed for contributing to this decline. Spurred to action, it was falconers who supported the research and then educated the public about how widespread use of DDT and other pesticides weakened raptor eggshells. As a result, DDT was banned, and peregrines are no longer listed as endangered.

Today, falconry can be legally practiced in 49 states. The only exception is Hawaii, which has only one indigenous hawk and does not allow the import of nonnative species.

In Colorado, falconers are allowed to use nonnative raptors and take great care that they don't fly away. "Harris' hawks are popular among falconers in Colorado, but they are a warm-weather bird and don't survive the winter here on their own," says Tucker. "Some people use gyrfalcons, which could come to Colorado on their own, but they don't breed here. Captive hybrids are also popular; for example, crossing a gyrfalcon, which is big, with a peregrine, which is fast, to make the biggest, fastest falcon. But we are required to put two transmitters on them to make sure they come back."

And then there are eagles, the "jumbo jets" of falconry, as Tucker calls them. Though commonly used for hawking in Europe and on the Asian steppe, only Wyoming and Utah allow falconers to take eagles from the wild and only with a degradation permit for an immature bird that is preying on livestock. If an eagle is older than 3 years old, it must be released back to the wild. In Colorado, eagles are rarely used by falconers because they are difficult to obtain and mainly used to hunt jackrabbits.

Even if you never hunt with a hawk, seeing one soar in the sky or hearing one shriek in the distance evokes a sense of freedom, strength and daring. And if you do get the chance to hold one of these regal birds on your arm, it's an experience you will always remember. ☞

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*A regular contributor to Colorado Outdoors, Lisa Ballard is an award-winning freelance writer and photographer. She has harvested birds and big game throughout the Rockies and other parts of the world, including one memorable pheasant hunt with a red-tailed hawk.*  
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