

Red Headed Merlin

A falcon that is rarely met with in terms of European falconry nowadays is the diminutive but stunningly attractive Red Headed Merlin or as some people prefer to call them Red Necked Falcons. This falcon comes in the nominate form and, depending on your reading and interpretation of various scientific papers, either one or two sub species thereof. The nominate form is the *falco chicquera chicquera* of the Indian continent including Nepal and Bangladesh through to Iran. Then the sub species is *falco chicquera ruficollis* of Southern Africa with some scientists believing this itself has a sub species in the form of *falco chicquera horsbrughii*. The former is to be found in Gambia, Ethiopia, Somalia, Zambia and Mozambique. The latter inhabits Zimbabwe, Namibia, Southern Mozambique, Angola, and South Africa.

The Indian and African varieties look sufficiently different enough to be easily recognisable as to origin but in falconry terms they are effectively the same falcon. In the wild both Indian and African falcons behave in the same manner and tend to stay together as a pair year round. They co-operate when hunting and it appears to be the male that does the initial chasing to get the intended victim out into the open for the larger female to catch. In terms of size, going from my own personal experience of training and flying



both African and Indian Red Headed Merlins I would give the effective flying weight of a trained female at between eight and nine ounces (225 to 255 grams) and males at five and three quarter ounces to six and a half ounces (155 to 180 grams).

In the older works on falconry Red Heads were always compared directly to European

Merlins but labelled as being more heavily armed. I think this was very much a case of tunnel vision thinking on the part of the relevant authors at the time. However, to be fair to them they didn't have the scientific knowledge available to them that we have now and also of course they saw perhaps at best an odd example of the species involved. Added to this more

often as not the example the authors may have got to have seen would either be a taxidermy specimen or in the form of a skin, but almost certainly not a live example of this lovely little falcon. So with all respect to them making accurate assessments was hardly an easy thing to achieve. Personally I believe European Merlins, are in terms of wing loading, feet size, style of flight in the wild and general body shape, much more akin to a miniature Gyr Falcon. Whereas

for me the Red Headed Merlin seems to resemble a miniature Red Shaheen or Barbary Falcon far more than it does a Merlin. I am not talking here of comparing them to Barbaries due to colouration, especially of the head and nape. I would be in agreement that Red Headed Falcons certainly are very heavily armed in terms of having longer and more slender toes in relation to their body size. However the overall shape, wing loading and shape is much closer, in my opinion, to

Shaheens and Barbaries.

The Falconers of India and Pakistan have a great deal of experience when it comes to flying the Turumti, as they refer to the Red Head, and they are flown both singly and in casts. They are flown at birds up the size of Partridges and one older Pakistani Falconer I spoke to told me he used to throw the Turumti at quarry in much the same way as he would a Sparrowhawk. This was in more or less an over arm throwing motion that was designed to give the little falcon a considerable impetus on leaving the fist. In the case of Quail this could indeed be very beneficial and make the difference between a kill or and missed opportunity. The initial rush was sufficient to make up the all important early ground and put the Quail under pressure immediately and give the Red Head the confidence that it was almost within striking distance and should therefore persist in its efforts. Because Red Headed Merlins used to be plentiful most Falconers on the Indian continent would trap passage falcons, train them very quickly, fly them for a few short weeks and then let them go again. Why keep them for another six or seven months before flying them again when it was far easier just to trap another passage the following season.

In Europe in the late sixties and for the first couple of years of the seventies, until effective legislation was passed the prevent the importation of wild taken falcons into much of



Europe The Red Headed Merlin was a very common site in Britain and I suspect across most of Europe. I certainly saw them being flown in at least seven other European countries with my own eyes during that sort of era. It has to be said that these poor Red Headed Merlins came over in literally droves from Pakistan and India. They were not only exceedingly cheap, even when taking into account the addition of air freight, they were also used by the trappers in India and particularly so those of Pakistan as what can only be described as make weights. A group of falconers would get together, as an example, and place an order with a trader in Pakistan for six Luggers Falcons. The order would specifically state immature falcons only were required as everyone agreed that the taking of haggards (adults) out of the potential breeding population was morally and ethically wrong. However what would arrive at the destination airport was anybody's guess. Male or female, young or old, normally

bore no relation to the original order. Also as I say Red Headed Merlins and Shikra Hawks (*accipiter badius*), a hawk similar in size but not nature to a European Sparrowhawk, would be put into the consignment to make up for any shortfall in the order of sending males instead of females, old instead of young.

A classic example of this was on one occasion when I went to Heathrow to collect a consignment of what was supposed to be ten young female Luggers (*falco Jagger*) from Pakistan. On getting home with the box I discovered I had three young female Luggers, one haggard Lugger female and two adult males. To make up the numbers to ten large falcons the trappers had put in four adult female Red Naped Shaheens (*falco peregrinus babylonicus*) and by way of apology three Red Headed Merlins, all adults and all female. So an original order of ten young falcons actually turned out to arrive here in the form of three young falcons and ten adults. The feelings on sorting the order were very

mixed. In trying to obtain falcons so as to carry on our sport a group of us had ordered falcons that, at the time, were not endangered in any way, but we had stipulated we were not to be sent adults. Instead of adhering to our wishes the trappers and suppliers had placed us in the position where we had unwittingly become part of the problem that would gradually and quite dramatically affect both Lugger Falcons and Red Headed Merlins.

