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Falconry

in Spain

Many different cultures around the world have become captivated by birds of prey. The beauty of these raptors, their elegance and aloofness,

the freedom they symbolise as they ride the winds looking down on the whole of creation, has captured our attention

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Dedication, time and adequate infrastructure are needed to keep the birds in top condition for flight. Falconry is a very demanding hobby





We owe falconry a large debt in the conservation of birds of prey. A major development has been the techniques for their breeding in captivity





Where to see falconry

The hunting season begins in October and finishes in February. During this period there are meetings almost every weekend. Although the season lasts for less than six months, falconers must keep their birds in top shape during the whole year, and they usually continue to take them out for training. If you want to take part in a hunt you should contact the organisers. The easiest way to find out about events is on the website www.cetrero.com

Before attending an event it is a good idea to find out if it is actually falconry (the hunting of wild prey) or a flight display (either using bagged game or lure). The latter tend to be the more popular events, for example the ones in the north of Spain, the one in León in October, and the Sky Trial in Eciija, Sevilla in December. Falconry arts and crafts feature at Lúa and Stoop Fair, both held in June in Madrid. Falconers are also becoming popular faces at country fairs and medieval markets

In Central Asia more than 4,000 years ago, our dream to transform these birds of prey into hunting partners came true.

And so falconry was born, one of the most sustainable and natural hunting methods there is

Nature in her wisdom decides whether the hunting ability of a bird of prey trained by humans is greater than its wild prey's ability to escape.

This makes falconry an extremely selective method of hunting that respects thousands of years of natural evolution. If the bird catches its prey, it will always be the weakest, the most impaired, or the 'lost sheep' of the group. For royalty and nobility this form of hunting has always been a healthy pastime and a badge of aristocracy. Their hunting partners were called 'noble birds' and tough laws guaranteed their protection.

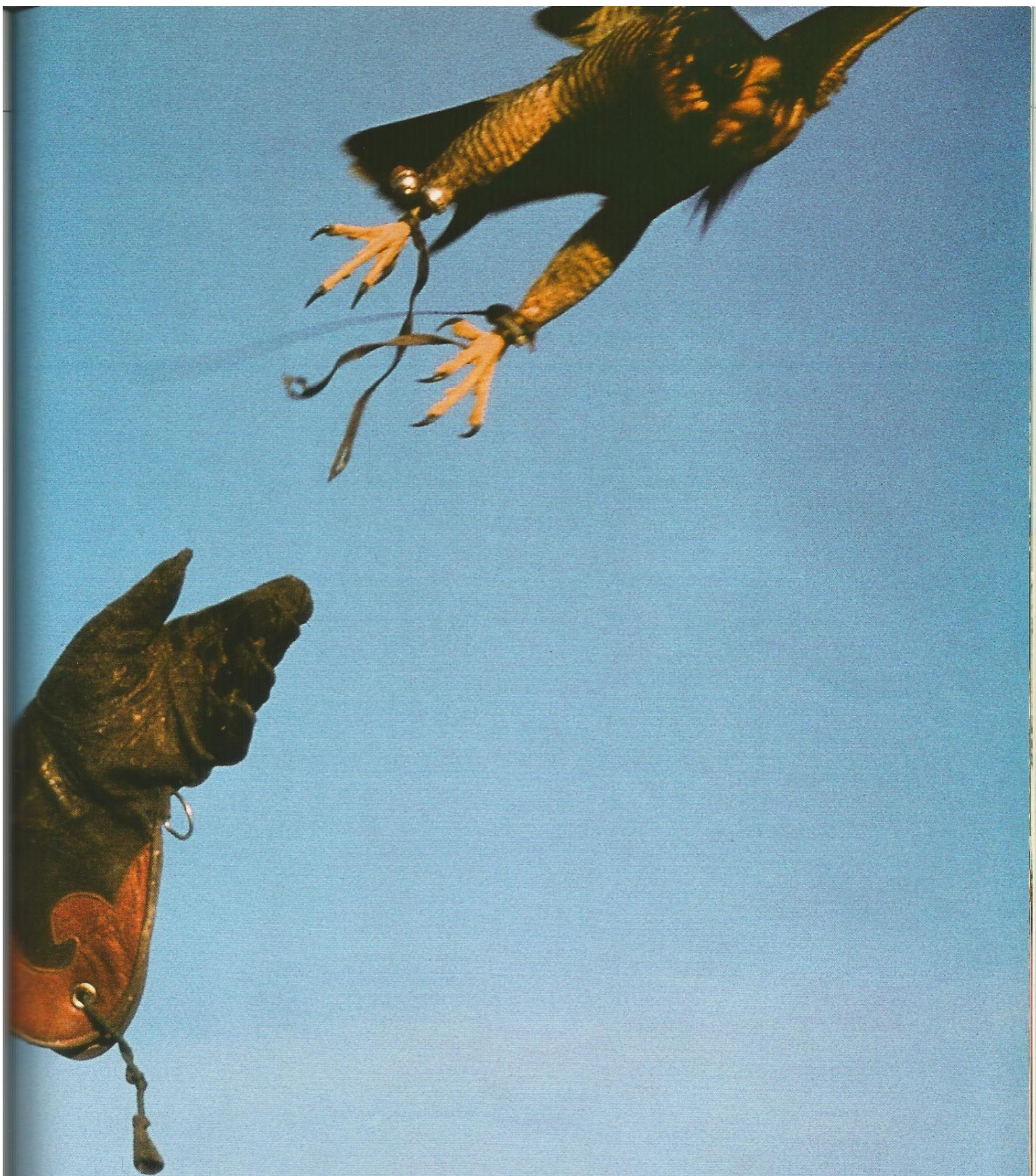
Falconry was one of the favourite sports of the most important royal courts in Europe.

