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Eagle-Eyed: How Falconers Bridge an Interspecies Gap Through Attentional Understanding

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Introduction

Riding on horseback, clad in ornate cloaks and hats lined with thick fur, Kazakh eagle hunters traverse the mountainous landscape of the Bayan-Ölgii province of Mongolia. One hand steers a horse while the other serves as the perch for a creature with an appearance so fierce and impressive that some have dubbed it the “prairie dragon”; a golden eagle (Benson, 2017). Bird in hand, the eagle hunters set out with a goal to bring home wild game to their yurts, such as foxes and rabbits. These dragons are trained to fly to the fist of the hunter, with whom they have trusting partnership with. For the Kazakh, the practice of eagle hunting is directly and deeply steeped in tradition and culture. An eagle hunter for 22 year, Ouni learned to fly eagles from his father, and their family has kept and hunted with eagles for generations. In hopes of keeping the mastery of the eagle hunter alive, Ouni is teaching his teenage son, who must train for five years before he gains the title of an eagle hunter (GoPro, 2017).

On the other side of the globe, falconers across the United States hold their fists and eyes to the skies as well. Hawks and falcons are preferred over eagles in these parts, and the use of certain birds in falconry along are regulated by federal and state laws, along with many other aspects of the practice. Along with being out with their birds in the fields, many of these falconers take their journeys to YouTube, blogs, Facebook, Instagram. Evidently, technological and societal influences have ushered in new aspects of falconry; radio trackers and GPS are commonly used together with traditional bells to locate the birds while they fly. Falconry has gone corporate through bird abatement services, in which hawks and falcons are used as scare tactics, deterring nuisance birds (pigeons and starlings) from frequenting areas such as large cities, farms, and airports. Despite these additions and adjustments to the practice, falconry still

maintains many of its traditional forms and combines its archival-like embodiments of world cultural heritage with recent innovations (Agravante, 2015).

Kazakh eagle hunters and western falconers clearly occupy different categories and niches in the world in many respects, evident by their distinct cultures and societies and differences in the details of their falconry practices. However, the very heart of their passion for and devotion to falconry and their birds remain the same, constant throughout the differences: the bridging of the interspecies gap between human and bird by utilizing a sort of joint attention, in which a considerable part of the enjoyment and “quality” of a falconer comes from an immersion in and comprehension of a non-human attentive field. “Attention” as referred to here and throughout refers not only to the commonly acknowledged “spotlight” or “zoom lens” metaphors of visual or auditory attention that have been made popular by pop psychology (Wolfe et al., 2018). Rather, attention can extend much further than what is in a field of vision or which sounds are picked out from the environment.

In the case of human beings, attention can be conceptualized introspectively as it is inscribed into one’s thoughts and actions, and also commodified and packaged into understandable units, evidenced by the most seemingly mundane aspects of living. Attention, as with virtually all aspects of human lives, is molded by both social and cultural factors, influenced both by the individual and the environment in which they exist. This type of understanding of attention can manifest through even common actions such as walking or describing an object or scenario, in which along with the physical the act of description comes manifestation and illumination, often unconsciously, of facets of the environment, world, subject that have perhaps been made especially prominent by forms of socially and historically ascribed attention toward it (Solnit, 2000; Lee & Ingold, 2006; Horowitz, 2013; Schmidt, 2013). Attention permeates

throughout human existence, embodied and evident in various domains, and cyclically shapes how we experience and interact with the world, and is shaped by that same world as individuals and groups. Attention as it pertains to humans in this way, could then also be applied to other creatures, as they too have existences and actions that interact with their own perceptions and representations of the world (von Uexküll, 1957)

The deep, intricate relationship that falconers share with their birds allow, and in fact hinge, on their understanding and ability to fully embrace a non-human attentional experience; a unique and exceptional mindset and practice. Falconry dates back over 4000 years, perhaps before the first written records, and is currently still practiced in over 60 countries, spanning land and cultures (Khalad, 2009; Agravante, 2015). Even today's falconers' methods remain strikingly similar to those of earlier days, and depictions of the practice by falconers persist throughout time and culture. Falconry, regardless of the time or culture it is practiced in, at its roots shares the same common thread, the connection of falconer and falcon (or hawk, eagle, even owl), supported by the falconer's complete and utter comprehension and embodiment of the attentional world of the bird; that is, not only what the birds sees or hear, but how the existence of the bird in its environment molds its life and behaviors. Through its methods and language often used to teach and discuss falconry emerges an unmistakable and universal truth of falconry, you have to understand what the hawks are paying attention to.

