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RED GROUSE HAWKING

By Professor Matt Gage

In the early 1980's, falconry was practiced by a tiny minority in Britain. Most of us with a fierce desire for the art had to connect through literature or bird-watching.

Over and over, I read every falconry or raptor book I could get my hands on, and spent hours watching wild raptors, with an obsessed desire that only the die-hard readers of this article will understand.

For me, the ultimate falconry dream had to be hunting high-flying peregrines over an English pointer at red grouse. In post-DDT Britain, getting a buzzard to fly was enough of a challenge, let alone a noble peregrine, so I resigned my pipe dream to the bottom drawer labelled 'sheer fantasy'.

But things got much better through the nineties. Captive breeding took off, equipment and knowledge became more accessible, and it started to seem possible to practice falconry to a good standard in conjunction with other less eccentric activities, like having a job or a family. I played hard with peregrines on the low ground, started an English pointer, and made plans to turn my grousing dream into reality. In 2000, I visited northern Scotland with a couple of friends, one of whom was an experienced grouse fanatic, and we dabbled on a couple of small patches of heather, and even saw one or two grouse. Despite the lack of game and shortness of time, I was hooked on the opportunities that were there, and returned to the balmy south with a gameplan in my head. After writing a lot of letters of enquiry to landowners,

I was fortunate enough to be offered a let on a moor in Caithness, right in the heart of gamehawking Flow country at the very top of Scotland. I've returned to this very special place every year since, and also been lucky enough to enjoy extra opportunities through the season on some Yorkshire moors. There is always more to learn and discover in falconry, but here are some thoughts for the budding grouse tyro, learnt through thick and thin from chasing good sport with peregrines over English pointers at red grouse.

Finding a moor

Ask most lairds why they own and run a grouse moor, and financial return will be quite low on the list: they mostly do it for love, not money. People who maintain and run grouse moors are the unsung – even bad-mouthed - heroes of conservation of the British uplands, a unique habitat in its own



A good days hunting.

right. Numerous studies have clearly shown that grouse management is greatly beneficial for other upland specialist species, which have all been lost on those estates turned over to forestry or heavier grazing. Indeed, the North York Moors National Park have recognised this formally by entering into a formal Wildlife Enhancement Scheme agreement with the British Falconers' Club Yorkshire region to allow a small patch of heather moorland to be managed both for conservation and falconry. The syndicate have improved Levisham moor for upland wildlife and for hawking grouse, and there is now a small but huntable head of grouse being enjoyed. This agreement has been a defining success, showing how low-impact hunting is entirely congruent with conservation of biodiversity and unique habitat.

In general, therefore, it's not simply a case of buying your way into a moor with a fat wallet. In my experience, highland keepers and lairds are pretty particular people who care a great deal about good behaviour and etiquette on and off the moor. Falconers have a steeper hill to climb here into favour, because raptors are not generally popular on grouse moors. Some lairds and keepers are informed and open-minded, and our laird has played a driving role in keeping traditional Flow



Freddie Mackay, 50 years of highland keeping and upland conservation, still going strong.

country grouse hawking alive. But in general, it's hard to find a good let, and it means that falconers actually on grouse moors (and beyond) have a responsibility to fly the flag of good sport and behaviour. It only takes one or two bad apples for the word to spread quickly about what 'falconers' get up to, and news of misbehaviour travels very fast up there. You might think that in the open expanses of heather



Grouse marks persist for a few weeks so give hints on the population size.

moorland, there isn't much opportunity for misbehaviour, but much of the upland sporting culture is built around rigorous cooperation between estates, and a view towards sustainability in the longer term. Because of this, practices like greedy bag-filling, unsporting behaviour to the quarry, straying over marches, racing on the hill tracks, errant hawks and dogs, disrespect to the accommodation, are just a few of the things that vex the protectors of the grouse and traditional highland sport. Our laird has actually descended with his cheque book on (shooting) miscreants, provided a refund, and sent them packing.

