

# Fairbanks falconer puts in time, effort for love of flight

By SAM FRIEDMAN  
Fairbanks Daily News-Miner

FAIRBANKS, Alaska — Dave Lorrington spoke to his peregrine falcon named “80” as he unfastened the leash and sent her out on a duck hunt.

“You behave now and come back to me,” he told her.

In less than a minute, the female falcon was airborne and far from the Creamer’s Field barn. She turned in a high circle somewhere near Wedgewood Resort until she was a distant speck.

Lorrington repeats some kind of last-minute plea most times he releases one of his birds on their own.

It’s an open question whether these highly-trained but independent animals will return. On their own they can fall prey to eagles, foxes, cars and telephone wires.

To Lorrington and a handful of other falconers in Interior Alaska, it’s worth the anxiety to train these birds of prey and let them free into the skies. For Lorrington, seeing the hawks in flight is the highlight.

“The biggest payoff for me is just to watch the falcons in their natural state, flying high and then coming down and diving on their prey,” he said.

Bird connection

Eventually, 80 came back to Lorrington on this flight. But first she obstinately took a perch on a telephone pole across College Road, completely ignoring the group of mallard ducks Lorrington flushed out of a pond for her to hunt.

Lorrington walked over to near the Alaska Department of Fish and Game building and brought 80 back to him as he often does, coaxing her in with a live pigeon on a string and then offering her a favorite meal, quail meat.

As the bird landed on the ground nearby, Lorrington cursed himself for dropping his protective leather glove on the ground back by the barn.

He made do by pulling his cotton sweatshirt over his hand and barely winced as 80 flew up to take a perch there, the bird’s sharp talons digging in. There was clearly a connection between man and bird, as Lorrington carefully wiped a piece of blood off 80’s beak.

Lorrington is a commercial pilot and former Alaska Wildlife Trooper. He’s been hunting with falcons since he was 12 years old.

Both 80 and Lorrington’s female gyrfalcon named Summit are some of the most mild-mannered raptors he’s ever had, he said.

The peregrine falcon recognizes his voice and calls out to him when Lorrington gets home, “somewhat like a dog wags its tail,” he said.

More than a connection between a hunter and a dog, his connection with Summit brought to mind the trained velociraptors in this summer’s Jurassic Park movie, in particular the scene where Chris Pratt’s character lovingly pats the nose of a muzzled dinosaur.

Lorrington’s gyrfalcon went without a name her first few years. Only this year did he settle on Summit, for her birthplace near Summit Lake on the Richardson Highway.

He picked 80 because his son had a college classmate named 80 and he liked the name.

How to train a raptor

As trained birds of prey, Lorrington’s falcons calmly tolerate Lorrington taking their hood on and off. They also don’t mind the weight of a radio transmitter on their legs.

They have learned to associate the sound of a whistle with food. Usually the sound of the whistle and a bird or lure on a string is enough to bring them back to him.

“In initial training they’re on a leash, but pretty soon you’re going to have to take them off,” Lorrington said. “On that first flight you’re going to have to hope that bird flies to your fist with no restraints.”

If a bird eats while it’s out on its own, it will have no motivation to return to its master, Lorrington said. The falconer will likely have to return to the same area in a day when the bird is hungry again.



Erin Corneliusen/Fairbanks Daily News-Miner

Dave Lorrington releases Summit, his 4-year-old gyrfalcon, to go duck hunting at Creamer’s Field in Fairbanks, Alaska.



Erin Corneliusen/Fairbanks Daily News-Miner

Dave Lorrington holds Summit, his 4-year-old gyrfalcon, after removing her hood so she can go duck hunting at Creamer’s Field in Fairbanks, Alaska.

The radio transmitter has been a key modern advancement to the ancient art of falconry, Lorrington said. Before that, falconers listened for the sound of bells around the bird’s ankles.

Difficult sport

Raising a raptor is a lifestyle as much as a hobby. In addition to raising their falcons, they also often raise their food. Lorrington traps pigeons at the downtown Fairbanks parking garage for use in training and feeding his falcons. He also orders live chukars, a type of south Asian pheasant, from Minneapolis. He keeps a freezer full of quail meat.

Lorrington is one of about nine falconers he knows of in Interior Alaska, and that’s probably a near-complete list because falconers generally know each other, he said. The state has strict regulations on the types of birds falconers are allowed to take and which birds they use for training.

Lorrington’s license permitted him to collect both 80 and Summit from the wild. 80 came from a nest off the Yukon River.

Inefficient hunt

Falcons aren’t nearly as effective as shotguns for harvesting lots of waterfowl. Lorrington came to Creamer’s Field almost

every weeknight this fall, setting Summit and 80 after ducks and geese on some of the front ponds.