Shared Attention Through Language

An additional characteristic that seems to be shared among falconers of all types is their pride for their endeavor, and excitement and willingness to share their stories with others. Whether the falconer is a Kazakh eagle hunter or from upstate New York or Ireland, their language and messages often remain constant regarding their relationship with their birds and

their enjoyment of falconry (Woginrich, 2015; Woodworth, 2018). Perhaps the most resounding and crucial idea is that the birds are not pets, they are *partners*; a single word with a powerful and complex meaning to falconers and understanding this unique interspecies relationship. As world renowned falconer and social anthropologist Lauren McGough¹, who spent a year studying under Kazakh eagle hunters, describes it, “these birds don’t need her in any way” (Benson, 2017). Deviating from the more typical human relationship with a pet animal, developing a bond and a symbiotic partnership with these birds transcends the basics of interspecies cooperation and takes the experience to a level that needs to be *felt* to be properly understood (Benson, 2017).

This essential feeling describe by McGough is widely echoed among falconers and can be understood as a deep grasp of the bird’s attentional world. These birds of prey, unlike domestic companions such as dogs and cats, are free to simply fly away forever and will thrive in nature if they do so; they are and remain wild animals, never domesticated. In hunting with a bird, the falconer is ultimately striving to do nothing more than orchestrate a flight in which the bird utilizes its natural behavior; they are not trained to kill, as it is their natural instinctual behavior (National Geographic, 2017; Hull, 1994). This partnership, then, is based off of gaining the trust of a wild creature and being able to embrace their natural abilities. From the falconer there is a the ambition, the requirement, to then understand not only that a bird flies quickly as one could observe through a pane of glass, but to embrace intensely the wild nature of the bird, participating in how predator and prey relate to each other, motivations behind behaviors and

¹ I contacted Dr. McGough in hopes of connecting and discussing this paper with her and learning more about her research (her Ph.D. dissertation is titled “Hunting with Eagles Among Kazakh Pastoralists: A New Model for Ethno-Ornithology and Human-Animal Relations”). I received a response one day before the deadline for this paper saying she would be available toward the end of May, or for a phone call or when she is in Boston in July. Unfortunately, the timing did not work out to include her input on this paper, but I am hoping to set up a meeting in the future.

actions, and a sharing of perspective in order to build trust between two independent creatures. In this, falconers find enjoyment; the immersion into a attentional world unlike their own.

Descriptions of enjoyment and love for falconry abound, and while each falconer has a unique rapport with their bird and the practice, several themes recur. Upon a fist or soaring overhead, the falcon accompanies the falconer as they step into the wild, all senses primed in the hunt for prey. The main element of falconry besides caring for the bird is the hunts or flying of the birds. In the game of the hunt, the falconer's role is to flush and scare wild animals out, so that the bird, equipped with dagger-like talons and wings that can carry some species to speeds of up to 240 miles per hour, can complete the hunt with a pursuit and kill. The stillness of nature is shattered in an instant, as the bird spots a rabbit, fox, duck, or other wild game commencing the high-speed tactical chase, accompanied by unparalleled anticipation and bouts of celebration from the falconer.