So the first thing to realise is that it's difficult, but not impossible, to find a good grouse moor that will allow falconry. If you manage to locate a moor with a possible agreement to you for falconry, what should you look out for? Naturally, you will be interested in the grouse population, and this will depend on whether you're happy to walk all day for a couple of points, or whether you want ten points in a short walk from the Range Rover, and home in time for tea and crumpets. Here, financial considerations will creep in, because a well-stocked moor will cost you more because of competition with the shooting market. If the moor has been shot hard, but still carries enough grouse for a hawking let, the birds could still be very jumpy and difficult to manage for nice flights off a point. Enlightened estate owners will realise that falconers take much much smaller bags than guns, and create less disturbance, so you could get lucky and be allowed onto a moor that has a few grouse and a bit of early shooting, and this has worked fine for me. Be wary of very low grouse numbers, and don't let your enthusiasm run away too much. Walking and running dogs all day for a single point on a jumpy, barren pair is no fun after a week. Tempers get strained, dogs and hawks get disillusioned, and it's no good for the moor to hunt out the last pairs. By the same token that you get bad apples in the falconry barrel, so too can the odd moor owner think it's acceptable to let a barren moor; if you're unsure, see if you can walk the moor and look out for grouse marks and check heather quality, both of which tell you

a lot if you can't run a dog. Another tradition that is widely upheld on Scottish grouse moors, is that last year's tenant (assuming all went well) is usually offered the next season's let first. This means that both parties have a responsibility: the landlord because you get offered first refusal, but also the tenant because if you decide on a year out if the grouse are looking bad, you may well be out permanently. You've therefore got to be prepared to take the good years and the bad if you want to keep returning.

If your detective work and diplomacy are on track, next, let's get a bit more particular in case you have a choice (which is unlikely). Relief is important on a moor, and steep sides and deep ravines (where grouse will often head) can make for hard walking and tricky tracking. Aspect can be important too, with nice updrafts helping, but nasty downdrafts spoiling a beat. If the moor is at high elevation, low cloud can be a problem; if it's at low elevation, check could be a nuisance, and fencing more so. What's the eagle situation like? This is becoming a real problem now. What are the neighbours like, and do they shoot hard? Unfortunate incidents have happened. If grouse are at low density, how big is the estate? What is the accommodation like for dogs and hawks? Is there a safe weathering lawn? Is there the all-important freezer space for hawk food? If all looks good, you're doing very well, so the final question might concern the dates available. Many estates run a fairly traditional season with grouse in August and September, then onto deer in October, with perhaps some pheasant or partridge shooting too on the estate margins. If you get the chance to go at any time of the grouse season, there are pro's and con's throughout. August grouse can still be a bit green, and you might encounter some birds that are too young to hunt if the summer weather forced a second clutch after hatch. Having said that, there's a reason why the Glorious Twelfth is when it is, and shooters don't want to drive weak flyers past the butts either. Young, full-sized grouse fly very fast, and are more honest than overwintered birds, so they provide excellent sport. In Caithness, we probably encounter grouse that are too young, meaning they can be flown down by a half-fit hawk, from about 5% of points in August, and less in September. It's still a disappointment to flush a young covey, because it almost always teaches the hawk only bad lessons, and disturbs the growing family, but I have seen even three-quarter-grown grouse burn off big female peregrines before they get into the swing of it! Positives of August grousing are the long days, lower risks of gales and rain, and the heather is in bloom. It's holiday season and a good time of year to get a fresh eyass hunting. Unfortunately all that warm weather means the mighty midge will be on the wing in the far north, and he is not to be taken lightly. Freddie Mackay, our keeper, has fought the midge single-handedly on the hill for almost 50 years, and although he has a number of gaelic descriptors for *Callicoides impunctatus*, his



Late summer grouse hawking: great fun with Roger Upton, Tristan Lougher, Gus Gough and Robert Hutchinson, and no shortage of dogs.

final conclusion is 'You'll never beat the midge.... NEVER!' As soon as the wind drops, midges will be up and out of the damp heather, and they make life outside almost intolerable for man and beast. Hawks must not be left on weathering lawns, or you will return to find them in a state of hysteria with swollen eyelids, and ceres and feet bitten. The same goes for dogs in outside kennels. Hawking in calm conditions is tolerable as long as you keep moving, but a kill will see your hawking buddies desert you as you stand and scratch and swear, while you try and get your star to take her reward in a dense midge cloud. There is nothing you can do to stop them biting because most repellents aren't effective, and we've even tried German army weapon's-grade DEET. Interestingly, something that does work better than anything is 'Skin So Soft', so book your Avon lady to call, and stock up before your trip, because you're worth it.

