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**ON THE WING:
EXPLORING HUMAN-BIRD RELATIONSHIPS IN
FALCONRY PRACTICE**

A thesis presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology at
the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, UK

By

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Abstract

This thesis is concerned with the relationships that develop between humans, birds of prey, prey animals and their environments in the practice of falconry. Falconry is a hunting practice in which humans and birds of prey develop a hunting companionship through which they learn to hunt in cooperation. Described by falconers as a way of life, falconry practice and the relationship to their birds take on a crucial role in their everyday lives. The research is based on fieldwork carried out over a period of three years largely in the UK, with shorter fieldtrips to Germany and Italy.

Falconry practice raises many interesting questions about human-animal sociality and identity formation. Through the practice falconers learn how to ‘lure’ a bird into a relationship, as birds of prey cannot be forced to hunt and cooperate. When hunting the abilities of birds of prey are seen to be superior to those of the human being who becomes – if skilful enough – an assisting hunting companion. The careful attention necessary to establish a bonded relationship between falconer and falconry bird demands practices particular to falconry and involves a highly complex set of knowledge practices and methods. The establishment of this relationship depends on a fine balance between independence and dependence as well as wildness and tameness of the falconry bird that cannot be understood through conceptualising notions of ‘the wild’ and ‘the tame’ (or ‘the domesticated’) as opposites. Rather, the becoming of falcons and falconers through the practice allows moments of transformation of beings that resist familiar categories.

This study of falconry challenges an anthropocentric mode of anthropological inquiry as it demands to open up the traditional focus of anthropology to also include

nonhuman animals and to consider meaning making, sociality and knowledge production as co-constituted through the activities of humans and nonhuman animals.

I focus on the practices involved in taming, training and hunting with birds of prey as well as in domestic breeding, arguing that it is important to see both humans and birds as well as predator and prey as active *participants* in mutually constitutive learning relationships. Focussing on processes of emergence in both becoming falconers and becoming falconry birds I develop the notion of *beings-in-the-making*, in order to emphasise that humans and birds grow in relation to each other through the co-responsive engagement in which they are involved. I further show how humans and nonhuman animals relate to the environment within which they engage, in which movements and forces of the weather play a central role. I use the term *weathering* to refer to the ways the weather influences the movements of human and nonhuman animals as well as being a medium of perception in which they are immersed. The landscape and the sky above are here not to be understood as two separate spheres divided by an interface but rather as caught up in a continuous process of transformation in which the lay of the land and the currents of the air are co-constituted. Finally, I suggest the perspective of *creaturely ways* to describe a mode of sociality that is constituted beyond the purely human sphere of interaction and to show that the sense of identity and belonging of both falconers and birds is not delineated by a fixed species identity but rather emerges out of the experiences and relationships that each living being develops throughout its life. Creaturely ways thus involves a focus on questions of ontogeny rather than ontology, which is crucial for understanding the mutually constitutive processes of meaning making, becoming and knowing in which falconers and falconry birds are involved.

Through exploring the complex relationships involved in falconry practice and the consideration of humans *and* birds as active participants within them, this thesis makes an original contribution to anthropological studies of human-animal relationships. It further contributes to the development of a notion of more-than-human sociality that reaches beyond the idea of the social as confined to members of the same species. Moreover, the study contributes to the anthropology of learning and enskilment through analysing processes of knowledge making in their constitutive influence on the development of human and nonhuman ways of becoming. It further contributes to studies on the perception of the environment through considering the practitioner's perception and experience of the weather and currents of the air as they interplay with the ground below. Finally, this study makes a contribution to the as yet little studied field of 'modern' hunting practices and suggests a more nuanced approach of understanding the relationships of predator and prey they involve.

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Concluding Summary

In following the development of the relationship between falconers and their birds this thesis has been guided by the overall question of:

What kind of anthropological approach is necessary to address and conceptualise the relationships between humans, nonhuman animals and the environment evident in falconry practice?