This process of the hunt, waiting, watching, and chasing is described by falconers as “addictive”, “freeing”, “like magic”, or even that they “manage to feel [the] falcon's heart beating in [their] chest while it flies” (BenZvi, 2018; Al Jazeera English, 2018; Kadry, 2009). Witnessing the birds, they say is “beautiful and violent. It lets you forget everything else happening in the world, from wars to late mortgages, for a few seconds” (Woginrich, 2015). One Kazakh eagle hunter reflects on his hunts, saying that “all the unpleasant things disappear, and I leave all my worries, all my pain behind. I live in that moment [...] Aside from that, I don't think about anything” (Al Jazeera English, 2018). In the midst of the hunt, the falconer, in a way, becomes an extension of their feathered partner, immersing themselves completely into the world of a hunting bird of prey. They baptize themselves in zone of the bird's attention surrounding their place in nature, their pursuit of prey, and forces acting upon them, dictating

their behavior; living vicariously through their partner, and for a few moments abandoning human attentional objects, and from that comes the magic and excitement, the sensation of a common heartbeat between two separate creatures.

Though falconers come from many walks of life and corners of the world, speaking a variety of languages and tongues, they are united in their characterizations of their relationships with their birds and enjoyment of the pursuit. In order to build and maintain a partnership with a wild animal that has the freedom to leave any time, falconers develop insight into the bird's attentional world from its perspective, understanding circumstantial, environmental, and biological motivations for their behaviors and actions. The relationship is fragile, and relies on an equal partnership, according to McGough, who explains that "the only way their relationship will work is if the bird is happy with the partnership. If it's not happy, it will simply fly away. So it requires a unique frame of mind, unlike any other human and animal relationship" (Benson, 2017). This mindset carries over to hunting and flight sessions, during which falconers describe an unparalleled excitement and reciprocity of emotions with their bird, steeping themselves in the experience and existence of the avian hunter. This unique process of shared attention is not only conveyed in how falconers speak and write about falconry but are also evident through common methods and practices in falconry.

Shared Attention Through Practice

In forging their partnership with their birds, falconers carefully structure their training and reinforcement in order to encourage trust in the bird. It is important once again to reiterate the lack of domestication in these birds and their difference from commonly known pets and livestock animals, which rely on humans for their survival. Consequently, the training of these birds requires a particular perspective and headspace unlike those involved with training

domestic animals. Earning their moniker “the masters of the skies” raptors live solitary lives as non-social animals, and thus are not reinforced or rewarded by the prospect or benefit of any social bond with humans or any creature. Furthermore, these wild masters also live naturally challenging lives; within their first year of life, 70 to 90% of raptors that successfully hatched will die (Ash, 2014). Of that, only 10 to 30% that survive past their first birthday, most will die due to predation, malnutrition, other natural causes, or electrocuted by power lines or hit by cars (Woginrich, 2015). Thus, in order to master the skies, these birds are wary and defensive, posing the falconer with a particular path to slowly convince them of trust and to provide them with effective hunting flights, in which the falconer must immerse themselves in or understand and embrace entirely the attentional mentality of the bird.

In the falconer community, it is universally agreed upon that when it comes to the training of birds, slow and steady wins the race, and the bird’s trust. Golden eagle perched upon their gloved wrists, Kazakh eagle hunters gently strokes the back of the eagle’s neck, to which the eagle responds by lower its head; a display of trust toward the eagle hunter. The eagle hunters explain that “you can't be too authoritarian with them, otherwise the eagle will be fierce. You have to give them freedom”, “you must care for her like a child, as you would your own baby. My main form of communication is to stoke her. When you do this you mustn’t scare her. She understands when you are scolding or cursing her. Although she doesn’t know any words, she knows when you are being gentle”, “you should teach it without scaring it [...] If you neglect or harm them in any way, you will not be an eagle hunter” (GoPro, 2017; Al Jazeera English, 2018). Likewise, United States based falconers express the same message, warning that “raptors cannot be taught by poor treatment or harsh words, rather these actions only sow the seeds of distrust, and they assure failure in the training of any raptor (Falconry Told, 2014).

