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Falconers build bonds with their birds

By [Sarah Bricker](#)

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On July 11 in Samnee's home in De Soto, a small sharp-shinned hawk is in its early weeks of life. The bird is Samnee's first of its size. | [Sarah Bricker](#)



Dennis Samnee holds a small, blue cover in his hand. Samnee makes his own falconry gear from scratch, tailoring each piece to each bird. Head pieces are made with supple leather and strong stitching to protect the bird while hunting. | [Sarah Bricker](#)



Mike Mallet, Missouri Falconry Association Vice President, holds Dennis Samnee's six week female sharp-shinned hawk Wednesday inside the backroom at Samnee's home in De Soto, Mo. The smallest hawk in the United States, this female is already full grown at six weeks. | [Sarah Bricker](#)



Quail are raised and kept in a airy shed on the right-most edge of Samnee's property on Wednesday. "They are a pain to take care of," Samnee joked. Samnee raises the quail to provide fresh, nutrient-rich red meat for his falcons and hawks. "Quail provide a good source of red meat, feather and bones ... all of which are essential to a raptor's diet," Samnee said. | [Sarah Bricker](#)

Dennis Samnee took up falconry about 26 years ago, inspired after catching and releasing a red-tailed hawk that terrorized his wife's chickens. These days, falconry is not just a hobby for Samnee, it's a lifestyle. | [Sarah Bricker](#)

DE SOTO — A gaggle of white-grey geese waddle around the winding stony walkway of a quaint wooden house. Some swim in the nearby pond while others mingle with the chickens on top of the hill.

A cherry-red Smart Car drives up, spitting gravel and dust before stopping in front of the house. Out of the car steps a tall, tanned man with wide shoulders and salt-and-pepper hair and beard.

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The man walks up the driveway, his smile growing larger as he approaches. He pauses to avoid stepping on a young goose, wipes his feet off at the door and walks inside.

A large, black cage stands just inside the doorway.

"HELLLO!" caws the blue, yellow and green Macaw parrot within the cage.

“Hi Mango,” says the man cheerfully as he walks past.

The man disappears into a backroom. A small hawk flutters its brown wings atop a metal perch resting on a fake, grass-covered table. The bird readjusts its yellow feet, the talons sharp and curved, and swivels its head to ruffle its cream colored breast with lines of light-brown spots. The silver grey irises flash as the bird evaluates its company.

The hawk hops from the perch to his hand. “She’s about six weeks old now,” he says proudly.

Dennis Samnee holds a female sharp-shinned hawk in his hand, the smallest hawk species in America.

Samnee got involved in falconry, the hunting of wild game with trained birds of prey, after catching and releasing a red-tailed hawk that was terrorizing his wife’s chickens. He has been a falconer for about 26 years.

He raises and trains his own birds, makes falconry gear by hand, and is the current president of the Missouri Falconers Association.

Under Samnee and vice president Mike Mallet, the group has become a more popular and respected association. In recent years it has begun working closely with the Missouri Conservation Department to keep falconry regulations and laws up-to-date and more efficient.

At his home at the end of secluded gravel road in De Soto, Samnee cares for and trains five different birds of prey including a sharp-shinned female, a male Barbary Falcon from Africa, A female European Goshawk from Finland, two merlin falcons, and two gyrfalcons.

Each of the types of birds is kept in their own free-loft mew, a enclosure designed to hold birds of prey and allow ample exercise and space. Mews must be kept up to Missouri Conservation Department regulations.

Samnee and his wife, Cindy Samnee, care for dogs, geese, falcons, hawks, quail, chickens and a talkative macaw daily. They clean cages, provide fresh water and food multiple times a day and ensure the animals are all doing well throughout the day and night.

“Many people don’t understand the effort it takes to care for these birds,” Dennis Samnee said. “I couldn’t do this without my wonderful wife,” Samnee said smiling at his wife.

“Samnee’s right,” Mallet said. “Each bird has different requirements for raising. I couldn’t raise my

red-tailed hawk the same way as Samnee's sharp-shinned."

They need different diets because each bird flies differently Mallet said. Hawks are better suited for longer, field flights and falcons tend to excel over short distances due to speed and diving abilities.

In the summer there is no flying because the birds are molting feathers. Most falconers raise, breed and train at this time, making it a busy time for falconers.

"It's really not a sport," Samnee said of falconry. "It's a lifestyle. It's a lot of work. It requires a lot of time, and the more you put into it the more you get out of it."

Becoming a falconer is a long process that includes an exam, obtaining a permit and having certain equipment approved by the Missouri Conservation Department.

"You take a 100 question test in 60 minutes and must get an 80 percent score or above to pass. Then you have to find someone to be your sponsor for two years and work with them first," Samnee said.

Falconers usually start with either an American Kestrel or a red-tailed hawk and, over a period of seven years, work their way up from apprentice to master.

The amount of work involved in becoming a falconer and keeping the birds is immense, but Samnee and Mallet both said it's well worth the exhausting efforts.

"We see what most people never see in their lifetime. We see it every day," Samnee said.

"It's incredible to see the aerial stuff they do when they hunt, and you're right there with it," Mallet said. "You're National Geographic...right on top of it."

The birds are not pets by any means Mallet and Samnee said.

"But," Samnee said caressing the young hawk fluttering on his hand, "you develop a certain kind of bond by spending an abundance of hours with it...It just wants a little bit of trust."

The trust developed between bird and handler is essential according to Mallet. He said that trust is what allows you to "condition it to let you be a part of what it does naturally."

"Hunting, what we call hawking, is done so that we can watch what goes on in nature. It's not so much to catch game, although that is a bonus for you, but to see your bird be successful. You put so much time into training them it's like watching your own kids mature right before your eyes," Samnee said.

Samnee takes falconry seriously. He is constantly working with his birds and the sport is constantly evolving.

“The sport’s been around over 4,000 years, and I have friends in England, Germany Hungary and Canada. But, there’s just so much to learn it’s crazy. I’ve been doing it for 26 years, and I still learn something new every day.”

“I go to work and come home to my wife and my birds and ... ” Samnee said.

“I love you,” Mango cried, interrupting Samnee.

“Yes, Mango I love you too,” he laughed at the needy Macaw. “But, yes, I go to work and I come home, and I give my best to my birds. I sold my truck to account for a two-dollar drop in pay.”

Now, Samnee joked, “I’m driving a little car, and I’m flying a little bird.”

Supervising editor is [Grant Hodder](#).