This question has been explored in tandem with three interrelated sub-questions specific to falconry practice:

1. *What kinds of processes are involved in establishing a co-operational hunting companionship between humans and birds of prey?*
2. *What role do practices of enskilment and learning processes play in the constitution of the bird-human relationship as well as in the relationship between predator and prey?*
3. *How does training and co-operational hunting with birds of prey influence the ways in which falconers perceive and experience the environment?*

Based on the presented ethnographic material I have suggested that falconers and their falconry birds may be understood as *beings-in-the-making* who become through mutual learning relationships and processes of enskilment in which both humans and birds are perceived as active participants. A core insight of this study, closely connected to the above, is that the human-bird relationships in falconry are constituted through a mode of more-than-human sociality, that I have called *creaturely ways*. The human-animal relationship involved in falconry should be seen as one of becoming in relation to each other, rather than through the interactions between beings that are already assigned to specific forms. This allows us to follow

the ways living creatures grow through the experiences they make throughout their lives, and which shape the ways they come to identify with each other and to perceive and experience the environments through which they move. Especially relevant for this argument has been Ingold's relational approach to understanding humans and other animals in "their mutual involvement, as centres of perception and action, in a continuous life process", as well as his view of life "not as the revelation of pre-specified forms but as a process wherein forms are generated" (Ingold 1993: xxiv). Furthermore, through focusing on human and bird mutual becomings, I have shown that these relationships cannot be treated in isolation but are always embedded within a wider nexus of relationships that connect them to the environment and other beings who dwell there in. This nexus of relationships can, with Ingold, be understood as a meshwork made up of "the paths along which life is lived" (Ingold 2011: 151), rather than a network connecting interacting entities (ibid. 63-64).

The research questions have been addressed through an analysis of the practices involved in manning, training, hunting and to a certain extent breeding with birds of prey. To prepare the ground for the argument of the thesis chapter 1 and chapter 2 in part one, *Rousing*, served to contextualise the questions of this thesis and contemporary falconry practice and pointed out the main historical developments that led to its contemporary organisation. I have shown that falconers express a strong sense of belonging to the 'natural' world and that falconry practice allows them to participate in a set of relationships from which they would otherwise be excluded. More than just a means to an end in order to bag quarry, falconry birds are regarded as hunting companions with whom a relationship has to be established, in which 'having a feeling for birds' is seen as central. The second chapter has shown that falconry, for most falconry practitioners, is more than a hobby and becomes a

way of life, which greatly influences peoples' daily lives and requires time and commitment.

Subsequently, part two, *Casting Off*, dealt with the development of the relationship between falconer and bird in preparation for co-operative hunting. In Chapter 3, 'Creating the Bond', I discussed the process of manning, describing the initial process of accustoming the bird to the presence of the falconer and his environment. The aim of this is to establish a bond of trust between falconer and bird, thus laying the foundation for a co-responsive and communicative relationship crucial for the development of a hunting companionship later on. I introduced central techniques of manning, such as hooding, feeding and carrying, including a description of the aviary in which the birds are kept, and showed how these techniques all are geared towards gradually introducing the bird into this new environment. In addition, I emphasised how for falconers, this developing bond depends on a fine balance between dependence and independence, tameness and wildness. Furthermore we saw how this is understood as a way of getting to know the other willingly, in a process of relational becoming or mutual making, of both falconer and bird, rather than through domination and control. What is stressed in the relationship is the trust and confidence needed to adjust sensitively to the bird, and the importance of avoiding bad experiences, which might impede the further development of a hunting companionship.

Following the discussion of manning, chapter 4, 'Luring her in', portrayed the initial flight training that birds receive. Through three fieldwork stories showing different stages of training and use of the lure, a central training tool and recall device, I described how falconers seek to set up learning experiences for their birds aimed at making the bird hunt 'just as a wild bird would' while allowing the human

to serve as her hunting assistant. I showed how the lure enables the falconer to engage with the falcon in the air, allowing the falconer to take over, at least to some extent, the flight training that youngsters would receive in the wild. The initial training through the use of the lure, and later when the bird is allowed to fly freely, is intended to make the bird more independent while still maintaining attentiveness towards the falconer. I then described how a falcon's growing maturation into a falconry bird is demarcated through 'entering' the bird at quarry, referring to a bird's first successful hunt, forming an important step in the development of a hunting companionship. The relationships that develop through training as well as those between predator and prey, I argue, should be understood as ones of co-responsive learning. I went on to discuss the further theoretical implications of this argument, and of that of the previous chapter, in the 'First Intermezzo'.

