

***FALCONRY AT DROMOLAND CASTLE:
CELEBRATING "THE SPORT OF KINGS" IN ROYAL IRISH STYLE***



A splendid specimen from The Dromoland School of Falconry

Newmarket-on-Fergus, IRE. --- Falconry can be described, quite simply, as "taking wild quarry in its natural state or habitat using trained hawks or falcons." True, as far as it goes. But the history, the challenge, and the sheer romance of it - those can only be fully appreciated in their most natural setting: Dromoland Castle in western Ireland.

Majestically set on the shores of Lough Dromoland, Dromoland Castle itself dates back to the sixteenth century. It was the ancestral home of the O'Briens, Barons of Inchiquin, one of the few native Gaelic families of royal blood and direct descendants of Brian Boromhe (Boru), High King of Ireland in the eleventh century. The castle is surrounded by over 410 acres of breathtaking scenery, including a championship parkland golf course. Lavish interiors, fine food and superb wines complement the deluxe accommodations of the Castle's 99 spacious guestrooms, while Dromoland Castle Golf and Country Club, The Spa at Dromoland and a wide range of outdoor recreational opportunities offer relaxation and stimulation alike.

What better setting could there be to partake of an experience so ancient it is sometimes called "the first sport"? And what better introduction to it than that provided by The Dromoland School of Falconry, helmed by expert falconer Dave Atkinson? With the castle as a backdrop and the demesne at their disposal, guests of Dromoland Castle have a unique opportunity to experience falconry at its finest - and its history, challenge, and romance.

The History

There are two theories about the origins of falconry, although it is generally understood that it was practiced as long ago as 2000 B.C. One theory posits that it began in Mesopotamia; others the Far East (more specifically, Korea). Similarly, the date of its introduction to Europe is unclear; perhaps it came with the Huns when they invaded in the fourth century, but it may have arrived later, with the returning Crusaders in Medieval times.

Although favored birds vary across continents and the centuries, in modern falconry, birds are classified as broadwings (eagles, buzzards (known as hawks in North America, and not to be confused with vultures), and Harris's hawks); longwings ("true falcons" and tiercels, as the smaller males are known, such as peregrines and gyrfalcons); and shortwings, or accipiter ("true hawks" such as goshawks and sparrow hawks). One of the earliest books on the subject of falconry associates social ranking with specific raptors. For example: the king and the gyrfalcon; the earl and the falcon peregrine; the yeoman and the goshawk; and the knave and the kestrel.

Falconry has always been a favorite of nobles, whether in Europe, the Middle East, or East Asia. And with good reason – young falcons and hawks were rare, expensive, and by their very nature required large tracts of undeveloped land to fulfill their destinies. In at least some settings and times, however, ordinary people practiced falconry too, to reliably supplement their larders. (Indeed, one of the best hunting birds, the goshawk, was once called "the cook's hawk" for that very reason.)

Displaced and in decline as firearms gained ascendancy for both sport and subsistence hunting, falconry has recently seen a resurgence in popularity. That process began in the 1970s, when peregrine falcons were listed as endangered species in the United States due to exposure to the pesticide DDT, which in turn gave birth to a raptor conservation movement. (Peregrines were not removed from the list until 1999; notably, two of birds used most commonly in contemporary falconry are native to North America (the Harris's hawk and the red-tailed hawk).)

The Challenge

Birds of prey are difficult to breed, rear, and train properly, a process that demands a skilled hand over many years. Some varieties can be temperamental, and none is particularly sociable. Appreciating their different strengths and weaknesses also requires long experience, as Mr. Atkinson can attest. (He nurtures, trains, and works as many as 50 hawks and falcons of 6 species at any given time.)

For example, the Harris's hawk is ideal for hunting rabbits, while the red-tailed hawk is a hardy and versatile, suitable for hunting not only rabbits, but squirrels and even geese, ducks, pheasants, and wild turkeys. Goshawks, truly superb hunters, are extraordinarily fast and efficient, but they can be willful and even have fits of pique. Owls are also used as trained hunters – they are as intelligent as hawks and falcons but, because they have relatively poor sight, they require very different training to exploit their phenomenal hearing abilities.

Particular though they may be, raptors have a timeless appeal for everyone: as an English noble noted in 1801, "the ladies not only accompanied the gentlemen in pursuit of the diversion [of falconry], but often practiced it by themselves; and even excelled the men in knowledge and exercise of the art."

Young or old, male or female, fearless or cautious, students of The Dromoland School of Falconry are encouraged to learn as much as they'd like about the challenges of falcon and hawk husbandry under the expert tutelage of Dave Atkinson.

The Romance

Nothing surpasses the majestic beauty of these magnificent creatures set against the classic surroundings of Dromoland Castle. Guests will be awed by the sight of them not only in flight, but also intimately at hand, as they alight on Mr. Atkinson's (or their own) gloved forearm.

The school offers a range of programs for experiencing the wonders of falconry: the Hawk Walk, during which the instructor explains the natural history of the birds and their role in the environment and then assists willing students in handling and flying one of the Harris's hawks; falconry courses of varying durations ranging from one hour to three full days; corporate outings tailored to the particular sponsor's requirements and desires; and birds of prey appearances, which provide an excellent opportunity for photographing the range of raptors under the school's care. Mr. Atkinson has even arranged for wedding rings to be delivered to the altar by a falcon!

Falconry at Dromoland Castle sends the imagination, the heart, and the spirit soaring, as free and high as the raptors themselves. It is, quite simply, an experience not to be missed.

The Dromoland School of Falconry: where romance takes wing

About Dromoland Castle:

Dromoland Castle, located in Newmarket-on-Fergus, County Clare, was built in the 16th century. Majestically set on the shores of Lough Dromoland, it is surrounded by over 410 acres of breathtaking scenery, including a championship parkland golf course. Lavish interiors, fine food and superb wines complement the deluxe accommodations of the Castle's 99 guest rooms, while Dromoland Castle Golf and Country Club, an intimate spa and traditional outdoor recreational opportunities ensure a unique guest experience.

Dromoland Castle is located at Newmarket-on-Fergus, Co. Clare, Ireland. The hotel can be contacted at: 011 353 61 368144 or 1-800-346-7007; website www.dromoland.ie. Reservations can be made through the hotel (sales@dromoland.ie) or through The Dromoland Collection at: www.dromolandcollection.ie.

The Dromoland Collection comprises Dromoland Castle and Castlemartyr Resort, two of Ireland's finest and most celebrated hotels. The hotels in this collection embody the legendary Dromoland tradition of incomparable hospitality complemented by exquisite surroundings, yet each possesses a distinctive style, character and charm all its own.

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