

THE FALCONRY OF RUSSIA

BY STEPHEN J. BODIO

ILLUSTRATIONS BY VADIM GORBATOV

Falconry, one of the oldest and certainly “greenest” of all field sports, is dependent on a deep understanding of all of its elements—not just of raptors but of their prey and also of the hunting birds’ helpers such as hounds, bird dogs, and horses, many of which have co-evolved with falconry. It is also an endless source of imagery from ancient times to the present, from cave art to the paintings of modern masters such as Vadim Gorbатов. All of this was and is true of any falconry. But Russian falconry is the most interesting and important of all, both historically and in terms of “spectacle.” Because of Russia’s vastness and geographical diversity and its position, both physically and culturally, as the bridge between Europe and Asia, Russia’s falconry has been the most splendid and diverse in the world. There is no kind of hunting with birds, from the most humble to the most ornate, that has not been practiced at some time in the lands ruled by Russia. Tsars have maintained imperial mews with hundreds of falcons; peasants and farmers have supplemented their harvest flying sparrowhawks at tiny migratory quail; and mounted nomads still hunt wolves with eagles in the mountains and steppes of Central Asia as they have done as far back as anyone knows. In fact, if we consider all of the lands once ruled by the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, now a loose grouping of independent states, as a sort of “Greater Russia,” then Russia contains somewhere in its heart the birthplace of both falconry and many other ancient partnerships between animal and man, such as horsemanship.



The world's oldest kind of falconry may also be one of the strongest survivors, maybe because it was useful in the beginning and still is today. Any falconry may be compelling, fascinating, esthetic, and a source of obsession; however, though hawking was more pragmatic before the invention of firearms, it has never been the easiest way to obtain your food. But on the vast steppes of Central Asia, south of the taiga, and in the mountain ranges such as the Tian Shan and the Altai that cut through them, nomadic horsemen have been training golden eagles, the legendary "Berkuts," for thousands of years. These birds can and still do catch foxes for their skins, small deer for food, and wolves to protect the nomads' flocks. Though difficult, their use is "practical" with a vengeance! My book *Eagle Dreams* describes two trips I took to ride with the Kazakhs in Mongolia and hunt with them. These Kazakhs had fled Stalin's collectivization of Kazakhstan's

"Vadim Gorbatov has ridden with the Berkutchi of Kazakhstan, seen goshawks nesting in Moscow parks, and watched Georgian falconers toss their sparrowhawks at migrating quail."

agriculture and his persecution of their culture in the 1940s. They are still herders, and still sell the skins their birds collect.

But, as I was able to see later, Stalin never managed to stamp out "eagle culture" in Kazakhstan, despite his efforts to ban it, which extended to his ordering thousands of the birds' traditional partner, the tazi dog, to be killed because they allegedly threatened the game. It is gratifying to report that hunters with eagles and tazis are scattered from the Tian Shan in the south to Siberia in the north, and that an entire village near Almaty, Nura, is composed of eaglers and falconers who fly other birds such as goshawks as well.

These falconers fly all of the quarry that their brethren in Mongolia do, and more—they also hunt deer with eagles. Also visible in the steppes are ancient petroglyphs, rock "paintings," depicting games, dogs, horses, and hunters, some 6,000 years old or even older. Clues to the origins of falconry may be exposed here. One I photographed seems to depict an attack on a large hoofed animal by a bird of prey and dogs, much like the hunting done with both today.

From Central Asia falconry seems to have moved east to China, Korea, and Japan; south to India; and west to European Russia in the north and toward the Caspian, the Black Sea,

and the Mediterranean along the Silk Road. I will return to European Russia, but the branch that went southwest leads to other ancient surviving "practical" forms. The best-known of these is classical Arab falconry, done until recently "for the pot" but now a sport of rich sheikhs. Obviously, this form is not Russian, though the sheikhs use birds—sakers and peregrines—hatched in Siberia, Mongolia, and the "Stans." However, another ancient form of falconry that traveled in this direction survives in the Caucasus, Georgia, probably Armenia and Azerbaijan, Turkey, and around the Mediterranean. All through this area, people in the countryside catch sparrowhawks in the late fall and train these delicate birds quickly. Soon the fields are full of migrating coturnix quail, easily found with the aid of a pointing dog and as easily caught by a thrown "spar." In a few weeks such a bird can account for hundreds of quail, after which she is usually released rather than

kept through the winter.

