

THE FALCON WARS



Two fast birds and men fanatical about racing one of them and killing the other: **Nick Mooney** delves into the dastardly history of Tasmania's pigeon fanciers.

This is a story about obsession sullied by ruthlessness, conspiracy and hypocrisy. It implicates gentlemen, scumbags and many in between who sought to exterminate a native bird to pursue a hobby. Set in Tasmania, it is a palimpsest of rapidly changing attitudes and laws during the late 20th century in Australia.

Peregrine falcons, iconic for being the world's fastest animal, are specialised for catching flying birds. They prey upon several hundred species in Australia, including introduced pigeons, a derivative of the rock dove of the northern hemisphere. Peregrines are one of the world's most widespread birds and have been in Australia a long time. Mummified carcasses at a nest site in Tasmania were carbon dated back to 19,600 years ago, the oldest nest record of a bird anywhere.

Domestic pigeons, on the other hand, were brought to Australia by Europeans for food, decoration, and message-carrying. Racing took off with the establishment of industrial mining in the late 19th century; pigeon racing had long been a hobby of miners in Britain and elsewhere. But with pigeon racing came 'predator hysteria'. Tasmania is a great place for peregrines (parochially called the black-cheeked falcon or the falconhawk) so, once pigeon racing established, the stage was set for war.

Nearly every aspect of racing pigeons flies in the face of nature (no pun intended). The predator defences of rock doves are familiarity with their environment, experience, alertness, speed, and travel in flocks of homogeneous colour. Wild rock doves come to know safe and dangerous spots, unlike racers crossing unfamiliar ground. Racing pigeons are bred to fanatically home even in the face of danger (sometimes interpreted as bravery but of course the birds have no choice). Pigeons are fast enough to often best a peregrine.

Young peregrines play and practice aerobatics and grabbing while waiting for their parents to return with food. The upper bird is a larger female. Photo: Nevil Lazarus

I've seen one, attacked head on by a pair of peregrines, calmly dodge this way and that like a matador until the falcons gave up. Surprise is usually the key to efficient predation and those peregrines didn't have it. The 'blue-bar' colour variant is closest to the original rock dove, but the inevitable desire for customised pets has resulted in many variants, the mix being extremely unnatural. Flocks offer protection by providing lots of eyes for danger and, especially if flock members are even coloured, predators have difficulty singling out prey. Systematic releases of individual pigeons, as occurs in sprint racing, effectively train peregrines to catch pigeons. These 'oddities' of colour and behaviour conspire to flick all the predatory switches in peregrines. To cap it off, fanciers keep racing pigeon numbers high even when the natural prey of peregrines migrate or are depleted by drought. Even so, there are an awful lot of pigeons and relatively few peregrines.

Unfortunately, the often obsessive nature of racing means some fanciers show a far greater love for racing than for their pigeons. I've seen a Hobart fancier knocking his cowering pigeons off the shed roof with a broom to get them to exercise for the coming 'Calcutta' (a big race worth big money) as he railed over his shoulder about the peregrine waiting overhead. Just a year ago I visited one fancier to follow up his complaints about a peregrine. He offered to show me how predictable it was. 'No – I believe you!' I said, but he chased his birds out of the loft anyway. Sure enough – swoop, whack – and off went the peregrine with a hapless pigeon. Dumb cruelty is what I'd call it. In the early 1970s I stopped one day to watch fanciers releasing pigeons from a car parked near Roseberry. Every time a pigeon returned to the car instead of heading home they grabbed it, wrung its neck and threw it, still convulsing, into a steel drum burner, with a casual '#\$%& useless that one'. They had a shotgun on the roof too, 'in case a hawk chased one back to the car'. It didn't make sense and still doesn't.

With pigeon racing came 'predator hysteria'.

The peregrine enemy

Tasmanian raptors were routinely listed as 'not protected' by early 20th century officialdom, a reflection of the imported game keeper attitude. A low point was reached in 1935, in an almost exact repeat of the parliamentary debacle that led to a bounty on thylacines, then on the eve of extinction. In response to lobbying from pigeon fanciers, the Animals and Birds Protection Board agreed to 'the extermination of black-cheeked falcons, little falcons and sparrowhawks'. Fortunately, one board member so opposed the motion that no funds were allocated and nothing happened.

