

On a wing and a prayer

THE life of a wildlife film-maker can be a dangerous one when your subject, the karearea or native falcon, is not at all keen on a Hollywood career, Sandy Crichton discovers.

A PIERCING screech, a rush of air from a wing beat, a momentary lapse in concentration.

Panic, surprise, shock, fear ... a thud, a cloud of dust and then the pain!

My knee had already started to swell as I lay on the rocky ledge surrounded by camera kit looking at the distant rear end of my extremely vocal assailant. Three metres above I could see where I had lost my footing during the attack.

I looked back up at the now-empty blue sky before quickly grabbing a sturdy branch and holding it above my head in preparation for the next aerial assault. "What on earth am I doing here, is it all worth it?"

I had held a fascination with the New Zealand falcon ever since my first encounter with them while holidaying in the South Island in the late 1990s. That first encounter had been at close quarters on the edge of a recently felled commercial pine forest near Lake Mahinerangi in Otago.

The falcon perched on a tree stump, occasionally turning its head to watch me as I ate lunch at the side of the road. I was in awe, captivated by its striking appearance and astounded by its indifference towards me.

The experience contradicted the many stories I'd heard of falcons' aggression during the breeding season – based in no small part on their penchant for attacking unwary trampers and high country musters who venture too close to their nests.

Despite its fearsome reputation it is still one of New Zealand's most highly regarded animals, respected by forestry workers, farmers and conservationists alike. It appears on the twenty-dollar bill, commemorative coins, stamps, street names, wine labels and is the name behind one of the country's best-selling cars – the Ford Falcon.



George Chance

One of George Chance's stunning black-and-white shots of a falcon mid-flight which inspired film-maker Sandy Crichton.

On the one hand the falcon was a national icon, celebrated in Maori legend, while on the other it was a troublemaker – a nuisance that could make forestry workers down tools, trampers change routes and high country farmers shoot at it. It was this somewhat ambiguous relationship with everyday New Zealanders that I was keen to explore.

I returned to the South Island as a wildlife filmmaker in the winter of 2003 and when I spoke to people about the falcon, one name was mentioned with recurring regularity: George Chance. Eighty-seven-year-old George was a politely-spoken, unassuming man who had spent most of his spare time during the 1970s photographing the New Zealand falcon. His stunning images, many in black-and-white, captured the falcons with an intimacy not seen before as they hunted, fed, courted, nested and raised their chicks.

George was an optometrist by trade, having followed in his father into this career on returning from the Second World War. His father, George Chance senior, was an English-born optician who settled in Dunedin and was one of New Zealand's pioneering landscape photographers.

When I first met George he recounted so many incredible stories of his falcon encounters over the years that I just sat listening and wondering what it must be like to have such a close connection to a species.

Throughout his life George had photographed many of New Zealand's most iconic birds, but the bird that remained closest to his heart was the New Zealand falcon.

His eyes would light up and a smile would spread across his face whenever he recalled a favourite falcon anecdote, and there were many to choose from. He talked of knowing the birds so well that he could understand their language; on one occasion he claimed that he had translated an adult male telling the female he was off to catch a gull. Even more surprising was the fact that the male actually returned some time later clutching a small gull!

George told me how he had been seduced by the feeling of danger and excitement that the falcon offered – he reckoned being attacked by a New Zealand falcon was not unlike being dive-bombed by enemy aircraft in North Africa during the war.

He described the many injuries he had sustained and the items that the falcons had stolen from him: a cap with a military badge of sentimental value and a handkerchief that had been plucked with surgical precision straight from his trouser pocket.

He explained how he had wanted to progress from stills photography to the moving image but that he had been prevented by the expense. Later he would also tell me that his heart was failing and he was going blind.

I reflected on those early meetings with George as I repelled another attack, like a madman waving a branch in the air at an often-invisible adversary. There were now two birds, a breeding pair, dive-bombing me. The pain from my knee was unbearable; I collected my scattered camera gear together as best I could with one hand while brandishing the branch with the other.

