

The Adventurist: The Hawk and the Hound

Local falconers spread their wings

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(Credit: Chris Casella)

How does one become a falconer? I asked.

“You have got to be really, really mentally deranged,” said Joe Dorrian, 46, during his latest hunt. “So ... I suggest psychotropic drugs until you’re totally off the deep end.”

I examined Dorrian’s team: three humans, a few dogs, a couple of hawks, and a pocket full of gooey, dead “tidbits.”

Mark Miller, 23, a taxidermist donning full camouflage, is the proud owner of a male Harris hawk, which had tagged along for the hunt. Maureen McGeean-Lake, 26, quiet and observant, said she is one of the few female falconers in the state. Paul Bertani, 25, is an

electrical engineering PhD graduate student whose long legs can leap over a briar patch faster than you can say “Talley-ho!”

Dorrian is a federally licensed general class falconer and the self-proclaimed “apex of the entire falcon community in all the state of Ohio.” On the whole, the ground crew did not seem so mentally deranged.

The lead hunter, however, was a completely different animal. The female Harris hawk, Ms. Sinister, was a soaring package of fierce talons, a threatening beak, and a piercing stare.

In one fluid, majestic sweep, she was off Dorrian’s arm and soaring over the field. And in that one moment, she was gone.

“She’s not leaving, she’s stretching her wings,” Dorrian asserted.

Sure enough, she faithfully returned.

She pretended to ignore Dorrian as he recited her grand introduction, simply clinging to his forearm with her intimidating talons. She stared toward the field, calculating its potential for rabbit inhabitants.

Meanwhile, three lively dachshunds whined and wiggled in their kennels. The second the doors opened, their tails became propellers that drove the bouncing brown bodies through the brush.

The hunt began with a clamor of bells, yipping dogs, hollering humans, and rough winds ripping through the dry brush.

“There’s nothing more unique in all of nature,” Dorrian said of the relationship between human and hawk. “These are captive-bred birds, so they’re raised around humans. But even the wild ones that we trap, they could fly away at any time. And you see them – they’re flying free right now. They could take off if they wanted. But they come back to us.”

Dorrian carried a tall T-perch, on which Sinister sat. She had a clear view of the land from her lofty perch, while Dorrian trudged through tall, prickly weeds below. It was unclear who was the master.

HO! HO! HO! called Dorrian.

One of the dogs popped out of the brush, in a delightful burst of comedic relief. Two clumps of burrs had Velcro-ed her floppy ears together on the top of her head. Yet the pup was too excited to hold still for any grooming; the hounds had smelled rabbit, and there was no time to waste.

“The bird feeds off the dogs,” said Dorrian, explaining how the hawks and dachshunds work as a team – a bird’s eye view paired with several expert noses to the ground.

“If [the dogs] are on a scent line and see the bird fly out, they’ll actually pull off the scent line and follow the bird in the air. If the bird misses, the dog goes over and tries to find the track. And normally the bird will fly up and follow them.”

After gracefully gliding through the air, Sinister suddenly dove toward the ground. The brown, bouncing, bell-jingling bodies leaped towards the target. The humans shouted “HO! HO! HO!” and ran as best as their clumsy long legs could.

A rabbit had been caught.

Scaly talons clutched motionless white fluff. The bird released a terrible shriek.

CAAAAAAAAAAAW!

She held the note as long as her breath would last, seeming to pause for effect before repeating the sound. The rabbit did not struggle after being pinned to the ground, as if accepting its fate.

“Give her a tidbit,” Dorrian instructed. “We’re going to trade her off here.”

Dorrian’s team distracted the hawk with a dead mouse. Sinister would get the rabbit all to herself later, after the hunt, Dorrian said. But for now, the wounded prey needed to be euthanized.

“In the wild, a bird wouldn’t necessarily wait until something is dead,” he said. “So, part of the humanity, or I should say the ethics, of falconry is to treat the prey animals with as much respect as possible.”

The rabbit was whisked away and quickly pocketed out of Sinister’s sight. In the next moment, she was back on her perch and ready to hunt. A mouse tail dangled from her beak.

“Falconry is sort of a fringe sport, even in hunting,” Dorrian said, describing the bitter competition some hunters feel with the hawks. He still finds people who brag about shooting hawks because they kill rabbits, even though the birds are protected under the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

Under strict regulations, according to the Ohio Division of Wildlife, the act makes allowances for the sport of falconry. A falconer must first be properly permitted by federal and state agencies, a process which takes months to complete. After the prospective falconer becomes familiar with the regulations, terminology, methods of raptor care, required equipment and sport procedures, he or she must apprentice under a licensed falconer for two years.

The apprentice must then pass an exam before building his or her raptor housing facilities, which undergo an inspection by the Division of Wildlife. The apprentice must also log at least 30 minutes a day training and caring for the bird for two seasons before being eligible to become a general class falconer.

Despite a falconer's commitment to caring for the bird, Dorrian added that there are also people who disapprove of the birds being held "captive." Dorrian said he responds to such disapproval by letting his bird outside, and then whistling for it to come back – which it does.

Excursions of notable distance, however, are not unusual. Falcons will fly miles to pursue their prey. A particular dog will chase until it dies from exhaustion. It seems only natural that the human and hawk temporarily lose touch from time to time. Dorrian said that radio telemetry helps track missing hunters, but the bird is essentially free to leave any time it goes out. They have a greater incentive to return, though.

"They eat well. They're warm. They get to fly whenever they want," said Dorrian. "Life is good; it's pretty easy."

Dorrian said some falconers fly birds that were captive-bred, like Sinister. Other birds, like McGeean-Lake's red-tailed hawk, were captured from the wild. McGeean-Lake said that falconers with wild birds usually keep them for a season or two before letting them back into the wild. "They know what to do," she said of the wild birds upon their release.

The dogs continued sniffing and the hawks continued scanning, yet the prospect of another capture seemed doubtful. The humans prepared to leave. Dorrian called the final "HO! HO!" Rounding up the animals is the difficult part of the hunt, he said.

"You might as well just give the team the keys to the car and tell them to put the rabbit in the freezer when they get back," joked Dorrian. "We're superfluous to all this. They don't need me."

But the dogs did eventually tumble back into their kennels. The hawks ultimately accepted their jackets. For the first time since the hunt began, a human was in the driver's seat.

The hunt had stirred up an appetite among the crew. Fortunately, we were only seconds away from defenseless prey: a combination Pizza Hut and Taco Bell.

_To experience falconry:

Contact the Ohio Falconry Association at www.ohiofalconry.org to be linked with Dorrian or another local falconer._