South African Sojourn

BY MIKE DUPUY

Hawking at the 2008 IAF annual meeting

This past July, my wife Christine and I had the good fortune of attending the annual general meeting of the International Association for Falconry and Conservation of Birds of Prey (IAF), held in South Africa. It was a very long trip. We left our home in central Pennsylvania late on Friday morning, arriving at JFK Airport a few hours before our scheduled flight on South African Airways. The first leg of trip would take us from New York to Dakar, Senegal—a distance of 3,812 miles, taking more than eight hours. And this was just a refueling stop; we spent an hour sitting in the plane before it took off again at 6:35 A.M., just after dawn. We still had 4,163 miles to go, which took another eight-and-a-half hours, so we were completely exhausted when we finally touched down in Johannesburg, South Africa, at 5:00 P.M. local time.

As we lined up for customs, I saw a familiar face: Frank Bond (IAF president oand NAFA's general counsel), wearing his gray Stetson. We said hello as we snaked through the line. We would next see each other at the conference hotel.

In spite of our fatigue, Christine and I were exhilarated to finally be in Africa. We still had a final plane flight before reaching our final destination, but first we would be staying overnight at a hotel near the airport. Because it is winter in July in the Southern Hemisphere, the sun was going down soon after we landed. We took a cab to the hotel, put our voluminous luggage in our rooms, and went to the hotel restaurant for our first meal. We both ate ostrich for dinner, and it was quite good. Eventually we went to sleep, woke up, showered, ate, took a few pictures, and then took a taxi back to the airport to continue our journey.

Johannesburg had not been inviting. I had been warned several times to be careful in South Africa and not to walk the city streets alone. Our hotel was barricaded from the surrounding community behind a high wall. South Africa is still in the throes of a post-colonial economy and currently has an unemployment

rate of more than 30 percent. I did venture out the hotel gates briefly to see the street we were on, but nearly all of the houses and buildings stood behind compound-like walls—much like the streets in the wealthier sections of my native country, Haiti. There are parallels between

the histories of Haiti and South Africa, if you give or take 200 years. But South Africa has a first-world infrastructure.

When I was studying public policy at Georgetown University, the first course I took was "South Africa: Evolution or Revolution." That was in 1989, when Nelson Mandela was still being held in prison. What I learned that semester recently came back to the front of my brain. I had tracked down Herbert Howe, my former African Studies professor, the day we left, and I spoke to him for a few minutes about the trip—his was my third caution about safety in the cities of South Africa.

During the academic period of my life, in the "crystal palace" of Georgetown University, at the edge of Washington, D.C., I thought that it would take a revolution to end South Africa's apartheid system—a particularly repugnant form of institutionalizied racial segregation. Fortunately, Mandela and other insightful leaders were able to dismantle apartheid and move the country toward freedom and equality without resorting to violent revolution. Such a revolution would not have solved anything and would certainly have made matters worse.

During that first semester at Georgetown, I sought out representatives of the African National Congress (ANC) and the apartheid government. I recall setting up a meeting with a junior attaché for the South African embassy. (I had to drive through a bomb-proof Plexiglas room to park in the basement of their embassy in Washington, D.C.) The attaché took me to lunch at the exclusive Columbia Country Club, and we talked about South Africa. We became friends, and he invited me to his going-away party before he returned to South Africa a few years later.

Nelson Mandela was finally released from prison in 1990 by the government of President DeKlerk. I had heard Mandela speak at the D.C. Armory building, while he was on a world speaking tour shortly thereafter. Mandela, a lawyer, had been imprisoned for 28 years by the white minority government. Even while in prison he was the leader of the ANC. In spite of the years taken from him, he was talking about reconciliation rather than retaliation. And now here I was, 19 years later (coincidently on Nelson Mandela's 90th birthday) in a new, unsteady South Africa, to do of all things, act as NAFA delegate to the IAF—life can steer you in ways you cannot imagine.

As we boarded the Dehavilland Dash 8-400 turboprop, we were already well seasoned travelers. What was a 60-minute flight to us? We had just crossed the Atlantic and then flown South to the bottom of Africa. A 238-mile leg was nothing to us. We were hardened and ready for more. This final flight to the conference destination took us from Johannesburg to Bloemfontein, the judicial capital of South Africa. We took off at 3:10 P.M., so we had daylight on our side. I shot video out the window, and Christine and I took photographs of the unusual and new topography below us. When we arrived, I tried to see if I could pick out any other falconers at the airport. I went to the arrival area of the small airport and found our host, Dr. Adrian Lombard, who had organized the IAF meeting—which would be held simultaneously

with the South African Falconers Association field meet at Thaba Nchu (Black Mountain). While waiting for our luggage, I met a falconer from Belgium and his wife. When we got to the arrival area, I met another IAF delegate from Morocco. The six of us, with all of our stuff, loaded into Adrian's truck for the 45-minute drive to the Protea Hotel at Black Mountain.