But obsession is not so easily thwarted. In 1938 the fanciers formed the Southern Tasmanian Hawk Council for the purpose of eliminating the peregrine. I have an amazing document describing the council's efforts. A bounty on the peregrine was initially 10 shillings 6 pence per head but by 1953 had reached five pounds, a considerable sum for the time. The numbers of bounties paid in southern Tasmania varied from only six in 1944, perhaps reflecting men away at war, to 39 in 1960, during a booming economy. The document reports that W.H. Guppy, immortalised on bounty posters, was elected Hawk Steward in 1938 and held that office into 1962.



In country pubs in Tasmania, bounties on peregrines used to be advertised. This illegal poster was confiscated from the Granton pub in 1973. Peregrines were persecuted on the mainland as well, although this is not as well documented. Scanned by Vic Hurley

The document shows that persecution of peregrines was systematic:

'75% of the Hawks sent in are trapped and 25% shot. Some Hawks have been caught easy, or by luck, but mostly it is hard work, going miles to reach the cliffs where they nest, not once but for weeks and sometimes months on end, during the night, and earlier part of the morning. To assist these hunters in meeting the wear and tear on their car, petrol etc, the award was raised to 5 pounds, and by the time they travelled for miles over the country, very little profit was left out of the 5 pounds.'

Posters advertising the bounty were stuck up in many country pubs, perfectly legal since peregrines were not protected until 1971. Even then, bounties continued, according to some fanciers reaching \$50 in the 1980s.

Early insights

In the early 1970s Rachael Carson's expose of the impacts of pesticides on birds in *Silent Spring* reverberated around the world. As bird predators, peregrines were highly vulnerable, and I became involved in one of many research projects initiated in response. With Penny Olsen of the CSIRO as our research guru, a group of us started learning huge amounts about peregrines, as were researchers everywhere.

Our field work was painfully slow to begin because we knew of very few nests. Then luck gave us a leg-up. My research colleague Nigel Brothers got a tip-off about a pigeon fancier who used to shoot peregrines at their nest. So off he went to look up one Sappy Bester of New Norfolk.



Found beside a peregrine nest at Ryndaston in 1979, this falcon trap has a crudely made cage to hold a lure pigeon, with tin cans for seed and water, and steel-jawed traps to catch any falcon (or anything else) that attacked. Photo: Nick Mooney



This photo, used as court evidence to prosecute an illegal trapper, shows the grisly scene encountered by Nick near Luina in 1982. The owner of this illegal trap was fined a mere \$240, a sum paid for him by local pigeon fanciers. Photo: Gary Melville



Having just grabbed a pigeon over the water, a peregrine struggles for control. If they fall in, they both will drown; it happens. A peregrine skeleton complete with leg band was found on the bed of a Hobart reservoir drained for repairs. Photo: Nevil Lazarus

'Hi, Mr Bester, I'm Nigel Brothers of Parks and Wildlife and I'd like to talk to you about falcons.'

'Parks and Wildlife eh; well, you can just bugger off.' But Sappy hesitated as he was about to slam the door.

'Hang on – what did you say your name was?'

'Nigel Brothers.'

'Any relation to Charles Brothers.... Dr Charles Brothers?'

'Yep, he's my grandfather.'

'Well then, you'd better come in.'

It transpired that Sappy was in the worst of the World War 2 fighting in Libya and credited Nigel's grandad, then in charge of the nearby Royal Derwent hospital, with saving his sanity, perhaps his life, when he returned home badly shell-shocked. It quickly became apparent we'd struck gold. Sappy was a gentleman and a genuine bushman-naturalist. Well before the war, instead of playing footy, he and his brother hunted peregrines or 'Jackos' as he called the females and 'screamer Jimmies' the males. He took us to many nests, most of which he alone knew. At some there were still scratchings on rocks which Sappy had made decades before, scoring falcons shot and adventures had. They were tough men. On a trip to Yellow Rock near Collinsvale, Sappy told us, they'd forgotten their rope, so on their walk from New Norfolk they coiled up a length of fencing wire on which Sappy lowered his brother the 30 metres to the nest ledge.

