

Tourists can now experience the ancient sport of falconry



WOODSTOCK, Vt. (AP) — Falconry is an old tradition in many parts of the world, including the United Kingdom and the Middle East. But now it's starting to be offered as an activity for tourists at hotels, vineyards and other sites around the U.S., from Vermont to Colorado to California.

The ancient sport of using birds of prey to hunt wild animals has existed for at least 4,000 years. Experiences designed for tourists typically show off the birds' flight and faithful return to their handlers, though in these programs, birds don't usually bring back creatures they've caught.

During a 45-minute session at the Woodstock Inn in Woodstock, Vermont, a professional falconer flies a trained bird and provides a history of falconry and information about raptors. Then guests can try it themselves, handling and free-flying a Harris's hawk, or they can just observe the sport. In a longer 90-minute session, a second raptor is flown.

Bouchaine Vineyards in the Carneros region of California's Napa Valley started using falconers in 2016 to keep other birds — like starlings and migratory species— from eating their grapes. Visitors were so intrigued to see the peregrine falcons fly and work with their trainer that the vineyard decided to offer experience to its guests, along with wine-tasting and lunch.

"It's wonderful to showcase the site. It's amazing to showcase the birds, and to be able to actually hold a glove out and have a falcon land on your hand is really an incredible experience," said Chris Kajani, Bouchaine winemaker and general manager.

At New England Falconry in Vermont last month, a young Harris's hawk was eager to do what's he's trained to do. He launched from a high wooden platform soaring through the swirling winds over a grassy field and landed squarely on the falconer's gloved hand where he was rewarded with a piece of meat.

The Harris's hawk — the most social raptor because it hunts in groups— had rich brown and tawny feathers, sturdy yellow legs with long black talons, and intense eyes that allow him to spot prey while soaring high in the sky.

"He has fun out here," falconer Jessica Snyder says of the 1-year-old hawk named Audubon. "He can catch himself meadow voles, anything from even a worm. He likes to eat worms. He has about 10 times the sight ability of an average human."

Next Snyder brought out a screeching female barn owl, its flat white face appearing a little sleepy in the broad daylight. The nocturnal owl with its golden spotted feathers perked up and took flight, flying slower and lower than the hawk, its wings silent in the wind. Snyder called her with a whistle and a “pshhht” sound because as an owl she’s very sound-oriented.

The birds have a bell and an antenna attached to their leg so they can be heard or tracked if they fly off. And each bird has a unique personality, she said.

The ancient sport of using birds to hunt rabbits, squirrels, ducks, even foxes declined with the introduction of guns. Falconry only arrived in the U.S. in the early 1900s and tended to be a sport for the elite, according to Sheldon Nicolle, president of the North American Falconers Association.

A recent best-selling memoir, “H is for Hawk,” helped introduce falconry to contemporary readers through the story of a woman training a northern goshawk in England while grieving for her father.

Nicolle estimates there are likely 20 or 30 opportunities for falconry experiences around the country in addition to the Woodstock Inn and Bouchaine Vineyards, including in southern Vermont at the Equinox resort, and the Broadmoor resort in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

“As a falconer, I always tell people essentially all we are is extreme bird-watchers because we’re getting to watch this up close and personal,” he said.

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If You Go...

NEW ENGLAND FALCONRY: Open year-round, by appointment only. Located at 4148 Hartland Hill Rd., Woodstock, Vermont. 802-457-6621. <http://www.falconryatwoodstockvt.com/>. Rates: introductory session: \$95, \$30 for participant who doesn’t handle hawks. Extended session: \$180 per participant, \$50 for participant who doesn’t handle hawks. Located about 260 miles (418 kilometers) from New York City and 140 miles (225 kilometers) from Boston.

BOUCHAINE VINEYARDS: Falconry vineyard experiences are offered in spring, summer and fall by reservation, (800) 654-WINE or 707-252-9065. Located at 1075 Buchli Station Road, Napa, California. The cost is \$200 per person, including wine tasting and lunch in the Bouchaine gardens.

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