Ultimately, the gentleness and patience and complete lack of aggression and scare tactics needed to train a raptor's trust comes from the understanding that in the world of a falcon, aggression is interpreted as threat to their life, and as a vulnerable animal, any negative or questionable acts are impermissible. By tapping into the attentional focus and mentalities of the bird, falconers attune to how the bird sees them and their actions in relation to its world, and tailor their interactions accordingly. Then only if the falconer is successful in completely molding and matching their behavior with what the bird would perceive as a worthwhile partner, which requires considerable thought and ingenuity as the birds do not normally form social bonds. In training too comes a fluency in subtle raptor body language, which serves not only as a form of communication, but "is all imbued with meaning and insight into what they are thinking" (Philipps, 2018). Reflecting on her connection with the birds, McGough states, "I love being able to understand an eagle's mind" (Philipps, 2018). This deep connection, akin to mind reading, is not only used in the training of the bird, but also throughout any and all interactions, and takes on new forms when falcon and human step out onto the field.

In the field, or wherever the flying and hunting is taking place, human and bird put their partnership on display, hunting wild game in tandem. During these outings, the bird is the true hunter, pursuing and killing the prey, while the falconer acts as a sort of director, coordinate the flight and the hunt. Many falconers describe the experience to a "visceral" or "intense" chess match (Falconry Told, 2014; Benson, 2017). To the extent that they can, falconers take into consideration all factors at play during the hunt, from the effect of the weather to the precise condition of the bird to the behavior of the target prey, which includes weighing the birds up to five times a day to the hundredth of a gram to ensure ideal hunting weight. Striving toward the goal of orchestrating the perfect flight, the falconer must see and experience the environment and

situation as their bird does, and by doing so the grandmaster falconer and master of the sky strengthen their partnership. As creatures of a different species, the way a raptor attends to the world differs at a level much beyond that of two humans. In shifting perspective to that of an animal living life not just through a different lens but a separate camera entirely, falconers become sensitive to factors that otherwise might not have been relevant, or had a completely different meaning as defined by their personal and human attentional sphere, and thus hold the key to engaging and providing successfully for their bird.

Conclusion

Spread amongst six continents and over 60 countries, falconers come from a vast array of walks of life, cultures, and societies; however, they are united by their unique partnership with their birds. Even falconers separated by the passage of time share this connection, from hunters in 2000 B.C., to William Shakespeare, to the falconers today, much of the language used and methods practiced by falconers remain strikingly similar and hinge on one common concept, the bridging of a gap between man and bird through attentional understanding that allows for this partnership to flourish (Burdi, 2011). This understanding goes beyond textbook knowledge, such as knowing the extreme speed at which the birds travel or about their acute eyesight, which can be up to eight times that of a human. In this profound attentional understanding and sharing, falconers incorporate and embody what could be explained as the avian analog of human culture – how life experience and historical, evolutionary, and biological factors shape how the bird perceives and interprets the world; from the birds' vulnerability in the wild to their instinctual motives and behaviors.

While this attentional comprehension and practice is the fundamental component of the falconer's interaction with their bird, many falconers attest to its influence in life outside of

falconry situations. As Shawn Hayes, a falconer from California puts it, “Falconry is not a sport, it’s not an art—it’s a way of life”, a sentiment that British novelist T.H. White, author of *The Goshawk* and *The Once and Future King*, shared half a century earlier, that “Falconry is not a hobby or an amusement: it is a rage” (National Geographic, 2017; Benson, 2017). Others say that falconry fosters an extreme and detailed interest and behavior and insight into relationship building that carries over to other aspects of life; “Vehicles become threats. Brand names disappear. People recede, birds become salient. Every place I’ve flown a hawk makes the world new, turning it into somewhere more complicated, less human-centered, a place brimming with nonhuman lives and motives and significances”, writes Helen MacDonald in her book *H is for Hawk* (Parkin, 2017; National Geographic 2017). The falconer, even in absence of the falcon, retains aspects of avian attention that become ingrained and integrated into their thoughts and actions, shaping their attentional world through a connection with a non-human creature.

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