

## Natural History.

### THE SPORT OF HAWKING.

#### III.—The Gyrfalcon.

THE three great Northern falcons (*Hierofalco*)—the gyrfalcon, the Icelander and the Greenlander—approach very closely to one another in form, coloration and habits. The three kinds are now generally considered to be but local races, or at most mere varieties of one species, and as such they will be here considered. The gyrfalcon (*Falco sacer*, Forster; *Falco gyrfalco*, Linnæus) which specific name also includes the Iceland, Greenland and Labrador falcons, is by far the largest of the true falcons, the female measuring 24in. or more in length, the male about 2½in. less. The wing is 10in. long from carpal joint to tip of longest feather. A fine female of this species will weigh nearly 4lbs. The tarsus is feathered half way down, there being only a bare strip on the posterior surface of the leg. The color varies considerably from almost pure white, barred with faint plumbeous markings, to a dark brownish lead color, marked with darker transverse bars. This species has the peculiarity common to all the true falcons, of having the bands on its plumage longitudinal up to the first moult and transverse thereafter. In the character of the beak, feet and wings the gyrfalcon closely resembles the peregrine, being a true "long-winged," "dark-eyed" hawk.

The flight of the northern falcon, although perhaps less rapid than that of the peregrine, is grand and majestic in the extreme. Its power of foot is terrible, and the force of its stoop often sufficient to kill a heron at a single blow. It is by far the best "footer"—i. e., game killer—of all the falcons, surpassing even the royal eagles in this respect. It preys mainly upon seagulls, waterfowl and ptarmigans, and is fearfully destructive to the latter species. As regards man it is a bolder bird than the peregrine, often being seen in the immediate neighborhood of the smaller settlements of British America. It is almost as difficult to stalk and shoot, however, as the wary peregrine himself. The nest of this species is built upon naked and inaccessible cliffs, or occasionally in the tops of the highest pine trees. The parent birds are ferocious and reckless in the defense of their nest, and are able to beat off most intruders. The nest itself is a rough affair, much like that of the peregrine. The eggs are laid in early May, often while the rivers are yet frozen and the ground covered with snow. The ground color of the eggs is yellowish brown, which is almost concealed, however, by the numerous blotches of deep reddish brown upon it. They measure about 2½ inches from pole to pole. The gyrfalcon is found throughout the northern region of both continents, and is seldom found south of the 50th parallel of latitude. These birds have, however, bred in Vermont, and are not exceedingly rare in the northern New England States during cold winters.

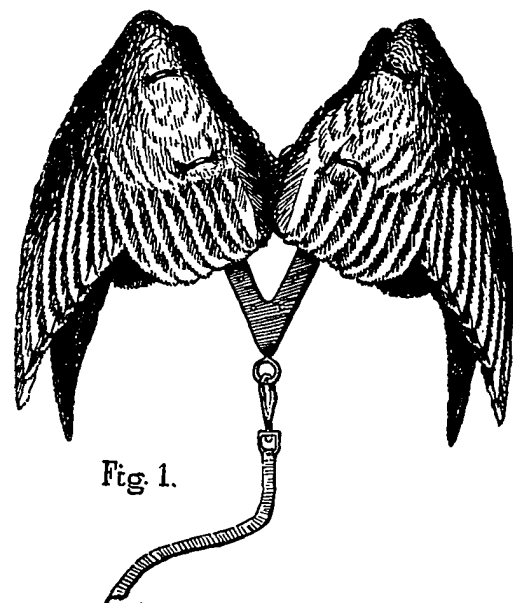
When the sport and art of falconry were at their height the gyrfalcon was considered a royal bird, thought fit only for scions of reigning houses to own and carry. Enormous sums were paid for the falcons, and they played an important part in the royal pageantry. They were flown at kites, herons and sometimes at lesser game, though strong enough to take hares, ducks, geese and even more powerful quarry. Kite hawking was for centuries a favorite sport.

The capture, taming and training of the adult northern falcon in no way differ in method from that advised for the haggard peregrine, except that the royal bird is more savage and untamable than his wandering relative, and therefore requires even more care, patience and gentleness. It is even doubtfully safe to have an unhooded gyrfalcon on its block where young children are about, the proud bird fiercely resenting any familiarities from those to whom it is not accustomed. The rule never to tease or irritate any hawk applies more strongly to the gyrfalcon than to any other species; it is seldom that anything can be done with a bird which has once been made the victim of a practical joke or the like.

Because of the intractable temper of this species it is better to train the *eyas*, or nesting falcon, than the haggard or wild-caught adult bird. It will probably be generally found necessary to be lowered by a rope from above in order to reach the eyrie. The young birds are put into a covered basket well lined with hay, and are then pulled up by the assistants above before their captor, who will probably have enough to do to fight off the parent birds. In this basket, which should be darkened by being covered with dark cloth of some kind, the *eyases* are carried to their destination, being fed three or four times a day with small pieces of perfectly lean beef, pigeon, rabbit or the flesh of any small bird.