As the frosts come in late September and October, the midges die back, and the grouse have toughened up. Into November and early December, if you get high pressure conditions you've struck gold as it's a fantastic time to hunt red grouse in the frosty blue. As long as the moor hasn't been shot too hard, they should still hold to a point (though less reliably than earlier on), and they will explode from the

heather and fly like black cannonballs to the horizon. Their back becomes armoured as their synsacrum fuses up, and they can take whumping hits and just keep on going. Your hawks will be fit and on the game, so you can hit the ground running. Unfortunately, like the grouse, the weather can toughen up too in the winter, and if you can only grab a week and there's a deep Atlantic low passing slowly through, you could be stuffed if the moor has the wrong aspect. If the rain or sleet comes hard, then take your salmon rod and try to enjoy some fishing!

Grouse basics

The red grouse is a type of willow grouse, and is endemic to the British uplands. Adult grouse subsist almost entirely on ling heather, and they cannot be economically reared and released on a scale that is normal for partridges, pheasants and some ducks, so they are truly a wild quarry. Sustainable grouse numbers for sport are maintained primarily through a combination of heather and predator management. There are widely-recognised conservation benefits to other upland species as a by-product of grouse moor maintenance and management. Adult pairs form territories, and grouse are generally not big movers from their area of birth, although

this depends on population density, and severe weather will see them packing up and moving to the lower ground in search of food and respite from the permafrost. Being a ground-nesting species that is adapted to living in upland areas with generally low predator numbers, it is especially vulnerable to generalist predators like foxes, corvids and harriers. Raptors are protected in the UK, but other predators are controlled to improve survival of young grouse. For the first two weeks after hatch, grouse chicks supplement their diet with invertebrates, which are essential for growth, so a warm dry hatch is a big bonus. After three weeks, heather becomes the mainstay of their diet, and it is heather quality that is fundamental to a grouse moor's productivity. Despite this somewhat monotonous diet, grouse are excellent to eat: mature them in the fridge for a few days, and then pan-fry them hard for 5 minutes followed by a 12 minute roast in a very hot oven. Serve them up with red cabbage, roast potatoes, and a nice Chianti, and make sure you have a good cook in your team who can do this to perfection!

Back to the management, heather patches are burnt regularly to create a patchwork of young, medium and old growth that provides the right combination of nutrition and cover, and maximises the number of available territories per acre. Heather beetle can be a particular problem on damper grouse moors: eggs are laid in sphagnum, and the beetle larvae eat the growing heather shoots. Whole miles of moorland can be

devastated by this pest, leaving behind red or grey stands of heather that were once green and purple. The beetle's main predator is a tiny parasitic wasp, so the beetle outbreaks tend to cycle as a result. Heather can recover after being 'beetled', but it takes a couple of years, and predisposes the ground to unwanted spread of Molinia grasses, which can dominate the heather and reduce the grouse food supply. Grazing by sheep and deer also needs a careful balance to limit the spread of grasses, and protect the heather. On top of all this, grouse populations can suffer disease cycles when maintained at high density, with the strongyle gut nematode and louping ill from ticks being major constrainters of population health. Despite these pressures, it is remarkable how good management can produce a bumper crop of grouse on productive moors. Many of the driven moors shoot thousands of brace each season. In 1888, Lord Walsingham is famous for shooting 1070 birds in a single day in 1888 on Blubberhouses moor in Yorkshire (which is a terrible waste of good grouse if you're a gamehawker, and enough to keep most of us happy for a falconry lifetime!)

Dogs

Good dogs are the makers of grouse hawking, so don't treat this part of the team lightly. The majority of moors demand pointing dogs to allow the sport to happen. Grouse are secretive, ground-loving game birds, so spotting or walking is



Preparing to set forth.



Good dogs allow the whole operation, so treat them royally.

almost never feasible. Moreover, the actions of a good pointer are at least half of the beauty and excitement of the whole art. To see a fine English pointer or setter working a moor at great distance, with complete and professional independence is a sight and activity to behold. Our dogs have to run big to cover large areas after grouse at quite low densities, and they have to want to do this all afternoon, and again tomorrow. We once took out an ex-England international footballer, who was mesmerised by the stamina and fitness of our dogs as they coursed for hours over hill and dale on boggy ground, before locking calmly onto point. Your dogs might need to cover miles and miles of uneven ground to find grouse, so be wary if you're unsure of their ranging abilities. HPR breeds might seem fast and energetic as they romp across the low ground meadows, but up on the hill the landscape and smellscape are different. I've seen dogs that work fine over short beats on the low ground simply lose interest or energy after 10 minutes of romping about on heather, where the smellscape is relatively monotonous and game is widely dispersed.

