

INTERNATIONAL FALCONER

ISSUE 34 - 2009



Flying through time with the Kazakhs

In Focus - 2008 Welsh Hawking Club Field Meet

Reaching for the sky


An end of season reflection

An American odyssey

The golden eagle as a UK falconry bird


The highest of highs, the lowest of lows

One world. One passion.



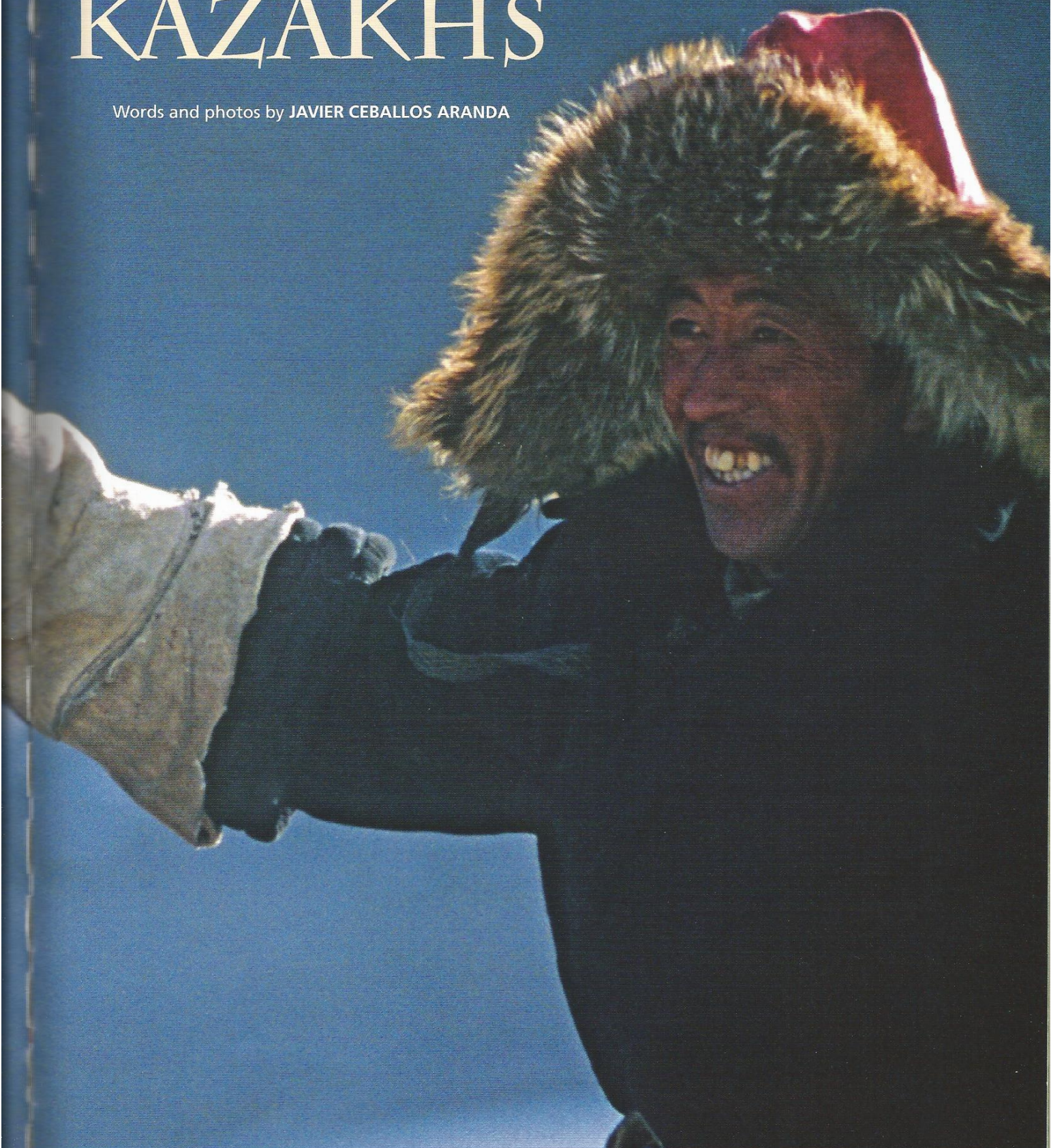
FLYING WITH THE

IN THE WEST OF MONGOLIA, IN THE BAYAN-OLGII REGION FALCONRY PERSISTS. THE KAZAKHS, A NOMADIC PEOPLE SPREAD ACROSS CHINA, RUSSIA AND MONGOLIA, CONTINUE HANDLING GOLDEN EAGLES WITH ANCESTRAL TECHNIQUES. IT IS AMAZING TO GO BACKWARDS THROUGH THE TUNNEL OF TIME TO THIS MOST PRIMITIVE FORM OF HUNTING WHICH REMAINS BARELY UNCHANGED SINCE ITS CREATION OVER 4,000 YEARS AGO. THE USUAL PREY IS THE HARE AND THE FOX . . . BUT ON EXCEPTIONAL AND VERY RARE OCCASIONS, THE FALCONER HAS DARED TO FLY THE WOLF. ►



THROUGH TIME KAZAKHS

Words and photos by JAVIER CEBALLOS ARANDA



THE ADVENTURE begins in Ulan Bator, capital of Mongolia. There is good reason why this is the coldest capital city in the world and we are greeted by -25°C upon landing. Olgii, our next destination, is 1,600km to the west. This time we fly by propeller aircraft. The landscape is spectacular: huge areas of smooth mountains with frozen rivers and lakes show us how inhospitable the place is. There is no sign of life, not even trees. Once in Olgii, we continue our journey in a Land-Rover. After almost six hours following tracks and crossing rivers, we arrive at the village where Artak, our host, lives.