Sappy explained that the smaller males were more timid than the females and if you shot the female first 'you'd struggle to get him'. They were curious men who tried to find out when and how many eggs falcons laid, what they ate and how closely spaced nests were. Everything he told us held true. Very important was his record of 16th September as the usual date clutches were finished – a date we could use as an anchor to plan for banding nestlings.

Sappy had his own ethics. Some hunters would take small nestlings for rearing, then knock them on the head for the bounty, but Sappy said he couldn't do that. He also disdained the cruelty of trapping – setting steel-jawed rabbit traps around a wire cage containing a lure pigeon and coming back days or weeks later, if ever. Sappy's helpfulness to us brought him threats from other fanciers but that didn't impress a Rat of Tobruk and he told them to get stuffed.

Worse happened to others. Anton Chauncy, husband of our famous author Nan, and creator of Tasmania's first private nature reserve, refused access to peregrine hunters and promptly had his access bridge burned, telephone lines cut and safety threatened.

Over the years we met other retired falcon hunters and started to fill in the historical gaps. One such, Laurie, showed us more nests. He and a mate used to check their traps every few days, setting off in the dark by motorbike to finish before work. He told us that in one year he caught seven adult females at a nest before he caught the male. I thought this a tall order until I later saw four adult females and a male at the one time, squabbling over a nest.

As we lifted the lid on this culture it became obvious that persecution of peregrines, indeed anything that looked sideways at a pigeon, was widespread in Australia, pretty well everywhere racing pigeons were kept, from Wollongong to Horesham and Adelaide to Perth.

Trapping horrors

Trapping by fanciers was usually brutal and indiscriminate. Being aerial hunters, peregrines are the last to come down to traps so every other predator gets caught first, in a process fanciers referred to as 'cleaning out the shit'. Before he developed skills at trapping peregrines at nests, Laurie told me he'd probably killed 500 brown falcons. A sympathetic fancier told me of a trap at Leith, which killed some 302 'hawks' over several years including only two peregrines. Visiting after the trap was deactivated, I found bits of numerous harriers, brown falcons and goshawks.

It amazed me how many cliffs and rock-stacks had evidence of trapping – tell-tale bits of wire twitched around logs or rocks (to hold traps), old cages and rabbit traps (some still grasping skeletons), bottles with shrivelled grey peas or wheat and tin cans pierced to let water drain from grain. Some people had gone to an awful lot of trouble to get their gear into those places.

As we lifted the lid on this culture it became obvious that persecution of peregrines, indeed anything that looked sideways at a pigeon, was widespread in Australia, pretty well everywhere racing pigeons were kept.

In my late teens, a keen interest of mine was hunting down these traps. Several times I released the lure pigeons knowing they'd go home and alert the owners to check the trap, me meanwhile hiding nearby, seething. Probably luckily for everyone the owners never turned up. By the 1970s others were starting to get protective of falcons too. The famous Tasmanian climber Bob McMahon came across several traps and had run-ins with fanciers. I had a shotgun waved at me but our attentions often meant the traps were moved to less effective places. At Round Hill, Burnie, the last trap I knew about was in dense scrub that a peregrine was unlikely to visit.

One by one the traps were abandoned, a process driven by the law and an increased willingness of landholders to refuse permission for trapping. There were a couple of successful prosecutions, one at Luina in 1982 and another in 1988 at Roseberry. The former involved carnage. It seems a harrier was first to come to the trap; it died, caught by a foot then its head while thrashing about. A quoll then came along and stepped in another trap. Then a devil killed the quoll and got into the cage, ate the pigeon but, on leaving, itself got caught. I found the mess one morning after a local miner tipped me off. The devil, miserable in the snow, had dug as deep as its trapped paw would allow. I informed the local ranger, who witnessed one Wally Frederick arriving at the trap, shooting the devil, removing the harrier and resetting the traps. The fine was a paltry \$240.10 and the local pigeon fanciers paid it but the precedent was set. The next fine, for a trap at Roseberry that mangled a white goshawk, was also covered by local fanciers but the \$1200 made people sit up and take notice.