Here I took a step back to reflect on, and further explore, the developing relationship between falconer and bird described in the preceding chapters. Considering manning as a process that establishes a context for learning and communication between falconer and bird, I showed how such an initial bond becomes a precondition for the learning process that is involved in subsequent training practices. I then took a closer look at how falconers, through improvisational imitation, learn to create training situations for their birds, in which tools play an important part. Based on the example of the lure, I argued that tools are central in facilitating meaningful engagement between humans and birds, helping them to communicate. Finally, I argued that the structured engagements encountered in the manning and training should be understood as co-responsive learning processes that for both falconer and bird involve the mutual making of both the 'becoming falconer' and the 'becoming falconry bird' through the activities engaged in. This

perspective formed the initial groundwork for further exploration of the human-animal relationships involved in falconry, a discussion that was continued and developed in the ‘Second Intermezzo’ and ‘Creaturely Ways’.

The third part, *On the Wing*, opens up the analysis from the human-bird bond to the engagement of both humans and birds in a wider set of relationships with quarry animals and constituents of the environment. Chapter 6, ‘Weathering’, raised our gaze towards the sky and traced the influences of weather and air in falconry practice. We saw how the air takes on an invisible yet perceptible texture for the experienced falconer and how their narratives and skilled practices reveal a ‘weathering world’ in which earth and air are perceived as co-constituting each other. Even the bodies of the birds are interwoven with the flows of the weathering world, which influence their metabolism, strength and moods. I demonstrated how the ebbs and flows of air currents are crucially interrelated with features of the landscape, rather than divided from them by the surface of the ground. This helped us to understand the entwinement of weather and environment in the practice of hunting with falcons, and their importance to both falconer and bird. I showed how knowledge of weather phenomena is constituted through practical engagement with a winged creature in a fluctuating environment. The air and influences of the weather, as they appear to falconers and birds, form an integral part of the practice.

After having explored how falconers come to perceive and experience the weathering environments they move through, in chapter 6, ‘Hawking’, I deal with the activities involved in a typical hawking day. I highlighted the centrality of hunting in companionship with the bird and the importance of a ‘good flight’. We saw how falconers seek to assist the bird in setting up flights and the aesthetic pleasure and experience of engagement these encounters can afford. There are many

ways to hunt and through a description of the difference between hunting ‘from the fist’ and ‘out of the hood’ we saw how different engagements with the bird, and hence the quarry and the environment, shift falconers’ perceptual focus and demonstrate the different shapes that hunting companionships can take, characterised respectively as ‘feeling like a bird’ and ‘thinking like a bird’. Having considered the relationships that underlie the appreciation of a good flight and cooperation in hunting, I looked at instances when things go wrong, such as losing a bird, and the type of knowledge necessary to deal with such eventualities. Finally, I briefly discussed how the experiences and memories of hawking become part of falconer’s hunting knowledge, stories and narratives, shaping their experience of everyday life. This served as a basis for my further argument that the engagement and felt participation with the birds when out hawking not only manifests a companionship with the bird, but also points to the experience of an underlying sociality between humans, non-human animals, and the environment in which they move.

Based upon the ethnographic material and initial discussions in the previous two chapters, in the ‘Second Intermezzo’ I further developed an understanding of the relationships between human and animal beings and their environment. Building on ideas introduced in the First Intermezzo, I argued for the notion of making as a process of mutual becoming, to encompass the influences of the environment within which humans and animals move when training or hawking together. I discussed the centrality of movement for the relationship between beings and their environment, stressing that falconers and birds do not engage with each other as closed-in subjects interacting with a surrounding environment but rather build their relationship through common immersion. This immersive quality, I argued, accounts for the intimate connection between humans and animals during a hunt, which cannot be separated

from the influences of the weathering world through which they are mediated. Finally, I proposed the notion of *atmospheric beings* as a way to capture the experience of being sensually immersed and what this might reveal about how living beings and their environment are co-constituted. I argued that through their dynamic bodily and sensual encounters with a bird, falconers can know something of how the bird perceives the world.