In European Russia, the practical man probably flew goshawks, the best hawk

for getting a varied bag of edible creatures. Russia's goshawks include the biggest (and what many consider the best) subspecies in the world, the legendary white birds of the races *buteoides* and *albidus* that the Chinese falconers call the "North-of-the-Waste Whites" because they appear in China from north of the Taklamakan Desert in Xinjiang. (These go well south in migration and have always been prized by falconers in the Stans; I have seen a trained one in Kazakhstan).

Russia has city parks large enough for goshawks to nest and unlike in the West, where the species seems to avoid man, the bold goshawks of Russia actually nest inside the city of Moscow.

But the Russians also controlled the greater part of the European trade in the arctic gyrfalcon, the bird of emperors. (Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, Holy Roman Emperor and King of Sicily in the 12th and 13th centuries, was a devotee, and wrote the first scientific natural history, largely about their training and care).

For several hundred years, "Dvinsky Pomichiks"—wandering trappers—traveled north and east to Siberia on secret roads when it was still cold to take young gyrs from their cliff nests or trap slightly older ones from the sky, suffered the mosquitoes and "white nights" of



the far north, then returned as freezing rivers and snow made their travel possible again. In the 17th century an enormous expansion of falconry under Tsar Aleksey Mikhailovitch brought many more birds to his palaces and hunting lodges along the Moskva. Unlike in the west, whereas the last great expert on the species until very recently may have been Frederick II (gyrs were rarely used effectively between 1820 and the 1970s), gyrfalcons were understood and highly valued in Russia, where they were used on difficult and dangerous quarry such as ravens, herons, and cranes. Russia even has a patron saint of falconry, St. Tryphon, whose icon always depicts him with a white Gyrfalcon on his right fist—he was a falconer to the tsar, and his head was saved when a lost bird was revealed to him in a vision.

Because falconry in European Russia was associated with the aristocracy it vanished for a while, along with such things as state kennels with hundreds of borzoi dogs. It has now undergone a revival; because Russian falconers can fly native gyrfalcons, sakers, peregrines, and eagles, they are uniquely well supplied.

In such parts of the "Empire" as the Caucasus and the various Stans, it has been going strong as far back as memory reaches.

Without any doubt, the origin of falconry is in Central Asia, somewhere in the Altai and Tian Shan ranges where Siberia, Kazakhstan and Mongolia come together. Possibly it is linked to the domestication of horses in the steppes of southern Siberia and eastern Kazakhstan—certainly all the early horse cultures seem to be falconry—or "eaglery"—cultures. Amazingly, they still exist today, still working eagle and horse and tazi hound together as they have at least since the Bronze Age.

The great portraitist of Central Asian falconry is Russia's Vadim Gorbatov. He has ridden with the Berkutchi of Kazakhstan, seen goshawks nesting in Moscow parks, and watched ancient Georgian falconers toss their sparrowhawks at migrating quail. He says of falconry. Here and in the following article is a selection from his work, featuring birds of prey. If anyone has ever depicted falconry better than Vadim, I have not seen it. ■

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The Hawks of Vadim Gorbatov

BY STEPHEN J. BODIO

A stunning portfolio of paintings by Russia's premier wildlife artist

In the United States, at least until recently, wildlife painters got little respect. The few exceptions—an Audubon here, a Rungius or Fuertes there—stood out starkly. Exactly why this was so is hard to understand; in Europe and England naturalist-artists have always had a place.

The same has also been true in Russia, which even under the Soviet system was a nation of nature lovers. In Russia,



perhaps the best-known “animalier” is Moscow’s Vadim Gorbatov. He appears everywhere—in calendars, magazines (especially in *Hunting and Nature*, the oldest continuously published outdoor magazine in the world), books, and galleries.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, he has begun to get more exposure in the West. Part of his new visibility results from his participation in the Artists for Nature Foundation. Based in the Netherlands, this organization brings together well-known artists in every medium from all over the world to what its founder, Ysbrand Brouwers,



Gorbatov is especially drawn to the goshawk, a native of his beloved northern forests. Some of the finest examples of the goshawk in art were achieved by anonymous painters in 17th-century Japan, but Gorbatov has matched or even exceeded them. Look at his adult goshawk swooping into a group of strutting black grouse (above) or his immature goshawk missing a mallard (at left).