However, it did require great dedication to the care of the birds and produced relatively few rewards, and the advent of firearms threatened to trigger a sharp fall in its popularity.

Falconry's heyday, when the hawk was the centre of attention of monarchs and courtiers alike, when their winged companions filled many of their waking hours, was brushed aside by the advance of technology.

Hunting techniques changed. Prey that had been caught in lengthy complicated fashion could suddenly be caught in larger numbers and with less effort with blunderbusses and shotguns that hit their targets almost every time.

Nevertheless, a few diehard romantics, English nobles and Dutch royals, enthusiastically kept falconry alive in



■ Removing the fetters is a truly magic moment, full of expectation for the imminent take-off. The bird is now free and ready to fly away. We don't know if the chase will be successful, but emotions are so strong we feel that this moment alone makes falconry worthwhile

Falconers studied and kept raptors long before the ecological movement or modern-day ornithology appeared

Europe in the dark years of the 19th century.

Falconry as Spanish cultural heritage

In eastern Spain, there are records of our relationship with hunting and birds of prey dating back more than 2,000 years. It is amazing that falconry has been part of Spain's cultural heritage for so long.

Falconers studied and kept raptors long before the ecological movement or modern-day ornithology appeared. The vast collection of books that have been written on the subject was begun

as long ago as the 14th century with Prince Juan Manuel's 1325 offering, *Libro de la Caza* (book of hunting). Laws passed in defence of birds of prey by a number of monarchs, including Alfonso X el Sabio in the 13th century, also prove falconry's historical credentials.

There can be no question that falconry has contributed to the conservation of birds of prey, both by breeding them in captivity and reintroducing them into their natural habitats. Programmes are now under way to increase the numbers of species such as the Spanish imperial eagle (*Aquila adalberti*) and the osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*), based on the falconry technique of hacking, in which young falcons are released in a semi-wild state in order to improve their



The new dawn of falconry in Spain

In the whole of Europe in the 1950s and 60s, birds of prey were considered vermin and were being treated as such. But fortunately for the birds, the go-getting, tenacious Spanish falconer, well-known publicist Félix Rodríguez de la Fuente, gave a new lease of life to the sport and conservationist groups managed to secure the birds' legal protection. Although falconry now has its place in Spain's cultural legacy, it also passed

through hard times. In the 20th century the numbers of birds of prey living in the wild decreased, partly because, as mentioned above, people thought they were vermin. There were also changes to their habitat, including power lines, biocides and communication infrastructure. None of this had anything to do with falconry itself. Nevertheless, in 1989 the Spanish Government banned the sport. Six years later, the ban was declared

unconstitutional, thanks to unstinting effort and the support of organisations all over the world.