Most well-bred pointers and setters will want to cover the ground once fit, so prepare them before the trip with running over soft but uneven and challenging ground; this is important for hardening pads too. The next task is to ensure that they point and flush without error, so the sport and spectacle can be enjoyed. Hot-heads that charge in can spoil a day, though false-pointers are worse. So make sure your dogs don't just point, they point game, and then hold the point until you're ready to serve the hawk. Plenty of exposure to the right game in the right conditions with your sensible control will make a great dog, so don't cut corners. Partridge are probably better to expose dogs to in preparation for grouse, because shifting pheasants can encourage creeping. Sticky dogs are not as bad as creepers or chargers-in, as long as they're pointing grouse, but the nicest flights can be engineered with a staunch dog that flushes on the button from a quiet command. Lots of shouting at the dog to stop creeping, or running about

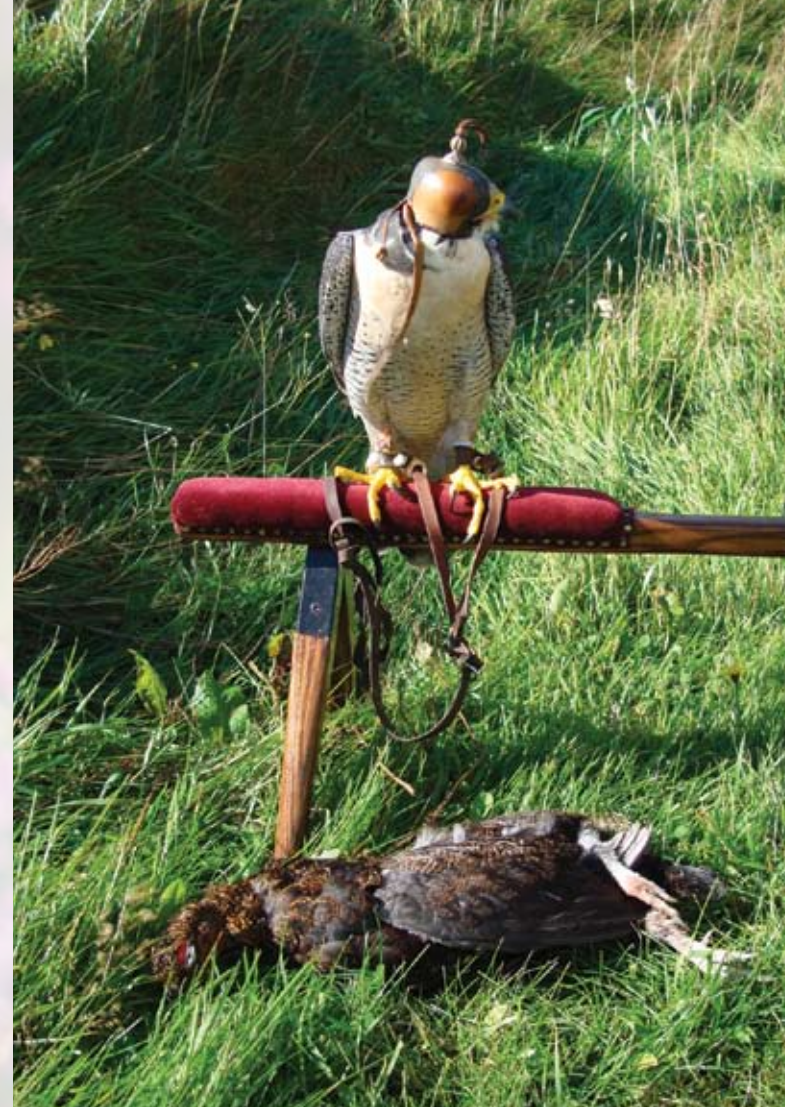
looking to flush the grouse when the dog won't move, makes for a tight-holding falcon, as well as distracting enjoyment from the falcon's flight.