Arriving at their future home the young birds should be placed in a roomy box or basket nailed against the inside wall of an outhouse at about the height of a man's breast from the floor. A broad shelf must be added to

the floor of the hamper, projecting a couple of feet beyond it. This box is comfortably filled with straw, and the home of the young hawks is complete. Bewits, bells and jesses, the latter made of somewhat lighter leather than those used for an adult peregrine falcon and perfectly soft and well oiled, are now placed upon the legs



of the young hawks. No leash is needed, however, it not being necessary or advisable to tie fast the nestlings. Feed your charges thrice daily, as above directed, and at each meal blow loudly on a whistle as directed in a previous paper as a part of the training of the haggard. In the course of three or four days you will probably find your birds waiting for you on the top of the hamper when you appear at feeding hours.

It is now time to introduce the eyases to the lure. The lure proper for hawks brought up from the nest (Fig. 1) is made of a fork of hard wood, weighing from 2½ to 3 lbs., each arm of the fork being about 6 in. long. It is covered tightly with strong scarlet cloth, and to either fork are firmly and neatly lashed the wings of a pigeon. The arms of the lure are pierced with convenient holes, through which pass strong cords with which to tie meat to the appliance. A ring is inserted at the apex of the fork and a swivel and strap attached thereto as a handle. This instrument, with a tender beefsteak attached by the cords is placed among the hungry young birds at feeding time, and they are all allowed to feed from it, at the same time giving them a few choice mouthfuls from the hand, whistling shrilly the while. At your fourth or fifth visit after the eyases have grown accustomed to the lure, swing it round your head by the strap and shout your field call as you enter the room; they will soon learn that such demonstrations herald for them a full meal, and will welcome you accordingly. Now have a lure for each bird, and when the hawks begin to fly to the lures be sure to have each garnished with particularly fresh and juicy pieces of meat, but later, when the falcons fly eagerly to them as a matter of course, place tough and gristly pieces upon them, and when each bird is tugging at his lure kneel among them, and, shouting your call, give some juicy and tender pieces to each eyas. They will thus soon learn that you give them more savory morsels than they can obtain for themselves by the hardest pulling. Which valuable lesson—to you—they will not fail to remember and profit by.

The eyases are now fed abundantly twice daily from the lures, always receiving tender bits from your hand at the same time. Though they will now fly far from home (having from the first been given perfect liberty, the door of the out-house being always open, except at night, before the nestlings can fly), and will have altogether deserted their hamper, they will seldom fail to come to your whistle call and the swinging lure at every meal. They must, of course, be fed at regular hours, morning and evening. After the birds become strong and powerful in flight it is well to attach light leaden balls (½ oz. in weight for a gyrfalcon) to their bewits, to prevent their preying for themselves, which they only too soon learn to do. The jesses and bells are of course worn all the while the falcon is at liberty.

The young birds are now said to be "flying at hack," an especially important era in their training, as it teaches them judgment, power of wing, and to know their home; they also become more accustomed to strange scenes and localities. "Hack" is usually kept up for about a month, at the end of which time, or a little earlier or later, one or more of the falcons will begin to come home irregularly, showing that he has learned to kill game for himself, and is no longer entirely dependent on your bounty. It is now necessary to "take up" the "hack hawk." Throughout the taming of the eyases they have been accustomed to the presence of dogs, horses and men, especially at feeding time; with yourself they are perfectly familiar, and taking up should not be a very difficult matter.

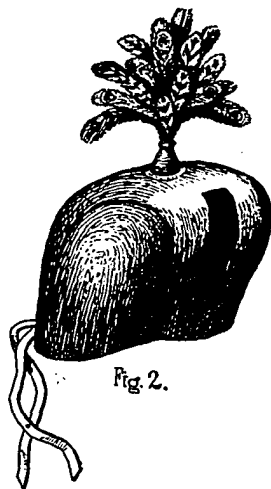
Take up the wildest of the birds first, by gently approaching him while feeding on the lure and slipping a spiny swivel with leash attached to the ring of his jesses. If he be very wild the low net, already described, baited with the lure, may have to be used to capture him. In either case the hawk must not be permitted to eat a full meal before being taken up, as "baiting on a full crop is bad." Carry him, if possible, on the lure, into a darkened outhouse, and there place as best you can a well-fitting hood proper on his head. Immediately allow him to eat a full meal through the hood if he does not decline to do so, as he very probably will. The taking up should be done in the late afternoon; carry him until dark on the wrist. Unhood by candle light, and feed the falcon, allowing him to finish his meal through the hood. After this carry him to the outhouse and tie him to a block for the night. Unhood the hawk and make the room per-

fectly dark, so that no light will enter in the morning. The next morning hood up, and again carry the hawk as before; feed through the hood out of doors, and while the hawk is eating remove the cap, and again replace it before the meal is finished. This treatment is continued in the same manner as was directed for the haggard peregrine, until the eyas are perfectly "broken to the hood."

The treatment of the young gyrfalcon should now be exactly the same as we recommended as proper for the adult peregrine after breaking him to hood, whistle and lure. Of course, if you have several eyases, each is taken up from hack in turn, as soon as it shows any irregularity in returning for food.

