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By ERIC PACE

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For generations, rulers of the Arabian sheikdom of Bahrain have enjoyed hunting with falcons. In neighboring Abu Dhabi, the oil-rich emir, Sheik Zayed, is such an avid falconer that he once sponsored an international congress of falcon experts.

Across the border in Saudi Arabia, Prince Khalid bin Faisal prizes falcons so highly that he has set up a mountain-top falcon center occupied by 150 of the birds.

Falcons are esteemed by many Arabs, notably the well-born and well-to-do, because hunting with them is an exciting sport with deep roots in Arab culture.

As another lordly falconer, Sheik Isa bin Rashid bin Abdullah al-Khalifa of Bahrain, has put it: "We take pleasure in following the habits of our grandfathers."

Highly Prized Birds

The sport and the birds are so highly prized by some Arabs, United States officials have recently contended, that gyrfalcons, protected members of a subgenus of falcons native to Arctic regions, have been smuggled from the United States to the Middle East.

As practiced by Arabs for centuries, falconing has retained something of the harsh, fierce quality of traditional desert life. The falconer lets loose his trained falcon within sight of the quarry, which typically is a bird known in Arabic as the hubara. The fast-flying falcon sights its prey and flies toward

it, attacking it with beak and talons on the ground or in midair, forcing it to the ground.

Arab falconing practices have varied over the years and from place to place. Wendell Phillips, an American oilman and archeologist, reported that in part of southeastern Arabia in the 1950's, the falcon generally blinded the hubara on the ground, then fed on it until the falconer rushed up to seize the remains.

Over the years, the hubara has grown scarce on the Arabian peninsula, prime falconing areas have shrunk, and the sport has become more difficult and expensive to pursue. Some devotees have been taking their falcons across the Arabian Sea to hunt in Pakistan, where the hubara is more plentiful.

One result has been that those Arabians who still manage to engage in the sport are largely the privileged members of hereditary ruling families, who have retainers to help them as well as ample means. As one member of a Saudi merchant family put it recently, a bit wistfully, falconry is now "a sport of kings."

A Falcon Shortage

Falcons have grown harder to come by, too. In the past, skillful Arab falconers could simply go out and trap falcons in the wild. But in recent years a falcon shortage has helped to raise prices for fine birds imported from Pakistan, Syria, and other lands. The United States Department of Agriculture says that gyrfalcons sell for

\$50,000 or more in the Middle East and also in Europe.

The high price of sought-after falcons is only one indication of the importance and prestige that the fierce, handsome, haughty-looking birds have enjoyed for centuries in the Middle East. As early as the sixth century several classic works on falconry were written in Arabic and Persian.

And in eighth century Baghdad, the court of the caliph al-Mahdi had a chief falconer, Adham ibn Muhriz al-Bahili, who wrote a treatise on hunting with birds of prey, and also with dogs and cheetahs, that has been esteemed for centuries.

A Continuing Fascination

Though the allure of falconing has long since faded at the courts of Europe, some modern Arab potentates have continued to be fascinated with its scientific and historical aspects as well as its sporting side.

In the 1960's, Sheik Rashid, ruler of the Persian Gulf state of Dubai, like to hunt in southern Iran, taking tens of thousands of dollars worth of falcons with him along with retainers and friends.

It was in 1976 that Sheik Zayed of Abu Dhabi, president of the United Arab Emirates, invited ornithologists and other scholars interested in falconry to a conference in his palm-studded realm on the Arabian Peninsula's Persian Gulf coast.

Across the peninsula, in Saudi Arabia's Asir Province, Prince Khalid bin Faisal, who is the local governor, has the recently founded falcon center run by a professional falconer from England, Peter L. Whitehead. It carries out research about falcons in addition to breeding them.

Falcon chicks nurtured at the center are released into the Asir countryside so that they can learn how to hunt in the wild, and attempts are made to catch them when they are older. Of the 15 of these young birds that were freed earlier this year, 12 were recovered.

The center specializes in varieties of falcon other than the gyrfalcon, and Mr. Whitehead contended in an interview this month that Middle Easterners are "not actually that keen to have gyrfalcons. They don't fly anywhere near so well" as the best native falcons.

Indigenous Falcons

Speaking about the charges that gyrfalcons have been being smuggled from the United States, he said: "An awful lot of the fuss has been in America itself. In the Middle East there hasn't been so much interest in the American falcons."

Falconers in the Middle East, he argued, are more interested in indigenous falcons. And within Saudi Arabia's royal family, he suggested, "the princes who fly falcons never buy them."

Instead, he contended, these princes obtain their falcons either as gifts from well-wishers or from their own retainers, who still manage to go out and trap them in the wild.



The New York Times
A Saudi Arabian falcon trainer with his bird. Some of the hunting falcons used in the Middle East may have been smuggled from the United States.