I made a deal with George to try to "add movement" through my film work to his classic falcon stills from past decades in return for his help. Since then I had been following a remarkable population of Otago falcons that had adapted to take advantage of commercial pine plantations (much of their native habitat is long gone).

Wildlife photographer George Chance during filming of "Karearea: the pine falcon," Berwick Forest, Otago.



Sandy Crichton

I had been filming them for two breeding seasons, and was about to embark on a third and final season.

Most of my time had been spent in Berwick forest near Milton, and Akatore near Lake Waihola. These were areas that George had known since childhood and although the face of the landscape had changed dramatically, his beloved falcons were still present.

In conjunction with my role as filmmaker I had also taken on the voluntary role of “falcon consultant” to Wenita Forest Products, the owners of pine plantations throughout Otago, and I was often called upon to survey areas where falcons had nested perilously close to felling operations. As a direct result of increasing awareness through the making of the film, more nest sites were reported and consequently protected from the logging threat.

George would often say that time spent in reconnaissance was seldom wasted, and our reconnaissance agents were the forestry workers of Otago – our eyes and

ears on the ground. Gnarly, straight-talking, weather-beaten men who, contrary to popular belief, were great admirers of the falcon, and often went out of their way to protect the birds.

One forestry worker, Darren Kealey, described how he came across a nest containing chicks as he was clearing debris from a recent felling operation – a falcon nest being no more than a scraped hollow on the ground usually sheltered by an upturned root ball or an overhanging rock. On spotting the little balls of grey down he quickly jumped out of his digger, removed the chicks from the nest and carefully placed them into his lunchbox for safekeeping. He then proceeded to clear the area at a safe distance around the nest to his satisfaction. Job done, he returned the chicks to their unharmed nest.

With George’s support and guidance, I had got pretty close to the pine plantation falcons during my first two seasons – but nowhere near as close as I needed to be. The falcons had a knack of nesting in the

most inaccessible places for filming, and so far I hadn’t had the good fortune of finding an easily accessible nest.

The closest I had managed was at least 100 metres away on the opposite bank of a steep-sided gully. George had got around this particular problem decades earlier with the aid of crampons, ropes and sheer determination. I – much to George’s disapproval – was holding out for a more accessible nest site! I felt as though I hadn’t managed to get close enough to the birds to fully gain their trust and as a consequence many of the behavioural images remained elusive – I just wasn’t doing justice to George’s photographs.

So there it was, my final season was to be all about getting even closer to the falcons, pushing the boundaries and taking a few risks. I had finally found a nest I could walk right up to but as I limped back up the dusty slope, still under the watchful eye of my assailants, I wondered if I would ever be able to capture the footage I so desperately needed.

New Zealand falcon/karearea (*Falco novaeseelandia*)

THE New Zealand falcon, also known as the sparrow hawk and the bush hawk, is (along with the Australasian harrier hawk/kahu and the morepork/ruru) one of just three native birds of prey still alive.

Sadly, several New Zealand birds of prey have become extinct since human arrival – such as the Haast’s eagle, the largest eagle that ever existed, which preyed on moa; the laughing owl, named for its shrieking, “barking” cries; and the small, almost flightless New Zealand owl-nightjar.

While the native falcon remains, it too is at risk from predation by introduced pests, habitat destruction and deliberate killing by humans, and its population is in decline.

The karearea is found only in New Zealand, in both the North and South Islands, and numbers only about 5000. There are three forms of New Zealand falcon: the bush, eastern and southern forms, which vary in size, plumage and habitat. All are generally black or dark brown above, and buff barred and streaked below.

The karearea is among the world’s fastest birds, reaching speeds of more than 200 kilometres per hour, possesses formidable eyesight and can bring down prey six times its own weight. The falcon feeds mainly on small birds, insects and rodents.

The female lays 1-4 eggs, with the nest often a “scrape” in the ground, or in epiphytes growing on trees. These vulnerable nests mean that falcon eggs and chicks are an easy meal for introduced predators, such as stoats, possums and rats, which are the main threat to the karearea’s survival.

