

## READING COMPREHENSION

### A BIRD IN THE HAND

by Mike Macbeth

- 1 Leashed, she spots her prey. Unleashed, her great wings pump air and she lifts effortlessly to circle above her quarry. Then she dives-knife-perfect at 175 m.p.h.-and in an explosive moment makes contact, tearing with her talons. A few feathers float to earth and the whistle screams its requiem. Without hesitation she swoops back to her master, the impact of talons against leathered gauntlet sealing her return to captivity-and the end of the freedom-captivity cycle, what romantics call the majesty of falconry.
- 2 Falconry began as an elitist blood sport in Persia some 2,500 years ago and reached its zenith in Europe in the Middle Ages. In Canada today the sport is illegal in six provinces and restricted in others by the scarcity of birds of prey (raptors)-the peregrine falcon, for one, is almost extinct-and opposition from powerful conservationist lobbies. Still, the sport endures, and is experiencing a small resurgence. Three of the six falconry clubs in Canada have been formed since 1975 and two are less than one year old. The new Ontario Raptor Society has grown in a few months from 6 to 35.
- 3 Doug Wilson, 22, secretary of the Ontario Raptor Society, became a falconer because he no longer sees any sport in hunting with a rifle. "My ferruginous<sup>1</sup> hawk, Tiny, nabbed 28 cottontails last winter. With a gun, I'd have easily shot a few hundred. It's so pitifully simple to kill them." He is echoed by Sandy Macauley, of the Manitoba Falconers' Society, who believes falconry is part of a return to sports such as hunting with bow and arrow or flintlock. "They increase the element of chance by matching the competition," he says. "They are an attempt to get more enjoyment out of less killing."
- 4 The return to falconry is impressive when viewed against the difficulties falconers must overcome. Hunting with birds of prey is illegal in Alberta and all provinces from Quebec east. In Manitoba and Ontario, a hunting permit is easy to get but falconers may not own species of raptors native to the province. If they choose to import from the Yukon, British Columbia or Saskatchewan, they run up against a law that prohibits non-residents from being granted export permits. Usually, the would-be falconer must track down a nestling or nurse an injured adult back to health. Then, he faces awesome antagonism. Conservationists deplore his acquisition of an endangered species; naturalists and humane societies condemn the confinement of a wild creature; the squeamish object to the accepted diet of chicken heads and live pigeons. With such overwhelming opposition, falconry clubs know they need political allies. The Ontario Raptor Society has shrewdly aligned itself with the 17,000-strong Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters.

<sup>1</sup> *ferruginous* - resembling iron rust in colour

- 5 Falconers are quick to point out that it takes a totally committed individual to stay with the sport. "It's not like a gun that you stick in the corner after hunting," says Wilson. Three to four hours a day of tedious rote training is necessary to develop a responsive bird. Macauley says the ritual of persuading a falcon to hand-feed chicken heads for the first time is patience-trying. "You're feeling frustrated and the bird's acting like a paralyzed nincompoop. But if you lose your temper once, you'll never get its confidence back." Once trained, a raptor requires a few hours of exercise almost daily. And whether attached by a leather leash to an unprotected perch in the back garden or kept loose in an eight-cubic-foot shed-like "mew," the bird's delicate constitution and sensitivity to minute weight gains make daily weighing necessary. Doug Wilson's ferruginous hawk stands 16 inches high, weighs about five pounds and has a 54-inch wingspan, while the largest bird of prey used for hunting, the Golden Eagle, can weigh 16 pounds and reach a height of two feet and wingspan of 78 inches.
  
- 6 What the falconer fears most is the day his raptor chooses freedom over obedience. That day has come for president of the Saskatchewan Falconry Association, Robert Rafuse, whose five-year-old prairie falcon, Sage, has gone missing. "I go out every day for three hours, walking, driving, calling for her," confesses Rafuse. His sense of loss is hard to express-and harder still to bear because he knows "there's no affection of bird for man-it's all one way." Four thousand years after the blood sport began, it still hinges on the hunter's tenuous relationship with his bird. "The bird can quit any time," says Rafuse. "When it's flying, it's free."