There are lots of views on how to create a good pointer, but they don't train themselves, and however you do it you will have a fantastic hunting companion if you create a dog that covers ground intelligently and independently, looks back at you occasionally, and will turn, stop, or return on your command. If he drops deeper when working a downwind beat, and on finding birds will work round grouse carefully, and then hold a point for as long as it takes you to find or reach him, or your falcon to make pitch and position, then even better. Finally, if he will have birds in the air exactly when you give him a quiet 'get 'em up!', then you're close to grouse perfection. Of course a drop-to flush is nice too, but we're all there to enjoy ourselves a bit. Good dogs are the lynchpins of grouse hawking, so make the effort, and don't be reliant on just one dog. Make sure the runners are getting big meals of good food, and a comfortable, warm, undisturbed bed for rest. If one dog is being used heavily, give him a whole day off every so often to recuperate. Encourage the use of young dogs in your team to let them learn, even if it means your own flight isn't perfectly controlled. Enjoy your dogs, and marvel at their abilities and dedicated service!

Hawks

Most of us will have our own ideas for what makes an ideal gamehawk. For me, a good tiercel peregrine is hard to beat as a stylish match for grouse, and about matched for weight. If you have a female that goes up, then equally good, and she's probably a bit more deadly in general. Size is not as important as confidence and attitude, and I've witnessed tiny tiercels buffering high into a wet Scottish gale as well as any big female, and then slaying grouse. An added benefit of tiercels is that they can take a hearty meal off a kill, yet still be ready to be up and at 'em the next day, while a gorge for a female might put her into uncooperative mode for a day or two. On the other hand, females seem to stoop harder, and certainly punch better into the wind at the bottom of the stoop. Go too big, like a female gyr-hybrid, and you might start to see the hawk looking ungainly alongside a shifty 1½ pound grouse, and the added intimidation can spoil the flight by encouraging dumping.

A word of warning: experienced hawks on the low ground do not always perform as well on the moor. Some will flat refuse to fly, for unknown reasons. Some will refuse to stoop grouse. Some don't like dogs. Some don't like groups. And some just don't like being away from home. These foibles are in the minority, and it's obvious that a new quarry will present a challenge, but beware that your ace partridge hawk might not also perform on high. It's understandably frustrating when a low ground star performer simply flutters to the heather



and stares vacantly at its owner. Others will fly but refuse to stoop or become quickly disillusioned if they don't succeed at the strange new game. Grouse are dark and can tightly hug the contours against a dark background, which can be off-putting for some hawks, especially if the light is low and this is all very new. Repeated dumping lessons into the heather in front of your stooping falcon seems to put off some birds from sacrificing their pitch, especially when they are thinking 'where is my partridge?' So see if you can get a day or two on the heather before you plan your grand tour, and take up eyasses to train on the moor from the start. Better still, if you can catch a grouse, allow a long pluck and feed-up, and even sacrifice the next day, and you'll be well on the way to a committed grouse hawk.

Falconers

Although hawking on your own in the wild country of northern Scotland is a wonderful experience, you'll likely be flying with other falconers to share the fun, and expense! Like dogs and hawks, physical fitness of all the team is important for grouse hawking as you may have to walk miles each day over rough terrain for your sport. Teamwork on the hill and in the lodge is really important, and all the while respecting the ground and the sport. There might be a tendency to push things, like game bags, straying over marches, or raking about back on the same ground after a previous covey. The hills

A good confident tiercel is a perfect match for red grouse.

have eyes, so if you want to return next year, or care about the good name of good falconry, then all of the group need to have the same careful attitudes. The dynamic within the hawking team is also very important. Gamehawkers can be a funny lot, evidenced by a quick glance through the ridiculous arguments and clashes on any web forum, so be careful if you don't want competitiveness or jealousy to spoil your holiday. Days out with Roger and Mark Upton exemplify to me how a positive and polite attitude keeps everyone happy, and returning year after year to enjoy great sport. Even when things go badly wrong, there is never any judgemental sniping, just an acceptance that things don't always go right, and celebrations when they do. Personalities are under bigger pressure up there when falconers are away from home and indulging in emotionally-charged activities! Add a good splash of alcohol and some late nights, and things can turn sour over a week or two, which is the last thing you want on holiday. If grouse are thin on the ground, or hawks or dogs aren't flying or working to expectations, then we can all get a bit obsessive, so easy-going and positive attitudes are very important to stop the gloves flying about! When a deep Atlantic low comes past, then the cabin fever can really test the group dynamic. Last year we endured a storm that ripped at the heather for four days, even preventing us from weathering hawks. There was a lot of pacing about and looking at tree branches to see



Mark Upton and Dodger: a proficient grousing team.

if any lull was coming, between poking about in equipment boxes. We even went for a drive out to visit an RSPB reserve (there were more birds on our moor!) At times like this it's worth feeding up early and trying to do something else, but that isn't easy because often the wind dies down later in the day. So pick your team right and, like me, you will enjoy first-rate company on top of the sport.