Since then the tradition has been given full legal status and its practitioners must abide by the regulations set by the different autonomous regions



■ Falconry is a very selective hunting method - indeed hardly worth it for the game captured. Wild animals keep themselves in top physical condition and often manage to escape the birds of prey



Falconry in Spain today

Falconry is a minority sport in Spain as it is in the rest of the world. Before you decide to keep a bird of prey you have to consider how many people you will need to look after it and keep it fit for hunting. It is a very demanding hobby.

Modern-day falconry in Spain uses birds reared in captivity. Different birds reach different heights before swooping on their prey; this is called *alto vuelo* (high pitch) and *bajo vuelo* (low pitch).

Falcons are high pitch birds. They have long narrow wings and a strong beak with which they finish off their prey once they have overpowered it. There

is a difference between *altanería* (wait on) and *vuelo de mano por mano* (direct flying attack).

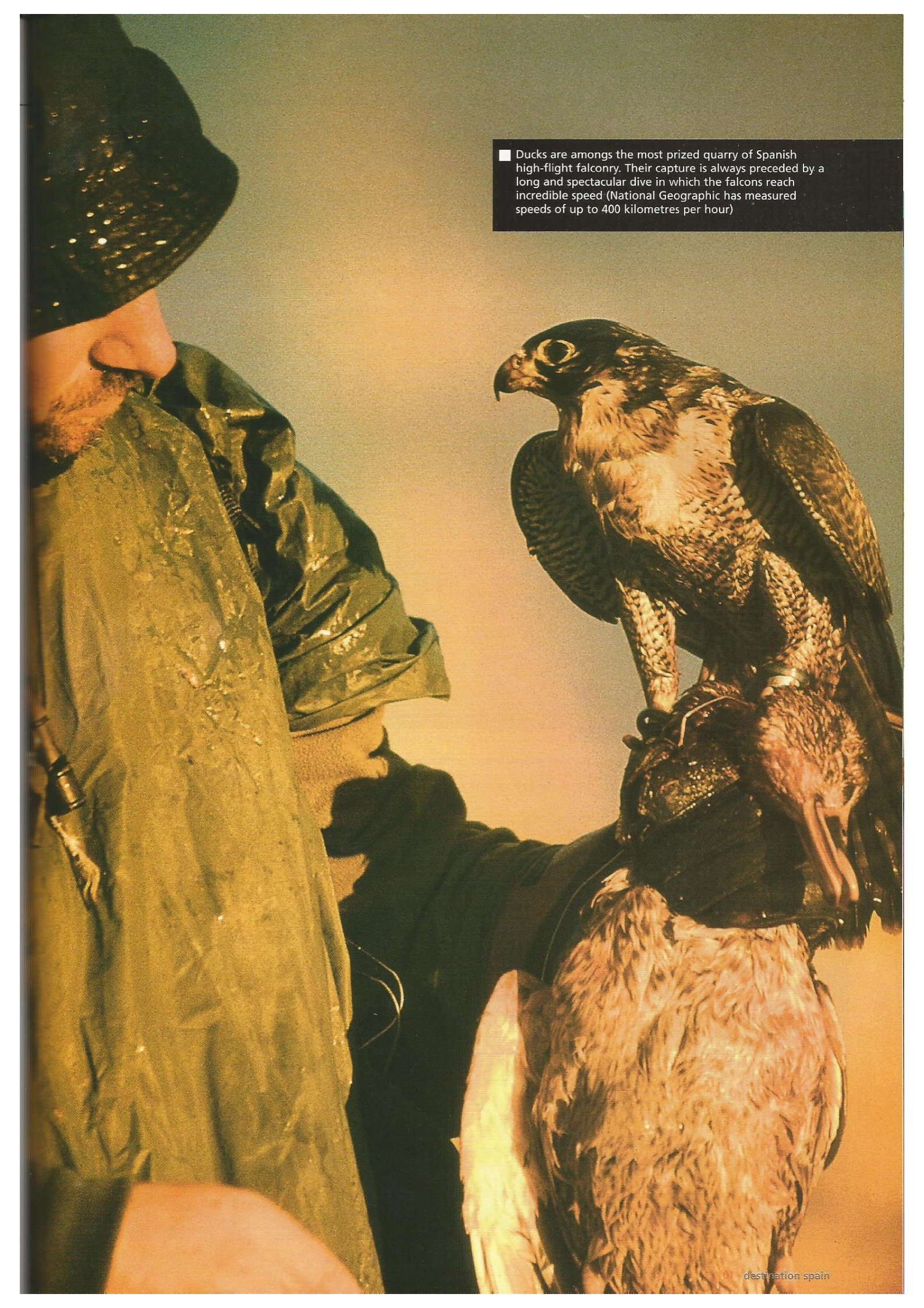
Spanish *altanería* is world renowned. Here a dog is used to locate the prey, the most prized of small game; the red-legged partridge (*Alectoris rufa*).

