

Work-Life Balance

How physicians relax, play and ... adventure

The thrill of the HUNT



Forget golfing. Trauma surgeon Bill Waswick, MD, winds down from his high-stress work by going hunting with his birds of prey, a sporting hobby that requires extensive training and certification.

Join us in this engaging series as the MSSC takes a peek at the hobbies, adventures and pastimes of its membership. Have an interesting story to tell or know a physician who does? Email Phillip Brownlee at PhillipBrownlee@med-soc.org.

Once called a “sport of kings,” falconry is a millennia-old craft that pairs man with birds of prey as dedicated falconers take their trained raptors into the wild to hunt game together. Falconers are heavily trained and must be licensed and have permits. The North American Falconers Association describes the art and practice of falconry as “months and years of hard work punctuated by brief moments of exhilaration, excitement and joy as well as punctuated by moments of sorrow, grief, stress and frustration.” Wichita surgeon Bill Waswick, MD, who specializes in trauma surgery and burn care, is a master falconer who has been training and hunting with hawks and similar birds of prey for 20 years.

How did you get interested in falconry?

I grew up on a farm in rural North Dakota and was always interested in hunting, fishing and outdoors stuff. About 20 years ago, Don Sanchez, who graduated from residency here in Wichita, was a master falconer and I developed an interest in it. To be a falconer, you need to take a written exam because these are federally protected birds. After you pass the exam, you have to build your mews – where you keep the bird. Fish and Game has to come out and inspect it and approve it. Once you’ve done that, then you are allowed to be someone’s apprentice for two years. I was apprenticed under Don Sanchez.

What appeals to you about this sport?

I choose to fly red tail hawks and a falcon called a kestrel, a small falcon that captures small birds

out of the air. Both are native to Kansas. For me, it’s just a passion to be out there with the bird and watch him fly. Obviously, their instinct is to hunt. I caught the bird I have right now last Saturday [Oct. 1] and I train him to come to me when I blow a whistle or call him. Once he learns to do that, I’ll release him. We walk along and a rabbit or squirrel might come up and he’ll chase it. If he catches it, he eats it. If not, I feed him.

Why not keep your birds?

Some people keep them. The longest I’ve kept one is three years. For me, the real enjoyment is training them and working with young birds less than a year of age. I work with them for one to two years and then release them in the wild and catch a new one. They are wild animals. They are not like pets. Also, my wife and I like to travel. If I have a bird to take care of, who do I get to feed it? Another reason I choose to do falconry the way I do is if I release it, then we have the summer off. I catch another one in the fall. To be legal, I can only hunt him from Oct. 1 through the end of March.

How does falconry de-stress your life?

It’s my version of a sport. I’m part of the hunt. We typically hunt three times a week. Sometimes more. If not, I bring him something; I feed him every day. It’s my relaxation. Also, it gives me some exercise. I don’t golf and I’d rather not go to the Y and walk; I’d rather go out and walk with my bird. Even if I can’t go out, I can go hold the bird and work with it.



BIRDS OF A FEATHER: CLOCKWISE FROM TOP OF PAGE: BILL WASWICK, MD, HOLDS RED TAIL HAWKS HE HAS TRAINED AND HUNTED WITH OVER THE YEARS; THE SMALLER BIRD IN THE ABOVE PHOTO IS A KESTREL, THE SMALLEST AND MOST COMMON FALCON IN NORTH AMERICA.