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Harris's Hawk

# SOARING MISSISSIPPI

Falconry requires intense dedication, time, money, and a desire to learn

By Houston Havens

**W**hen most people hear the term falconry, they think of an outdated practice that was used long ago as a means to catch wild game before modern weaponry was developed. And to an extent, they would be correct. However, the sport of falconry is alive and well today in the United States, and Mississippi currently has 36 licensed falconers.

Strictly defined, falconry is the sport of hunting using falcons or other birds of prey, as well as the keeping and training of such birds. The “keeping and training” portion of the definition should

not be mistaken for simply bringing home a pet. Falconry requires intense dedication as well as time, money, and ongoing education. It must be considered more of a job than a leisure activity, and to become a master requires several steps.

## The permit exam

Mississippi requires prospective hunters to take a hunter education class on hunting methods, equipment, and safety; it also requires them to pass a test on the class materials before purchasing a hunting license. Similarly, the first step in becoming a falconer is to prepare for

the falconry permit exam, which covers a wide range of topics related to raptor biology, falconry equipment, caring for birds, and hunting with birds in the field. A minimum score of 80% is required to pass the exam before moving forward in the permitting process. To prepare for the exam, suggested literature can be found on the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks (MDWFP) Falconry Program web page, as well as other sources like the North American Falconers Association website. Also, contacting practicing falconers can be an excellent way to learn about the sport while gaining a better understanding of the commitment involved in working with raptors.



Red-tailed Hawk



equipment will vary, depending on the desired species of bird. Once applicants have completed construction, obtained the necessary equipment, and received feedback from their potential sponsors, they can contact MDWFP to schedule an inspection. A satisfactory inspection with no deficiencies allows the applicant to submit a falconry permit application for an apprentice class permit. The permit costs \$100 and it is valid for five years.

## Permit classifications

**Apprenticeship** Permitted falconers must be at least 12 years old and, regardless of age, start as an apprentice working under close supervision of a general or master class sponsor. Apprentices must capture their first bird from the wild and must hunt with that bird for at least one hunting season. Some of the overall goals of an apprenticeship are to learn about the general husbandry and training of raptors, as well as wildlife and hunting regulations. Apprentice falconers can only possess one bird under their permit.

**General** Falconers must be at least 16 years old and can only move into the

## Facilities and equipment

Falconry requires permitted beginners to work as an apprentice under an experienced falconer, called a sponsor. Prospective sponsors generally like to see that an applicant has passed the permit exam before agreeing to work with him or her. After passing the exam and consulting a potential sponsor, the next step in the permitting process is to acquire the necessary falconry equipment and to construct the facilities where the bird will be housed, called a mews. Applicants are responsible for constructing their own mews, at a minimum, to the specifications listed on the Falconry Program checklist. Associated equipment such as perches, leashes, and hoods can either be purchased or homemade. Some details of falconry facilities and

### AN INVISIBLE BOND

Evidence suggests that the art of falconry may have begun in Mesopotamia about 4,000 years ago. Since 2010, UNESCO has inscribed falconry as a living human heritage element of 18 countries. Falconry is the largest multi-national nomination on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.







Peregrine Falcon

#### AEROWOLF

Like wolves, the Harris's Hawk is often found in the wild living in groups or packs with complex social hierarchies, engaging in cooperative hunting using sophisticated strategies. This highly social behavior is not observed in any other bird of prey species and is well suited for falconry.



Harris's Hawk

general class after a minimum of two years as an apprentice. A general class promotion also requires approval from the falconer's sponsor, noting that the apprentice has shown capability and dedication in caring for, training, and hunting with the bird during the apprenticeship. General class falconers can possess up to three birds under their permit.

**Master** Eligibility for a master class falconry permit requires five years of experience under the general class permit. Master falconers are allowed to possess up to five wild raptors and any number of captive-bred raptors. In addition to hunting and sponsoring apprentices, master falconers often use their birds in educating others about the sport.

### Raptors used in Mississippi falconry

A variety of raptor species can be held for falconry purposes in Mississippi, depending on the class of the permit-holder. Red-tailed hawks are overwhelmingly the most popular falconry bird in the state, because of their year-round abundance in Mississippi and their relative ease of maintenance. Maintaining a bird in optimal weight and body condition for hunting is a precise task. Red-tailed hawks are relatively large birds, allowing for a wider margin of error for a huntable body con-



dition. Red-tails primarily feed on small mammals, making them ideal for falconers interested in hunting rabbits and squirrels.

American kestrels are the smallest species of falcon in North America, which, in contrast to the size of red-tails, perhaps provides some level of intrigue for falconers. However, because of their small size, their diets consist of smaller prey items like insects, mice, and small songbirds. While kestrels are impressive to see in action, they are not useful for hunting small game animals.

A few master class falconers in Mississippi hold Peregrine falcons under their permits. Peregrines specialize in hunting small to medium-sized birds, making them ideal for falconers interested in hunting migratory game birds like doves and ducks. Capable of reaching speeds around 200 miles per hour when diving toward their prey, these falcons are truly remarkable to watch while hunting. A limited number of juvenile Peregrine falcons can be captured in Mississippi each fall as they migrate through the state, and a special permit is required.

## Interested?

If you think you may be interested in becoming a permitted falconer in Mississippi, it is highly recommended that you first contact a practicing falconer to discuss what is involved. Interested individuals can assist with caring for the birds and accompany the falconer in the field to gain valuable experience and education before pursuing a permit for themselves. For more information on falconry requirements and regulations, visit the Falconry Program page on [mdwfp.com](http://mdwfp.com).

*Houston Havens is the Waterfowl Program and Falconry Program coordinator for MDWFP.*



American Kestrel



Red-tailed Hawk



Red-shouldered Hawk



### VIDEO

To see these birds in action, check out Mississippi Outdoors TV on the MDWFP YouTube channel.