In *mano por mano* high-pitch hunts, crows are captured, in particular the carrion crow (*Corvus corone*).

Bajo vuelo involves birds that usually fly close to the ground. These include the goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*) and the sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus*).

There are also two different categories. In the *mano por mano* (direct flying attack) the bird flies from the fist

when the quarry has already started running. This is the method used with hares and rabbits. It is called *empuesta* when the bird leaves the fist before its prey has become aware of your presence. This is obviously the most natural method, with the trainer serving only as a watchtower from which the bird stalks its prey. This is how magpies, starlings and jackdaws are caught. A native American species has recently come on the *bajo vuelo* scene: the Harris hawk (*Parabuteo unicinctus*). It is more common in the UK than in Spain, where it is becoming the most popular bird used by novice falconers



■ Ducks are among the most prized quarry of Spanish high-flight falconry. Their capture is always preceded by a long and spectacular dive in which the falcons reach incredible speed (National Geographic has measured speeds of up to 400 kilometres per hour)

Organisations

Spanish falconers become members of an organisation in their own autonomous region. There is only one national organisation, AECCA (Asociación Española de Cetrería y Conservación de Aves Rapaces). Worldwide, the body that represents falconers' interests is the IAF (International Association for Falconry and Birds of Prey) made up of member associations in 50 different countries. It holds its annual general meeting in a different member country each year. In October 2002 the British Falconers' Club (BFC) held the 34th AGM in Woodhall Spa and in 2003 the honour to play host to the delegations from across the world went to the AECCA, which held the AGM in December in Jerez, Andalucía

flying and hunting capabilities. Falconry has also left an indelible mark on environmental education. A number of zoos and interpretation centres, including the Zoo Aquarium de la Casa de Campo and the Zoo Parque Grande (both in Madrid), the Águilas del Teide centre in Tenerife, the Parque de Cabárceno in Cantabria, and the Castillo de Águilas de Benalmádena in Málaga, have undergone a revolution in the way they show their birds of prey to the public.

From presenting the visitor with listless birds behind bars, they have progressed to keeping them physically fit by entertaining visitors with flight displays using falconry techniques.

Interestingly, raptors are also used for air traffic control. At practically all of Spain's airports hawks are used to frighten off flocks of birds from the runways.

Various art forms – painting, tapestry, capitals, stained glass windows and sculpture – have found inspiration in

falconry. It is also the source of a number of new words in the Spanish language and a host of scientific tomes and fiction have been written on the subject.

Falconry has even been recognised as the best preparation for life for nobles and gentlemen.

About the author

Javier Ceballos Aranda is a member of both the BFC and the AECCA and is the author of an essay on falconry *Soltando pibuelas* (published by Cairel, Madrid 2002). He was technical director and scriptwriter for a TV documentary *Aliados del Aire* about the different ways falconry is understood around the world, in Asia, America, Africa and Europe. At the moment he is preparing his doctoral thesis on falconry in Spain at Madrid's Polytechnic University





■ These flights are one of the early phases in training a bird of prey

Useful information

Internet sites

www.cetrero.com
www.cetreria.com

Organisations

AECCA: Apdo. Correos 41121, 28080
Madrid cerdeno1@terra.es
British Falconers' Club BFC
Tel/fax: (+34) 01543 481737
admin@britishfalconersclub.co.uk
www.britishfalconersclub.co.uk
IAF www.I-A-F.org

Magazines and journals

Yarak, cetrería y aves de presa quarterly
magazine
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AECCA

Yearbook and twice-yearly newsletter (La
alcándara)
Sky Trial, falconry yearbook of the Real
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Bookshops

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