

Falconry / Hawking

Poodles and/or proto-Poodles are a frequent sight in falconry/hawking scenes memorialized in huge wool or wool/silk tapestry hangings which kept great houses as cozy as possible in the High Middle Ages and Renaissance (see ["...Visuals"](#)). These Poodles (proto-Poodles?) are easy to spot when they wear a moderate version of our "show coat", which was then a warmer-weather working clip. They're not so easy to spot when they wear a 15th or 16th century cool-weather shaggy coat. For an 18th-century image, see Oudry's [Oiseau de proie touchant sur des canards qui se cachent dans les roseaux](#), in which a parti-coloured Poodle flushes several puddle ducks from cover for the convenience of the bird of prey who soars close overhead.

The enormous tapestries were manufactured in factories, their creation guided by cartoons, which might be repeated or approximately copied. Although the tapestries contain fantastic elements (for example, carpets of flowers and the occasional unicorn), in relation to practical matters with which then-viewers were completely familiar (and in relation to which their imaginations would scorn to take flight), for example, practical details of falconry, the tapestries provide a reliable retroscope. We can be confident that these proto-Poodles were present in reality and making themselves useful. But how? Read on...

About falconry

Falconry was from the earliest times one of the chief sports of royalty and the nobility; it spread geographically from Asia to eastern Europe, western Europe (and thence to the Americas). It was most broadly popular in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance; towards the middle of the 17th century falconry began to decline, even as the pot-hunter realized the advantages of the gun (see [Duck dogs -- guns](#)). In continental Europe, falconry died out (except in Holland) under pressure of the Napoleonic Wars. However, at that same time (1790s) the sport was revived in Great Britain, corresponding to a nostalgic revival of archery. Fascinatingly, James Howe's painting (1811) of Falconers Fleming of Barochan, Anderson and Harvey (see ["...Visuals"](#)) contains a small moyen-sized Poodle, along with the spaniels and a pointer, and thus is an authentic reflection of the 15th and 16th century hawking tapestries.

In relation to training and caring for hawks and falcons which belonged to royalty, the nobility, and landed gentry like Malcolm Fleming of Barochan, falconry was a highly-skilled means of earning a living. It was also an "amateur sport": Oliver Cromwell, the austere Roundhead leader, was not, until later in his life, "landed" and yet he was preoccupied with falconry; he came from near Ely, in the fens; a fine place for this. A

good falcon was a favorite, a constant companion carried everywhere on the fist, the fourth part of the quartet also including a man, his dog, and his horse. The object was sport; and also to eat.

The best how-to text for falconry and hawking remains *The Art of Falconry (De arte venanci cum avibus)*, by Frederick II of Hohenstaufen (1194-1250), which is readily available for modern readers translated and edited by C.A. Wood & F. M. Fyfe (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1943; reissued 1961; reprinted 1969). This edition is particularly useful because it contains a marvelous bibliography, through which one is introduced to all books of consequence in the subject .

Frederick II, emperor and German king, king of Sicily, was Norman and German in ancestry, but essentially a Sicilian; he underwent influences from Byzantine and Moslem culture. He was a poet, a patron of Provençal troubadours and German minnesingers, and also of architecture, philosophy and science. Falconry was one of his main preoccupations; he brought together the best falconers from the four corners of the world, and provided optimum facilities. *De arte* is his own master-work.

Today we are keenly interested in "clicker-training" captive dolphins through positive reinforcement; we note that the captive dolphin is free to go away to the other end of the tank. Similarly, the captive falcon is entirely free in the sky as soon as she leaves the wrist; therefore her training is analgous to training dolphins in the open ocean (as has been done). From the falcon's perspective, the falconer is perceived as a hunting partner--and his dog--and his horse. Lucidity in "positive reinforcement" training is essential, and to admire this quality, if no other, modern dog trainers will enjoy Frederick's book.

However, if the combination of Wood, Fyfe and Frederick in nearly 700 fascinating pages daunts you, Gilbert Blaine's *Falconry* (London, 1936) gives a lucid quick overview. Blaine is remembered as a falconer who was extraordinarily gifted, an important factor. It was common knowledge in Frederick's time, although a less well-known fact in our own, that the essential pre-requisite for hawking and falconry is a gift for handling these birds.

To put Frederick, and the proto-Poodles in the tapestries, into an historical context: John Cummins, *The Hound and the Hawk: the Art of Medieval Hunting* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988).