Gorbatov's evocative portrait of an adult peregrine falcon at rest captures the silent grandeur of the arctic. Behind the falcon, vast herds of caribou migrate across the frozen tundra.

calls “endangered locations,” so that their artwork can focus attention on the need for conservation. Gorbatov has been working with the organization since its beginning in 1999 and has expanded his palette to include wildlife from Alaska, the Pyrenees, India, and elsewhere. But his favorite subjects—birds of prey, large predators, and the fauna of northern Russia, the taiga, and the tundra—remain his most evocative.

Vadim Gorbatov was born in 1940. Like most naturalists, he started young. “I began to draw very early, when I was four years old,” he said. “It was wartime, and, like all children of that time, I drew pictures of war. At the same time, I started to draw animals. One time in kindergarten, prior to the New Year’s Day holiday, while children were sleeping, a room for games was decorated with stuffed birds and mammals, dry tree branches, leaves, and cotton. When I entered the room, I was stunned. This picture impressed me so profoundly that I remember it today, sixty years later.”

He learned from books as well. “Books that influenced my childhood were *Animal Heroes*

by Ernest Thompson Seton, Rudyard Kipling’s *Jungle Book*, and Vladimir Arseniev’s *Dersu the Hunter*,” he said. Models for his early drawing included sketches and paintings by German artist William Kuhnert: “I was fascinated and endlessly redrew these illustrations and modified them in my own way. I also liked to make small sculptures of animals out of clay and cut them out of chalk.”

In rural Russia after the war, life was still simple. “Another source of my interest in animals was the fact that I spent my childhood in a village where I could interact with them and with the beautiful, still rich and unpolluted natural environment of central Russia,” he said. “Postwar times were difficult. Therefore, our family as well as our neighbors had chickens, ducks, goats, and pigs. We had dogs and cats. There was a herd of cows and a stable of horses in the village. All of these were themes for my drawings.

“When other kids were playing soccer or flirting with girls, I wandered in the woods, fields, and swamps. I had half a binocular, and I knew all the nests of the birds and dens of the mammals in our forest.

“The impressions of my childhood and the

interest in animals that emerged during that time were probably very strong. After I had been involved with new, fresh ideas of ‘industrial esthetics’ and industrial design, graduated from the Academy, and defended my dissertation, I returned to what was dear to me during my childhood and resumed drawing animals.”

I asked him if his parents had any interest in nature or animals. “I don’t think they had any particular interest in nature, but they supported my passions and obtained books about animals for me. Most importantly, they did not mind the presence of feathered and furred creatures and other pets in the house. I kept lizards, frogs, salamanders, injured birds, squirrels, and ferrets. I had birds of prey, such as kestrels, buzzards, and sparrowhawks.”

Raptors and falconry are among Gorbatov’s favorite subjects. He is especially drawn to the goshawk, native of his beloved northern forests, and the golden eagle used in falconry by the Kazakh nomads. The fierce goshawk, used as the “kitchen hawk” for nomad and peasant alike because it will catch more edible game than the more specialized and impractical “noble” falcon, is a totemic bird in Gorbatov’s art. The masters of the goshawk in art were the anonymous painters of the Tokugawa shogunate in 17th-century Japan, who worked with ink on silk, but Gorbatov has matched or even exceeded them. For perfect examples, look at his adult northern goshawk swooping into a group of strutting black grouse, or his immature goshawk missing a duck (a painting almost Asian in its delicacy).

For a different kind of portrait—one of ferocity in repose—look at his old Kazakh resting with his trained “Berkut” or golden eagle. And notice the contrast of its rich desert colors with the chill grays and dark greens of his Russian paintings.

He remains intrigued by falconry to this day. “Hunting with birds of prey has a special place in my mind. I am fascinated with this kind of hunting; it is simply a part of nature’s process . . . profit and trophy hunting have no place in it. In falconry, everything is in the process, not in the result.”

