



Donors

Friends of Don Hunter

NAFA Journal 2002

In Memory of a True Gentleman and Falconer: Donald V. Hunter, Jr.

—by Vic Hardaswick, Kent Christopher, and Tom Cade

It is with regret and deep personal sorrow that we report the passing on June 14, 2002 of an old friend of American falconry, Donald V. Hunter, Jr. His departure marks the loss of a primary figure among the generation of men who pioneered the sport of falconry in America.

Don was born on the family farm in rural Ulster, Pennsylvania on April 15, 1922. His school years were spent in Chevy Chase, MD, a suburb of Washington, D.C., where his father practiced law. Don explored and learned all the nearby woods, fishing holes, and hunting spots in that



area. During the summers, he enjoyed roaming the outdoors at their farm along the Susquehanna River. Don had a love of nature and an interest in wildlife photography. One evening his father took him to a lecture on falconry. This event changed the course of his life.

Growing up in the D.C. area, Don was a contemporary of such men as Frank and John Craighead, Al Nye, Morgan Berthrong, and other early falconers. Don worked with the local Cooper's and "Duck Hawks," located their nest sites, photographed, banded, and trained them. He pursued these interests along with his passion for hunting and fishing until he entered undergraduate school at Cornell University at the age of 16.

Don left his studies prior to the outbreak of WWII to join the Army Air Corps. He flew mainly the B-29 bomber as a flight commander in the Pacific Theater. Don's war experiences made great stories that he occasionally shared. Perhaps the following vignette serves to convey something about the character of this unique man. Don's flight of B-29 bombers left the Island of Tinian and headed west for Japan. Upon reaching their targets in Japan, they were met by heavy ground fire and all the aircraft were shot down except for Don's. Don and his crew did not escape unscathed — their aircraft had over 2000 holes in it. This B-29 was from then on named "Flak Alley Sally." Because of increased drag produced by battle damage, they did not have enough gas to make it all the way back to Tinian and landed on Iwo Jima for fuel. After a few repairs, they limped their aircraft back to Tinian. When they circled around the island to land, the ramp was empty except for a bunch of guys jumping up and down. When they landed, Don discovered that his ground crew had waited there for 12 hours past his scheduled arrival time, hoping against all odds that he and his aircrew would return. Those guys thought a lot of Don, and he thought the world of them. He was an excellent pilot and twice awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

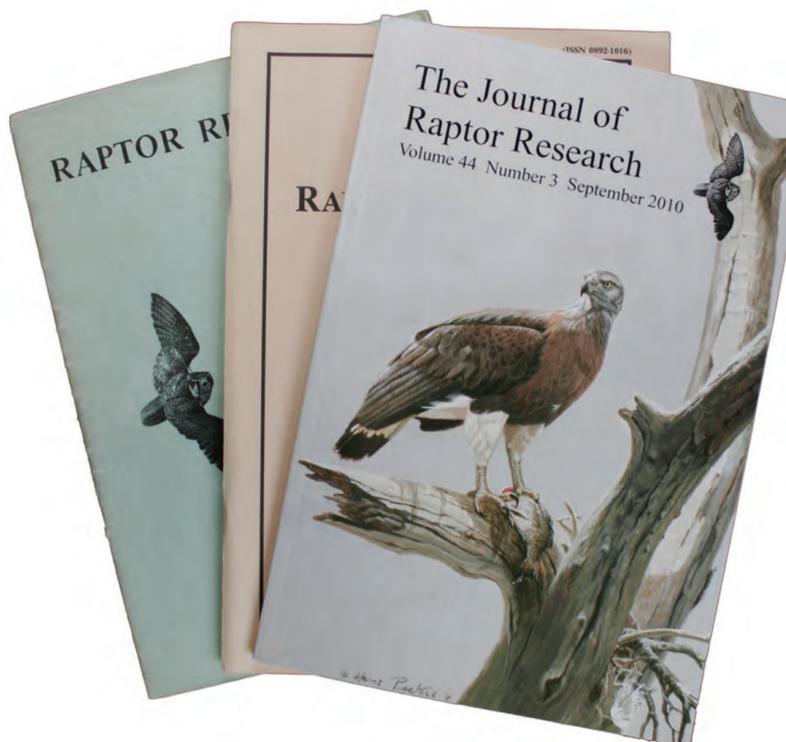


After the war, Don married, finished his undergraduate degree at American University in Washington, D.C., and completed his J.D. in law at the University of South Dakota after moving his growing family to Vermillion, SD to begin a lifelong career in agriculture and public service. A natural leader, he served as President of the Livestock Feeders Association at both the state and national levels, President of the National Cattleman's Association, and Chairman of the South Dakota Livestock Sanitary Board. In the late 1950s, with his formal education completed and his career underway, Don's love of falconry was rekindled. He hunted local rabbits with his Red-tailed Hawk/Basset Hound combination. Boise falconer, Rich Howard, visited Don in the 1960's and described such a hunt. "It was a hoot. With the Basset Hound in full cry and the Red-tail flying from one tree to another, we flushed cottontails and watched this dynamite team work the brush. Two cottontails were bagged that afternoon."

"I can still remember Don's enthusiastic smile of satisfaction. It was a good hunt." Rich also revealed that, "The most memorable with Don was seeing someone actually fly a Gyrfalcon from a horse. It was impressive — a man living the history of a centuries old sport." Don's pride and joy for some 17 years was his magnificent white Gyrfalcon named Lena, which was trapped in 1964 during the Hunter-Webster expedition to Northern Mackenzie on the coast of the Beaufort Sea in Canada. Don's falconry developed into flights with Goshawks from horseback, and his male Gos, Dingbat, together with his pointer, were a deadly combination over the years taking many South Dakota pheasants 'on the rise.' Don's falconry evolved into a modern version of grouse hawking using Gyrs and Gyr hybrids that would wait-on at high pitches over his cherished "all age" English Pointers. Don conducted classic game hawking like this for the rest of his life.