During spring and summer the

Kazakhs live in yurts, circular tents that they pitch, dismantle and transport in their nomadic life. When the cold arrives they stay in small adobe houses. The means of family subsistence is mainly based on livestock. The yak is the most copious animal: meat, milk and cover come from this bovine. Its dung is even used as fuel in the fires of their rudimentary kitchens (there is no wood in the area). On the other hand, Bactrian camels and goats provide two important materials to Mongolia's textile industry: wool and cashmere.

In the village, the elderly and the children are the kings of the family. The kindness and hospitality of people is striking,

as well as their curiosity about what they find new, which is almost everything we are carrying: torches, books, gloves, multi-purpose penknives....all are the objects of admiration. They are astounded when they see themselves on the digital camera screens or on the filming team's monitor after being filmed.

The house where we are staying has a passageway-cum-room at the entrance and two inhabitable rooms, one with rickety old beds to sleep in, and the other, larger, serves as a living room and a place to eat. Besides the kitchen, there are two small pieces of furniture, stools and a low table. In this same room, to the left of the door, are the



protagonists of our story: two golden eagles.

The golden eagle, *Aquila chrysaetos*, has six sub-species spread out around the world; the one from this region, *A.c. daphanea*, being the largest of them all. It is particularly renowned for its enormous talons. The *berkutchis* (the falconers who handle eagles) only train females, because, like the rest of falconry birds, they are larger than the males, reaching 2.3 metres in wingspan and more than 7kg in weight. They hunt with them between October and April.

The falconry tradition is passed down from father to son and it is the youngest male sibling's duty to maintain it. This son, when

the day comes, will also assume responsibility for looking after his parents when they can no longer manage on their own.

Falconry equipment is totally home-made. A *pihuela* (leather strap) is put on to each of the eagle's legs in order to facilitate its handling. The falconer puts on a thick pelt glove each time he wants to hold his bird. In order to avoid any struggling due to slight shocks or the apparition of prey that it has no interest in pursuing, the eagle's head is covered with a *tomaga* (home-made hood). They fix a wooden *baldak*, onto the saddle in order to support the fist they carry the eagle on.

Additionally, and for merely superstitious reasons, they fix

a tuft of eagle owl feathers onto the eagle's back and onto the hat worn by the hunters. They believe that by doing so they are protected from evil spirits.

In this region, prey is available and danger is scarce for raptors, which means the population of wild eagles is in good health and a sustainable resource for the *berkutchis*.