Gorbatov does not hunt, but he respects ecologically sound hunting. Hunting in Russia remains respectable. “I was not a hunter when I was a child, but I made bows and slingshots like other boys. Later, during my youth, I hunted hazel grouse with a gun. I have a positive attitude toward hunters and do not consider them enemies of nature. The true hunters among my friends with whom I travel

to hunt (I do not take a gun, only binoculars and a notebook) are nature lovers who care about the preservation of wild nature. These hunters are excellent pathfinders, knowledgeable in biology and animal behavior. To them, hunting is primarily an interaction with nature and a reason to get away from the big cities. Among Russian artists whose work I value, among writers and actors, there are many true and passionate hunters.”

Gorbatov has traveled and studied widely (one of the consistent features of all his art is attention to historical and cultural detail), first in the old Soviet Union—to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan—and later to India, Alaska, and South America. Of these travels, he speaks warmly: “To the artist-animalist, it is absolutely necessary to work in wild nature and visit the wild places where the animals that you draw live.”

Recently he has become fascinated with Karelia, the boggy, forested, subarctic region on the border of Russia and Finland. Any North American can see similarities between this region and Minnesota and parts of Canada. A few of its creatures, such as the Eurasian capercaillie, the world’s largest grouse, are unfamiliar, but both ecosystems share ducks, corvids, grouse, moose, shorebirds, and weasels, either identical or similar species. Gorbatov plans to complete a series of books on nature there.

The Karelian paintings have a damp chill to them that makes me nostalgic for my northern youth as I write these words in the midst of a droughty New Mexico summer. Gorbatov paints changing seasons, mud, and melting snow. Look at his capercaillie crossing a rutted track amid puddles and falling leaves, his duck and redshank in newly ice-free ponds, his swallows in the brief window of summer with darkening skies overhead, his woodcock on a mud island.

European Russia, including Karelia, is a long-inhabited region despite its wildness. Gorbatov, who has spent his life exploring these edges, loves to paint the subtle interactions between man and nature. He will depict, as did Audu-



Vadim Gorbatov is one of the best-known wildlife artists in Russia. Here he shows an example of his work printed on a Russian calendar.



Gorbatov's study of an old Kazakh resting with his trained "Berkut" or golden eagle is a different kind of portrait—one of ferocity in repose. Notice how its rich desert colors contrasts with the chill grays and dark greens of his Russian paintings. On the facing page, one of Genghiz Khan's warriors slips his gyrfalcon at some geese.

bon, human figures going about their business in the background—a horse and sled behind feeding redpolls, a bright window under a great gray owl, or a cabin under that totemic goshawk again, perched on a snowy branch in the winter twilight. The redshank alights on a rotting boat, or a spaniel retrieves a duck in the sunken wreckage of a German tank. Many western artists depict a nature in which people never existed, but Gorbatov paints history, dogs, farms, and more. He will depict 19th-century Russian princes and peasants, hunts with spear and borzoi and falcon, and fights with bears. In his landscapes, an abandoned chapel's roof lets in the snow; icons and a cross keep vigil in a corner even as crossbills fly above. A capercaillie might perch above a laika dog that barks to summon an unseen hunter. His work with Artists for Nature continues this tradition.

Though Gorbatov has not yet visited the Rocky Mountains and the Southwest—he plans to come in the fall of 2006—his work has already started here.

First, he was commissioned to create the art for a Korean translation of Ernest Thompson Seton's late 19th-century book *Lobo*, about a cattle-killing wolf and his tragic death. With

typical thoroughness, Gorbatov requested that my wife and I send him nearly 200 photographs of New Mexico backgrounds, trees, arroyos, rocks, and other details.

The results were stunning. That he got everything from rock formations (and wolves, another totemic animal) to 19th-century American firearms right was no surprise. But how did he know that in New Mexico there is always a raven in the sky?

And now his first U.S. work is soon to be published by the Raptor Education Fund in Denver: *Fidget's Freedom*, a children's book about peregrine falcon reintroduction and hacking. The young falcon's first attempts to fly and her narrow escape from a hunting eagle are perfect subjects for Vadim Gorbatov, who manages to teach and amuse even as he creates images of great beauty. I can only hope that his new audience and his forthcoming trip make this the first of many American works for one of the finest depecters of birds and mammals of this or any other century. ■

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