Preparation

So you've booked a moor, you've got a good falcon and dog team, and your best buddies are coming. Excellent! What should we do to prepare before the trip? We can probably all agree that your dogs should be losing their summer shape and hardening up, as well as dropping and returning nicely to the whistle. But we won't agree on how to prepare falcons for grouse in the early season. Of course it also depends on the length of your trip, and the background of your hawks. Some people prefer the bottom-up approach of doing the basics, and then working fitness, attitude and pitch into the hawk over each successive grouse flush. Certainly this does work, but it can take time. Others prefer top-down, attaining fitness and pitch with the use of aids like kites, and then hitting the ground running. I prefer the latter, because every day and point is precious to me, and I'd rather start without worrying

about fitness or condition constraining the hawk's potential. I've done both, and some hawks perform better with some work on pre-trip fitness, while others don't seem to need it. I usually fly my hawks only once a day, which doesn't provide a huge number of potential flights in, say, a fortnight trip. You may lose a couple of days to weather or the Sabbath, and possibly end up with only ten or twelve flights, which isn't much for the hawk to really condition itself into a star performer. Two weeks of decent kite work before your trip will clear out the moulting fat, open up the lungs and vessels, calm her pent-up anxiety a bit, and create the appetite of a lion. My hawks enjoy the kite, and it's a relatively controlled method of flying at pitch, so I can put them up to it at a heavier condition after the moult than I might if I was starting to go hunting. Shawn Hayes advocates 'the double', or 'we're going home and doing high jumps', but he's hardcore and I'm a slack-mettled Brit, so I let them get away with just one lift each day. One of the potential downsides of kiting a falcon before the hunt is that it makes the hawk fitter and a bit more outward-looking than a bottom-up trained falcon, and thereby creates an increased danger of success on check. But where you're going the check should be minimal, so you might strive for some Pitcheresque flying style in the big skies of her ancestral home. Up there you can slacken the reins and

really see what she's capable of, so for me, and for both eyass and intermewed falcon, it's more top-down than bottom-up in preparation for the grand tour. Either way, any check trouble will more likely start when you return home from the moor and she's fighting fit and confident; look out the low ground and put some fresh batteries in your transmitters...

Practice

The big day has arrived. You've settled into your cottage, the keeper's mentioned a covey or two are about, and the forecast is set fair: let's get out there and enjoy the sport! Load up the hawks and dogs, put some beer and chocolate in the cool bag, and head for the high ground. Choose a beat that has a bit of lift, but beware that hawks can hang lazily in a good updraft if they're unfamiliar with rising air. Now we're grouse hawking! For me it's the pinnacle of game hawking because, with an experienced team and the reduced number of variables, you can really actually enjoy and absorb the whole spectacle. No distracting woodpigeons, reared game, dog walkers, joggers, tractors, cars; you know where the birds are lying, and that the dog's not lying. You actually have a modicum of control. Your star pointer has been out of sight for some time, so we spread out a bit to check for him. As I climb the hill, I crest the brow and see him locked on point on the top of Soabhe Hill, where there is a patch of good heather and often a covey. He's staunch, and an old stager who knows the game, so I don't hesitate and risk jumping the covey, and back off. No fiddling with jesses, leashes or swivels, it's off with the hood and I release the single clip to her anklet. A bobbing look around her new landscape, a mute and a rouse, and then off she goes, boring into the cool breeze and mounting up and up into the cool blue. Now we can relax and be confident that the grouse will hold until we flush, so take your time if she knows the game, and move slowly into a position to watch the stoop and control the dog. Soon she's just a black spot flickering very high above, and she can see for miles and miles. She knows exactly what's going to happen, and she's a natural climber. Try not to shout at the dog to hold, or rush about swinging your arms in a panic in case she's distracted. Play it cool, like Geoffrey Pollard, and keep her guessing! Now it's up to you for once how to steer the flight, because the grouse will react according to where the falcon is above them. They prefer to escape into the wind, but won't want to fly right under her, and where you stand doesn't make much difference. A downwind flush will allow a faster stoop and a higher chance of her killing. An upwind flush will bleed off stooping speed, especially at the bottom, and give the grouse more anchorage in the air to outmanoeuvre the hawk, but it might encourage an even higher pitch next time... Depending on whether the hawk needs killing confidence, I usually flush downwind if the pitch is making me smile, and upwind if I think she could do better. Today, it's her first