Peregrine's-eye view

- Hawks (short/broad winged); falcons (long/narrow winged).
- Most important hawk for Poodle History Project: European goshawk

- Most important falcon for Poodle History Project: peregrine falcon ("duck hawk").
- Peregrine hunts by gaining altitude, then plummets spectacularly down ("stoops") on flying prey; needs open country.
- Although the goshawk can hover (as bird-watchers know well), the kill is accomplished by zooming in from the side; can hunt in cover; useful against rabbits.
- Falconer handles peregrine; austringer handles goshawk (alone because will kill rivals).
- Peregrine spectacular sporting-hawk, on a pinnacle all by itself, pleasure to train and handle (particularly, in relation to Poodles/proto-Poodles puddle-ducks "at the brook").
- Goshawk is "everyman's hawk", as handy to the poacher as to the squire. Moody, yet requires less skill than peregrine. May be kept in work for great part of the year. Hardy. Long-lived (a certain Frenchman kept goshawk for 30 years). Virtues are summed up in nickname *kitchen hawk*; French nickname for the goshawk is *cuisiner* (cook; but in this context, caterer, as for the mess); can be used on rabbit in co-operation with white ferret whom she soon learns to recognize.
- Eyasses: juveniles taken from the nest (traditional wisdom: not too soon; must be wild-hatched; nearly fledged).
- Passage hawks are immature, caught in migration; the best.
- Haggard: adult-caught wild bird, presents difficulties but if you get a good one, pearl beyond price.
- Tiercel is male falcon, so called because one third smaller than female; male hawk is also one third smaller than female, but never called tiercel.
- Trade in hawks and falcons was far-reaching (Frederick particularly admired those from Iceland), highly-skilled, and complex, requiring delicate international diplomacy. From the Middle Ages into the 20th century, passage hawks were caught annually on their flyway, during their southwards autumn migration, at Valkenswaard, a village in Noord Brabant, near the Belgian border. Here, Europe obtained its principal supply of passage hawks; this trade was the principle focus of the village; in late autumn a fair was held, attended by falconers from all parts of Europe; the freshly-caught hawks were sold by auction; Valkenswaard falconers served widely in European courts from approximately 1550-1790. (Fascinatingly, in Salvaterra de Magos in Portugal, the Falcoaria, residence of the Valkenswaard falconers, still exists; it resembles a southeast Dutch farm, square, with one story. Here are the living quarters of the falconers and their families, and also stables, kennels, mews, and storage for accoutrements and food.) The trade commenced to decline around 1830; disappeared in the first decades of the 20th century; the heath on which the hawks were captured was broken up, enclosed and turned into farms. See Frederick (appendices), and also *Het Cultuur Historisch Museum te Valkenswaard* (Valkenswaard: Stichting Museum, 1995), 7-37 (Dutch text), 78-88 (English summary), Literatuurlijst (Bibliography), pp. 104-5.
- Neither hawks or falcons are suitable house-pets because have spectacular mode of excretion; traditionally kept on special perches standing in sand, in mews.

"Hawking at the brook"

Frederick devotes the whole of Book VI, his entire final section, to "Hawking at the Brook with the Peregrine Falcon" (it was in this phase of falconry--water work--that the Poodle and/or proto-Poodle made himself useful).

He notes that ducks are the natural prey of the peregrine; for this work he specifies a large falcon; must be specially trained with the lure to "wait on" over the falconer, and to heed his voice (Frederick describes exactly how to accomplish this training, with a careful explanation of different types of flight habit, and how to train each type); in temperate seasons and weather appropriate to "waiting on"; appropriate environments are fens (marshes), ponds, and streams, and different falcons react to these different environments in different ways, and this must be taken into account in training. The falconer's main purpose is to "hold her above him, waiting on at as high a pitch as possible, while he raises ducks for her" (p. 388); she is then in the best position to stoop (plummet down) and take one. However, she may, instead rake away: Frederick discusses the several causes, prevention, and solutions to various related training problems. When the falcon is waiting on properly, ducks are flushed for her, by approach, by a sudden noise--slapping a glove against the falconer's horse's neck, or beating a drum. If the falcon stoops and captures a duck, this may be on land, on water (and the stoop carries the falcon and her prey into the water), or a falcon may pursue a diving duck into the water. Each of these possibilities requires a somewhat different handling of the falcon; with the added challenge of reading the falcon's body-language, for example, is she enormously interested in ducks? The falconer modifies his behaviour accordingly. Suppose that the falcon does not capture the duck, she may then employ various ruses to capture her prey, and the falconer follows her lead...

