

DONORS:

California Hawking Club with Frank and Linda Ely, Mrs. Mary Fairman

In Memorium

by Glenn Stewart

Norval “Val” Fairman took his first peregrine falcon for falconry at a time that was a far different era than that which we enjoy today. Game hawking was new to most Americans and the captive propagation of raptors and radio telemetry were completely unknown. Val recorded his first trip to a peregrine falcon eyrie. It was a hundred foot tall sandstone cliff overlooking the ocean at Point Reyes near the San Francisco Bay Area. The film begins with him and his new wife, Mary, loading in to their convertible 1957 Chevy, and ends with peregrines stooping above the beach.

Val did not take a peregrine that day, nor did he take one on his next visit. These early days of falconry had not yet benefited from Yvon Chouinard’s later popularization of rock climbing and attendant gear. So being a smart guy, he hung a ladder from the top of the cliff but found that he still could not quite reach the eyrie. He finally hired a climber to make the trip to the nest and collect his bird.

During his next twenty years, Val watched the near extirpation of the peregrine due to DDT contamination of the environment and the beginning of captive propagation. He saw Brian Walton help other Bay Area falconers, Louis Davis and Dewey Savell get the first two raptor breeding permits awarded to non-scientists in the late 1970s, and Val soon had one too. He tried unsuccessfully to breed prairie falcons but had success after Dewey gave him a pair of peregrines. (Breeders were not allowed to receive any compensation for their progeny for at least another decade). **From that time until his death in 2016, Val always had at least one pair of peregrines on his property in Diablo, California.**

I got to know Val about twenty years ago when he was in the process of retiring from a career as an attorney for California’s Department of Transportation. At the time, he had two pairs of peregrine falcons that were producing as many as three cohorts of young each year. As a conservation biologist for the UC Santa Cruz Predatory Bird Research Group I would collect all the young he produced and set up a hack site for them. His older pair usually had eggs in the nest by early January and five week-old young in March. The pair would immediately recycle when we took the grown young and produce a second cohort of young that were ready for release at the more “normal” time of mid-June. So we usually released seven or eight young per year from that pair alone, and as many as a dozen from his property.