flight of the trip and she's at a lovely commanding height, so I call the flush quietly when she pushes well ahead of me into the wind. The dog is on the covey in a flash and they explode from nowhere and are up and speeding downwind in a panic because they don't want to fly under the falcon. We all shout 'ho!', even though the falcon is already on her way down in a tight tuck as the grouse skim across the heather at high speed. I know I should be looking at the stooping falcon, but my eyes are glued to the grouse at first in the worry that they continue on their way. Then I force myself to search skywards, and see the black streak coming across the sky. She's truly a spectacle. Now I also hear her as she pulls a tight curve while levelling out of the stoop and the air rushes hard against her stiff pinions providing the dramatic sound of tearing canvas to add to this force of nature. In a further second she goes through the covey, who are weaving in their escape and wondering who's going to get it, and she strikes a killer blow with deadly accuracy that takes out one of the younger grouse. She knows she has killed the grouse, and allows herself a long throw-up to bleed off speed, then a relaxed descent to land on the ground, craning her neck to look for her prize. Everyone is pleased, and she is thrown the grouse which lies quite dead in the heather. The dogs howl in excitement and pull to have a sniff of the covey mark, while your star pointer who has just delivered the grouse and has seen it all before, takes advantage of the distraction and slinks off out the back to go hunting for more birds. The falcon sits dewy eyed as the endorphins rage through her system, and then starts to pluck and eat the head and neck. We drink some cold beer and eat the chocolate, then move on to look for a chance for the next hawk on the cadge.

What could be more enjoyable than that for your afternoon's sport? You even got to absorb the whole thing without the usual distractions. Unfortunately, and speaking from personal experience, it can take a long time to develop a team that works to produce such a wonderful spectacle. To start with, you can begin to suspect that grouse are uncatchable, and enthusiasm for the kill is acute. I remember my first grouse was half hawked, half dogged, and I was generously told that 'well if your hawk hadn't been in the air you couldn't have caught it!' Now, that same peregrine kills most of the grouse served to him. He's become a good grouse hawk, but it took time. Most of us want to see the big pitches up on the open moor and the sizzling stoops, so if you're striving for this, you want to try and encourage your hawk to use the third dimension above, so try not to rein her in too tight and let her really fly a bit wide and high. You can probably let her weight creep up a little, as long as she's still motivated to fly (and return). Hopefully she will be a bit of a naturally 'big' flyer, which is something you should aim for in a grouse hawk because the landscape lends itself to allowing a bit of independence, but don't go too crazy because it's no fun



At the end of the day: Dave Myatt, Bob Green and Nick Curry.



Taking a fair reward.

tracking hawks in this huge landscape where roads might be few and far-between. Kiting preparation will help a bit to encourage climbing, and can be a useful recall tool across those wide spaces of the uplands. In the early days, don't be too worried about position over the point: aim to flush when she is at her highest, and this will be your critical call. While she's learning the game, it's far better to have her high and out to the side, than directly overhead but low. With eyasses, it's usually best to bank the lesson and flush early on while she's still pumping, rather than waiting too long and watching her go 'floaty'. As long as she is high enough to stoop down and put in a chase on the fleeing grouse, then you are making great progress. Hawks quickly learn what the dog is about and key in over the point, so you will hopefully quickly get to the stage where she is using plenty of air, while always watching the point.

In fact, the existence of this focal point can sometimes lead to problems. While the unfettered purity of grouse hawking presents a whole load of positives, this purity can also allow negatives. Everything revolves around the point, and clever hawks will pick that up very quickly. One of the most frustrating things that can happen in red grouse hawking is when falcons hang tight over the point. The dog indicates

exactly where those tasty bundles are going to explode from, and the way the falconer is waving his arms about and creeping round the point in that habitual manner makes everything very predictable to your hawk, which is what you don't want. Try and avoid obvious cues of how the flight and flush are going to happen. Of course you can't blame the hawk, as she thinks that the closer she is to the point, and just a bit upwind, is the best place to catch a grouse. A few downwind flushes off the point into the falcon's feet before the grouse get properly going will not encourage those big pitches. Grouse can be caught this way if your dog is good and you get the timing just right, so be wary of this unless you want a meat hawk. It's especially relevant if you're flying a grouse rookie, when the first few flights are going to be very influential for your hawk. So once she's had a grouse to taste, be prepared to flush for a lesson rather than a kill in the early stages, and you will reap the investment later on. If your hawk hangs on the point too tightly, then flushing the grouse into the wind should stop her killing from a low pitch. Although the flush is still a reward, it's not nearly as incentivizing as a kill.

