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Alberta Falconry Loses One Of Its Founders

— by **R. Wayne Nelson**

(With assistance from John Campbell, Jr., the AFA files, and from a manuscript John prepared in the 1990s that is both a partial autobiography and a partial history of falconry in Alberta.)

On August 29, 2003, John Campbell, Sr. died at the age of 77 at the family ranch near Black Diamond, Alberta, after a lengthy battle with cancer. The Alberta Falconry Association (AFA) lost one of its founding fathers and a very fine gentleman. In large part, John's love for falconry and birds of prey, and his dogged persistence in pursuing certain challenges, were responsible for the existence and quality of the sport of falconry that we enjoy in Alberta today. Also, these same qualities caused John to contribute substantially to the return of the Peregrine in those frustrating early years of captive breeding and recovery.

Early Years

As a 14-year-old at a boarding school in England in 1940, John became forever interested in falconry as a result of an article in the British sporting magazine *The Field*. He corresponded at length with Jack Mavrogordato and later with Colonel Gilbert Blaine, two now very famous falconers, and he flew a kestrel and Merlins until joining the British Army in 1944. For a time in Germany he had a second-hand Goshawk until required to return to England on a packed troop ship.

A New Life in Alberta

John emigrated to Canada in 1948, attended Agricultural College at Guelph, Ontario, married Elizabeth Balfour, and bought their ranch at Black Diamond, Alberta, in 1954. John and Elizabeth had seven sons who, no doubt, were quite an effort to raise. These boisterous boys had many times their share of car accidents, rodeo spills, and other life-threatening mishaps, but, thankfully, all survived their very adventurous younger years.

Falconry Again

In 1964, two eyas Goshawks taken by others and given to John brought him back into falconry, and got John Jr. started in the sport at age 11. John then set out to find others interested in the sport and to get falconry legalized in Alberta. Little did he know that this project would take 17 frustrating years! John soon discovered Mike Person, a falconer and recently graduated veterinarian who had just moved to Alberta from Colorado, and they soon became best of friends and co-workers in the decades-long efforts to legalize falconry and then build a vibrant Alberta Falconry Association (AFA). At that time John also corresponded with Richard Fyfe on the east coast of Canada and Frank Beebe on the west coast. John joined NAFA in the fall of 1964 and attended one of the first NAFA Meets, at Centerville, South Dakota. In January 1965 the



first incarnation of the AFA was formed, with John as president and Mike as vice-president. In that year they met with the Director of Wildlife and corresponded with the Minister of Lands and Forests to request legalization of falconry. But, at that time in Alberta there was a large number of unsympathetic Fish and Game club members and naturalists appeared to be a major political deterrent to legalizing falconry.

In the summer of 1965 John, Mike, and others boated parts of a number of Alberta rivers looking in vain for Peregrines. (That fall, at the Madison Peregrine Conference, it became clear that a wide scale Peregrine decline was underway.) In 1966-1967, Richard Fyfe, Frank Beebe, John and others worked to form a Canadian Falconry Association (CFA), for which John served as Alberta Director. Yet, the CFA was relatively short-lived because of the amount of work, the small number of Canadian falconers and the huge distances involved. In 1966, John and others imported six Swedish Goshawks to fly in Alberta and he flew one of these at the BCFA Meet near Vancouver that fall. Also that year, the Alberta association held a field meet and passed a motion that none of its members would take Peregrines from the wild in Alberta. Efforts continued to work with politicians, toward legalization.

Yukon Peregrines and Falconry On Hold

In 1967, John planned a 700 mile (each way) trip by freighter canoe and outboard engine from Dawson City down the Yukon River for 400 miles mostly in Alaska, then up the Porcupine River to Old Crow in the Yukon, and back. Accompanying him on the trip were U.S. falconers Bob Berry and Jim Anderson, and David Glaister, a neighbor of John. In addition to it being a collection trip, it was a falcon survey trip in which they found more than 30 Peregrine nests, banded many nestlings in that still-strong population, and Jim trapped a number of adults to take fat biopsies for DDT analysis. They returned with two eyasses for John and two for Mike Person that were flown that fall.

At Black Diamond, in the fall of 1967, the last falconry meet was held in Alberta until over 20 years later. From 1965 to 1968 the Alberta Fish and Wildlife Division had given a cool reception to the proposals to legalize falconry. Several escapades by B.C. falconers (including poaching Prairie Falcons and Merlins from Alberta) had soured the Alberta government's view of this sport. The

Alberta falconers were informally advised to get rid of their birds because falconry was not going to be legalized here anytime soon. Predictably, John didn't get rid of his Peregrines!