The scant regard with which Red Headed Merlins and indeed Shikra Hawks were held by the trappers and bird dealers of India and Pakistan can further be illustrated by another instance of importing falcons, this time from India. I had received a message from a dealer I did business with in India and he had four Black Shaheen falcons (*falco peregrines peregrinator*) for me. I had been after some for a while and he had come into possession of four and offered them to me at a very inflated price as far as he was concerned but in actual fact around one tenth per falcon of what I would indeed be happy to pay. So here I was being offered these falcons at ridiculously low price and even one that with air freight costs added you would have been happy to pay at the time all day long. So naturally I placed my order and sat back and awaited their subsequent arrival at Heathrow. On collecting the falcons from the airport and opening up the package within the safety of a large closed garage at home it turned out



there were indeed four exceedingly beautiful Black Shaheens and also four Red Headed Merlins. The note in the consignment papers stated the four Red Heads had been put in loose in case the bigger falcons got hungry during the trip, even though their eyes were in fact seeled (eyelids very loosely sewn together so as to prevent them seeing and crashing around and therefore hurting themselves). Such was the lack of value placed on these wonderful little falcons. At the time I am speaking of you could order Red Headed Merlins from Pakistan, provided you ordered six or more, for the princely sum of approximately £4 each, with probably the same again being added per falcon to cover shipping.

Depending on the region the trapper operated on and their own level of skill determined very much the condition you would receive your falcons in. If the trappers were skilled you would get almost feather perfect little falcons because they had been trapped using a Bal-Chatrri and quickly either manned down or seeled. As barbaric as it sounds seeling was, or rather still is, a system out on the Indian continent that quiets a hawk or falcon down very quickly as it has the same effect as leaving them hooded. It apparently doesn't hurt them and only lasts for a day or so in the case of a Red Head and three to four in the case of a Peregrine or a Lagger. A Saker Falcon may well be a one or two days longer than a Peregrine due to their

powers of fasting and less than mild temperament. However from the skilled trappers more or less immaculate falcons were the order of the day. At the other end of the scale is the unskilled trapper and bird handler who catches the Red Heads by means of bird lime covered twigs set in a semi circle around a bait bird. Bird Lime is effectively and extremely powerful glue that is a bit like the gum on fly paper. Once you have brushed against it the more you try and remove it the more you spread it around and become further enmeshed. Any Red Heads caught by this type of trapper would then be just tied by a cotton leash directly around the leg and left in a secure area till they were ready to be shipped. The primaries and tail would already be in a tremendously poor condition because of the bird lime and now being left to bate at will hardly enhanced the plumage side of things. Add to this the mental anguish these poor falcons must have gone through and I think most falconers in their heart of hearts were happy when legislation came about that overnight took away the market for these and many other of the smaller raptors originating from this part of the world.

My own first real falcon was indeed a passage male Red Headed Merlin that was in quite good condition despite the fact that it had indeed been trapped using bird lime. There was also a slight blemish on his leg where he had been tied up for a while

prior to being shipped to the UK. He was one of a batch imported by a friend of mine and I was fortunate enough to be allowed to go and help unpack the shipment and jess each little falcons up and put them on screen perches and give them food to help them recover from the shock of all that had gone on for the past few days in their lives. In the days I am talking about what were known as traditional Jesses were used and these took some time to cut and fit with many bites from the indignant little falcons being suffered along the way.

There were ten Red Heads in this particular shipment and despite ten young females being the very explicit order placed with the dealer there were only two females and these were accompanied by eight males. At least all of the little falcons with the exception of one male were in fact passagers, although it has to be said the one haggard male was truly beautiful. So beautiful in fact a friend of mine purchased it a few days later. When I had finished helping my friend kit all ten of the Red Heads up and putting them onto two screen perches we sat back and looked in almost awe at the sight before us. I had my pick of the seven immature males and finally settled on the one that had really tried a great deal harder than all the rest to bite me when he was his turn to be jessed up. So it was that "Remus" my first ever falcon came into my life. I can still remember taking him up from the screen perch onto the gloved



fist for the very first time. I was so proud I could have burst and yet at the same time I was so nervous and so scared of hurting him, he really was so small. Looking back on it now the glove I had was utterly ridiculous, far too big. More suited to an irate female Saker Falcon than the diminutive soul perched upon it.

It should be remembered that almost fifty years ago the amount of people making and selling falconry equipment across the entire continent of Europe could be counted on one hand. Plus no one sold everything, different people specialised in different things. So getting a decent glove was far from a case of picking the phone up and reaching for the credit card. Items had to be carefully

sourced and good contacts were highly valued. Things like hoods were made by a lot of falconers themselves. Not because they were skilled and delighted in the work but because necessity required a hood to be made by one's self if it was required quickly. I used to make my own hoods and In fact still use an old Anglo Indian I made some thirty years ago. It had been re-braced several times and never in its entire life could be described as a thing of beauty. But it fitted and served the purpose, which of course was the main criterion. Bells tended to be Indian or from Pakistan and could be ordered from the same people that supplied falcons. Swivels were either from India, very dangerous figure of eight things very liable to break if subjected

to even a half decent bate, or were from big game fishing suppliers or other equally obscure sources. Leashes were either strips of whale hide with a button styled and worked into one end or were home made from braided terylene and nylon etc. Blocks and other perches could usually be self made with a little thought but If you liked to see your hawk or falcon sitting on something decent they could normally be found by means of another falconer making some for himself and knocking up a few extra to sell at a profit and cover the cost of his own. That was certainly the source of my early large falcon blocks which served me well for thirty years or so before finally succumbing to the accumulated damaged of the elements, despite yearly rubbing downs and re-varnishing.

There certainly was no telemetry in these early days of my falconry career and things such as transport boxes had just never been considered. If a hawk or falcon would hood as it should then a cage or box cage would do the trick when it came to transportation. If not then it was the good old reliable card board box with some air holes let into the bottom edges of it. The other very great disadvantage that falconers this particular era had to put with, or rather their poor hawks did, was the general lack of knowledge regarding veterinary medicine relating to them and the treatment of even quite minor ailments.

To be continued