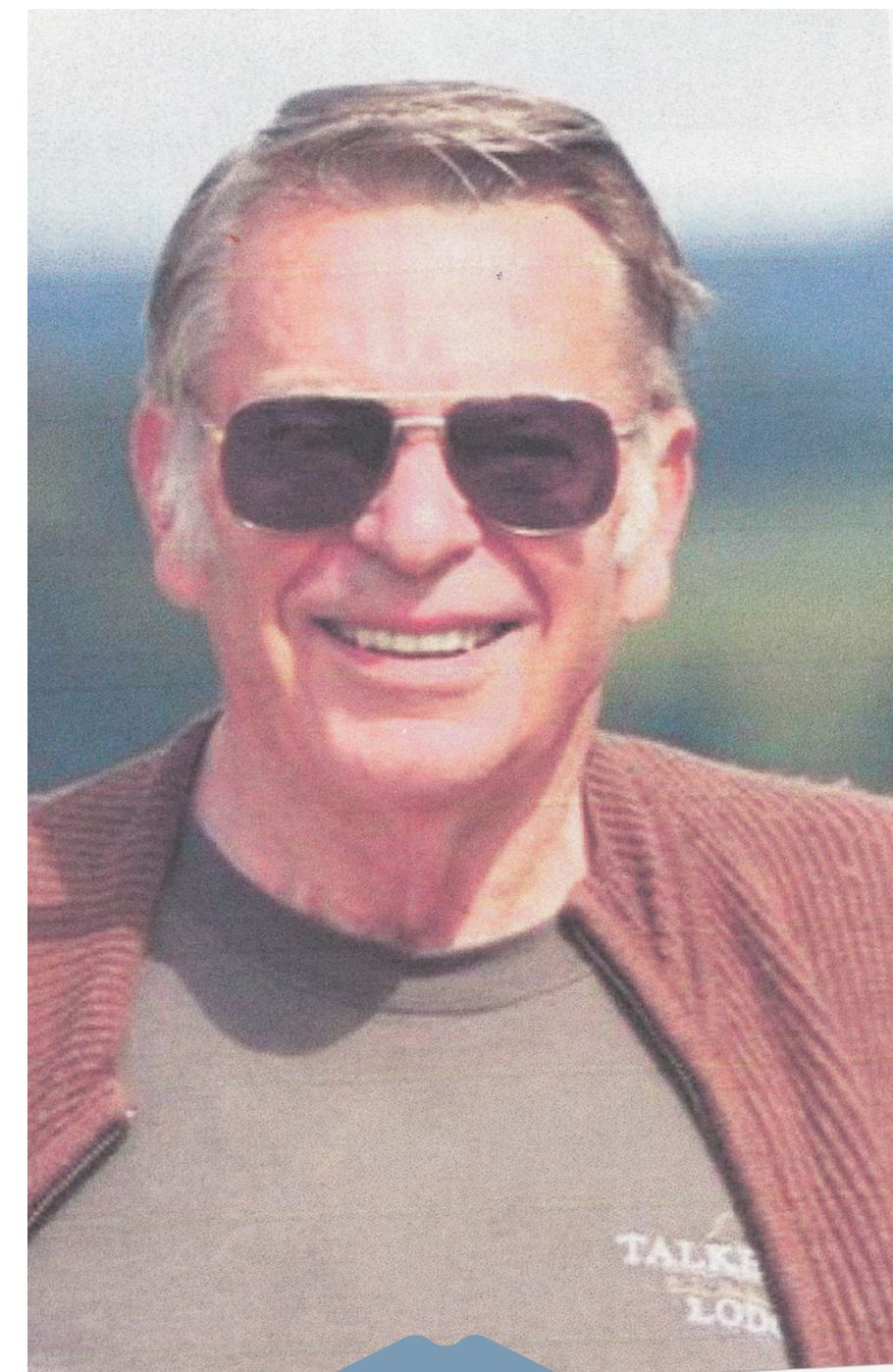
Periodically I asked Val if he wanted to sell or give any of his birds to falconers and occasionally he held back a falcon as a gift for someone. But Val said that he preferred to release his birds—to put some back—

and besides, he said, “falconers often complained that the birds were the wrong color, wrong size, or too hard to train.” It just made him feel good to see the birds going to the wild and he came to one of our hack sites along the coast to see a group of them released one year. One of his birds was found nesting on Santa Cruz Island off the Santa Barbara coast and another was famously the mate to the San Jose City Hall female in 2008.

In the course of our endangered species recovery work we often had contracts that underwrote the costs of releasing peregrines to the wild and we paid Val and other breeders for this purpose. We released Val’s birds in Santa Barbara County, Muir Beach, San Gregorio, Santa Cruz, and even on Idaho’s Camas Prairie. But every single time we paid Val for falcons under the terms of our contracts he refunded the money to the Predatory Bird Research Group as a donation that could be used for other raptor recovery work. He paid the entire cost of the mountain of quail his falcons consumed. More than anything else Val was a gentleman and a generous human being. He used his ability as an attorney to push back on some of the overly restrictive and oppressive policies of the Department of Fish and Game in the 1980s to help make falcons more readily available to all of us.

I imprinted one of Val’s falcons for use as a duck hawk and so that audiences could “connect with nature” during the many public lectures I offered on the peregrine recovery. “Sophie” flew at 1050 grams her first year. She and I visited schools, universities, corporations, Audubon club meetings, and community groups. During her thirteen years with me she killed ducks, appeared before more than 75,000 people, and agreeably stood for artificial inseminations that resulted in many lovely hybrids including two that I fly today. I am grateful to Val for that legacy.

In his final years Val never left home and rarely strayed far from his easy chair. I usually found him reading the most recently published falconry book. Even when he had lost the physical ability to be in the field with his birds and his dogs, he continued to read about our sport and to visualize flights in his mind. Val was a gentleman and avid follower of our sport. Val Fairman will be missed by those fortunate enough to have known this pioneer of Bay Area falconry. He will be honored with the installation of a memorial plaque on the Wall of Remembrance at the Archives of Falconry in March 2018.



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