



Jonathan Coleman is a certified falconer living in Tulsa. He is photographed with one of his two falcons.

“I can’t even wait until I get home from work to get started,” Coleman says. “I change my clothes at work so I’m ready to jump out of the truck and head for the birds once I get home.”

Before he could be eligible to practice the sport of falconry, Coleman had to serve for two years as an apprentice under someone like Ryan VanZant, a master falconer based in Bartlesville. VanZant, 30, has been a practicing falconer for more than a third of his life. He serves as president-elect of the Oklahoma Falconers’ Association.

“It’s like advanced bird watching,” VanZant says. “You get a controlled situation – and controlled is a loose term – of predator/prey relationships that you can see in the world. We get to see it every day.”

While falconry has a long history in Asia and Europe as the sport of nobles and kings, it has enjoyed a resurgence in recent years in the U.S., and many Oklahomans count themselves among those eager to keep and hunt with falcons, hawks, eagles and owls.

But it isn’t a sport that’s easy to master or to cram into a busy schedule. In fact, falconry is just as much of a lifestyle as it is a sport or a pastime, VanZant says, and it requires huge investments of time and money in the training of the birds, equipment and licensing.

“This isn’t like hunting with a gun on a Saturday morning and then being able to put it back on the wall and it’s ready the next time you are,” VanZant shares. “Falcons have to be in top form. They have to be hunting every single day. Rain is about the only thing that stops us from getting out there.”

While Copan falconer Scott Dillon’s wife doesn’t fly the birds, their young son has taken an interest. He even has a successful hunting trip under his belt.

“He had an exceptional flight that day. We were both all smiles,” says Dillon, who serves as secretary of the OFA.

While Coleman aims to become a master falconer, he’s confident that no matter how much experience he gains, he’ll learn something new each time he and his birds head to the field together to fly.

“I used to nearly have wrecks on the highway because I was too busy looking at hawks flying in the sky,” Coleman says. “You have this relationship with a wild animal. It could fly away if it chose to, but it doesn’t. The two of you have a bond.”

■ NATASHA BALL

## CULTURE

# A Bird’s-Eye View

Falconry has enjoyed a resurgence of popularity in the Sooner State.

**A**fter that 5 o’clock whistle blows, the highways are flooded with drivers, all of them swerving and weaving through traffic to get home as fast as possible. Some are after a warm, home-cooked meal; others, a reunion with family.

Not Jonathan Coleman. He races from work to his Tulsa home to two birds of prey, each of which has been itching for a chance to take to the sky in search of a meal.

These birds aren’t pets. They’re professional hunters, and Coleman is their trainer. He has been a certified falconer for four years.