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Raptor Rage

**JEFF CURTIS '86 HAS A
PASSION FOR FALCONRY THAT
WAS SPARKED AT FURMAN**

By Ron Wagner '93



JEFF CURTIS, a falconer since 2014, lives near Asheville, N.C. and owns two fly-fishing stores and a bed and breakfast inn.

SUSANNAH KAY

Sam was 100 yards away and 60 feet up a tree—so far I could barely see him. He could see me, though, and I could feel his piercing eyes, at least eight times superior to any human's. Waiting.

Jeff Curtis '86 told me to turn and raise my left hand. Sam is supposed to wait for Jeff's whistle, but the hawk had already launched himself when the shrill tweet rang out, knowing from years of experience that my motion meant it was time to eat. As he cut through the damp air on an overcast December day, the exhilaration of this beautiful predator racing toward me began to mix with something unexpected: fear, and a sudden gratitude for my protective leather glove.





CURTIS USES A WHISTLE to summon a bird.

It was silly, I knew. Sam, a Harris's Hawk, weighs about a pound and a half, and compared to the speed he could reach if I were an unsuspecting rabbit (about 120 mph) he was in gentle-cruise mode. As he closed in, though, the sight of this powerful, streamlined body brought out a primal dread of being hunted, and when the raptor raised his outstretched talons—four on each foot, an inch long, razor sharp, crushing power 10 times a man's handshake—to alight on my arm, time seemed to stop. Heart racing, I watched as he ripped a piece of stew beef from my fingers and gobbled it down. There was no asking or performing tricks—the meat was his. And when Sam was ready for more he eyed me with disinterest before flapping away toward another tree to do it again. Only when he was gone did I realize I'd never even felt him land.

From ancient times

Curtis is one of roughly 4,000 licensed falconers in the U.S., with most of them living in California. He works with his birds every day, often for hours at a time, and like others who practice his craft he often ponders its origin.

"Some 4,000 to 6,000 years ago, a couple of people were sitting around a fire, out in the desert, and one goes, 'Hey, we could trap that falcon and go hunting with it,'" says Curtis, whose fascination and intense interest in birds of prey was sparked while a student at Furman. "It's like somebody going, 'Oh, I'm going to grab that shark and go fishing with it.' How does that happen?"

Yet somehow it did, around 1300 B.C. in ancient Mongolia. And falconry most definitely didn't start out as a leisure activity. Humans ate the meat the birds caught, and the practice became so widespread and efficient it helped feed marauding armies. Through the centuries, falconry spread across Asia through China and Russia, reaching Europe about a thousand years after it began. And though falcons are the sport's namesake, along the way falconers learned to work with hawks, goshawks, owls, and even the mighty eagle. Golden eagles, which can weigh 11 pounds and unfurl a wingspan of more than seven feet, are still unleashed by Mongols to hunt—and kill—grown wolves.

Falconry survives in America today through people like Curtis who are captivated by the opportunity to share a wild animal's world and have the extreme dedication and unwavering patience to do so.

Curtis grew up in St. Petersburg, Florida, and made Furman his only college application after riding past the regal front gate many times on the way to his family's summer home in Montreat, North Carolina.

Despite this familiarity, Curtis was uneasy when he arrived on the leafy campus in the fall of 1982.

"I was scared to death of the new college thing. For me Furman was huge," he says. "I was looking for things to do."

An animal lover, Curtis had volunteered in an animal shelter back home. So he naturally gravitated to an on-campus club that worked with the Greenville Humane Society to rehabilitate wildlife, which included birds of prey.

"When you go clean their cages, hawks will typically back away from you as their defense mechanism. They told me owls will attack you, and sure enough they did. You'd go in there to get the screech owl, and that little guy's coming," Curtis says with a smile. "We had a great horned owl, and you'd actually go in with two people. One person would have a broom, not to hurt the bird but to kind of keep him away . . . We'd go up to Paris Mountain and release red-tailed hawks back into the wild. It was cool. Then I started reading about falconry."