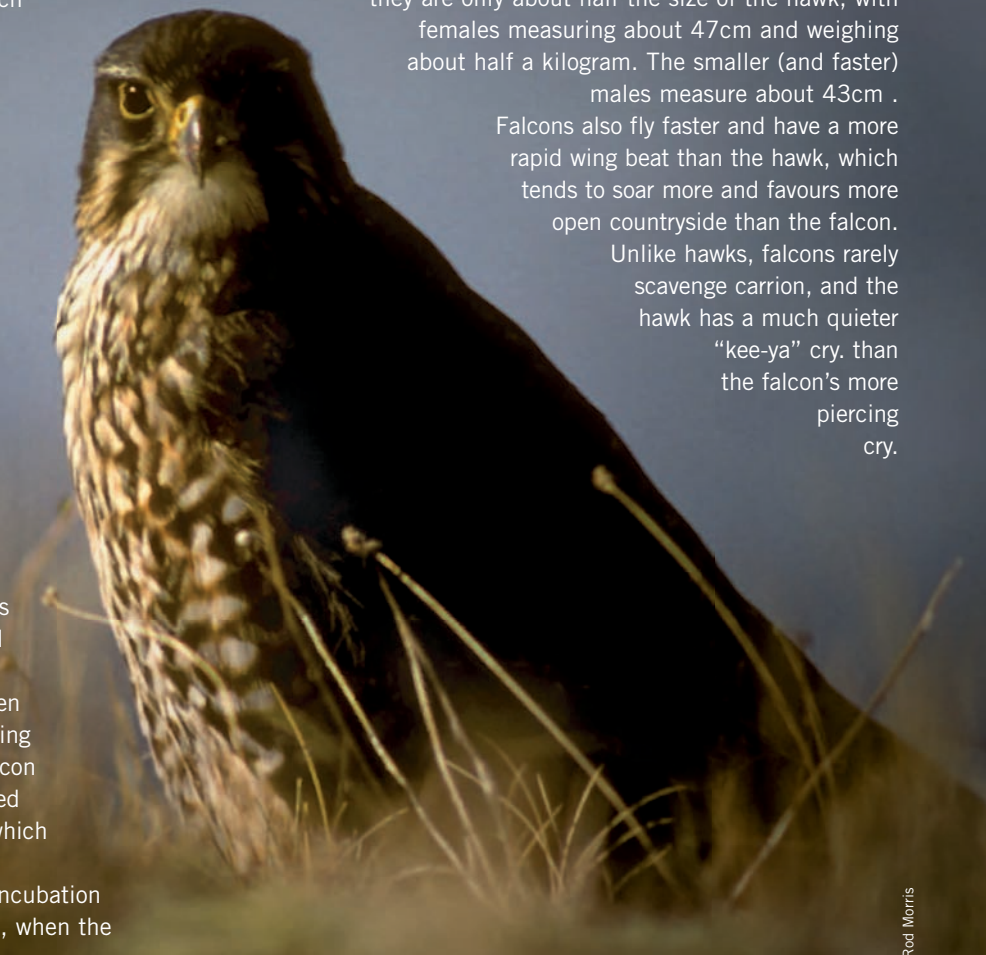
The male and female falcon share incubation of eggs till the downy white chicks hatch, when the

female takes over nest duties for the first two weeks while the male catches food for the family. Falcons aggressively defend their nest with loud “kek-kek-kek” cries and dive-bombing of intruders.

The native falcons can be distinguished from the more common harrier hawk by their much smaller size – they are only about half the size of the hawk, with females measuring about 47cm and weighing about half a kilogram. The smaller (and faster) males measure about 43cm.

Falcons also fly faster and have a more rapid wing beat than the hawk, which tends to soar more and favours more open countryside than the falcon.

Unlike hawks, falcons rarely scavenge carrion, and the hawk has a much quieter “kee-ya” cry. than the falcon’s more piercing cry.



Rod Morris



Sandy Crichton

Falcon chicks – film-maker Sandy Crichton endured countless aerial attacks to film nesting falcons. The falcons themselves face even greater risks from introduced predators.

