

Water Manning

Fastest Manning Technique Yet!

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Falconers have been using water to help man birds since, well, probably the first falconer. Frederick II wrote about it in great detail in his wonderful book *The Art of Falconry*. The last few years, some of us have been taking it a step further, with great results. This technique unfortunately has become known by the not very politically correct term “water-boarding.” Maybe we could start calling it “the super-soaker method” or “dunking” or something. Anyway, it entails not just getting a bird wet, but super wet. It is generally used on freshly-trapped birds or birds right out of the chamber, but it can also be used on inter-mewed birds to correct behavioral issues (more on that later). It is common knowledge among falconers that wet birds are reluctant to bate, but what we have found is that if you get them very, very wet they simply stop bating completely!





Dale Mutch, left, and author dunking a gyrfalcon. Photo by Joe Roy III.

To accomplish this you simply get the hooded bird on your fist. Use an old glove because it will get soaked. Pull the leash tight, holding its feet snug on your fist, and have an assistant cast the bird from behind, leaving its feet on your glove. Lower the bird and your fist into a tub of water up to the bird's neck. You need to hold its head up because

as soon as you start lowering it into the water, it will want to put its head down, which would put it under water. You obviously don't want to drown your bird. You can hold the top knot on the hood with your free hand to hold its head out of the water. Another method is to have the person that is casting it hold the hood braces under his thumbs on the bird's back. This

will prevent the bird from putting its head down and will also free up your hand. You can then use your free hand to help work water into its feathers. The person casting the bird can also gently pull the bird's wings out from its body a little, allowing the areas under its wings to get wet. When you are satisfied the bird is thoroughly wet, remove it from the water and have the per-



Wetting a bird even more after being dunked.

son that did the casting put it up on your fist. It may bate or fall off but that's okay, just get it back on the fist. By the way, a good trick to get a reluctant bird back on your fist is to grab it by the tail instead of the body. Get the entire tail in your free hand about halfway down the tail and use it as a lever to put them back on the fist. You can even hold them on the fist for a bit while

they decide to grip the fist and stay there. You won't hurt it, and you won't pull feathers out. It works better than grabbing the body because many birds, especially gyrs, don't like being touched; plus, you can hold on to it better than you can their body. Dan Konkel taught me this trick and it felt very unnatural at first. I was worried I would pull tail feathers out or break them. I

was also concerned about breaking or straining the fleshy part of the tail. My concerns were unfounded. I have now used it on dozens of birds, and Konkel and crew have used it on literally hundreds without ever having a problem.

Once you have the soaking wet bird back on your fist you can proceed to wet it even more. Use a spray bottle or even a garden hose



Joe Roy III manning a very wet gyrfalcon. It will be hooded hundreds of times during this one manning session.

to wet any areas, except the head, that are still dry. The hardest part to get wet is under the wings. Once you are convinced the bird couldn't get any more saturated, wet it some more. Now you are ready to take the hood off, even with a bird fresh out of the trap or chamber, and in full daylight, and in front of people and dogs, or anything else. Most birds will bate a few times. Help it back on the fist if necessary. When a bird is this wet it has a hard time regaining the fist. If it bates more than a few times it needs to be wetter. **Let me repeat that, if it keeps bating it is not wet enough!** Many don't even bate once. It's like a switch flips in their head and the bating is turned off. Until you see it in person it's hard to appreciate how well it works. It's hard to believe a bird that is still completely wild will sit the fist in broad daylight without bating, but it's true.

Birds vary in how wet they have to be to get this "switch" to flip. I have seen this done on over a hundred birds and every one stopped bating. Some very stubborn individuals had to be sprayed a lot, even after being dunked. I had to keep spraying one particularly stubborn gyrfalcon for half an hour, and drained two big spray bottles before he quit bating, but most take much less to get them to sit the fist nicely. A lot of them don't even bate once. You now have a couple off hours where you can do some intensive manning. You could even stretch it longer if you spray them occasionally to keep them wet. Some especially wild birds will still bate occasionally, but if it's more than once every five minutes the bird is not wet enough. Most will simply sit there.

When birds are this wet they get cold easily, even gyrs, so if it starts shivering, take it somewhere warmer. This method does have the advantage of keeping birds from overheating, which is frequently a problem with traditional manning. During this manning session, do everything the bird will let you, which will be more than you expect. They not only don't bate, they also don't dodge the hood near as



Dale Mutch has just finished wetting down a gyrfalcon that is fresh out of the barn, and is preparing to remove the hood.



The hood comes off in broad daylight. This bird has never been handled before.



And it just sits there! It's hard to see how wet this bird is in these photos, but rest assured, it's dripping wet.



Birds being weathered for the first time. The lawn sprinkler keeps them wet and, therefore, settled.

much. They also don't bite or foot as much. Hood it over and over, maybe five hundred times over the two hours. Yes, I said **five hundred**. Stroke it. Mess with its feet and its tail. Walk through the yard with the dogs. Anything you can think off. Just remember, if it's baiting a lot, it's not wet enough.