In the last part, *Binding*, I brought together the themes discussed in the thesis. In chapter 7, 'Creaturely Ways', I argued that we need to broaden our conceptions of sociality to include falconers' and birds' relationships with each other. Through a discussion of breeding practices and the developmental process of becoming an imprint bird I showed how these developing relationships cannot be fully grasped in a perspective that understands birds and falconers as possessing their own species identities a priori, and argued that to approach the experiential realities of such human-animal relationships we need not start with already finished forms. I also showed that not only humans have the ability to become in relation to the tasks and environments in which they are engaged, but that birds, too, develop their sense of identity and belonging in relation to what might be called their social milieu.

I proposed to follow 'beings-in-the-making' and to see creatures as co-constituted beings that are characterised by their ways of life, which might be entangled at some time and drift apart at others. I introduced the notion of 'creaturely ways' to capture a mode of sociality evident in falconry practice that is not only applicable to the human sphere of social relationships but also co-created in the co-responsive learning relationships that develop between falconers and other animals central to falconry practice.

This thesis contributes original knowledge to a variety of fields within anthropology and related disciplines. Firstly it is the first in-depth anthropological study of falconry practice as well as of relationships between humans and birds of prey, and therefore adds to studies of human-animal communities that have so far focussed largely on particular species such as horses, dogs, livestock, and ‘semi-domesticated’ animals such as reindeer. Through this focus on human-bird relationships, secondly, this study widens the largely surface-based perspective of landscape studies to also include aerial spaces as full of potential for action. The aerial perspective gained through working with birds also highlights the need of understanding landscape and air as co-constituted, and the importance of paying attention to the forces of the weather which have so far been left out of most studies that consider peoples’ relationships with landscape and place. Thirdly, the relational approach taken in this study helps us understand the interconnectedness of learning and being of both human and non-human beings, and thus contributes to understanding both as active practitioners in mutually constitutive relationships of becoming with each other. Through opening anthropological inquiry to include non-human animals as active participants, this study underlines the need to understand sociality not as a human domain separate from ‘nature’ and the lives of non-human animals, but rather as emergent from the entwined creaturely ways through which living beings become in relation to each other and the environments they inhabit. Finally, the study contributes to the as yet little studies field of ‘modern’ hunting practices and suggests a more nuanced understanding of the predator-prey relationships involved.

While the preceding thesis has explored central elements of falconry practice and suggested ways of how to understand the human-bird relationships involved it

does not pretend to have exhausted the subject. Several avenues of future research, extending the groundwork built by this thesis, and contributing to further the understanding of falconry practice, falconers and their birds emerge.

The above focus on the activities of training and hunting with birds of prey so central to falconry practice could beneficially be complemented by further study into how falconry connects with the wider social world – such as how falconry makes itself present and figures in falconers’ and their families’ lives outside of the core activities such as manning, training and hunting. Taking a historical perspective, further research into the connections between changing hawking practices and Britain’s increasingly fragmented and enclosed countryside would prove valuable, not only to understand falconry as it is practiced today but also with regard to the relationship between shifting and changing landscapes and practical adaptations more broadly. This also points to the embodied knowledge of the environment and changes in the countryside that falconers carry with them as an intrinsic part of their practice, which would stand as central to research outlined above. A more explicit focus on the role of nature as it is experienced and understood by falconers, coupled with the legacy of and connection of falconry to activities of leisure and sport will potentially provide ample insights into modern perceptions of nature and placing the practice of falconry in context to other countryside ‘sporting activities’. The pertinence of such a study is indicated by the notion of ‘fair-play’ (see chapter 6). In addition a more thorough engagement with the ethics of hunting with birds of prey would add an important layer to our understanding of the relationships involved in falconry practice, and hunting more generally.

To develop and test the validity of the perspective of creaturely ways further research on practices of domestication, breeding and imprinting birds of prey stands

out as ideal fields of exploration. The notion of creaturely ways, in referring to specific learning relationships and an inherently social mode of being in the world, suggest a wider scope and relevance than that of solely human-bird relations. A close attention to the actual engagements between humans and animals as relationships develop and learning occur will allow for further insight into issues of human-animal communication, learning and sociality – as they manifest themselves in their creaturely ways. It thus advocates research that includes animals as full participants in social practices.

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