In 1963, falconry gained formal acceptance and recognition as a legitimate field sport in South Dakota as a result of Don's passion for the art. Don was a founding and honorary member of the North American Falconers Association (NAFA) and hosted Meets, in 1963, 1964, 1966, and 1968 near his ranch in Centerville. Those gatherings served to focus local, national, and international attention on the growing sport of falconry. NAFA has become the fruition of the dreams of the charter members, some 45 of them including Don, who attended the organizational meeting held at Hal Webster's home, "Valkenswaard," near Denver during the Thanksgiving holiday of 1961. Don influenced the growth of NAFA throughout his life and was always a strong supporter of that organization.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, as the breeding populations of Peregrine Falcons in North America were devastated by the insidious metabolic effects of DDT, falconers set out to breed these falcons in sufficient numbers for eventual repopulation efforts. Don joined in this quest and once again demonstrated his strong and persistent conservation ethic. He experimented with early attempts at falcon propagation and loaned several Peregrines to the eastern Peregrine Fund program. He attended the famous Madison Peregrine Conference organized by Prof. Joe Hickey in 1965. At the end of that conference, Don chaired a rump meeting of attending falconers and biologists to discuss the possibility of breeding Peregrines in captivity and to consider how the different parties and interests might cooperate to that end. The formation of The Raptor Research Foundation, Inc. was a direct outgrowth of that meeting. Incorporated by Donald V. Hunter, Jr., Byron E. Harrell, Paul F. Springer, and George Jonkel in 1966 and first headquartered at Vermillion, SD, the foundation began publishing *Raptor Research News* (now *The Journal of Raptor Research*). It was a valuable clearinghouse



In 1966 Don and three others founded the Raptor Research Foundation

of information for the developing raptor propagation projects from 1967 to 1974, especially through the quick distribution of the "Breeding Project Information Exchange" and through a series of highly successful and well-attended annual meetings. The Raptor Research Foundation subsequently developed into an international scientific organization with diverse interests in raptor biology. Many of its newer members do not know

that the organization started out as a small group of people who were passionately devoted to learning how to breed Peregrines and other raptors in captivity.

Don's forte was working with people of divergent and often contradictory opinions. His mature and calming influence drew people together. He had the stature of a war hero, lawyer, civic leader, and statesman along with the common sense of one who had worked patiently with the soil as a farmer.

On his many trips to Washington, D.C. as President of the National Cattlemen's Association, he often had an opportunity to slip in some discussion with high government officials about the conservation of raptors. On one occasion Don was scheduled to meet with the Secretary of Agriculture about various Cattlemen's issues, but the only thing the Secretary wanted to talk about was Peregrine Falcons and DDT. Evidently, the EPA Administrator, William Ruckelshaus, was about to announce the cancellation of all registered uses of DDT, and the Secretary needed to be reassured that it was the right thing to do.



Don Hunter with white Gyr (Lena) and favorite horse (Buddy)



Don Hunter with Corny McFadden at a NAFA Meet

Raptor Center (TRC) at the University of Minnesota was another priority of Don's. He believed that our birds deserved the best care available. Don always supported the work of The Raptor Center and continues to do so even after his death.

Dr. Pat Redig, who knew Don well, recently announced the establishment of the Don Hunter Endowment for Raptor Medicine and Surgery. He states that, "The purpose is to generate a stipend that supports a falconer-veterinarian to fulfill the requirements for 3 years of clinical training in raptor medicine and surgery at TRC and to conduct original research that leads to a master's degree in a clinically important area that expands our knowledge base in this field. Having an endowed fund supported by falconers in Don's name is a terrific legacy."

The South Dakota Raptor Trust (SDRT) was co-founded by Don in 1987 and is a direct extension of his interest in breeding Peregrines for the recovery effort. SDRT provided Peregrine Falcons to many of the eastern states participating in recovery activities and also produced more birds for the mid-western recovery program than any other single entity, an achievement for which he felt great pride. Don attended, as an honored guest, the August 1999 celebration for the Peregrine Falcon's removal from the Endangered Species List, a landmark event that was hosted by The Peregrine Fund at its World Center for Birds of Prey in Boise, Idaho. While there, Don took the time to meet for several hours in Tom Cade's basement with a group of 13 other falconers who all had concerns about the degradation of our prairie grassland and sagebrush steppe ecosystems.

The establishment of The

Dramatic declines of various wildlife species and especially grouse that inhabit these vast landscapes indicated serious problems. The North American Grouse Partnership was the direct result of that meeting, and Don became its first Vice-president and a founding board member. Prairie Grouse are now recognized as umbrella species for these ecological systems, and NAGP continues its work to achieve the shared vision of a world in which humans demonstrate the wisdom to manage landscapes so that grouse and other wildlife can flourish forever.

Throughout his life, Don continued to encourage wise use of our natural resources and preservation of our cherished natural heritage. As a life-long farmer and rancher, he recognized clearly that agriculture helped build a strong America but that now an overly developed agribusiness threatens the integrity of our natural ecological systems and must be brought into a better balance for the common good. Although the spark of life has now left the eyes of Don Hunter, his life was and will continue to be an inspiration and guiding light to the many of us who value conservation, humanity, dignity, integrity, and compassion. Upon his passing, his son, Mike, expressed it well when he said, "He taught us how to live, and he taught us how to die." His son, Van, closed the eulogy at Don's memorial service with the proverb, "Mourn not too long that he is gone, but rejoice forever that he was." "À la vol," dear friend!

Don Hunter and Lena Horn