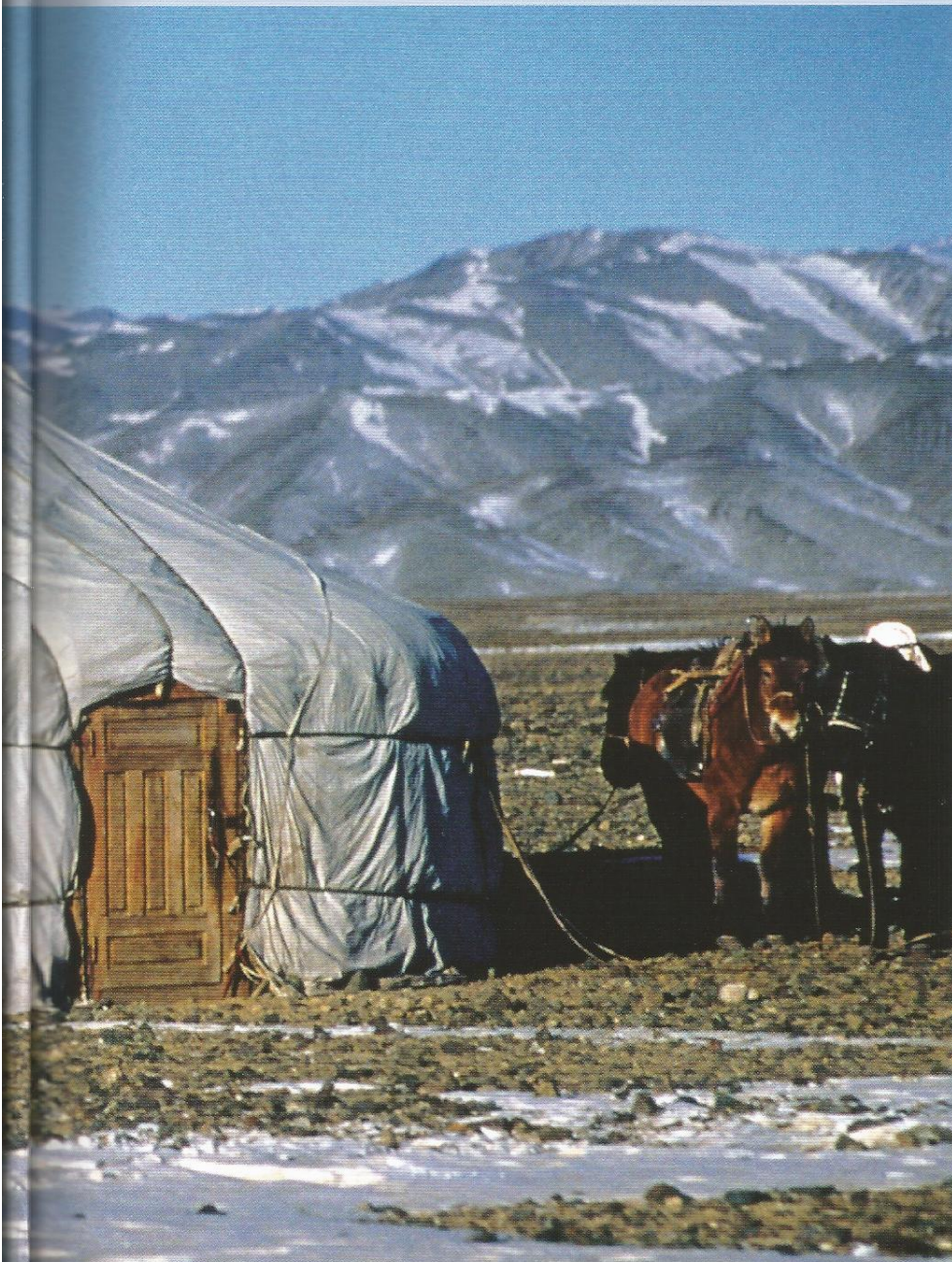
Several weeks lapse from the moment of seizing the fledgling until the day in which eagle and falconer share a day's hunting. The taming process is less difficult if the bird has just fledged. Adjusting to new noises, horses, dogs and people requires less attention than when the eagle is a few months old. In both cases, offering food from the fist facilitates this introductory phase.

Once the bird is eating quietly, the first flights to the fist begin. As it continues gaining confidence and strength, the flight distance continues increasing.

A lure, called a *chergá*, is used for introducing the hunt. It consists of a stuffed fox or hare skin. While the *berkutchi* remains still on horseback with his hooded eagle, an assistant rides along dragging the lure. The hood is taken off the bird and its instinct urges it to pursue the piece of pelt sliding along the snow. Words of encouragement from its companion and his extended fist invite it to flap its wings until capture. As a prize, it eats the piece of meat previously tied to the lure.

Gradually the falconer gets to know his bird. He tries to find the point of hunger that provokes its main aggressiveness. In the rest of the world, scales are used

During spring and summer the Kazakhs live in yurts.





craftsperson who made artificial brass talons for those eagles injured from wolf bites.

The *berkutchis*, on horseback, position themselves on the side of a mountain using height as an advantage. Their eyes comb the steppe until they find a potential quarry. Once discovered, they remove the hood from their eagles. Reaching the wolf does

to find out a bird's weight, but the *berkutchis* monitor this without using any such utensil. They just touch the bird's breastbone in order to check it.

Capturing hares, and even foxes, with these eagles with enormous talons is not excessively difficult. Hunting the wolf is another matter. Its size and especially its bite, make it a fearsome quarry for an eagle of scarcely 7kg in weight. The quarry is in clear advantage compared to its adversary. The Kazakhs know it and therefore seldom does anyone encourage this flight to take place. However, there are those who find that their eagle possesses such hunting prowess that they do feel the urge to challenge the king of the steppe.

The battle, although preposterous, is traditional in Kazakh culture. In the Aimag Museum of Kazakh culture, the only representation of hunting by falconry shows the capture of the wolf with the golden eagle. And we had the opportunity to meet a

Above: High up on a mountain slope, using height to their advantage, the mounted *berkutchis* slip an eagle.

Right: After a ferocious battle, the eagle breaks into her prize. Note the bandaged toe after a previous wolf encounter...this is a quarry reserved for only the very toughest of eagles.



not entail as much difficulty as overpowering it does. The powerful beating of the wings shortens distances, but once the wolf feels under pressure, it bears its fangs at its small assailant. The first talon reaches the spine, the other one the head, avoiding being bitten. After writhing and wrestling David triumphs over Goliath, technique and bravery

over brute force. The group of *berkutchis* ride incredulous and exultant for the successful outcome. The two eagles in pursuit have not dared to touch the wolf still being subdued by their courageous companion. It is clear that this is an extreme flight, reserved for the bravest and best endowed.

Gathered around the quarry,

Yaiderkhan is congratulated and praised by his companions. Artak ties the defeated animal to his horse's hindquarters. Alongside his father he rides off merging into the horizon. As we watch them, it truly feels as if we have joined the Kazakhs at the very beginning of falconry's time. ■

