

Hunting

BY JOE CONNELLY

with

PHOTOGRAPHS BY YVONNE ALBINOWSKI

Helena



Meet North Creek's teenage falconer

HELENA WILLIAMS STEPS OFF THE SCHOOL BUS AND CLIMBS THE long driveway to the house at the top. Basketball season has started and most of her classmates are already at the gym, but basketball is not Helena's sport, nor is it hockey or soccer or track. Helena is a hunter, and her teammate is a hawk. She grabs her satchel and puts it on the table and checks through the equipment inside: leather hood; leather lure, bells and swivels; and the short, finely knotted ropes, called jesses, that will hold the hawk to her when she needs. Helena adds the food she defrosted last night—the baby chicks that Valkyrie loves—and then she loads the bag over her shoulder, slides the thick leather glove over her left hand, and heads outside.

Around a corner from her house, across the lawn and into the woods, sits another smaller house, called a mews, where Valkyrie lives. This was built by her grandfather two years before, when Helena first applied for her apprentice falconer's license. The law requires every falconer to be at least 14 years old, to pass a 100-question written test, and have their mews inspected by the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC). At 16, Helena is one of the youngest apprentices in the state.

The hawk sits on her perch at the back of the house, her eyes searching the woods beyond. She shows no movement as Helena enters, but when the glove opens beneath her, she steps keenly to it, head arching, talons squeezing. Helena places her on the scale in the front room—1,100 grams, the perfect flying weight. The rules of falconry date back 4,000 years, and Helena's sponsor has trained her in the old ways of the sport, to know one's hawk like oneself, learn her hunger and fears, but even the guardians of the old ways use a digital scale. Just a few grams left or right of her flying weight could mean the difference between a bird that's ready to hunt and one that won't come out of the tree.

With her free hand Helena reaches into her bag and pulls out the crested leather hood and uses her teeth to help fasten it tight over V's eyes. (Helena's hawk is named Valkyrie, but everyone calls her V.) Immediately the hawk's wings fold silently behind her, as if asleep. Under the light of day, V can see a mouse in the grass 100 feet below, but without night vision she's vulnerable in the dark. Her best defense against predators is to remain perfectly still, which she does as Helena places her onto the perch in the back of her mom's Acadia. Helena does not yet have a driver's license. She sits in the passenger seat as her mom drives them to the open fields beneath the power lines, the best hunting grounds around. Every owner of a falconer's license must also hold a valid hunting license,



Falconer Helena Williams with Valkyrie, a red-tailed hawk.

which Helena wears conspicuously on the back of her jacket.

Helena's mom, Sarah Williams, owns Café Sarah, a bakery in North Creek. Sarah has invested thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours to see her daughter become a falconer, and she understands as much as anyone the cost of keeping and training a wild animal. One fall day while hunting beneath the power lines, Valkyrie lifted off a branch and instead of landing on Helena's glove she swooped and banked and disappeared into the sky. For the next three days, Helena walked those fields, swinging the lure, calling Valkyrie with her favorite food. They were about to give up when a DEC officer called. Her hawk was 30 miles away, sitting in a tree above a chicken coop in Stony Creek—so fat she could barely fly. The owners of the coop might have killed V for feasting on their poultry, but instead they called in a DEC officer, who realized V was a falconer's hawk by the bells and jesses on her leg. Helena worked all that summer to save up for a telemetry unit capable of tracking V if she ever took off again. It cost \$1,100.

Every licensed apprentice is required to have a sponsor—a general or master falconer willing to guide and train the novice. Helena didn't have to look far to find her guide. Buddy Fraioli, of Salem, is a director at large of the New York State Falconry Association. He's also the milkman who for years delivered Battenkill Valley Creamery to her mom's bakery. Buddy helped equip Helena and prepare her for the test. When she was ready, he drove her around the fields near his home in Washington County, searching the skies for a "passage" hawk, one in the first year of life, no longer a nestling, nor yet in adult plumage. At the end of the second day they found Valkyrie, a red-tailed hawk, and brought her back to Buddy's basement, where Helena stayed up with her most of the night. She's been with her every day since.

Estimates suggest that 80 percent of young red-tailed hawks don't survive long enough to breed. They fall from nests and are eaten by owls. They die from toxins and disease, cars and trucks and utility poles. A falconer doesn't own her hawk—she feeds it, hunts with it, and protects it until the day she releases it, hopefully to survive and make more hawks.

Many falconer apprentices will keep the passage bird for a year, then release it, to get experience with training different birds. Eventually Helena would like to get a goshawk, which can maneuver through trees and is more suitable for hunting in the woods. But goshawks are notoriously difficult to train, and apprentices aren't licensed to keep them.

When driving with Helena it's hard not to notice how hawklike she sits, straight and silent, her focus on the trees and sky. She has keen eyesight. "There's one," she says, pointing to a speck in a tree 100 yards away. When the car brakes for a squirrel passing across, she lets out an exasperated gasp, "Why did you slow down?" she asks. "That's food."

She takes Valkyrie out of the car and unties the hood and puts it in her bag. With her gloved arm strong and straight she carries Valkyrie to the tree line. Then, with a sharp rise of the glove, Valkyrie lofts to the nearest branch, eyes searching everywhere. Helena walks the brush ahead, looking for squirrels. Anything the bird catches will usually be saved and cut up for its future meals. Helena grabs a broken limb and bangs on a tree, hoping to send a few scampering. When she sees there's no game she turns to Valkyrie and raises her glove and blows her whistle. Valkyrie waits. It's a pause every falconer knows. Will she come to the glove or will this be the day she flies away? Helena blows her whistle again. Another pause, and then, with the choice made, Valkyrie drops from the tree, her wings stretched wide. She sails low over the ground, powerful and fast, seeming to get larger as she flies. For a moment it appears she might strike Helena's jacket and lift her away. Instead she brakes beautifully, and lights easily on the glove, and Helena carries her to the next open ground. ▲

Postscript: Helena released V. She plans to trap another red-tailed hawk this fall, releasing it before she graduates in 2021. SUNY New Paltz is her first choice for college, because they are the "Hawks" and that part of the Hudson Valley is where falconers flock to track, trap and monitor hawk populations.

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