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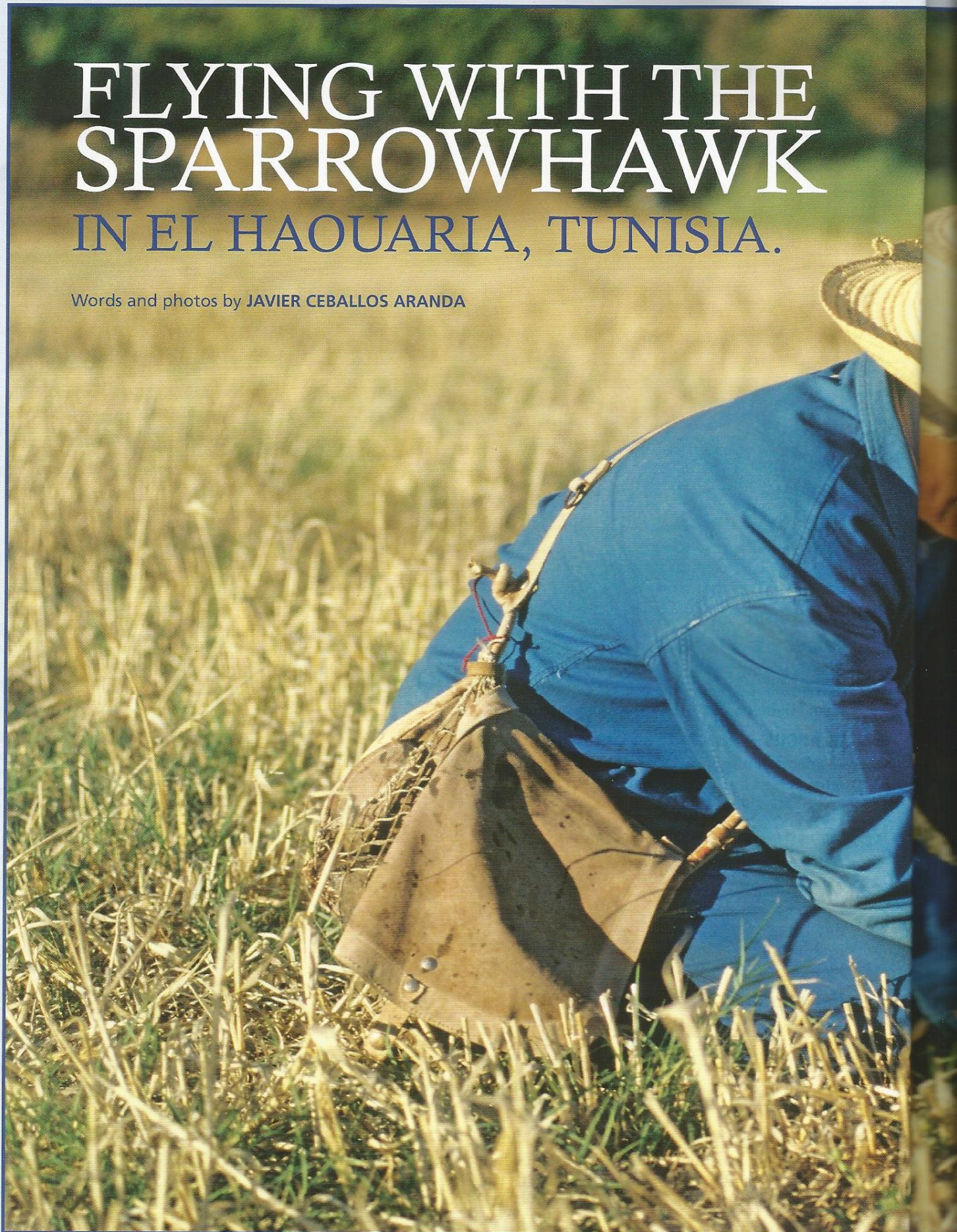
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One world. One passion.

FLYING WITH THE SPARROWHAWK IN EL HAOUARIA, TUNISIA.

