



CNN's report highlights UAE's Falcons Hospital

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WAM ABU DHABI, June 13th, 2010: CNN's Middle East edition, in a recent extensive report on June 10th, highlighted the Abu Dhabi Falcon Hospital, the largest of its kind in the world, employing 52 people and treating around 5,000 birds each year. The CNN's

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The CNN's report titled "Inside Abu Dhabi's state-of-the-art falcon hospital", says "pampered patients" stay in air-conditioned rooms and are fed a daily diet of quail -- and occasionally, mice at the state-of-the-art hospital.

Following is the full report: -- BEGIN TEXT: There's a state-of-the-art hospital in Abu Dhabi where pampered patients stay in air-conditioned rooms and are fed a daily diet of quail -- and occasionally, mice.

The Abu Dhabi Falcon Hospital claims to be the largest of its kind in the world, employing 52 people and treating around 5,000 birds each year.

The scale of the operation is testament to the popularity of falconry in the UAE. More than a sport or a hobby, it's an integral part of the region's cultural heritage.

Hospital director Margrit Muller told CNN: "Falconry is not regarded as a sport in the UAE, as it is in the United States and Europe.

"In the Middle East falconry has a different background. Even 70 years ago in the UAE most of the population were Bedouin living in the desert.

"It was hard to survive, so they used wild falcons to hunt meat. It wasn't a sport, it was a necessity for survival.

"So falcons were integrated into the Bedouin family like a child and even today, falcons have exactly the same position in the family. They're not regarded as a sports tool -- they are like a son or daughter." Muller said the hospital now treats all bird species and cares for falcons from all over the region, including Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. She said the owners are ordinary people who want the best for their birds.

The hospital has an array of high-tech equipment for treating sick birds, including an endoscopy unit that transmits live digital images to the waiting room, so the bird's owner can monitor the procedure.

"A falcon is like a child for its owners. In the same way as when you take a child to the doctor's, you want it to receive the best possible care," said Muller.

"We can hospitalize more than 200 falcons at the same time, housed in individual rooms that have air conditioning. You can compare it to a hospital for humans, from the way it works to the equipment we have." Hamad Al Ghanem regularly takes his falcons to the hospital for vaccinations and worming.

As a breeder of traditional saluki hunting dogs, and director of Abu Dhabi's Arabian Saluki Center, he is dedicated to keeping the country's cultural traditions alive. He is also a lifelong falconry enthusiast and owns about 35 falcons of his own.

"I became interested in falconry when I was a boy," he told CNN.

"My father and grandfather were falconers and they taught me. You don't have to study falconry -- it comes naturally as part of your cultural heritage. It's not just Emirati culture -- it's Arabian culture." John Sellar is chief of enforcement assistance with the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora.

He told CNN that one of the historic reasons why falconry is so popular in the UAE is that several species of falcon migrate across the area in the late summer and autumn.

In the past, falconers would trap the wild falcons, train them, hunt with them, and release them. These days, falcons are captive bred and owned for many years.

"It's not until you go there [to the UAE] that you see just how important falconry is culturally, traditionally and historically," said Sellar.

"The UAE has falcon hospitals that are like some of the best hospitals for people you'd find in the U.S. or UK." Ghanem says most Emirati families still keep falcons, although according to official figures there are about 5,000 falconers in the UAE. Falcons can cost between \$5,000 and \$80,000, depending on the bird's breed, sex, color and pedigree, he added.

Ghanem trains his falcons to hunt using live pigeons or ducks. Hunting is not permitted in the UAE, so falconers take their birds on hunting trips to countries such as Pakistan, Morocco and Sudan, where prey can include rabbit, Houbara bustard (a large bird), and even gazelle, he said.

Hunting isn't without its risks. Muller's patients have often suffered broken legs and wings while hunting. Others have parasitic diseases transmitted from their prey.

But the birds can be sure of a comfortable convalescence while they recover at the hospital. Falcons are fed a whole quail daily -- bones, feathers and all -- and, just like humans, when they're well enough they can receive visitors.

"Some owners come everyday to check what the latest is, to see how their bird looks and check if it's eating well," said Muller.

"It's the same as if they had a child in hospital. You can see the mutual relationship between falcon and falconer. The falcon recognizes the owner when he comes. There is love on both sides.

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