The raptors didn’t kill any ducks or geese the whole season, but toward the end of the season they got in better flying shape and were able to chase some ducks down a stream. Before freeze-up, the ducks were able to escape Summit and 80 by diving into the water.

The peregrine falcon can fly at speeds of more than 200 mph, making it the fastest animal on Earth. But much of its speed comes from flying high and diving. If 80 misses on her initial dive, she and a duck are fairly evenly matched, each flying at about 50 mph in what’s known as a tail-chase.

The falcons did catch their share of the chukars and pigeons during this fall’s season, but even these training birds sometimes escaped the falcons with acrobatic flying moves.

Coming home without any ducks after two months of hunting doesn’t bother Lorrington much.

“A successful day of falconry is when you come back with the same number of falcons as you left with,” he likes to say.

## Harp guitarist plays Friday

The Daily Astorian

Lewis and Clark Bible Church, 35082 Seppa Lane, is presenting musician and storyteller John Doan with his “Christmas Unplugged — Reclaiming the Holiday Spirit” program at 7 p.m. Friday. Admission is by a suggested donation of \$12-15 for adults and \$10 for seniors and children.

Doan is an international touring and recording artist who has appeared on radio and television across the country, including his Emmy-nominated Oregon Public Broadcasting special, “A Victorian Christmas With John Doan.” He was recently given the International Brand Laureate Award for “World’s Leading Harp Guitarist.”

He has performed with a diverse range of artists including Donovan, Burl Ives, Larry Carlton, Mason Williams (of “Classical Gas” fame), and as a member of the New Christy Minstrels. Doan is an associate professor of music at Willamette University in Salem.

For information call 503-325-7011 or go to [www.lc-biblechurch.com](http://www.lc-biblechurch.com) or [www.johndoan.com](http://www.johndoan.com)



Submitted photo

Musician John Doan performs Friday at Lewis and Clark Bible Church.

## Ride the bus with a can of food

Sunset Empire Transportation District’s Annual Holiday Canned Food Drive continues through Dec. 24. All bus drivers are accepting one can of food as bus fare for one ride on any fixed bus routes within Clatsop County.

All proceeds go to the Holiday Food Basket Program and the county food bank. Regular fare is required on any connecting bus routes outside of Clatsop County.

For information, contact Hazen at 503-861-5399 or [jeff@ridethebus.org](mailto:jeff@ridethebus.org)

Transit Center at 900 Marine Drive, and from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Thursday through Monday at the Seaside Transit Kiosk located at the Seaside Outlet Mall, 111 N. Roosevelt Drive.

Executive Director Jeff Hazen said.

Canned food donations will also be accepted from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily at the

## Share thoughts on area’s transit system

The Daily Astorian

Sunset Empire Transportation District wants opinions about regional transit service and is offering residents a chance to do just that from 10 a.m.-noon Saturday at the Seaside Safeway, 401 South Roosevelt Dr. (Highway 101).

SETD provides local and regional bus service and are undertaking a long range plan to determine the transit needs of Clatsop County. Questions include where and when passengers need to travel and what service can be improved.

For more information visit <http://transitstudy.ridethebus.org>.

## Free class in Astoria helps caregivers of older adults

The Daily Astorian

[bit.ly/1OQwFRp](http://bit.ly/1OQwFRp).

Oregon Care Partners holds a free class in Astoria for caregivers of those with Alzheimer’s disease and dementia 8:30 a.m.-1 p.m. Thursday.

The class called “Challenging Behaviors: Effective Approaches to Common Behaviors in the Non-Dementia Adult Population,” is open to all caregivers of Alzheimer’s and dementia patients, whether family or professionals. Registration is available online at <http://>

This class is designed to help anyone who cares for an aging Oregonian better manage challenging behaviors that are common among older adults, such as anger, yelling, cussing, threatening others, withdrawing, self harm and physical aggression.

Oregon Care Partners provides no-cost, in-person and online trainings around the state. All course offerings provide continuing education credits to healthcare professionals.



Submitted photo

Pictured, from left, Kathy Eggleston Swenson, Laurie Drage and Phyllis Taylor, who are performing a concert Sunday at First Lutheran Church.

## Pipe organ concert Sunday

The Daily Astorian

music ministry in the Denver area for five decades.

Kathy Eggleston Swenson presents a Christmas pipe organ concert, “A Journey of the Season,” at 5 p.m. Sunday at First Lutheran Church, 725 33rd St. First Lutheran members joining her are vocalists Laurie Drage and Cliff Weimer, cellist Phyllis Taylor and on the string bass, Charlene Larson. A freewill offering will be taken.

Swenson has worked in

She recently moved to Gig Harbor, Washington, with her husband, Keith Swenson, a pastor. They are in Astoria for several months while he serves as the interim pastor at First Lutheran Church.

Following the concert, there is a prime rib dinner for \$15. Reservations are required; call the church at 503-325-6252.

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