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IN TUNISIA in the spring, thousands of quail on migration from Africa to Europe rest at Cap Bon before crossing the sea. Since time immemorial, man has noticed that a small predatory bird, the sparrowhawk, makes the same journey two weeks earlier. The Tunisians use their ingenuity to capture, tame and train the sparrowhawk in that short space of time to hunt the quail as it passes through. Subsequently, in accordance with the age-old tradition, the hawks are set free. ▶

FLYING WITH THE SPARROWHAWK

IN EL HAOUARIA, TUNISIA.

Hassan is restless. For days he has been scanning the heavens. He knows intuitively that the first sparrowhawks are about to make land. He knows that as they arrive, they will look for a treetop where they can rest unseen during their stopover. Looking out for the slightest indication of their presence, he realises that his waiting is now over.

A few have now arrived. Their plumage serves as effective camouflage amongst the foliage. Life follows its course in the fields of El Haouaria. While the farm workers carry on with their customary labour of seeding and planting, there is no outward sign that a man is about to realise the dream he has cherished all year.

Retrieving the basket from the shed, Hassan sets about preparing the trapping gear, then calls his grandson to join him. Unaware that the call is a summoning of centuries of popular tradition, Yissem answers his grandfather. The nets, still kept wrapped up tightly, will be the means employed to capture the blithe spirit of the forest. Several nets will be needed to cover all the gaps which enable the bird to enter the dense foliage of the treetops. Not forgetting to place the cord in the basket, grandfather and grandson set out for the chosen spot.

The location of the trap for the sparrowhawk is well-established beforehand. Indeed, each treetop has been reserved for the same family for generations. The ideal environment is a clearing, such as an area of farmland, in which there is a small copse. Their preference for wooded areas leads the sparrowhawk to venture in. The spot must be clearly observable from a distance. It is vital to watch with



Hassan and his grandson preparing the trapping equipment.

great vigilance and without a rest in order to pounce immediately when a hawk falls into the net. With his grandson following close behind, Hassan gathers branches from the bushes all around. Yissem takes an active part in the search, excited by this adventure.

The cord that supports the net is concealed by a latticework of branches. Using rudimentary yet effective techniques, a measure of resourcefulness and the result of centuries of practice, the trap takes shape. Each movement of his nimble fingers shows that Hassan is not a novice at this. Once again it is proved that ingenuity makes use of simplicity to achieve the most difficult of tasks. In a few minutes what was before a plain and ordinary place is now the scene of dream about to come true; the meeting of man and feathered spirit of the forest.

The trapping of sparrowhawks has a long tradition in the region of Cap Bon. The Environmental Protection Agency is well aware that it is the custom of these falconers to release the birds in a

few weeks. Working jointly with the local Association of Falconry, they carry out a scientific ringing of the birds before they are released. If a sparrowhawk is captured later elsewhere, this will provide invaluable data about its migration route, age and the behaviour of the species.

Hassan continues suspending and extending the net. It must be tense enough so as not to be noticeable but at the same time ample enough to wrap itself around the sparrowhawk when it hits the net. Having finished setting it, he goes back to the hiding place, accompanied by his grandson. There is hardly a trace of their passing. From a discreet distance, they spend hours watching various birds of prey riding the warm air currents. With their many years of birdwatching, these falconers are highly experienced field ornithologists.

With an intuition honed by experience, Hassan stands up and approaches the net. A sparrowhawk lies entangled in its folds. It is essential to arrive in time so that the animal does

A sparrowhawk lies entangled in one of the nets. It's essential to remove her as quickly as possible to avoid any feather damage.



FLYING WITH THE SPARROWHAWK IN EL HAOUARIA, TUNISIA.

not become anxious or damage its plumage. With the greatest of care, Hassan extricates his valuable catch. The sparrowhawk is quickly immobilised using a simple but effective tether, which makes it possible to carry it around without spoiling its plumage.

Pleased with the outcome of their long vigil, they set off home in fine spirits. On their arrival, Hassan immediately fits the jesses on the bird. Absorbed in his thoughts, Hassan recalls similar scenes of himself as a youngster and his father the falconer. Yissem is gradually drawn in to his grandfather's annual ritual.