You can try to feed them, but when they are wet they don't really want to do anything, including eat. After I am done with the training session, I usually hood them and leave them alone for a few hours on a safe perch to finish drying. I then take them up and give them a chance to feed on the fist. This is done inside and is much more like traditional manning, except that the room doesn't have to be as dimly lit. There is a kind of lag-effect from the earlier

dunking. Most of the time, even though the bird is completely dry, it will still sit the fist fairly well, much better than if had never been dunked. It's common to get them to eat at least a few tidbits the first day. Hooding will be much less of a fight too, which shouldn't be a surprise because you have already hooded it five hundred times. With traditional manning you probably wouldn't hood the bird five hundred times in the entire first year.

If you do a repeat water-boarding session the next day, or even later the same day, you generally don't have to get the bird near as wet to get the "switch" to flip. Most can just be heavily sprayed with a spray bottle if they had been dunked in the last day or two, but again if they are baiting a lot they are not wet enough.

Birds manned this way tame down much faster, and there is far less stress on both the falcon and the falconer. They also eat much sooner. Dan Konkel figures it puts you at least a week ahead.

When you are ready to weather a bird the first time you can use water here too. Simply put a lawn sprinkler on them and they will sit nicely. It will also make picking them up easier. Again, be careful in cold weather.

Inter-mewed birds can also benefit from water-boarding sessions. Reclaiming a particularly wild bird after the molt is made much easier. It has also been used to help get birds over being hood-shy. I am sure there are many other situations where creative falconers will find use for this technique.

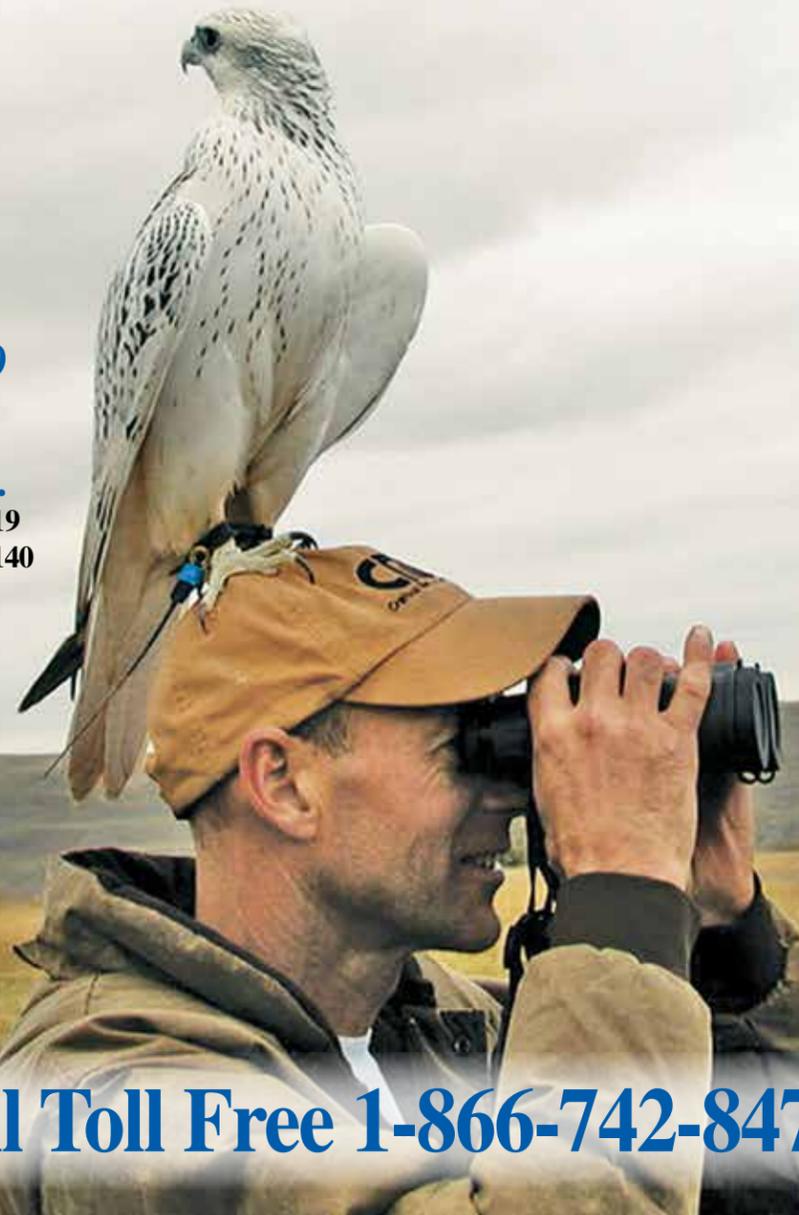


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