Karearea: the pine falcon

SANDY Crichton did survive repeated attempts on his life by the ferocious subjects of his filming – the result is his natural history documentary *Karearea: The Pine Falcon*.

With the aid of a protective umbrella, and a birdwatching hide inherited from George, Sandy somehow manages to dodge aggressive, dive-bombing falcons while also trying to persuade the loggers to stop felling trees where the falcons are nesting. The result is a visually spectacular and touching film which has been shown at 29 film festivals worldwide and has won 11 awards.

You can see *Karearea* during the Reel Earth environmental film festival, which was co-founded by Forest & Bird, and opens in Palmerston North this month before touring the country.

Forest & Bird has a copy of *Karearea: The Pine Falcon* to give away. To go in the draw to win a copy of the film on DVD, answer the question: which is bigger, the male or female karearea? Send your answer, with your name, postal address and a daytime contact number or email to Karearea Draw, Forest & Bird, PO Box 631, Wellington.

George Chance's hide, used in the filming



Sandy Crichton

Sandy Crichton and assailant



Nature, red in tooth and claw

UNFORTUNATELY our native wildlife doesn't distinguish between the common and the critically endangered when it comes to choosing from the dinner menu. Photographer Rod Morris tells the story behind his photograph of a falcon and a rather unfortunate young takahe:

"In 1975 while Hans Rook and I were young wildlife trainees working on a takahe field study in the Murchison Mountains we came across a young takahe freshly killed by a New Zealand falcon in a side basin off Miller Peak. We observed the falcon's two fledged young feeding on the carcass as well.

While takahe chicks this size are nearly as large as adults, they are still vulnerable and dependant upon their parents for food and defence. We found the dead chick's sibling nearby being harassed by a group of kea.

Not wanting to see this takahe chick go the way of the first, we intervened.

It was just before dusk and as there were no adult takahe responding to the calls of the distressed chick, we took it back to our hut.

We fed the survivor on honey-sweetened boiled rice that night, (it was the nearest 'brew' we could create from hut supplies to resemble the sugar-rich tussock bases the parents would have fed their chick). It must have been OK, as the chick ate all the rice we placed in its bill with great gusto.

In the morning, four of us trainees searched for several hours before finally locating the takahe parents in dense hebe scrub.

We reunited them with their lost chick and quietly left.

Hans and I were surprised at the size of the chick the falcon had killed and we put this down to the inexperience of the takahe chick – I would think size alone is no defence against a falcon attack.

Prehistoric prey assemblages of the falcon show birds were taken up to the size of kereru and kokako, though typically even in the past, they preferred smaller birds like native parakeets."



Vintage falcons



NATIVE falcons and fine wines have formed a mutually beneficial partnership in Marlborough.

A programme to allow falcon populations to recover while also protecting grapes from damage by smaller birds is now in its fourth year and is proving successful – for both falcons and winemakers.

The programme began life as Falcon for Grapes, and was re-launched as the Marlborough Falcon Conservation Trust at the Marlborough Wine Festival in February.

Spokesman Nick Fox says there are now about 30 falcons in the programme on the Wairau Plains, both relocated from the wild and those that have bred around the vineyards.

He says the presence of falcons is proving a strong deterrent to small birds which otherwise cause millions of dollars worth of damage to grapes – monitoring has found no grape damage within 300 metres of each site where falcons are present, and very little damage within 600m.

The falcons are also benefiting from predator control. While they were breeding in the hills around Marlborough, their



Falcons, with radio transmitter attached, soar above Marlborough vineyards.

numbers were being reduced by predation by feral cats, possums and hedgehogs; they were also being shot and electrocuted on power lines. Fox has monitored falcons in Marlborough for 35 years and says their natural population has declined in that time – as many as three-quarters of chicks born in the wild do not survive.

In the programme their eggs are protected in artificial nest barrels that

predators can't reach – unlike their vulnerable "scrapes" of nests in the wild. The project team also tracks the falcons with radio transmitters and provides supplementary feed.

Fox says the survival rate of chicks raised in the artificial nests is 100%, raising hopes that their numbers will help boost wild populations – and help produce a nice drop of wine at the same time.