



Everything Jersey

Falconers are a small but dedicated band of hunters in N.J.

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By **Victoria St. Martin/The Star-Ledger**

CALIFON — Large snowflakes fall gently from the pinkish sky as David Tuttle crunches through the shin-deep snow that has blanketed a farm stretching from Califon to Long Valley.

Tuttle trudges across the field with a walking stick in his right hand, his 18-inch red-tailed hawk, Red, perched on his left. When they reach a stand of trees, Tuttle pulls his arm back and flings it forward, releasing Red into the sky. With a swoosh, the bird takes flight, soaring across the horizon before settling onto a tree limb high above.

On a recent winter day in the densely populated Garden State, Tuttle and Red are practicing the ancient sport of falconry.

A tradition dating back 4,000 years, falconry still has a place in our modern world, say members of its small but passionate following. Though often misunderstood, the practice of hunting with trained falcons or hawks for small animals like rabbits, squirrels or pheasants offers a front row seat to nature, they say.

"The fascination of this sport is I'm taking a wild bird and making it my hunting companion," said Tuttle, who lives in Middleberg, Pa. "For me it doesn't get better than that."

Falconers are rare in New Jersey. There are about 4,000 in the country, but only 55 are licensed here. The Department of Environmental Protection issues the permits, and officials say the number of falconers has remained constant over the last decade.

Falcons and hawks — birds of prey sometimes called raptors — typically grow to 18- to 24-inches tall and weigh only one to three pounds. Their wingspans can stretch to five feet. The hunting season stretches from September to March, but falconry is a year-round job. Licensed falconers trap their birds and train them to come to the glove when beckoned. They can spend several hundred dollars a year for their care.



[Enlarge](#)

Tim Farrell/The Star-Ledger

David Tuttle with Red, a red-tailed hawk. David Tuttle and Mike Dupuy hunt rabbits in a Long Valley farm. Licensed falconers in New Jersey use birds such as red-tails, peregrine falcons and goshawks to hunt small game. (Tim Farrell/The Star-Ledger)

Devoted falconers in N.J. inform public about origins of ancient sport gallery (14 photos)

"This isn't a sport that you can just do one day a week and then you put away your bird for three, four weeks," said Richie Ross, 44, a Toms River resident who has been involved in falconry for five years. "This is year round — you got to feed it every day, you've got to exercise, you've got to train them, look after their health."

Some falconers keep the birds for a long time, while others —like Chris Browne of Princeton — release them back into the wild after a year or two.

Ancient art of falconry is alive and well in New Jersey

Many experts place the origin of falconry to Mongolia more than 4,000 years ago. Some believe it goes back even further - about 10,000 years ago to the middle east. But regardless of it beginning, the art of catching game with trained birds is still being practiced - right here in New Jersey. (Video by Andre Malok/The Star-Ledger)

"It's kind of a cycle. You have the bird for a short time and I always consider it like a gift from nature," said Browne. "I get to enjoy their life and then they go on and make a nest and find a mate and do all those things they're supposed to do in

their life."

Falconers say they are sometimes the subject of scrutiny and opposition from animal rights and anti-hunting groups. Some of them get repeated harassing phone calls after it's revealed that they're a falconer.

"We're not doing anything with the birds that is not part of their natural life," said Browne. "They naturally hunt rabbits and squirrels and other small animals in the woods. That's what they do every single day of their life to feed themselves and the only difference is that in falconry we get to go along."

Falconers say the sport is more about nature than it is about the hunt. For every seven flights with a bird, there will only be one successful kill, they say.

"There's a lot of synergy in falconry that brings all of it together," said Mike Dupuy, a falconer from Columbia, Md., who joined Tuttle in the Califon woods. "It's not all about the killing and taking large numbers of game. If it were, it'd be a really inefficient way to go about making a living."

Becoming a falconer requires dedication. State law mandates a falconer be at least 14 years old and have a sponsor to sit for the 100-question exam. After passing the test, a beginner must build a mews (the barn-like structure that houses the bird) to obtain an apprentice permit, according to Anthony McBride, a principal biologist with the DEP who runs the state's falconry program.

Apprentice falconers can only keep a red-tailed hawk, which is known to have a good temperament and is easy to train, said McBride. After two years as an apprentice, a falconer can apply for a new permit and advance to general or a master falconer status. With the higher status, a falconer can keep hawks and falcons: up to two for a general and three for a master, said McBride.

Most of the birds wear bells on their legs so their owners can keep track of them during the hunt. Some falconers have replaced the bells with small radio transmitters. But even outfitted with this high-tech gear, some birds fly off and are never found.

A few dozen members of the New Jersey Falconry Club gathered in Eatontown earlier this month for the club's annual

winter meet. Owen Miller, a 13-year-old from South Orange, was there to see first-hand what he'd only read about in books.

"I'm not a big hunter," said Miller, a seventh-grader. "I just really like the birds. They're so cool and just the idea of having one of them and being able to experience the hunt like this ... would be really interesting."

Kids should be encouraged to put away their video games and get outside with a bird, Dupuy said.

"It's the front row to the nature show," agreed Ross. "Nobody sees this or very few people see this, but here I am ten feet from a bird that does what it does normally, it's only doing what it does in nature, it's just allowing me to be close to it."

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