The magic window

Curtis went on to earn a psychology degree, and after settling in North Carolina he met his future wife, Susan, a Petersburg, Virginia, native, while leading outdoor programs for children with special needs. They married in 1992, and a few years later they joined Susan's parents in opening the Sourwood Inn, a retreat bed-and-breakfast on 100 acres between Asheville and Weaverville. In 2003, Curtis launched Curtis Wright Outfitters, a fly fishing store and guide service located in Weaverville.

Curtis's courtship with falconry became serious in 2012 when he met Peter Kipp-DuPont, who requested that he be allowed to set up an educational table with his two peregrine falcons in front of Curtis's second store in Asheville's Biltmore Village.

Kipp-DuPont has been a falconer for more than 40 years, and Curtis knew this was his chance.

But becoming a falconer is sort of like ascending to the rank of Jedi Master, and the first step requires convincing a falconer to sponsor your mandatory two-year apprenticeship. It's not a decision they take lightly, and it took weeks of persuading before Kipp-DuPont agreed to take Curtis under his wing.

Naturally, Curtis wondered how he'd get his first bird. Kipp-DuPont's answer was simple: You catch one. Only juvenile birds, less than a year old, are legal to capture, and if you have the right equipment and knowledge, snaring one is surprisingly easy.

His first bird was a feisty female red-tailed hawk he named Rocket Girl after an American pale lager brewed by Asheville Brewing Company. (Curtis names all his birds after beers or bourbons.) Once she was in captivity the real work began.

First you must simply spend time holding the animal to get it accustomed to a human's presence. "It's just hours and hours," says Curtis. "But within about two to three hours they're usually standing calmly on the glove. And then it's a food-based relationship. They don't eat until they take food from you, the falconer."

Sometimes that can take a while, as Curtis found out with Rocket Girl.

"She was stubborn: I don't like you. I don't like this. Forget it. It was five days without food before she took anything from me," he says.

Birds, like all animals, have different personalities, and red-tails are no exception. Curtis's second hawk, Green Man, took food from him within an hour. While catching a bird of prey and training it to rely on you to eat can be arduous and time consuming;

convincing the animal to stick around is a greater balancing act.

"All the books say the minute you think your bird loves you, you're going to lose that bird," Curtis says matter-of-factly. "I can't free-fly my two hawks unless their weight is about 750, 740 grams. If it gets up to 850 grams, they aren't coming back." That's because, when not hungry, the animal literally forgets the human exists. Curtis is quick to point out, however, his birds go to bed full every night.

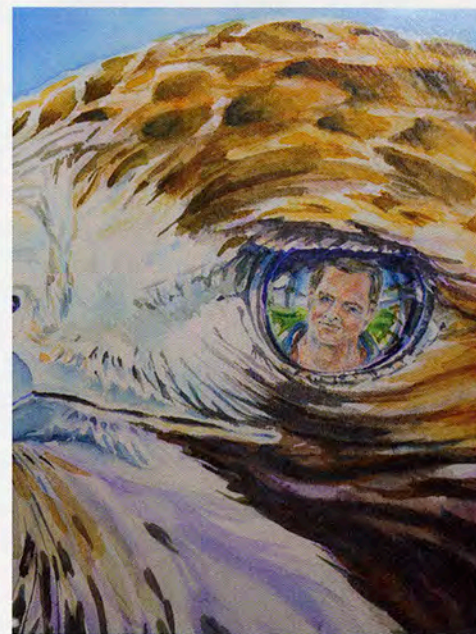
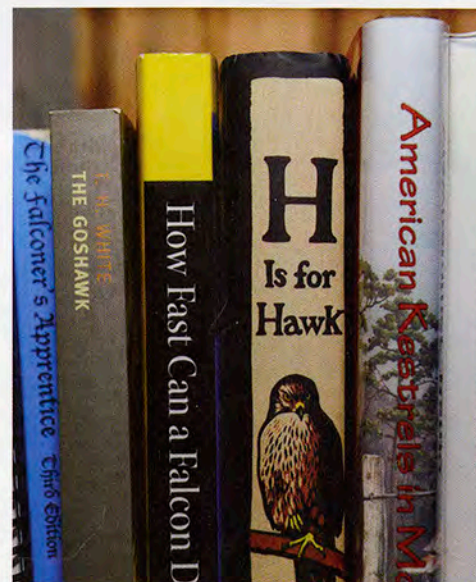
"We don't want to be cruel," he says. "We want to find that magic window where the bird will be responsive to come back to us but also be keen to where he's looking around for stuff to kill and to eat, because that's what falconry is."

