

AN ALTERNATIVE ANGLE

A passionate falconer and raptor artist living in the heart of England's grouse country – a recipe for disaster, surely? Will Pocklington visits artist Andrew Ellis, in search of an answer.

As I traversed over the fell from my weekend lodgings, to meet sporting artist Andrew Ellis in the pretty Pennine village that he now calls home, I puzzled at how I might approach the imminent interview from an interesting angle. My pondering was short-lived.

Before I knew it, I was stood chatting to Andrew over a cup of tea while a three-week-old peregrine chick sat squawking away in the middle of his kitchen table. "We've been having a bit of trouble with this one," Andrew explains, the round ball of down scuffling in its box as his partner, Kirsty, expertly administers its medication through a syringe. Andrew is not only a bird of prey artist, he is a falconry fanatic who has harboured a life-long passion for the sport. Yes, he

is part of the shooting scene too, but his falcons come first, so his views on grouse moors and birds of prey are particularly poignant.

"I'm a raptor enthusiast, and I know the problems that they can cause on a moor," he tells me, "but they certainly aren't scarce on the ground we have access to. We see raptors all the time up here – peregrines, merlins, harriers, short-eared owls, buzzards – this is certainly no raptor desert. In fact, we regularly have wild

birds mobbing ours when we're out flying, at both East Allenheads and Muggleswick. I wouldn't see anything like as much back on Dartmoor, where, in comparison, there is very little moorland management."

Indeed, not so long ago, a visit to Andrew would have me journeying in the opposite direction from *Fieldsports* HQ, to Plymstock in the South West. However, three years ago, Andrew's home location changed, his long-

standing marriage ended and his contract with the Halcyon, the gallery with which he had worked closely for over 14 years, came to a natural end. "In both instances it seems we were heading in different directions. I wasn't in a great place," he concedes. "My paintings started to suffer and I wasn't doing as much, which was having a knock-on effect on finances too."

His migration north came about through a friend who offered him a place to live in return for a few pieces of artwork each year – a testament to his highly regarded

ability with a brush. "From what was a really low point in my life, things turned around for me and now they could hardly be better," he smiles. "The only downside is that my children are still in Devon, although I do get down to see them almost every other weekend and they come up to see me regularly. They both love it here." I was interested to learn that Andrew's son is shaping up to be a promising young artist himself. "He really is good at sculpture," Andrew



In the splash zone, peregrine & curlew



Peregrine & grouse, Allenheads

Andrew with a tiercel peregrine

SPORTING ARTIST

tells me, “but I’d want him to go through it all at a much more measured pace than I did, if he decides to pursue it as a career, that is.”

Andrew’s path to becoming a professional artist was very much fast-tracked – sitting all of his qualifications in art at school, and then embarking on his University course at 17, several years junior to his classmates. “Perhaps I should’ve taken more time to establish myself,” he ponders. “I was getting jobs straight away after leaving college, but I wasn’t mature enough. In fact I now look at the paintings I did for Ranulph Rayner’s *The Story of the Sporting Gun*, and know that they were done by an inexperienced artist, so to speak.”

As we continued, it became increasingly apparent that I was talking to a genuinely passionate wildlife enthusiast. While based in Devon, Dartmoor was his local moor. “Although good for some birdlife, it can’t even hold a candle to the amount of wildlife I’m surrounded by up here,” he exclaims. “This is something else, the number of upland waders alone astounds me.” Of course, this is largely down to the keeping; dedicated predator control and sound management of the moorland habitat for grouse, which provides a perfect habitat for oodles of other species. And Andrew has capitalised on this, spending time out in the field with the estate’s keepers, even helping with heather burning and gritting on occasion. “Being here has allowed me to become part of the fabric of the estate and the village. I’ve had such a valuable insight into the management that goes into providing good grouse numbers, but also the wide range of waders and other unique fauna and flora of the uplands”. Indeed, this affinity with the natural world shines through in Andrew’s paintings.