The hotel is architecturally beautiful and is designed as a series of interconnecting pyramids. (It was formerly a gambling casino.) After checking in and getting a look at our rooms, we went to the lobby and registered. A short time later, a large contingent of falconers headed out to the game preserve adjacent to the hotel for a hunt. I got into a truck with a new falconer, whose name was Jonas. Two falconers (Lizet and Bertus) rode in the truck bed with an African goshawk. Christine got into one of the game preserve's tour vehicles with a contingent of international falconers and their significant others.

The Maria Moroka National Reserve is large (15,000 acres) and sits at the base of Thaba Nchu. We were taking in the beauty of this land. Being there with all of these other falconers and their birds and the contingent of IAF delegates from around of the world was incredible, to say the least.

We saw some nice flights with falcons and hawks. None of the set-ups were perfect, but everyone was happy not to be on a plane or in a truck. The air was crisp, but the sun was warm. The lake reflected back the bright light in our eyes, making it difficult to identify the birds that flushed in front of us. I think it was the third time some Egyptian Geese took off before I finally stopped asking what they were. (They make a bit of noise when startled and are quite large.) Ostriches, wildebeasts, springboks, elands, and other distinctive African wildlife roamed around the surrounding grasslands.

When the sun goes down, it gets cold quickly. Since we were in the Southern Hemisphere, the moon was upside down to us northerners. As for wild raptors, there are more than 80 species of birds of prey in South Africa alone. South African falconers have not had to wait for a legal peregrine falcon take. They already have it, and they fly some beautiful peregrines there. In fact, they fly and breed just about anything they want. Their lanner falcons are nearly all passage birds, and you see wild ones flying around as you look for places to hunt. South Africa is definitely a great place to be a falconer. We may have it good here in America, but South Africa is amazing.

The IAF annual general meeting

Most North American falconers have little idea what the IAF is and what it does. In fact, up until I was elected by the NAFA board to be the IAF representative, it had seemed to me like a backwater position of little import to most NAFA members. Most eyeballs would probably roll into the backs of falconers' heads at the NAFA meets when someone would stand up to present an IAF report. Former NAFA director and current IAF vice-president of the Americas Bill Johnston wrote a series of articles in *Hawk Chalk* that provide a useful primer to those interested in learning more about the organization. It is an excellent series and helped me understand some of what was ahead of me, so I highly recommend it.

The IAF is run by an executive committee and an advisory committee and has delegates from around the world, some of whom vote on IAF business at the annual meeting. The delegates serve as representatives of their countries and provide cross-cultural ties among falconers. Some delegate's are elevated to various positions as officers, and some are appointed to subcommittees. The organization is top-down structurally, but the problems for which it provides assistance come bottom-up from the falconry community. For example, if Country X wants to make falconry a recognized legal activity in their nation, the IAF provides support and context to the country's government agencies to help make that happen.

The IAF is currently working with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to establish the principle that falconry is an intangible cultural heritage that should be preserved. Nick Fox is the UNESCO coordinator for the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The UAE is proposing that falconry be considered a national heritage and wants other countries to act as signatories to this initiative. This would make it harder for national governments to shut down falconry or put unreasonable restrictions on our sport. To learn more about the IAF, visit the organizations web site at www.i-a-f.org.

The IAF's full proper name includes "and Conservation of Birds of Prey." So the IAF is also working to make the second part of its name more relevant and is involved with several international raptor conservation programs. One such program is the effort to prevent the extinction of several species of Old World vultures. The birds have been eating dead cattle containing diclofenac, a pain reliever used extensively in India and other countries

to treat ailing livestock. When the vultures eat cows contaminated by this analgesic, their kidneys shut down, resulting in a rapid death. The effect on the birds has been so devastating, many populations are near extinction.

The actual meeting of the delegates is rather formal. The officers stand up and give their reports. Special committee representatives present their findings on a wide range of subjects relating to international falconry and raptor conservation. All of the delegates give reports on matters of interest, note, or concern in the country they represented. Some countries were unable to send delegates due to the high cost of travel to the bottom of the African Continent. Those fortunate enough to make the journey learned a lot and got to go afield with the birds we all love so much.

I gave my report—a brief synopsis of what has been going on with falconry in the United States. Most of what I covered was from my personal observations and communications with NAFA's extended board, state clubs, and falconers who responded to my query about what issues they believe are most important. For example, I raised concerns about habitat destruction occurring in our western states, a matter (cheat grass) raised by Dave Smith, president of the Idaho Falconers Association. I cited business and regulation concerns brought to my attention by Brad Wood, president of Northwoods Limited. I talked about the risk associated with distributing graphic hunting videos online, which was raised by NAFA member Steve Hein of Georgia.

