Woods, Waters and Wildlife

Story and photos by W.H. (CHIP) GROSS

Falconry: Hunting with hawks

\(\) cottontail rabbit bolted from the brushpile at my feet and made the mistake of running into

the open. The Harris's hawk, perched high in a nearby tree, saw it immediately and launched herself into the air in pursuit. The rabbit had not run 20 yards before the hawk was on it, leading with her talons. The bird of prey ended the rabbit's life in a single squeal.

This seldom-seen lifeand-death drama, predator versus prev, is played out thousands of times daily in the wilds of Ohio. But in this particular case, it was not a truly wild raptor doing the hunting. Rather, the bird was a trained hawk, conditioned to hunt with a human partner. And that partner was Scott Hammond, a Master Class falconer and current president of the Ohio Falconry Association. We barely had begun our hunt on that early-December day last year on Hammond's sprawling, family-owned

farm near Yellow Springs when the rabbit burst from cover.

"It usually doesn't happen quite so quickly," said Hammond, as he coaxed his Harris's hawk,

Ohio falconer requirements

- Must be at least 16 years old
- Must serve an apprenticeship under a licensed falconer holding either a Master or General falconry permit
- Must pass a written exam
- Must construct a bird-holding facility (mew) that passes state inspection
- Must comply with all state and federal laws regulating falconry

hunt for hours and don't make a kill." He enticed his hawk with a piece of meat that he had brought along just for that purpose. As Sundance became more interested in the tidbit, Hammond slowly and gently took the rabbit from her and placed it in his game bag.

> populations," said Hammond. "According to statistics kept by the Division of Wildlife, the average Ohio falconer takes just 10 rabbits per year and less than one squirrel per year. To say the least, it's not an efficient method of hunting. We do it because of the fascination we have with these birds and the privilege of watching them hunt."

Falconry — hunting

sess certain birds. For instance, a peasant may have been permitted to hunt only with a small merlin or kestrel, whereas peregrine falcons and other rare birds were reserved for royalty. And because royals had many birds, full-time professional falconers were employed to care for them. Today, falconry is practiced worldwide as a sport, with more than 3.800 licensed falconers in the United States and some 60 in Ohio.

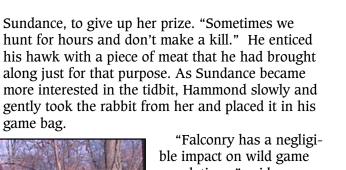
Developed 4,000 years ago, the sport of falconry is

practiced worldwide with 3,800 licensed falconers in

Hammond and his hawk Sundance.

Falconry is not for everyone. It takes a special commitment, dedication and patience, as well as untold hours of training, hunting and caring for a bird of prey. Also, falconry is very closely regulated by state and federal governments, and stiff penalties are applied to those people attempting it illegally.

Hammond became interested in the sport through



with hawks and falcons developed some 4,000 years ago in Egypt and China, eventually spreading to Europe and then North America. It was extremely popular in medieval Europe. Back then, falconry mainly was a way of obtaining food, the U.S. and 60 in Ohio. Pictured here are Scott but only people of certain social classes could pos-

them to hunt using different methods. The buteos, for instance, search for prey from a high perch, then dive on it out in the open. Accipiters, by contrast, do more chasing of their prey — usually other birds through heavy brush and thickets. Falcons soar high overhead, stooping at high speeds to knock unsuspecting birds out of the sky using their feet as balled fists. Licensed falconers obtain a hawk or falcon for hunting either by trapping it from the wild or buying it from a licensed com-

a love of animals and hunting. "I'm a geologist by

Education Center at Yellow Springs," he said. "At

love with raptors and have either worked with or

Technically, a raptor is a bird of prey with a

hooked talons for grasping and holding prey. But

conry, and those are divided into three groups.

only a few species of raptors are well suited for fal-

and other ground game in relatively open country.

An example would be the red-tailed hawk, common

in Ohio. In military-airplane terms, buteos are the

"bombers" of the bird world. Accipiters are short-

winged hawks used to hunt other birds in wooded

or brushy terrain. These are the "attack

Cooper's hawks and other species. True

falcons are long-winged birds of prey

that hunt other birds, such as water-

"fighter jets" of the bird world. These

American kestrel, a small falcon com-

The different physical characteristics

fowl, in open country. They are the

species include peregrine falcons,

prairie falcons, gyrfalcons and the

mon along Ohio's rural roadsides.

of these three groups of birds allow

helicopters" and include goshawks,

Buteos are broad-winged hawks that hunt rabbits

hooked beak for tearing meat, and powerful,

ing as a naturalist at the Glen Helen Outdoor

kept birds ever since."

training, and early in my career found myself work-

the raptor rehabilitation center located there, I fell in

mercial propagator or other falconer. The training of a hawk or falcon takes many long hours, but eventually the time comes when the falconer must hold his breath and turn the bird loose to hunt, hoping it will choose to remain with him. There are no guarantees, however.

"The first bird I ever trained, a red-tailed hawk, simply flew off after a month's training the second time I took it out hunting," Hammond said. "I never saw it again."

Undeterred, Hammond kept at falconry and has had many successful hawks since, although now he attaches a radio transmitter to a leg of his bird that helps him locate it if the hawk does fly off or they become separated in the field. Hammond says that even after 22 years of being a falconer he's still learning and continues to be in awe of these beautiful birds of prev.

Hammond tells a humorous falconry story about how one hunt cost him a car. "My hawk attacked a skunk one day while we were hunting and got sprayed pretty bad," he said. "Foolishly, I took the bird back to my car and put it in its carrying cage. The strong odor of skunk permeated the car and I never could get it out. I finally had to get rid of that vehicle because of the smell."

For more information about falconry, go online to the Ohio Falconry Association website at www.ohiofalconry.org.





(From top) Peregrine falcon, Harris's hawk and red-tailed hawk