Outlandish claims

When the unwelcome reality finally dawned on pigeon fanciers that they could no longer hunt peregrines, it spawned some astonishing claims in an avalanche of letters in the mid-1970s to Parks and Wildlife and newspapers. Attempting to harness the modern ethos that introduced predators should be removed as pests, they claimed that the Japanese had introduced peregrines into northern Australia during World War 2 to kill messenger pigeons, and concluded with a demand for culling. Some came from local fanciers who had hunted peregrines before the war, so clearly they were lying.

The Japanese nonsense was then seamlessly replaced with a new 'known fact' – that wildlife authorities in Canberra were breeding peregrines and releasing them in Tasmania and elsewhere. We quickly realised this came from fanciers killing peregrines we had banded in Tasmania with Canberra return-addressed leg bands from the CSIRO. This silliness was all but impervious to any information, even after I showed fanciers bands from ducks, albatross, falcons and honeyeaters, all with the same Canberra return address.

It surpassed silly when pigeon fancier Daryl 'Doc' Baldock, a famous footy player come politician, demanded to know why a Parks and Wildlife officer had released '62' falcons at the Devonport airport. My boss just shook his head in despair when I asked of the meeting. I found I had a starring role in the release conspiracy when, in 1988, I stopped near Oatlands at a parked car where the driver was releasing pigeons. I was in my private vehicle and didn't introduce myself. The conversation went like this.

'Giddy, what are you letting the birds go for?'
'Racing pigeons – big race coming up – the Calcutta.'
 'Right. Well, it looks like a great spot for it.'
'Would be but for the bloody falconhawks.'
 'Whatcha mean? I can't see any hawks.'
'They're always there.'
 'Can't you do something about it?'
'We used to keep on top of them but the mongrels are protected now.'
 'Really?'
'It's hopeless, they keep importing them.'
 'What do you mean?'
'Yeah, they breed them in Canberra and let them go here.'
 'Who?'
'Those bastards in Parks. I was at the airport and saw that bloody Mick Nooney let go 62 falconhawks.'
 'Who's that?'
'Mick bloody Nooney – works for Parks. Anyway he showed me the bands on them: CSIRO, Canberra – I've got a ring here off one we shot later.'

He indeed did have a peregrine band and gleefully told how a mate had a whole necklace of them. All it showed was that this bloke was a liar and that fanciers were killing peregrines we had banded in Tasmania. I suspect fanciers concocted the concept out of bits they'd seen in documentaries about captive breeding for the American peregrine recovery program, and raptor research and rehabilitation in Australia. Tasmania has never imported or captive-bred peregrines.

Other skulduggery

Fanciers will rarely admit they sometimes force pigeons to fly too close to their physical limits. Some lose 40 percent of their weight during a long race and researchers visiting Bass Strait islands usually find dead or dying racing pigeons, too exhausted to fly. Though gifted navigators, pigeons are not infallible, and many lose their way. In 1997 one even turned up on Macquarie Island, 1500 kilometres south-east of its destination. When 8000 racing pigeons went missing in NSW in 1992, some suggested



Obsession with racing pigeons motivated men to kill peregrine falcons, including this pair shot and dumped near their nest in 2008 in northwest Tasmania. *Photo: anonymous per Nick Mooney*



Germinating birdseed, and a doughnut shaped scraping left by frantic wings of trapped hawks, reveal that this patch of ground found near Burnie in 1992 recently had a trap that inflicted misery on birds of prey. *Photo: Nick Mooney*



Peregrines don't build a nest, instead laying in a shallow scrape, usually on a cliff ledge. These chicks are about three weeks old.
Photo: Julian Robinson

'roving gangs' of falcons were responsible but other fanciers admitted that sunspot activity, inclement weather and other factors can affect navigation. Indeed, most turned up in south-eastern Victoria.

