



Alexandra Heck/Metroland

Dan Frankian is the owner of Hawkeye Falconry Experience in Acton, a subsidiary of his falconry business that offers lessons and sessions in learning to fly large birds of prey.

You can try falconry right here in Acton

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A teenage boy stood with a large bird of prey on his arm. Cautiously, he nudged the bird into the air.

With a large sweeping movement, it landed on a perch in the field, turned, and stared down at the boy.

With one whistle, the magnificent creature spread its wings and swooped back down onto the boy's arm, the boy swaying as he braced against the bird's weight.

He was beaming, ear to ear.

Dan Frankian isn't your everyday pest-control expert.

He's an Acton-based falconer who uses his birds to eliminate problem bird populations across the GTA, and across the globe. In addition, he offers falconry lessons at his home office and aviary in Acton.

It's a niche discipline. Frankian said there are only a handful of falconers in Ontario, and of those, he's the only company to have three licences - for pest control, wildlife rehabilitation and falconry.

"We've gone as far as sending teams to Thailand and Ecuador," he said.

However, pest control isn't the only purpose of Frankian's feathered friends. His animals have played roles in countless movies and commercials, even fashion photo shoots.

People can come for an hour-long session to learn about the basics of flying some of the world's most powerful predatory birds.

"When you come to Hawkeye, you're going to learn a bunch of things," said Frankian. "Your prime responsibility as a falconer is to ensure that your bird is A-OK."

As Frankian sits down at a table in his office, he begins to punch holes into two fine strips of leather using a leather punch.

"These are jesses," he said, explaining that the two strips fix to separate pieces of leather that will be folded around the bird's legs and fastened with a grommet.

"You have to be really good at leather," he said, explaining that the jesses attach to a swivel and a leash, which are carefully knotted to a perch for the bird to sit on.

This technology hasn't changed since early falconers began training hawks and falcons to hunt, hundreds of years ago.

"People have dogs, they enjoy their companionship with dogs," said Frankian. "This is radically different."

As a hobby, falconers in Ontario keep native species such as red-tailed hawks, and desert natives such as the Harris hawk.

Falcons are a much more difficult bird to train and care for, said Frankian, explaining that they are faster than their hawk counterparts.

In order to become a falconer, Frankian explained, crucial steps that must be taken.

First, one must get more than 30 hours of experience flying a bird as an apprentice. Next, a falconer sponsor must be found, and a hunting licence and outdoors card obtained.

"It's a marriage," said Frankian, explaining that hawks have an average life expectancy of over 25 years.

To get a predatory bird, people have a choice of purchasing one or trapping one from the wild.

This, of course, must be during a specific time of year, and they cannot capture endangered species or mature females.

Out in his aviary, he explains

the detail and forethought required to keep his extensive fleet.

Each aviary has an indoor and outdoor portion, completely fenced off and enclosed. The floors of each room are laid with gravel, have faux sod-covered perches and a single heat lamp for the sometimes-bitter Ontario winters.

"There's a huge amount of responsibility," he said, explaining that he moved to the location two years ago, and has been working to completely enclose the aviaries so that there are double doors.

Last year, one of his prized golden eagles, Riff-Raff, was stolen and never recovered. Frankian must also be vigilant for escapee birds, without the double doors.

As he continues to settle in, he is expanding his operation and offering falconry lessons.

For more information, visit www.hawkeye.ca.

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