

(Travel article)

Get a Hawk's View at Falconry School

by Barbara Chaney

The bundle of raw power perches on your arm, coolly awaiting your signal. That signal, as you'll learn, is to release your grip on its talons, gently hold your hand up and push it forward. With a snap of its wings, your hawk launches into flight.

"Casting" your bird into the sky is only the beginning of your introduction to a sport considered one of the world's oldest. At Ireland's School of Falconry, you'll partner with predators of the sky—hawks, falcons, eagles and owls—to be falconer for a half-day. With a little instruction, you'll learn how to hunt with a hawk and signal it to take off in flight.

Courses at the school range from introductory lessons to hunting treks, but all begin with a short primer on the school's 27 birds, including Harris hawks, sparrow hawks, peregrine falcons, a ferruginous hawk, an African Tawny eagle and a European eagle owl.

Young falconers, seven or older, are welcome and will be paired with their own bird, usually a Harris Hawk, known for its easygoing temperament. As Director Deborah Knight says, "Hawks and falcons are the fighter pilots of falconry. Smaller birds are better."

Cast your hawk and learn how to recall it to land on your fist during an introductory lesson. Walk through the woodlands on a "Hawk Walk" and your bird will follow, flying from tree to tree as it checks out the local prey. If you're feeling more adventurous, take part in an actual hunt, where the hawk swoops down on small prey. You may handle the school's owl, with its six-foot wingspan and watch Peregrine falcons—a bird whose dives have been clocked at speeds of 136 miles per hour.

Falconers for 10 years, Knight and her husband James opened the school in 1999 on the grounds of the 13th-century Ashford Castle, 23 miles north of Galway in West Ireland. "The relationship we have with birds is unique," she says. "The bird is flown free, and nothing stops it from coming back except its relationship with us. They don't rely on us. They're not pets."

SIDEBAR:

Ireland's School of Falconry
(353-92-46820, www.falconry.ie)

The school charges 55 euros for an introductory lesson of 45 minutes, 85 euros for a 90-minute Hawk Walk and 140 euros for a two-and-a-half hour hunt. Classes are offered year-round. Ashford Castle also offers accommodations (353-92-46820, www.ashford.ie).