Shooting and other skulduggery involving less chance of being caught largely replaced trapping. A few decades ago a pigeon fancier policeman in Launceston explained to me how it can work. You go to an open area away from witnesses and let a not-so-good pigeon go. If it's under any pressure, say chased by a falcon, it will return to the car for shelter, allowing you to shoot the pursuing falcon. Only a few years ago a farmer friend of mine at Richmond (Tasmania) sprung such a setup at one of his farm gates. Another technique is to shoot peregrines under the guise of wallaby hunting. Most years when I check a sample of nests I find an addled clutch or starved brood with used cartridges nearby. I've also seen all sorts of plans for booby-trapped pigeons. Plastic explosives have been used to blow up both pigeon and peregrine in the United Kingdom. Poisons have been glued or splashed on live pigeons. One local story doing the rounds was of a Tasmanian fancier who hiccupped while trying to blow strychnine capsules through a straw into a pigeon's crop. He managed to spit it out before the capsule's coating dissolved.

Now and the future

Although there is still sporadic persecution – a shot peregrine was recently found next to a fancier's loft near Hobart – this results in too few deaths (probably ten a year) to make any real difference to peregrine numbers. But it wasn't always so and I estimate that about 80 peregrines, or 15 percent of the state population, were killed statewide per year for decades. On its own, this would have had only local impacts but something else lurked. Coincident with the last phase of heavy persecution, organochlorine pesticide pollution was rife in Tasmania, with DDT thinning egg shells, making them prone to break. This double whammy suppressed even regional populations.

Fortunately, not all pigeon fanciers are ruthless; I have met many who accept peregrines and other raptors as a fact of life despite the frustration they cause. Some fanciers have tried imaginative deterrents such as eye patches dyed onto pigeon wings or whistling bells on legs. Others have tried decoy flights or varying release points and times – anything to break up patterns which falcons take advantage of.

The fanciers might have mellowed – and me too – but the same attitudes still lurk albeit in more politically correct forms.

Just two years ago I was asked to a meeting of local fanciers in Hobart. Apparently things had recently gotten worse with falcons. The same issues still worried them and it seemed like a repeat of the last such meeting I went to nearly 20 years ago. There we were, much the same players, all 'older but no wiser for the dream still lingered on'.

I too would prefer peregrines left pigeons alone – it creates tension, some pigeons carry disease and they are not necessary as prey. To me, the ideal would be pigeon racing in an environmentally friendly form. Perhaps, pigeons should be bred back to original colours and sprint racing avoided wherever peregrines are predictable problems. If training flocks were all released at the same time, instead of serially, it would spread peregrines' attention. Maybe new competitive styles could be developed that focus more on reliability than speed. Extensive research has shown a white rump patch on the basic blue-bar pattern helps pigeons survive peregrine attack, something that might be used in selective breeding.

Basically, it's up to fanciers to adapt because their traditions have gotten them in the fix in the first place. Let's hope the recent introduction into Australia of avian paramyxovirus (APMV1), via smuggled racing pigeon eggs, is an aberration. The disease is lethal to pigeons and many native birds, probably including peregrine falcons, but the only thing that seems to worry most fanciers is the potential impact on their sport. I've seen nothing to show they are concerned about the disease other than when it infects their pigeons. When I was a kid, everyone seemed to keep pigeons but now it's smart phones and computer games that enthral. We can lament what has been lost. But considering the cruelty that some fanciers visited on raptors and their pigeons, innocent birds all, maybe we're well rid of that Dickensian past; to date this breeding season I've seen no evidence of skulduggery so maybe we are finally there!

NICK MOONEY (aka Mick Nooney) has studied raptors for nearly 50 years. Originally it was simple fascination but it continued amongst other work under Tasmanian government wildlife authorities for nearly 35 years. Nick is a founding member of the Australasian Raptor Association and still researches and manages raptors with an emphasis on mentoring and education. He recently set up a wi-fi camera beamed to his local Primary School from a peregrine nest that was subject to killing for bounties not that long ago. This article is the basis for a chapter in a coming book, *Wildlife Wars*.