Also in the late 1960s and 1970s, John assisted Richard Fyfe and his Canadian Wildlife Service colleagues in a number of raptor surveys and bio-icide sampling river trips, including a number of trips on the Bow and South Saskatchewan rivers. John became the Canadian director for NAFA in 1971 and discussions were renewed with the provincial government. However, absolutely no progress was achieved. Frustrated, John resigned as Canadian Director at the end of 1973.

The Alberta Provincial Government Peregrine Breeding Project

In 1969, John and John, Jr. went to Old Crow with Yukon permits for two more Peregrines which they trained and flew that fall. In November, John attended the NAFA Peregrine Symposium in Ft. Collins, Colorado and, while driving back with Wayne Nelson, John decided that those four Peregrines were much too important and valuable to risk in flying. He set them up for attempted breeding efforts in his barn. The falcons had been legally obtained in the Yukon, but were not legally held in Alberta because it was impossible to do so under the current regulations.

In early 1971, when Alberta Fish and Wildlife accidentally learned that John had two pairs of Peregrines, and seized the birds, the government quickly realized that it had a really interesting problem. It was doing nothing for a species (the Peregrine Falcon) that had almost vanished from the province, but it had just seized falcons from a private individual who was actually trying to breed Peregrines in captivity. After some interesting discussions, John was fined the minimum fine (\$10), and the birds were formally confiscated to the Crown. But shortly afterwards they were returned to John as Crown (government) property and until 1985, John operated the provincial government's Peregrine breeding project!

In 1973, John fledged the first captive bred anatum Peregrines in Canada, in the same year that



anatoms were first captive-bred in the U.S. And in 1974, he and Phillip Glasier, a British falconer/breeder, were the first to successfully breed Merlins in captivity. During those early, difficult years of captive breeding of falcons, Wayne Nelson helped with observations of courtship behavior and with research literature for John's project. John and Wayne jointly wrote a number of articles on captive breeding methods and on Peregrine and Merlin breeding behavior for publication in *Hawk Chalk* and the *NAFA Journal*. They also made a 60-minute film on the captive breeding behavior of John's Peregrines and showed it to a Raptor Research Foundation conference and a British raptor captive breeding conference. Roger Flood also worked with John, especially on refining the parameters for incubating Merlin eggs and establishing and operating the Alberta Peregrine Foundation to secure funds for additional pens, incubators, and other equipment.

In a number of years John experimented with various incubation and rearing techniques with Peregrines, sometimes improving production, and sometimes not. Despite some losses because of this, by the time that the provincial project was closed down and several pairs were returned to John in 1985, he had raised 85 fledgling Peregrines for use in various breeding projects and for release across Canada. Today, many of the Peregrines in the Prairie Provinces and central and eastern Canada carry genes from John's breeders.

Finally, Falconry Legalized in Alberta

In regard to falconry, John's success with breeding Peregrines for release was an immeasurable positive factor when, in the late 1970s, as the new



John with an immature male Peregrine, Turbo, on a hen mallard, 1994 AGA Field Meet. Photo by Wayne Nelson

Alberta Raptor Association, the falconers and their associates started to push again for legalization of falconry.

From a decade earlier, it was clear that the government was not going to legalize falconry if the province's naturalist groups and Alberta Fish and Game Association were opposed to the sport. So, in 1978, John and Richard Fyfe gave a presentation to the Lethbridge naturalist club and John, Wayne Nelson, and Ross Lein (a University of Calgary professor) gave a presentation to the Calgary Field Naturalists. They focused on falconry's methods, long history, acceptance elsewhere, benefits to raptors and society, and its non-impact on raptor populations. Advice and data from NAFAs TAC, Kent Carnie, and other falconers were immensely helpful at this time.

These meetings, and an article about falconry they wrote for the Calgary Field Naturalist newsletter, changed many minds that had previously been opposed to falconry in Alberta. John and colleagues also made presentations to the Alberta Fish and Game Association (AFGA) at the regional level, and John addressed the AFGA annual convention, sought their endorsement of a resolution supporting falconry, and won it. Then, with the two major forces now on side - or at least not opposing falconry — the Minister and Fish and Wildlife agreed to build falconry legislation. However, when two years later the legislation had still not been completed, John sought some help through a political connection and the Minister quickly brought the legislation to conclusion. After 17 years, finally in November 1981, John and his companions had brought legal falconry to Alberta. John and friends then completed bylaws and formalities so that the Alberta Falconry Association could be officially registered and so the legislation could take effect (because the legislation requires permittees to be members in good standing of the AFA).

Building and Enjoying Falconry

At the inaugural meeting of the newly registered, Alberta Falconry Association in August 1982, John was elected its first president (again). During John's many terms as president of AFA, the association evolved in a number of ways and, in 1987, falconers were finally allowed to take raptors from the wild in Alberta. From 1982 to 1987, only captive bred raptors or those imported from elsewhere could be flown in Alberta. But in 1987, with eyas and passage birds now available, Alberta falconry finally came into its own. John hosted the first and second AFA field meets of the legal era at the Campbell ranch near Black Diamond in 1988 and 1989. Because of a possible perception of conflict with his responsibilities in another organization, John stepped down from the presidency of AFA in 1990.

