

FACT SHEET

United States Air Force

U.S. AIR FORCE ACADEMY, PUBLIC AFFAIRS, USAF ACADEMY, CO 80840

(719) 333-2990

The Falcon

Sports audiences across the country have been intrigued and delighted by the aerobatics of the falcon, flying mascot of the U.S. Air Force Academy. Trained and handled by cadet falconers, the birds soar and dive, sometimes zooming low over the heads of spectators.

While their public performances are limited to outdoor venues, most often at football games and cadet wing parades, the falcons appear at many other athletic contests in which cadet teams' play. All Academy varsity sports teams are called the "Falcons."

HISTORY

Members of the Class of 1959, the first to enter the Academy, chose the falcon as the mascot of the cadet wing Sept. 25, 1955, feeling that it best characterized the combat role of the U.S. Air Force. They did not specify any particular species, thus, any falcon can serve as mascot. Some of the characteristics which led to its selection are:

- Speed: can attain velocities exceeding 200 miles per hour in stoops or dives on their prey.
- Powerful and graceful flight, with strong, deep wing beats; they maneuver with ease, grace and evident enjoyment.
- Courage: fearless and aggressive, falcons fiercely defend their nest and young against intruders. They have been known to unhesitatingly attack and kill prey more than twice their size.
- Keen eyesight: about eight times sharper than man.
- Alertness, regal carriage and noble tradition.

Although they are members of the hawk family, falcons differ in that they have long pointed wings and dark eyes. There are five types of falcons native to North America, ranging in height from two feet to as small as five inches. They are the arctic gyrfalcon, the largest; peregrine falcon, sometimes called the duckhawk; prairie falcon; American merlin, or pigeon hawk; and the American kestrel, also known as a windhover or a sparrowhawk.

Through the ages, all types have been trained, usually for hunting. In medieval Europe, the gyrfalcon was reserved for kings and princes while the peregrine was flown by nobles of ducal rank. Recently, many countries have enacted legislation to protect the falcon, whose existence has become precarious. Colorado, along with many other states, has similar laws.

FALCONS AT THE ACADEMY

On Oct. 5, 1955, a splendid peregrine was the first falcon presented to the cadet wing. It was named "Mach 1," referring to the speed of sound. While "Mach 1" is still the official mascot name, each bird receives an individual name from the falconers. Ten to 15 falcons are kept in the mews (enclosures for trained hawks) north of the cadet area. The majority are prairie falcons native to Colorado. Cadets train both the tiercels (males) and falcons (females) to perform flying demonstrations. The Academy has been fortunate to have had white morph gyrfalcons represent the cadet wing. Previous gyrfalcon mascots were Atholl and Pegasus, who was later, renamed Baffin. Baffin got her name from the island in the Arctic Ocean where she was captured with the permission of the government of Canada. Capt. Richard Graham presented her to the Academy Nov. 20, 1965, as a gift from the 17th Air Force. Baffin died April 7, 1978, at the age of 13. During her years as queen of the mews, Baffin appeared at all home football games and countless other Academy events. What's more, she starred on several television talk shows. Artist Donald Eckelberry, renowned wildlife painter, was commissioned in 1972 by the Association of Graduates to record her

likeness for posterity. Baffin has been restored to her former beauty by highly acclaimed taxidermist Don Bowman. On Aug. 8, 1979, she was presented to the cadet wing by David Merrifield of Wildlife World, Monument, Colo. She is now on display in Arnold Hall.

Since July 1980, the cadet wing again has had other white morph gyrfalcon mascots to show the public. Currently Aurora reigns as the queen of the mews. She was purchased in 1996 from a gyrfalcon breeder and is shown proudly at various Academy events.

Experts once said falcons could not be trained to perform before huge crowds that the birds would panic and flee. Since 1956, however, cadets have flown the birds at sports events before thousands of cheering spectators.

Falconry is one of the extracurricular activities offered to cadets. There are usually 12 falconers, with four chosen from each new class at the end of the year to replace graduating seniors. The new falconers begin training in January under the leadership of experienced upperclassmen, the officer-in-charge and a Master Falconer. Without proper instruction, novices can physically harm the birds or adversely affect their training. Falconers' duties include daily checks of each bird's health and condition, training sessions during which the birds are fed a measured ration of meat, frequent cleaning of the mews and routine maintenance of equipment.

TRAINING THE FALCONS

Under special permits issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Colorado Division of Wildlife, the Academy is permitted to propagate captive falcons. Since 1974, most birds used for public exhibition have been hatched in the Academy breeding project. Due to the success of the project, birds excess to Academy needs have been transferred to agencies for use in educational programs dealing with raptors (birds of prey) or have been trained to hunt and then released into the wild. Annual reports on all activities of the Academy falcon program are submitted to state and federal wildlife conservation agencies.

Cadet falconers in flying demonstrations use peregrine prairie and gryfalcons. The birds are flown throughout the year, weather permitting, to keep them in top condition. Between May and October, when the birds are molting, the training is minimized to prevent damage to new feathers.

Young birds hatched in May or June grows rapidly and by the end of July is fully feathered and ready for training. The first step is to acquaint them with the jess, a short leather strap fastened to each of the bird's legs. The next stage is called manning, a procedure to let the falcons become accustomed to the presence, sounds and smell of people. Each falcon has a six-foot leash coupled to the jesses, and is carried on a falconer's gloved fist. In this manner, the bird gradually loses the fear of moving among crowds of people. A leather hood is used when necessary; when placed over the bird's head, the falcon will remain calm.

Next, a long stout string called a creance is used to secure the bird. One end of the creance is fastened to the base of a portable outdoor perch or weight, and the other end is fastened to the jesses, thus giving the bird a restricted flight range. The falcon is taught to hop, then flutter, and finally fly the length of the creance to the falconer for food. This is followed by training the bird to fly to the lure, a rectangular shaped leather pouch to which meat is attached. The falconer whirls the lure in a circle on a 10-foot cord; the bird quickly learns to strike it in mid-air, carry it to the ground and dine on the food. As the bird stoops toward the lure in free flight, the lure is jerked aside, causing the falcon to fly up, circle and make another pass. This procedure is repeated several times before the bird is allowed to strike the lure in mid-air.

When the falcon flies unhesitatingly to the lure every time, the creance is removed and the bird is permitted to fly free. Small battery-powered transmitters are attached to their legs, along with a bell, so that, should the bird not come to the lure as it had been trained, the cadet falconers will be able to follow and safely recover the falcon.

Six weeks or more are required to properly train an eyass or young falcon. When a bird is in top condition, it is able to fly for more than an hour and make repeated stoops. Although they can be trained to perform, falcons are never totally domesticated and remain wild creatures with strong, independent spirits.

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