

# Birds of Prey

## Falconry in Virginia

Story and Photos by  
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**E**arly on a crisp, February morning, a crowd gathered in a hotel parking lot near Winchester, Virginia. The occasion was a meet of the Virginia Falconers' Association (VFA) but the majority of those present were spectators. As falconers began to bring their birds from their vehicles and into the morning chill, excited onlookers reached for their camera phones. VFA members — men and women, young and old — patiently posed for photos and cheerfully answered the same three or four questions dozens of times. "Harris Hawk." "He's three." "He was bred in captivity." "Mostly rabbits and squirrels." The birds, presumably used to curious spectators, perched quietly on their handlers' gloved fists.

I can personally attest that it is quite remarkable to find yourself standing next to a bird of prey. I felt an intense, calm confidence emanating from each one. It's easy to see why they are such efficient hunting machines -- razor-sharp talons, powerful, meat-tearing beaks, and those eyes. As the handler moves, whether walk-

**Kira, a red-tailed hawk, intently studying her surroundings**

**Eva King with Kira**





**Kira is recalled from the trees above.**

ing across the parking lot, or speaking or simply breathing, just as on a tree limb moving in the wind, the raptor adjusts the position of its head to keep its eyes perfectly stable. Its focus is not always on food sources, though; there are plenty of threats higher on the food chain. Out of necessity, these birds are extremely aware of their surroundings at all times.

**Eva King sends Kira out on a rabbit hunt.**



After some final photos, the group split up into hunting parties and traveled to nearby properties. Falconry, particularly in a highly populated state such as Virginia, involves nurturing relationships with landowners. I tagged along with a sizable assembly to hunt with VFA president Eva King and her red-tailed hawk Kira. The morning had warmed and the pleasant day brought out an unusually high number of spectators. King gave an orientation outlining what to do to help Kira (whack trees with sticks to send squirrels running) and what not to do (stand under the tree she's in, staring up and taking pictures--Kira will think you are there because you've spotted something). And we were told if we saw a squirrel near us, to call out the falconer's

call, “Ho-ho-ho!” Then we were off into the woods.

Falconers team up with hawks like Kira to hunt ground game such as rabbits and squirrels, while the faster-flying falcons hunt ducks and other birds. For this outing, the immediate terrain and local knowledge pointed to squirrel as our most likely quarry.

King released the tethers from Kira’s legs and sent her into the trees above, while the hunting party spread out and moved forward in a line. And for the first time in my life, I was “squirrel-hawking.” Being able to participate in this ancient hunt fell into the once-in-a-lifetime category. Watching Kira watch her handler and the rest of the party move along, as we in turn watched her and followed her instincts, was a kind of man-to-animal cooperation I had never imagined.

Although that cooperation has been enjoyed by falconers for thousands of years elsewhere in the world, the origins of the sport here in the U.S. are not well known. But throughout the 20th century, interest steadily grew without regulation until falconers took the initiative in the late '60s and early '70s to push for sensible regulatory legislation. This coincided with a period of increased interest in the preservation of resources, namely birds. As a result, falconry is now arguably the most regulated sport in the United States. Falconers do not own the birds they handle, the federal government considers the birds assets of the citizens of the United States, much like any other resource.

Lee Chichester, a member of VFA and a falconer for nearly 20 years, calls it a permitted activity, not a right. “We practice our sport at the pleasure of our federal government,” she says. “Even though we call it a ‘license,’ in reality we are ‘permittees’ and that privilege can be revoked at any time by the government that regulates the activity. I’m not sure there is any other sport on the planet that allows itself to be controlled so closely.” Facilities can be inspected without

warning or notice, and a falconer can lose his or her license if an inspection finds sub-standard equipment or conditions.

Until recently, falconry fell under the control of both the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and the corresponding state agencies (in Virginia's case the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, or DGIF). But the FWS is in the process of turning control of the sport entirely over to the state agencies. While states have until 2014 to meet the minimum requirements, some states — including Virginia, as of January 1, 2012 — have already been certified and given full regulatory authority of the sport. Falconry will become illegal in states that fail to satisfy the requirements by 2014.

Part of the reason Virginia is on the leading edge of those states taking over regulatory control of the sport is the involvement of falconers here. The VFA plays an integral role in the future of the sport here in Virginia, actively taking part in educational efforts to let the public know about the sport and the birds. And with those efforts, naturally, sometimes comes the consequence of too casual an interest. But it's up to those currently in the sport to make sure that those inquiring are keenly aware of the intense and specific demands placed on those who choose to pursue falconry. Those who enter the sport do so through another highly regulated aspect of the sport, the apprenticeship program.

As a licensed apprentice, a new falconer is under the mentorship or sponsorship of a more experienced falconer for a minimum of two years. “Only after you've completed your apprenticeship are you moved up to the level at which you practice the sport without direct supervision by a general or master permittee,” Chichester says. “And it is up to that sponsor to ‘graduate’ you up and out of your apprenticeship.” If a sponsor doesn't feel that an apprentice has achieved a degree of proficiency in the sport, that apprentice could have to serve a longer apprenticeship, or



**Kingsley, a passage (first year) red-tailed hawk trapped from the wild and trained by Corey Basham**

**Arc, a gyrfalcon.**



make some other arrangement, which can put the apprentice's standing with the DGIF as a licensed falconer at risk.

This process is not in place to discourage new falconers, but to instill caution while informing the public. "The danger of being too closed a society," Chichester says, "is far worse than the danger of being too open a society."

In our squirrel woods outside of Winchester, the society of participants probably felt a little too open for Kira's liking. The crowd of tree-whackers was easily three or four times what Kira was used to, and after a thorough search, no squirrels were found. King recalled Kira, who swooped down onto her glove, and the party moved to an adjacent field where scouts from earlier that morning had reported rabbit activity.

But hunting with a hawk is a fragile thing. For instance, birds are typically weighed the morning of the hunt - too light or too heavy and they won't hunt. And if there are too many people rumbling through the woods, no matter how good their intentions, stress can begin to show as it did with Kira. In the end, even though there were a few rabbit sightings, none were taken.

But these frustrations are reminders that this is not like hunting with a dog, which may or may not be in the mood to hunt in thick cover, but will do it to please his master. These birds hunt for the same reasons they have hunted for eons: food. It is a fascinating, almost businesslike partnership between bird and falconer. Chichester sums it up succinctly. "The only thing I'm training a red-tail to do," she says, "is to allow me to be there, and to find me useful."

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