“I’m just in awe of the place really,” he tells me. “We went for a walk the other day and came across a clutch of 16 partridge eggs, the nest of a skylark, and we often see ring ouzels, oystercatchers and dippers. I never thought I’d live to see a black grouse, but now I see them every week, every day if I want to!”

A big bonus, without doubt, of Andrew’s move to the Pennines, is, somewhat surprisingly, the opportunity he now has to pursue his favourite pastime. “At first, I was very nervous about flying falcons up here, because one thing we can’t have happen is it to have an impact on



“Flying falcons has really helped me,” he acknowledges. “I know how birds fly, both the quarry and the predator, without the need for photographs.”

the shooting,” he admits. As it turns out, they are hardly noticed, and very careful about where they fly and when. And, according to Andrew, they take very few birds. “It is awesome though, and a rare and fortunate thing to be able to fly a falcon at game up here. It really is the pinnacle of the sport for me!”

I had to stop Andrew there, having just caught a glimpse of a jackdaw playing with what looked like a dog biscuit on the kitchen window sill, turning its head quizzically, as though it was asking me a question from a mere few feet away beyond the glass. “Is that a tame jackdaw?” I ventured. They laughed. “Oh, this is Quentin,” Andrew tells me as Kirsty opens the back door and the bird flutters up onto her shoulder. “He was down the pub with us the other night, he’s becoming a local celebrity.”

A scan out into the back garden yielded yet more evidence of the pair’s passion, a stunningly white gyrfalcon sat proudly on its perch in

the warm sun, regularly shooting Quentin a threatening look.

I could just as easily have been putting together a feature on a mad-keen pair of falconers, I thought to myself as I spotted a monitor in the corner of the room, relaying camera-fed visuals of a few of their falcons in the aviary, one of which, a lanner falcon, was tending to its young.

In fact, Andrew’s love of falconry has led to many of his artwork sales, having sold a substantial percentage of his portfolio to Arab clients, leading even to commissions and hunting trips with the Abu Dhabi Royal family. He has also worked as a consultant involved in the redesign of the UAE national emblem which, not surprisingly, is a falcon.

Since relocating to his current base, Andrew has also been perfectly positioned to meet a range of people and potential clients through other fieldsports, and more specifically, the grouse shooting on the estate. “I love the varied mix of people you can meet on a shoot day,” he says, “guns from all walks of life, loaders from afar and some real characters amongst the beaters. For what I do and the genre I paint, being here just makes sense.” He goes on to tell me how he has met clients from Africa and America. In fact, a recent commission is a series of paintings of setters, owned by a Belgian client who helps with the counting on the estate – the fieldsports world is a small one, but with far-reaching fingers.

Following his departure from being solely contracted to the Halcyon gallery, and



Megan, hooded in the studio

a brief tough spell, people soon began to realise that Andrew was free to do what he pleased, and commissions have been rolling in nicely ever since. “I’m very happy about where my artwork is going now,” he confirms as he tells me about plans for some of his smaller pieces to be hung in the lunch huts on the fell, showcasing his artistic prowess to those enjoying a day in the butts, who may have the chance to leave with one of his paintings as a memoir.

FROM THE STUDIO

We finish our drinks and head down the road to Andrew’s studio, just a stones throw away from his home, leaving behind the chirping peregrine in the capable hands of Kirsty. As we walk, he conveys to me the importance he places on being able to distance himself from his work, and this studio, being away from his house, allows him to do just that. “You need to be able to switch off and walk away from art so that you can approach it with a fresh mindset

the next day,” he says.

Entering the studio, I do not know where to feast my eyes – an incredible array of art fills my vision as Amber the English pointer, surrounded by reference drawings and photographs, jumps off her bed to greet me. There are a few pieces still in progress and several completed. His paintings, for me, are very much defined by the attitude and physicality that he manages to capture so adeptly on the canvas.

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SPORTING ARTIST

acknowledges. "I know how birds fly, both the quarry and the predator, without the need for photographs." This familiarity means Andrew can easily adapt and change photographed images anatomically, whilst still maintaining the essence that gives his work a unique edge, hence his reluctance to rely solely on photographs as the foundation of his art. "I'll always take a sketchbook with me when I go out with the camera," he continues. "It's weird how the human mind can pick up things that a camera just cannot."

