

A silhouette of a man wearing a cap and a glove, holding a falcon against a sunset sky. The man is on the left, looking down at the bird. The falcon is perched on his gloved hand, with its wings slightly spread. The background is a vibrant sunset with orange and yellow clouds.

A Passion for **FALCONS**

story and photographs by Michael Dreese

Mike Dupuy shares a deep passion for life and for the sport of falconry, and views birds of prey as metaphors for universal human aspirations.



C“You can fantasize about where you want to get,” Mike Dupuy explains. “You can keep it all in your head, or you can act when the opportunity is there, knowing it may not work. Just like the hawk.”

The falconer’s eyes burn with the intense focus of a raptor zeroing in on its quarry. Dupuy’s voice rises in pitched excitement. “The hawk attacks to get the rabbit! The rabbit gets away. The hawk will try again because the hunger is there. For me, the hunger is there.”

“Get off the couch!”

A charismatic speaker who has captivated audiences across the country with his “hawk talks,” Dupuy strives to both educate and inspire his listeners, particularly young people. He implores them to get off the couch: “You don’t have to play video games, the game is called life! Anything you can think of you can probably do.”

Dupuy practices what he preaches. A native of Haiti, the birthplace of John James Audubon, Dupuy arrived in the United States when he was 6 and spoke primarily French until the age of 10. Reading Jean Craighead George’s *My Side of the Mountain* kindled his appetite for learning and sparked his lifelong interest in falcon-

ry. The novel tells the story of a boy named Sam Gribble who runs away from his home in New York City. Over the next year, Sam lives off the land in the wilds of the Catskill Mountains with the help of a peregrine falcon named Frightful. Eventually, Dupuy would become a real life version of Sam Gribble.

On the way up

After leaving home at age 16, Dupuy supported himself by flipping burgers and stocking grocery shelves. Taking charge of his future, he enrolled at Montgomery College in Rockville, Maryland. Following his graduation in 1981, Mike landed a sales position with a leading computer manufacturing firm. After 15 years, his lucrative career had netted him a company car and a house in the suburbs. Dupuy felt unfulfilled, however, and he desired a more wholesome environment for his two children, Brooke and Marshall, and his wife Christine, a graphic designer. With his acquired sales experience and communication skills, he felt confident that he could transform his passion of falconry into a profession.

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A Passion for Falcons

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Although largely a confluence of random events, the family's move to the Susquehanna Valley in 2006 has proved to be a perfect fit. The Dupuys love the natural beauty and small town friendliness of the region. Now an accepted part of the rural community outside of Penns Creek, Mike realizes that his neighbors probably think he is a bit eccentric, but he enjoys a great relationship with them.

To the casual observer

Although a bit unusual to an outsider, modern falconers like Dupuy seek to preserve the skills and traditions that date back thousands of years to the ancient civilizations of the Middle East, Asia and Europe. Falconry is a form of hunting that utilizes trained birds of prey to capture the intended quarry. Reaching the height of its popularity during the Middle Ages, falconry became known as the 'sport of kings' due to its association with the ruling classes.

The essence of the sport is the relationship between man and bird. "This is a totally wild predator that's afraid of us," explains Dupuy. "Getting it to calm down and not be afraid of me, and then getting it to fly to me on command and then to hunt with me as a partner, it's pretty powerful."

Strong connection

Indeed, for devoted falconers the sport is not a passing fancy,

but a way of life. They will often break down in tears when talking about the loss of a beloved bird. After Dupuy found his goshawk Nevada dead on the ground and half-eaten, he kept the remains in the freezer for a year because he didn't have the heart to bury her. "You have to learn to accept loss," he laments.

Mike currently keeps two falcons, two hawks and two owls. To those who criticize him for keeping such magnificent creatures in captivity, Dupuy responds that his birds are protected from other predators, well-fed and provided with veterinary care when needed. And, due to the high mortality rate among birds of prey in the wild (70 to 90 percent during the first year), falconry has zero impact upon such populations. He is also quick to point out the sport's numerous contributions to conservation efforts. For instance, the rescue of the Peregrine Falcon from the brink of extinction can be largely attributed to falconers who figured out a method for getting the birds to breed in captivity.

Advisory positions

Dupuy is often consulted for his expertise in utilizing raptors to control bird populations. Recently, he has been advising officials at Penn State University on developing a program to deter an ever-increasing crow contingent from roosting near densely populated areas. He also started a hawk food company to supply fellow falconers, zoos and raptor rehabilitation centers.

Dupuy's ultimate goal, however, is to deliver his educational message on a bigger stage. Mike is currently developing a concept for a television show that could air on the National

Geographic or Discovery network. He has shot hours of footage of his trips to exotic locations such as South Africa, interviews with legends of the sport, and his own adventures, including the month-long search and successful recapture of his escaped female eagle owl.

"I'm a good evangelist for falconry," he explains. "I'm good at communicating what it's about, what drives us, what drives me and the values associated with it—what I see as intrinsic human values—and the passion that it gives me."

Like one of his birds on the hunt, it is not difficult to envision Dupuy's goal being fulfilled at the intersection of hunger and opportunity.

To learn more about Mike Dupuy and his falconry please visit mikedupuyfalconry.com.

Mike Dupuy has created a grassroots organization to provide relief for the Haiti earthquake victims and to sustain the long term rebuilding of the country. For more information, visit helphaitirebuild.org. **SL**

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