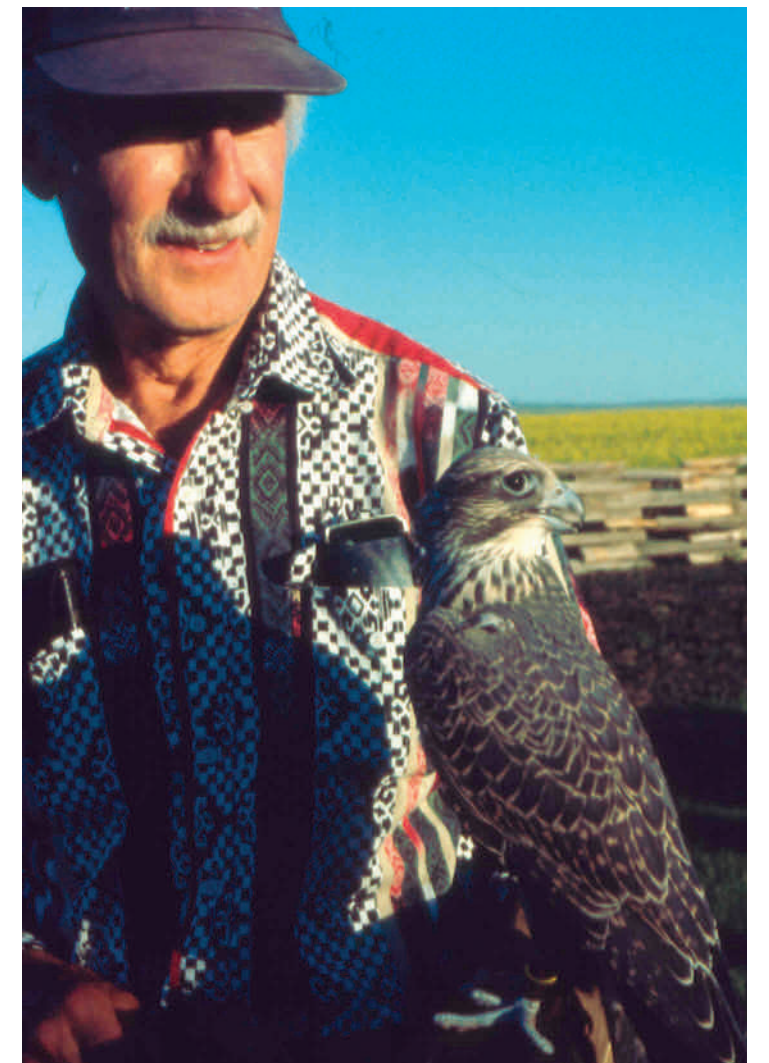
Through the 1990s the quality of falconry in Alberta reached a high level. Camaraderie and gentle peer pressure encouraged all falconers to work hard and do well with their birds. After retiring (sort of) from ranching and farming, in some years John hawked for long periods in the fall with Mike and Linda Person, Cleo and Mary Sealing, Rick Skibsted, and others. In some of these years

John did exceptionally well with several of his falcons, especially Peregrines, at ducks and sometimes at huns and sharp-tails. Through all of these years John was the AFA Supervisor for a number of novice falconers.

At the AFA field meet at Stettler in October 2000, John and Mike were each presented with a framed photo and a certificate and made Honorary Life Members of AFA. John flew a Peregrine until autumn of 2002, but sent it to Mike in May 2003 when he was becoming quite unwell. John was especially touched when, in late July 2003, NAFA bestowed upon him an Honorary Membership.

With wild birds of prey, John had many great adventures and he contributed in many ways to the recovery of Peregrines in Canada. John was also a major force in legalizing falconry in Alberta and bringing us the many opportunities and the high standards of falconry we have here.

Alberta falconers sincerely thank Elizabeth and the rest of the Campbell family for sharing this wonderful man with us for all of those years.



July 1998. Photo by Wayne Nelson

Black Diamond Peregrines

John A. Campbell

Like most raptor biologists and falconers, I knew the Peregrine was in danger of extinction in the 1960s. I decided to try to prevent this possibility from happening.

In the winter of 1966, I researched Peregrine records for Canada. At that time, Peregrines were considered of little value, or worse yet, as pests. Bureaucrats and non-

moved near fledging by the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) or Provincial Fish and Wildlife personnel and released all across Canada from the Bay of Fundy in the east to Alberta. Some were added to breeding projects at the CWS project at Wainwright, Alberta, the University of Saskatchewan project, and The Peregrine Fund. In return,



ful so long as we as a group were successful.