Educational experiences

The birds Curtis catches from the wild never lose the ability to hunt, and he and his wife have agreed to release them after no more than two years. Little Sumpin', a kestrel he caught early in 2016, was symbolically released July 4, joining both Rocket Girl and Green Man, who were let go after two years and nine months, respectively.

The birds never look back. That doesn't mean a small part of Curtis doesn't wish they would. "With Rocket, my first one, I don't think I cried, but you spend hours and hours and days with these birds. . ." His voice trails off, the implication clear.

Today, Curtis works with Sam and Hoppy Boy, another Harris's Hawk, and probably will for the rest of his life unless he sells them. The birds, native to the U.S. Southwest as well as Central and South America, have been captive-bred and, according to law, can't legally be released. They will likely live nearly 30 years.



CURTIS'S INTEREST in falconry is reflected in his library. His face is reflected in the eye of RocketGirl, the first red-tailed hawk Curtis worked with, in a painting done by his sister, Susan Averill, as a 50th birthday present.





A WARY EYE
Walker, Curtis's
feline friend, casts
a cautious eye on a
Harris's Hawk

“I’ve found when you give somebody that experience, when you’re holding that bird two feet or a foot from you and you get to look at it up close, you never see another bird of prey the same.”

Traditional falconry is about hunting with the raptors, which learn to watch for prey that humans or dogs flush out and strike. Curtis can’t stop his birds from capturing live game if they see it, but that isn’t his main motivation with Sam and Hoppy Boy. Instead, Curtis believes they serve a dual purpose: educating the public and hunting.

“I’ve found when you give somebody that experience, when you’re holding that bird two feet or a foot from you and you get to look at it up close, you never see another bird of prey the same way again,” he says. “And I think it teaches people just a little bit more respect for them. To share in their lives for that brief time period—it’s just amazing.”

David Heidrick and his wife, Lisa, have driven two hours from their home outside of Charlotte to take advantage of Curtis’s two-hour falconry outing at his 30-acre valley property nestled between two mountains near the Blue Ridge Parkway. They own a macaw, and Lisa tracked down Curtis’s outing as a gift to her bird-loving husband.

The three venture out first with Sam, who is nearly eight, and then one-year-old Hoppy Boy. Sam’s experience shows with soft landings on David Heidrick’s arm and quick flights back to the trees. Hoppy Boy comes in faster and doesn’t see the point of leaving again when he knows the food is near.

For their reward, both cap their afternoon by tearing apart a dead, but fresh, baby chicken, in fairly gruesome fashion.

“If you’re an animal person, this is a once-in-a-lifetime kind of deal,” says Heidrick. “I enjoyed every moment of it.”

Curtis is a General class falconer and will become a Master class falconer in 2019. He hopes to trap his first screech owl soon or work with a falcon like a peregrine (kestrels are the world’s smallest falcons and primarily hunt things like grasshoppers).

As the Heidricks drive up the driveway, headed south for dinner, a distinctive sound emanates from the mountain and echoes down the valley.

Whhooooo hooooo. It’s a great horned owl.

Curtis smiles. ●