If you are interested in learning more about what goes on at an IAF annual general meeting, I will try to have a short film of the South Africa conference finished by next fall, so keep an eye out for it. I videotaped my report, along with that of the whole delegation, and I would be happy to make it available to anyone who is interested. Along with the meeting, the video will show some of the top-notch falconry currently taking place in South Africa and provide a first-hand feel for the hospitality shown by our host. But enough of meetings. Let me turn finally to just one aspect of hunting in South Africa, which I had been dreaming about since reading descriptions of it in falconer Craig Golden's articles, many moons ago.

Hunting with Black Sparrowhawks

We hunted often with the usual suspects—that being the falcons. I also saw eagles and hawk-eagles catch several enormous hares. They even had Harris' hawks there, hunting in a cast. But the moment I was waiting for was to see the black sparrowhawks—or "black spars" as they are called, an African accipiter. My friend Shawn Hayes (California long-winger extraordinaire), and I ended up in different trucks heading to a hunting area with many francolins. We were with a group of falconers from the Natal Province, whom I dubbed the "Boys from Natal." What a generous group of guys they were. Well, we were about to have a blast.

South African falconer Mark Wynn had a female spar that caught a francolin from the fist on our second or third flight. Mark had decided to position himself just upwind of the francolins before the flush. The two dogs struck a point against the African plain, rimmed by a lake and a deserted campground. The sun was not far from setting. When the dogs went in, three francolins flew for their lives, coming right at me as I kept my high-definition video rolling. The spar looked like it was just out on a lark, following low but staying within reach. But when the francolin began its decent, the spar rose with incredible speed and struck the francolin, taking it down into the tall grass. Oh yeah, I got it on film—I could not believe the flight. I was amazed that the spar would be able to close the gap and take the fast-flying francolin, but it did. I have replayed that footage again and again. Shawn and I also got to see a tiercel peregrine take a francolin in fine style, just at last light, but my camera battery had gone dead, and I missed the stunning vertical stoop and kill shot—but some things are nice to have just as memories.

"You have to go out with Hank Chalmers," was the response I got from meet organizer Adrian Lombard when I first inquired about flying black spars, upon registering for the meeting. He gave me the usual filed meet description: Hank drives a white Land Rover with giant hoods on the roof, is about this tall, has dark hair, and on and on. Every time I ran to the lobby to look for Hank, someone would say, "You just missed him."

I didn't catch up with him until one of the last hunting days. We went to the field with Hilary White, the delegate from Ireland, and a few others. We drove for about 30 minutes along dirt roads that rattled every bone in my body. Most South African falconers seem to like smoking cigarettes while keeping the windows of their vehicles rolled up—apparently to get the most out of the smokes. I am an ex-smoker, who was in a second-hand-smoke hell as we drove along, but I never commented on the ubiquitous smoking. No smoker likes to hear the slings and arrows of the former smoker. (I came down with bronchitis a few days later, which took two months to cure.)

I thought for sure that the two birds on the roof of the Land Rover would be short a few tail feathers, due to being jostled on the rough road. I sat up front with Hank. He is an incredibly charming guy, with a ready smile, standing about five foot ten. And like most of the others, he's a chain-smoker. He seems to be universally liked by his peers and made the bumpy journey to the field fun. He lives in the Cape Town area and runs a public game preserve, with a birds of prey center.

Hank took his female spar out of the giant hood, and she was feather perfect, in spite of the rough roads. She sat steady on the fist as we began searching for francolins. The grass was so long there that the minute a hawk goes in after its prey, you lose visual contact with the predator and its prey. We got slip after slip and kill after kill, but I was frustrated at not being able to follow the action into the tall grass. We had caught four or five francolins before a friend of Hank's put up his lanner falcon for some training.

You have to be careful walking in that tall grass. You may suddenly find yourself waist deep in a porcupine hole that, until your rapid descent, you had no idea was there. As a stranger in a strange land you also have a lot of imaginings of potential danger, along with the fatigue an 8,000-mile trip can bring on, when all you want to do is stay up late talking to falconers, get up early to go hawking, and have conference responsibilities as well. I fell into one hole, but it was not bad. But Hank nearly broke his leg when he fell hip deep into a hole. I found some porcupine quills lying on the ground around the hole, so I took a few home for my son, Marshall.

Since Hank's mature bird had caught so many francolins, we let his immature spar have a crack at a few sunset slips. When that was over, we stood around the Land Rover and had some fun talking about the hunt. I am really glad I got to go out with Hank. I made several new friends that day. I love flying goshawks, and now I see why people rave about black spars.

The next IAF general meeting, in 2009, will be held in conjunction with the second Falconry Festival in Britain. I hope to see you there. Having participated in the first Falconry Festival in 2007, I highly recommend it. ■