

# Falconry: Hunting with hawks

A cottontail rabbit bolted from the brushpile at Amy 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 life-and-death drama, predator versus prey, 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,



Developed 4,000 years ago, the sport of falconry is practiced worldwide with 3,800 licensed falconers in the U.S. and 60 in Ohio. Pictured here are Scott Hammond and his hawk Sundance.

Sundance, to give up her prize. "Sometimes we 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.

"Falconry has a negligible impact on wild game 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 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, but only people of certain social classes could possess 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.

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

a love of animals and hunting. "I'm a geologist by training, and early in my career found myself working as a naturalist at the Glen Helen Outdoor Education Center at Yellow Springs," he said. "At the raptor rehabilitation center located there, I fell in love with raptors and have either worked with or kept birds ever since."

Technically, a raptor is a bird of prey with a hooked beak for tearing meat, and powerful, hooked talons for grasping and holding prey. But only a few species of raptors are well suited for falconry, and those are divided into three groups.

Buteos are broad-winged hawks that hunt rabbits 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 helicopters" and include goshawks, Cooper's hawks and other species. True falcons are long-winged birds of prey that hunt other birds, such as waterfowl, in open country. They are the "fighter jets" of the bird world. These species include peregrine falcons, prairie falcons, gyrfalcons and the American kestrel, a small falcon common along Ohio's rural roadsides.

The different physical characteristics of these three groups of birds allow 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 commercial 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 prey.

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.ohio-falconry.org](http://www.ohio-falconry.org). □



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