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EDUCATION

East Side man opens school for falconry

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Perched high in a tree and outlined against a bright-blue sky, Ki-Lo cocked his head at the sound of a whistle and the sight of food.

The male Harris' hawk alighted, flapped its wide wings three times and gracefully glided down to land on the leather-gloved hand of Powell resident West Carnahan.

"That's awesome!" Carnahan marveled, as Ki-Lo gobbled down a baby chick leg. "That is so cool."

Carnahan and his wife, Kirsten, were the lone members of a "Walk With a Hawk" class on a recent Sunday in a rural Westerville field.

Instructing was East Side resident Joe Dorrian, part of a select group of certified falconers nationwide and the only Ohioan licensed to operate a school (the recently opened Ohio School of Falconry) where others can experience the ancient sport.

Dorrian certainly appreciated Carnahan's elation: He was first captivated by falconry as a pre-teen and, almost 30 years later, decided to go through the arduous process of obtaining a falconer's license.

The payoff: developing a relationship with fierce birds of prey to the point that Dorrian can turn them loose into trees or the sky and they will follow him, hunt small animals, then return to him.

"It's entirely about the relationship," said Dorrian, 50. "They are wild birds, and they are saying: 'You're OK, I'll hang out with you.' It's amazing."

Falconry — the term is used generically for any bird of prey — has been around for at least 2,000 years. It was practiced in the Middle East before spreading to Europe during medieval times and catching on in North America only in the early 20th century.

When Dorrian was in the fourth grade, he became entranced by the book *My Side of the Mountain* — about a boy who lives in the woods and trains a peregrine falcon. Dorrian said he would roam the woods near his family's home on the Northwest Side with a whistle and a glove, just in case he came upon a bird of prey.

Then life intervened. He got married (to Kim Feinknopf), had two children (Mason, 14, and Lainey, 10) and went to work as an organizational-development consultant. (He now works for OhioHealth.)

In 2004, he stumbled across another book, *North American Falconry and Hunting Hawks*.

"We went on vacation, and I just couldn't put it down," Dorrian said. "My wife claimed I never left the hotel room. It reignited something in me."

He set out to become a licensed falconer, which takes plenty of time and money. The sports is one of the most heavily regulated in the nation, governed federally (under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act) and on the state level through

wildlife divisions.

The licensing process encompasses multiple permits, strict rules on housing and care of birds, an exam and a mandatory apprenticeship under a master falconer.

“It’s to protect the birds,” said Ron Ollis, a law-enforcement administrator with the Ohio Division of Wildlife.

Dorrian has three birds that he acquired from breeders, and one he trapped from the wild. Falconers can apply for permits to trap a juvenile wild bird, but that bird can be used only for hunting, as it is illegal to use wild-caught birds for profit (say, as part of his classes).

He said that training a bird to return to the glove takes three to four weeks of daily work, with food rewards providing the primary incentive.

Eventually, the bird can be let loose outside and will return at the sound of a whistle or the appearance of food. Dorrian has never had a bird leave and not return, he said.

He estimates that a beginning falconer would need at least \$1,000 to set up properly — including the cost of living areas for the birds. Dorrian’s birds live in spacious rooms he partitioned off his garage.

Costs for continuing food and care would be additional.

Scott McNeff, vice president of the North American Falconry Association, said the United States has about 6,000 licensed falconers. In Ohio, according to Ollis, Dorrian is one of about 85 or 90.

“It’s such a demanding and sort of obscure sport, and very few people have a lifestyle actually suited to do it,” said McNeff, of Kennebunk, Maine. “If you have a 9-to-5 job and a wife and kids, you can’t do it properly.”

Dorrian, of course, does have a 9-to-5 job and wife and kids. Both of his children have participated in his passion, he said, and his wife is understanding about it.

“I love his passion for it,” Feinknopf-Dorrian said. “Over the years, it has been a matter of finding a balance, because this (falconry) is a very intense thing, but we still have a family and we still want to spend time together.”

In recent years, Dorrian has become more interested in introducing others to the sport. He has served as a mentor to apprentice falconers — including Springfield resident Kris Klosterman, who recently completed his apprenticeship.

“Joe is fantastic,” Klosterman said. “He is a very unique person, and he knows falconry inside and out.”

In June, Dorrian obtained a permit to operate the falconry school.

Kirsten Carnahan, who used to work with Dorrian, signed up with her husband for the recent class. The duo spent more than two hours learning about the birds and then experiencing “calling down” the hawks from various perches.

“It’s incredible,” Mr. Carnahan said. “You would think it would be really intimidating, but the birds are so calm, it just feels natural. I’m definitely going to come back and try again.”

Such reactions are what motivate Dorrian.

“To be able to see the amazing smile on somebody’s face the first time they have a bird fly down to their glove, there’s a magic there,” he said.

“It allows me to relive my first experience through every student I work with, and that’s fascinating to me.”

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