The eyas is trained to fly first to the wrist, and then to both lure and wrist from increasing distances, until a distance of a thousand yards or more is reached, the hawk coming eagerly to your call from the wrist of an assistant almost as far as he can hear your voice. The falcon is now given its first lessons in "waiting on" by means of the lure, in precisely the same way as the wild-caught hawk was taught, but the gyrfalcon cannot be trained to wait on well in the field, and is generally "flown out of the hood" at game.

When the above lessons are well learned, and the bird no longer has any fear of strangers or animals, give the falcon a brailed live pigeon at his block, and allow him to eat it when killed. Next the eyas may be flown at a couple of free pigeons, a few of whose primary wing feathers have been pulled out, allowing him to eat them when caught; and finally the eyas is flown at strong pigeons every other day for a couple of weeks before being entered at wild game. When the falcon brings down his first pigeon killed in a fair flight go gently but confidently up to him, whistling your call the while. Slip the leash onto his jesses, peg him down by the former to an iron pin, and allow the bird to "take his pleasure" on his first "game." On subsequent occasions approach at once, and lift the quarry to which the hawk will cling tightly, place the hawk on your wrist and feed him from the body of the pigeon. This if it is not desired to fly the falcon a second time that day, but if it is intended to again use him cut off the head and neck of the pigeon, dropping the body into a pocket, and feed the hawk from the brain and neck meat. As the slight meal is finished hood him, and he is ready after a short rest for a second or even a third flight. It is even more important to skilfully and rapidly "serve" an eyas than it is in the case of the adult caught bird. When a pigeon dashes into cover the greatest haste must be made to flush it, shouting to encourage the falcon at the same time, and a live pigeon should always be carried to be substituted for the real quarry should it be impossible to flush the latter. The pigeon substituted may have a few long feathers pulled from one wing, so as to make its capture more easy, in order to encourage the falcon to "wait on" in future.



The eyas is now ready to be "entered" at the game he is intended to be first flown at, in the same way as the haggard peregrine. The northern and common American hares, the ptarmigan, pinnated grouse, cranes, herons and water fowl, are suitable game for a gyrtiercel. Probably a powerful female would take turkeys, swans, geese and other strong quarry well. As already stated they have been trained to hunt other and far weaker hawks, as well as vultures.

The daily management of gyrfalcons, or eyases of any species, does not differ from that already suggested as the best for adult caught peregrines. The bath, shelter and food should be precisely the same. The nobler falcon is, however, more delicate than the dashing peregrinus, and requires rather more careful sheltering and attention. Hawks should never be flown after they have been allowed to eat any "castings" (i. e., bones or feathers), until they have "cast," or injury to the falcon may result. Saturday night eyases, like haggards, must be allowed to gorge themselves on as much warm bird as they will eat. On days that they are not flown hawks must be given a full meal in the morning, but only a few mouthfuls in the evening: they will then be "sharp set" for hunting the next morning. But if it is not proposed to use them until afternoon the falcons may have two or three small and perfectly lean pieces of beef early in the morning. Of course the birds are always plentifully "fed up" after having been flown for the last time in the afternoon, preferably from the body of their last quarry, but beefsteak may be carried along for this purpose if preferred.

Falcons, if properly hunted, trained, fed and cared for, are very hardy and long-lived; both peregrines and gyrfalcons have been frequently known to live for from fifteen to twenty years in captivity, and to be always in good condition for hunting (except when moulting) throughout that time, barring accidents. Their time of usefulness is thus nearly twice as long as that of the dog, and a powerful and well trained gyrfalcon will support a family in a good game region. Some further points in regard to the qualities and the care of falcons will be discussed in a future paper.

Fig. 2 illustrates a hood proper, already described, in profile, with the addition of the feather plume generally

used by European falconers. The plume may be substituted for the leather strap if desired; the feathers are held in position by a hollow cone of leather sewn firmly round the base of the quills and to the top of the hood. As before mentioned they are of course less durable than the strap, but decidedly more ornamental.

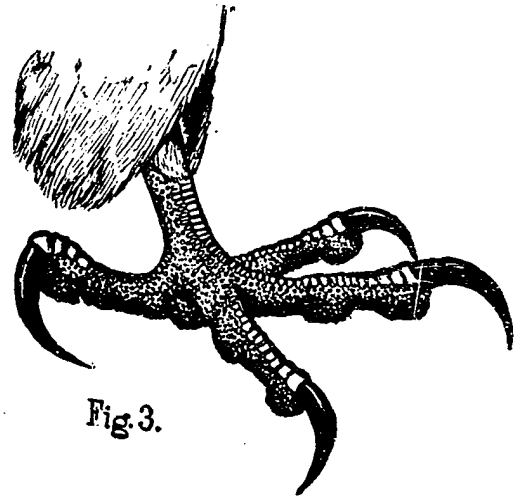


Fig. 3 shows the foot and tarsus of a gyrfalcon, showing the partly feathered legs and the great power of talon of this species.  
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