This form of falconry, as practised in Tunisia, has several unique features that sets it apart. The taming process takes place in a very limited time. It has to be quick because barely a fortnight separates the capture of the sparrowhawk from the arrival of the quails. In addition, the hawk is kept only for the duration of the hunting season, and is then released.

As with any other Mediterranean people, the inhabitants of El Haouaria like to be out of doors and in the streets and squares. The hubbub is a useful environment for the taming of the birds. By introducing them gradually to noisy places with a lot of movement, they become accustomed to human contact. A cafe is a good place to start. It is curious to note that no glove is used in this process. The falconers believe that the hawk's talons are not dangerous enough to make a glove necessary and in any case they prefer to carry them around in the palm of their hand. When they are out hunting, they tie a brightly coloured lead of

Once home Hassan immediately begins making jesses for the new arrival.



wool, several metres long, to its leg. On its first flights this will help to locate the bird and to retrieve it if it takes fright. When launching the hawk in pursuit of a quail, they throw it skywards like an oversized dart.

Once the hawk is comfortable in the presence of the falconer, the moment has come to take it out into the countryside. Introduction to hunting is rapid. They are, after all, wild animals that can fend for themselves. The difficulty lies with ensuring in such a short time that they are tame enough to approach when

Hassan carefully but quickly extracts his catch from the net.

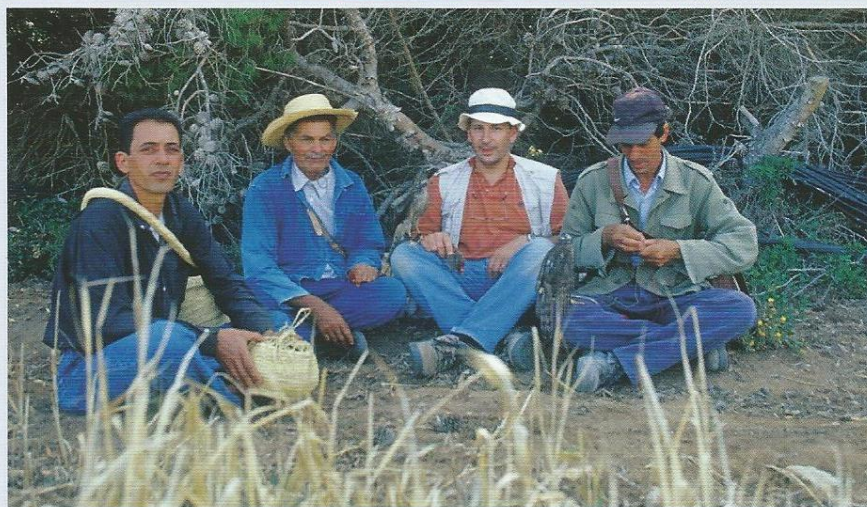




The preferred method is to carry the hawk in the hand ready to be thrown like a dart at quarry.

they have quarry in their talons while also preserving enough of the hawk's independent spirit to enable it to return to the wild later on. Hassan heightens the hawk's predatory instinct by throwing a piece of quarry at it over and over again. Little by little he gains the bird's trust, allowing it to eat from his hand. These training sessions help him measure how willing the bird will later be to let him approach and retrieve the quarry.

The training period has run out and Hassan decides to begin real live hunting. Huge flocks of quails cross the Straits at night on their way to Europe. Many others remain for a day or so in the fields of Cap Bon waiting for conditions to improve for their journey. Hassan has been ready since daybreak. With the help of a long stick, he searches the fields carefully. The quails are



The author (second from right) sits with friends on a trapping excursion.

so numerous that he does not need a hunting dog. With only the sound of his footsteps, a bird is sure to emerge. Others wait stoically immobile, confident that their camouflage will protect them from the intruder, until finally he gets too close and they take flight. The action is short and intense. If the hawk has been successful, it will, like other birds of prey, carry the carcass some distance to hide

it from other predators. Hassan soon locates it with the aid of the red woolen leash. Having safely pocketed the valuable quail, he weaves the leash once again into a ball in the palm of his hand and, holding the sparrowhawk, prepares to catch another.

In a single day they may perform scores of flights, not all of which end successfully, as falconers all over the world know only too well! ■