Although acrylic paint is his preferred medium, Andrew will occasionally use oil. Either way, there are typically three stages to the painting process. It begins with thumbnail images, from which Andrew will produce a larger drawing. Often taking just a portion of the original thumbnail, the larger sketch is then scaled up to the full-sized final piece.

It didn't take long for me to appreciate the diversity of Andrew's portfolio. He's no one-trick pony – also producing pieces of dogs, horses, portraits, African game, some figurative work too. A flick through his image library even lands us on a painting that features on the menu of The Ledbury. Ironically, I also spotted the original of a painting that I'd seen earlier that morning on my brother's mantelpiece, adorning a 'best wishes' card from the company that supplies his own hawk's food. Andrew certainly has his fingers in all sorts of pies.

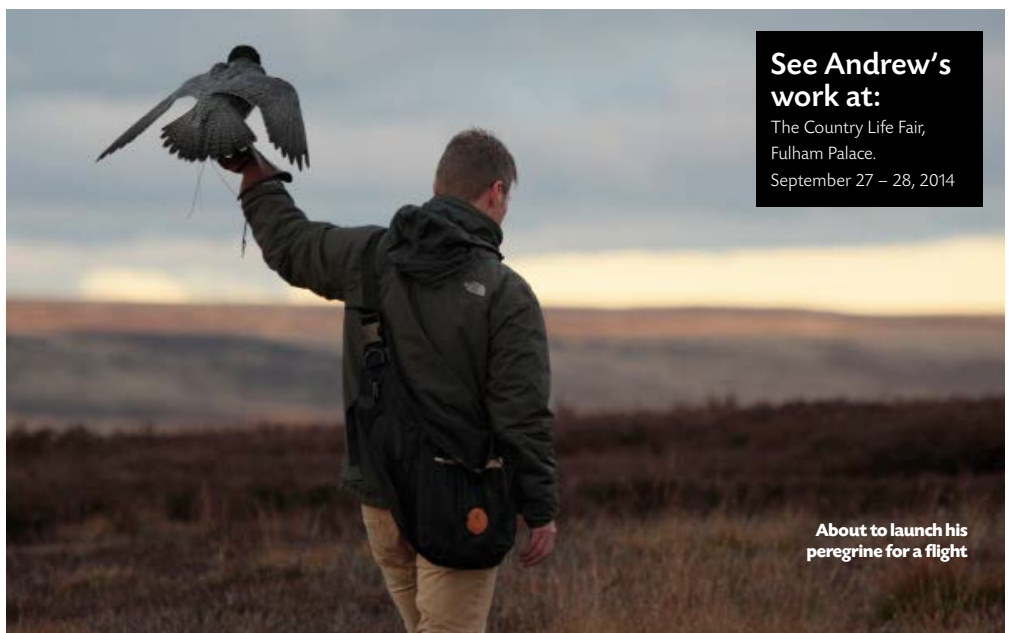
Indeed, he has a couple of very exciting projects in the pipeline for various clients. One of which will be the biggest commission he has done to date: a mural measuring 4 x 2.5m, depicting a pack of grouse hurtling across the heather, for which the preparatory work alone is expected to take a couple of months. "I think it's going to make a big impact," he says, excitedly. "I want people to be able to look at it and see what they might be lucky enough to be faced with on the moor: big packs of grouse flying at you, challenging shooting." Watch this space.

And so after stealing a few extra minutes admiring more of Andrew's work, and exchanging goodbyes, I turned to crunch my way across the gravel back to the car. A falconer and remarkable artist of birds of prey and wildlife, who not only lives, but flourishes, in the very heart of England's grouse shooting country – I'd certainly found an alternative angle.

www.andrewellispaintings.com



Allenheads grouse



See Andrew's work at:

The Country Life Fair,
Fulham Palace.
September 27 – 28, 2014

About to launch his
peregrine for a flight