

Falcon Quest

Striking raptor dives at 200 mph, and her 'long-winger' master trusts her instincts during the hunt



Aris Iannios waits for the right moment to release Petra for a duck hunt on a farm in Williams.
Mail Tribune/Jim Craven

January 21, 2010

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Mail Tribune
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WILLIAMS — Aris Iannios crouches in a wet pasture, about to play Labrador to a 3-pound hunter that is the apex predator of the air.

Circling 1,000 feet overhead is Petra, Iannios' 3-year-old peregrine falcon, the fastest hunting bird in the world. Her eyes follow Iannios as he inches toward a flock of widgeons swimming nervously in a nearby farm pond.

"Even though she's way up there and we can't see eye to eye, we still know what each other's thinking and doing," Iannios says.

With that, Iannios rushes toward the pond yelling and flailing his arms, scaring the ducks skyward. Sensing the cue, Petra dives downward at speeds eclipsing 200 mph, ready to ball her talons into powerful fists and punch her prey out of the sky in one winner-take-all explosion.

"To see a bird work in concert with a human is incredible," Iannios says. "She doesn't have much of a brain, but it's amazing what kind of instincts she has."

Harnessing the instincts of raptors is at the heart of falconry, a discipline that has remained both simple and complex for more than 3,000 years.

The sport dates back to 1,000 B.C., tracing its roots to China or Persia, where people began to take advantage of raptors' abilities to kill birds and small land mammals with relative ease.

The discipline became common among 15th century knights, who used falcons and hawks for hunting and sport.

And it remains a passion among a small cadre of bird enthusiasts who train raptors to hunt waterfowl, upland game birds and other animals for their own consumption.

Hawk-hunters are called "short-wingers," whose smaller and more maneuverable birds carry out on-the-ground attacks on everything from jackrabbits to quail.

OREGON'S 102 LICENSED FALCONERS ARE SOME OF THE MOST REGULATED SPORT-HUNTERS IN THE STATE, FALLING UNDER THE WINGS OF STATE WILDLIFE BIOLOGISTS AND THE MIGRATORY BIRD TREATY ACT.

Every state but Hawaii has a program affiliated with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, but most oversight comes through state natural resource agencies, says Martin Nugent, who oversees the falconry program for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Falconers must first secure state and federal licenses to possess and transport raptors, Nugent says. Individual facilities also must meet minimum requirements and pass state inspections.

Falconers fall into three classifications — apprentice, general and master — with the classifications determining the type of bird falconers can fly.

To become an apprentice, one must be sponsored by a master or general falconer who will help teach training and caring for the bird, Nugent says. Apprentices must be at least 14 years old and they can possess only one raptor, such as an American kestrel or a red-shouldered hawk, he says. Apprenticeships last at least two years.

General falconers must be 18 years old and pass a written test. They can have two birds, including Cooper's hawks, prairie falcons, Merlin and great-horned owls, Nugent says.

After five years as a general, one can become a master falconer. Masters can have up to three raptors — including peregrine falcons. Fifty-six Oregonians have that stature.

Nugent works closely with the Oregon Falconers Association, which includes the vast majority of licensed falconers here.

— Mark Freeman



Above: Aris Iannios of Murphy swings a small leather pouch at the end of a leather tether to lure his peregrine falcon, Petra, back after a hunt.

Jim Craven

Iannios, of Grants Pass, is a "long-winger," a true falconer who taps into the pure speed of these birds to hunt ducks in mid-air.

In either case, falconers must start under the wing of a master and garner intense and continuous training before man and bird can excel in the field.

It's a discipline Iannios has practiced since he was 9 years old, rearing and training several birds and culminating now in Petra, whose name means Rock in Iannios' native Greek.

Falconry has consumed his life and taken over parts of his house, which he shares with Petra.

The passion cost him his first marriage, yet the allure of joining Petra as she plays out her instinctive role of aerial hunter is as intoxicating for him now as ever.

"It's just one of those things," Iannios says. "Either you get bitten by it or you don't. If you do get bitten by it, it takes over your life."

Iannios bought Petra when she was 12 weeks old from a captive breeder in California and instantly began training her to associate him with food.

Small pieces of raw ducks or pigeon entice Petra to sit on his leather-gloved hand. She flew on a tether for a while before Iannios made the falconer's leap of faith and let her fly free — hoping she would return.

"It's amazing to let an animal fly off your hand," he says. "She's totally free."

But Petra does wear a radio-transmitting bracelet, which he's needed only once to track her down after flying away during one early hunt.

To entice her return, Iannios swings a small leather pouch at the end of a leather tether. It signals to Petra that she'll be fed, and she will fly downward to attack the pouch and receive her reward.



Petra eats raw duck meat while perched on Aris Iannios' gloved hand. Mail Tribune / Jim Craven

Everything else is about helping Petra be the best falcon she can be.

"You're pretty much training them to allow you to be their partner and their flusher," he says.

This pair hunts together regularly during the traditional waterfowl season, focusing exclusively on ducks. She kills about 40 ducks a season, with each bird generating five days' worth of dinners for her and her alone.

For Iannios, falconry truly is about the hunt and not the kill.

"If she flies up to 1,000 feet and gets a good try, that's fine with me," Iannios says. "I'm not here to duck hunt. I'm here to see her fly."

Often, the pair hunt for ducks wintering on ponds at farms and wineries in the Williams area. Petra rides in the rear of Iannios' Subaru wagon. It's the only time she wears a leather hood over her eyes because it helps keep her calm.

Petra leaps off Iannios' arm and her fast wings quickly allow her to ascend in wide, sweeping circles.

The actual hunt takes precious seconds, and Petra gets just one chance to bag a bird.

When Iannios flushes the widgeons, the falcon begins her descent. Falcons have been clocked at close to 300 mph, and the raw speed creates a jet-like rumble in the air.

Falcons dive 1,000 feet, but normally hit their prey 10 to 30 feet from the ground. Just before impact, they spin and place their balled feet forward. The back talons stick out like spikes to rake into the duck upon impact, which normally knocks them dead to the ground.



Petra, with a mallard duck she hunted. Photo by Aris Iannios

That's when falcons pounce onto their dinner.

But these widgeons, already skittish because of a wild peregrine that had been in the area, had a plan of their own last Thursday. They fly erratically just 6 to 10 feet off the ground.

That's a peregrine's gray area. It's so close to the ground, the force of her punch could hurtle Petra into the field, injuring her.

At the last instant, Petra pulls off and sails horizontally over the field. A miss.

"You flush the ducks, she misses one and it's over," Iannios says.

As the widgeons scatter, Iannios swings his leather pouch and within seconds the bird bats the pouch before landing to enjoy a nibble of a widgeon she killed a week earlier.

Widgeons 1, Petra 0.

"It's like Murphy's Law," Iannios laughs. "Anything can happen when you're hunting."

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