

# JOHN CRAIGHEAD REVISITED

by Kate Davis

## *A day with an American falconry pioneer*

**M**y introduction to this small world of falconry and birds of prey came through reading a book we all love called *My Side of the Mountain*. The minute I finished reading it, I immediately wanted to run away from home, live in a hollow tree, and fly a peregrine falcon. Many years after reading that book by Jean Craighead George, I was in the audience at a lecture presented by her brother, John J. Craighead, enthralled by his stories of the wild grizzly bears of Montana.

From the suburbs of Cincinnati, I decided that I would go to Montana and study birds of prey, thanks to the adventurous tales of the Craighead family. Little did I know that some 30 years later, I would be privileged to spend a day in the field with Jay Sumner, Director of the Montana Peregrine Institute, our two falcons, and the Craighead family.

John J. Craighead and his twin brother, Frank C. Craighead, Jr., were pioneers of American conservation and are certainly the fathers of American falconry. Born in 1916, they spent their childhoods exploring the wilds of the Potomac River. Their classic 1939 book, *Hawks in the Hand*, is a testament to their dedication to

wildlife, photography, and falconry and is a must-read for falconers to this day. Pictures of the Craigheads as teenagers, climbing into raptor



nest or crammed into blinds with bulky cameras beside falcon eyries, are quite astounding.

In 1940-41, the two spent nine months in India practicing falconry with the royal family of Bhavnagar,

for a 1941 *National Geographic* article titled "Life With an Indian Prince." The Archives of American Falconry published a book with the same title in 2000, based on the diaries the Craigheads kept during their stay in India and including many previously unpublished still photographs they took there. The Craigheads also shot extensive 16mm film footage during the year they were there, capturing all the pomp and pageantry of the final days of the Indian Raj.

One of the major sources of information about falconry in North America during the 1940s and '50s came from *National Geographic* articles the brothers wrote. Their 1937 piece, "Adventures with Birds of Prey," gave many budding American falconers their first glimpse of the sport. John and Frank conducted cutting-edge field research on the complex relationship between predators and prey in Michigan during the early 1950s for their Ph.D. dissertations, and the resulting book *Hawks, Owls, and Wildlife* is a classic in the field of ecology. In the early days of television—back when there were just three channels—everything came to a halt whenever a National Geographic Society special aired, and we always marveled at the latest Craighead adventures: rafting or capturing and radio-tagging grizzly bears, we all remember each episode.

The Craigheads' 12-year study of grizzly bears in Yellowstone National Park began in 1959. They employed the most comprehensive and groundbreaking techniques and set the standard for ecological studies from then on. The brothers helped develop radio-telemetry, fitting the bears with collar transmitters that now seem enormous. We can give John Craighead a nod each time we check the signal on the 10-gram transmitters we use on our birds today. They also pioneered satellite habitat mapping and used their data to promote conservation of the grizzly and other species.

In 1961, Jay Sumner joined the Yellowstone team and his dozen years of research have brought a wealth of knowledge, innovative ideas, and



*John Craighead (right) poses with twin brother Frank (left) and Prince R.S. Dharmakumarsinjhi during their epic 1940 journey to India. They stayed with the prince for nine months, hunting with falcons, and wrote an article about the experience.*

energy. A fast friendship began, and Jay was soon part of the family. His other love, that of peregrine falcons compelled him to locate every eyrie he could find around his hometown, Livingston, Montana. That same year, he rappelled down the face of a cliff known as the Tasty Freeze eyrie, because of the ice cream stand at its base, and he took an eyas peregrine for John, which his daughter Karen flew.

By the mid-1970s, Jay noticed that peregrines were getting harder and harder to find, and the Tasty Freeze birds were long gone. To his, and every falcon lover's horror, not a single nesting pair of peregrines could be found in Montana by the early 1980s. You can imagine the downhearted passages in his journal notes from that year. Peregrines have since made a recovery in Montana, thanks largely to the hacking of 617 birds in the state. With the aid of agency biologists, Jay Sumner and Ralph Rogers began formal surveys of Montana peregrine populations. Jay formed the Montana Peregrine Institute in 2002, and they have completed one of the

most extensive surveys of occupancy and productivity of peregrines of any state in the country. In 2006, they observed 61 active eyries in the state, a huge effort but vital to the recovery of the falcons.

I have known Jay for almost 20 years, but we became good friends when he put me to work as a volunteer for the Montana Peregrine Institute. A juvenile peregrine had been harassing my anatum during the fall, and I reported it to Jay. Bright and early one morning the following April we hiked up that drainage, hoping to locate a new eyrie. On the walk up, a motion caught my eye, and we saw two peregrines chasing a songbird right through the canopy of the trees. Minutes later, we spotted the two adults perched on a snag at the top of the cliff. We watched them drive an adult golden eagle from the area with a hearty tap and a feather flying.

We had found the new breeding territory and a cause for celebration. (And I could turn the spotting scope 180 degrees from the cliff face and see my driveway across the valley!) It was an experience I will always treasure,

and I was hooked for life.

During hundreds of hours of gazing at cliffs, Jay and I would talk about our influences, and I found that John Craighead was his mentor and a dear friend. I told him that John was the reason I originally moved to Montana and studied ornithology. I am now director of the Raptors of the Rockies education program, and a golden eagle that had been in John's aviary some 14 years earlier was still in our care. He also wrote the jacket review for a book I had written, for which I was honored and humbled.

"Hey, let's get John to come out in the field to fly our peregrines at the place where we had found the new eyrie," I said. Great idea, and wonder of wonders, it really happened.

The beautiful fall day came, and we hosted John, his wife Margaret, and their son Johnny. We loaded Jay's hatch-year peregrine and my three-year-old anatum into the Subaru, and across the road we went to the exercise grounds.

Jay flew his bird first, and she made some great passes at the lure, then it was my bird's turn. I was trembling as



*John Craighead (left) and his wife Margaret (third from left) pose with Kate Davis and Jay Sumner. He celebrated his 90th birthday this past summer. Below, Sibley with the newly occupied peregrine cliffs in the background, a mile from her house.*

I attached the transmitters to Sibley and told her to be good, get high, and for God's sake, don't try to hit John Craighead. She had been a little territorial in the past at her training hill, occasionally swiping hats off the heads of bystanders. I was hailed as a great trainer for such a novelty trick, but that and the occasional tap on the head with a foot was bad, bad, bad. I just prayed she would behave herself with the Craighead family.

Up she went and, after a few circles, I heard John say that it was just like the old days. As an almost surreal boost to our enjoyment of watching Sib, a wild adult peregrine came from nowhere and joined her in some high laps of almost synchronized flight. The two spent several minutes overhead before the wild bird headed off across the valley. It was a peaceful moment before the set-up of game. When she was in good position, we launched a bagged pheasant that she hit in a shallow stoop, knocking it to our feet. I was so relieved that the only blood of the day would be avian, and what an honor to have our hero present.

With his smile and a faraway look, I knew John was reliving a much more spectacular falcon stoop from the skies on wild game, an image etched in his memory forever.

The Tasty Freeze eyrie in Livingston has been renamed Pop Stand due to a change in business owners. The real owners, though, are the new peregrines that moved in after a 45-years vacancy. No falcons had been present since Jay Sumner lowered himself to that ledge to retrieve an eyas for John Craighead in 1961. The peregrines

are back, and John Craighead continues to inspire untold numbers of biologists, scholars, and falconers throughout the world. ■



PHOTOS (LEFT): JOHNNY CRAIGHEAD; ILLUSTRATION (RIGHT): VADIM GORBATOV