How dogs were used in falconry

Frederick recommends which sort of dog to use in falconry: a special breed improved, for generations, for the purpose; thick-set and with a good coat of hair so as to endure hard work on rough ground and resist cold and wet; of medium size: big enough to see over cover, not so big as to endanger the falcon if he dashes against her or steps on her; agile, so he doesn't readily tire; male, so as to be constantly in condition for hunting; courageous: no fear of wading or swimming through water; quick to understand, trainable, obedient, avoids what's forbidden.

He follows this description with several pages of fascinating (to dog trainers) instructions in relation to how to train the dog to go to the aid of his "own" falcon and the falcon to accept the aid of her "own" dog: the dog must understand that the falcon belongs to the handler and is therefore not to be harmed, and to grip firmly the relatively oversized bird the falcon is attempting to hold underneath herself; the falcon must be used to the dog but defer to him. (Frederick, pp. 267-70.)

The other tasks assigned to dogs were pointing and flushing. "Dogs are essential to the proper conduct of grouse hawking, and there is no truer saying than that good dogs make good hawks," states Blaine, in the course of his discussion of contemporary (thus no Poodles) grouse hunting with falcons (pp. 159-60). Setters used in hawking "should be bold, free rangers, staunch and sure on their points, for no false pointing dog ought ever to be employed with hawks. It is

remarkable how quickly a young falcon will learn to wait on steadily over a dog, when she never fails to see game flushed in front of him." Dogs employed with hawks must hold points indefinitely, since in this way more than one flight (by the falcon) may be obtained from one brood; a setter trained to dash in, flush the nearest bird of a brood, and drop instantly to wing is invaluable, but rare. In relation to partridge hawking, Blaine observes that the dog's sagacity is an important factor--an old setter used to the work is of great assistance since without his help the birds will take wing when the hawk is wide of them.

A busy spaniel was also indispensable, to flush grouse pointed by the setter, or to drive birds out of cover; this opinion is at least 700 years old: Cummings quotes (p. 212) Gaston Phoebus: "...[spaniels] love their master...and willingly go before him all day, questing and wagging their tails, and put up all manner of birds and animals, but their true calling is the partridge and the quail; a fine thing for a man with a good goshawk or falcon..." (Gaston III, Count of Foix, *Livre de Chasse*, ed. Gunnar Tilander (Karlshamn, 1971; Gaston Phoebus wrote this classic how-to between 1387 and 1391). Interestingly, Blaine doesn't enter into a full discussion of "going to the brook", that intense preoccupation of his predecessors.

Image worth a thousand words

The *Falconry* tapestry which is one of three "Devonshire" (because they belonged to the Duke of Devonshire) tapestries at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, England gives the best overview of "going to the brook"; the best book about this tapestry is *The Devonshire Hunting Tapestries*, by George Wingfield Digby assisted by Wendy Hefford (London: Victoria & Albert Museum, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1971).

In this tapestry, a group of ladies and gentlemen with servants and horses, and a professional falconer, also--a cowherd--a shepherdess--a miller's wife--form a busy scene. It's hard to imagine any duck sticking around for that, even in the densest cover. Yet, the ladies and gentlemen are flying falcons against mallards. Ducks and falcons swoop overhead. In relation to dogs, "which help to flush the birds as well as to retrieve", Digby identifies two as terriers and two looking like modern retrievers, but the practiced eye of the Poodle History Project's editor identifies the large (retriever-sized) "terriers", with their frontal eyes, and traditional Poodle-moustaches as proto-Poodles in cold-weather coats; and the two "retrievers" as proto-Poodle-wannabees; this supposition was supported by two Poodle History Project volunteers who kindly went along to the V&A; in the summer of 1996 to study the tapestry at first hand from the perspective of Poodle history. The mistake--if such it is--might be an easy one for art historians in a country in which today's falconers use Jack Russell terriers (North American falconers generally use a member of one of the German versatile-hunting breeds).

The head-piece in this section is taken from Simon Latham, *Lathams Falconry or the Faulcons Lure, and Cure in Two Books* (London, 1615), book 2, p. 38. This book is available on microfilm (English Books, 1475-1640, University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, MI) but is more readable on paper: #812 in the English Experience series of facsimiles of early printed books (Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, Ltd., 1976). (Unfortunately, a low-KB linecut showing all four members of the hunting team: horse, rider, duck-hawk and duck-dog, hasn't crossed the editor's path so far.)