Grouse will almost always try to fly into the wind to beat a falcon, because it works. You might think that heading the



Grouse know their patch: a damaged bird hides down a deep hole in the middle of the moor.

point will encourage the grouse to fly downwind, but the most important thing to crouching grouse during the flight seems to be where the hawk is overhead, and grouse will fly right past your ears to escape into the wind. Grouse can row into a wind like no other game bird I've seen, and can do this at the bottom of a high falcon's stoop and still sometimes pull away. So if your hawk is hanging tight in a manner that displeases you, flush as she flies forward to the point, and make sure she sees the birds, gets a bit of a stoop, but the grouse pull away and escape. It takes a lot of steel to do this, when you might otherwise bag your first grouse, but if you want a high flyer my advice would be to make things testing to start with if there are opportunities ahead. On the other hand, if your hawk needs some killing confidence, then it's your call.

Something that can affirm tight flying even further, is re-flushing grouse that have dumped into cover if the hawk is right on their tail. Sometimes it can help to station people during the flight near patches of likely cover, like streams, hags or reed beds to discourage dumping in the first place. Again, it'll be your call whether to re-flush a grouse, because sometimes it will do little harm and provide a second sporting spectacle, and might even be needed to encourage the chances of a kill for a rookie that has had a run of bad luck, while at other times it will negate style in your gamehawk, waste a good grouse, and encourage disobedience to the lure. Damaged grouse should probably be re-flushed so they are not left to suffer if they cannot be picked up by the dog. If the grouse has out-flown the falcon and then dumps, it's won fair and square, and your hawk wasn't good enough, so give it fair sport. It's a great lesson to the hawk to be out-flown

for a good distance by a grouse. If my falcon has flown high and done everything right, and the grouse dumps before she gets down to have a crack at it, then I will usually encourage a remount and repeat attempt; I realise that this makes her a bit less obedient to the lure. Often, grouse will simply repeat the dump, especially if there is appropriate cover about, and if you suspect this is going to be the case then it's a good policy to re-flush the grouse into the wind when the hawk is out of position downwind, which should encourage the grouse to fly to escape. At least then the hawk is beaten fairly, and it's a good lesson. Roger Upton likens dumping grouse to naughty street kids who know where all the hidey holes are, and scuttle down them under tight pressure! It's amazing where grouse will escape to: down holes, under hanging hags, up to their necks in streams. These tactics obviously help escape from wild peregrines. Hopefully you won't see too much of this and the grouse will outfly your hawk and encourage her to mount even higher and stoop even faster next time. By the time you get to the end of your trip, everything should be in full swing, and you're hopefully enjoying great sport and everything will go right on your last day. Then it's time to tip the keeper well if things have gone great, pack up your kit, and clean up the cottage (hopefully you'll have a few grouse feathers to sweep up). Unfortunately, it's time to return to reality... at least there might still be the remnants of a summer further south.

The future

Most of the heather uplands are a semi-natural habitat that was originally created for grouse shooting. As the general public becomes increasingly detached from nature and field sports, so the demand for this habitat has waned further north. Three-quarters of the world's heather moorland is in the UK, but we have presided over the loss of almost a quarter of our heathery habitat in the last 50 years as we plough it up and plant forestry monocultures, dig out the peat, or over-graze it. The heather uplands also probably face a fairly bleak longer-term future because of climate change, being especially vulnerable habitat in that regard. Despite this negativity, we are some way off these situations, and there is ample opportunity for the low-impact sport of falconry to contribute to the maintenance of grouse moors, as long as we maintain a positive profile of ourselves among moorland lairds and keepers. If there is a huntable head of grouse after a bit of shooting, then winter grouse hawking parties might also allow a moor and cottage some extra income at a time when things are otherwise quiet. Hawking grouse in the uplands is hard work on many levels, but the rewards are great if you can crack it. For me, the uplands remain one of the last wildernesses in the UK where you might genuinely catch a grouse that had never seen a sign of human activity before your dog appeared over the ridge. 🦅