

## HUNTING WITH THE SHEIKHS

by Mary Anne Weaver

**A**BRAR MIRZA, the conservator of wildlife for the Province of Sind, in Pakistan, is by nature a rather doleful man, and he always appears to be in a state of crisis. When I first met him, late last November, he was especially anxious, because he had been waiting for weeks—waiting for the full moon, and waiting for the rains, and waiting for the houbara bustard, an endangered species of a fast-flying and cursorial desert bird that migrates to Pakistan each autumn from the former Soviet Union and from the Central Asian steppes. A good many Arab sheikhs and princes were also waiting—discreetly—in opulent Karachi palaces.

Mirza dreads November, he has often said, because his entire life is put on hold. The responsibilities of his position include the delicate job of monitoring the Arab royal hunts. He is a bit puzzled by them, and can't really explain why, with the arrival of the houbara, scores of Middle Eastern potentates—Presidents, ambassadors, ministers, generals, governors—descend upon Pakistan in fleets of private planes. They come armed with computers and radar, hundreds of servants and other staff, customized weapons, and priceless falcons, which are used to hunt the bird. Mirza considers it all a little excessive. But then the houbara bustard has been a fascination to the great sheikhs of the desert for hundreds of years. Poets have written about it. Old men of the desert have sung of it in tiny tea stalls. Even today, Arab diplomats, in well-appointed embassies abroad, dis-

cuss the advent of the season, and discuss it endlessly.

"The bird is a month late!" Mirza announced one morning when I stopped by his office, in Karachi, and found him at his desk, which was covered with mounds of papers and with half-finished cups of tea. He would make a fine Inspector Clouseau: middle-aged, wiry, although with a bit of a paunch. "Only a handful have arrived. And I am being held responsible, as though it's all my fault. Look at these telegrams!" He threw a mass of papers into the air. They were urgent messages from the Pakistani government—the majority of them from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which was most distressed.

It is the Foreign Ministry that awards the visiting Arab dignitaries special permits to hunt. Pakistanis themselves have

been prohibited from killing the houbara since 1972. Yet each season, which lasts from November until March, their countryside is carved up, like a giant salami, into ever smaller parts. Some sheikhs—among them Zayed al-Nahayan, the President of the United Arab Emirates and the chief shareholder of the Bank of Credit & Commerce International, or B.C.C.I.—receive permits that cover thousands of square miles. No other hunters may cross the invisible line that separates Sheikh Zayed's personal hunting grounds from those of, for example, the Saudi Princes Naif and Sultan, or the Dubai leader, Sheikh Maktoum. At least, that is so in principle.

"Look at this!" Mirza nearly shouted, flailing a piece of paper before my eyes.



*The houbara bustard was declared an endangered species in 1975, but in the deserts of Pakistan each year Arab royals kill at least six thousand of the birds, whose meat has alleged invigorating powers.*

Across the top was stamped "CONFIDENTIAL MOST IMMEDIATE"; it was a message from Colonel S. K. Tressler, the chief of protocol. Sheikh Maktoum would soon be arriving from Dubai, and a party of royal Bahrainis was hunting on his turf—not even Dubaians but *Bahrainis*. Mirza was instructed to sort the muddle out. Then, there was a party of hunters from the royal family of Qatar "sneaking around," Mirza said, on Saudi Arabia's turf. And a member of the Dubai royal family was reported to have bagged two hundred birds in a protected national park, in the company of the honorary game warden, who was a member of the Pakistani parliament.

"None of this would have happened if it hadn't been for Abedi," Mirza said. He meant Aga Hasan Abedi, the Pakistani who had founded B.C.C.I. "He was the one who first arranged hunting outings in Pakistan for the sheikhs. He set up everything for them—from doing their shopping to providing bribes and geisha girls. The more he provided, the more their deposits filled his bank."

I HAD my first inkling of the royal houbara hunts during a visit to Pakistan a few years ago when, late one evening, I entered the elevator of my Karachi hotel and, to my astonishment, found myself in the company of two Arabs with falcons on their arms. After a bit of research, I sought out a friend of a friend from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a man I will call Ahmed, and he agreed to let me accompany him to the Karachi airport on a night when he was to receive an advance party of one of the sheikhs. He made me promise not to reveal that I was a journalist.

The sheikhs are obsessive about their privacy. Some have built personal airfields to protect themselves from public view. Some have constructed huge desert palaces, surrounded by fortress-like walls. Some live in elaborate tent cities, guarded by legions of Bedouin troops. They have their own communications equipment, road networks, security forces, and police. Totally closed off to outsiders, their hunting fiefdoms are, in effect, Arab principalities. They sprinkle the vast deserts of Balochistan, Punjab, and Sind, covering hundreds of miles. The sheikhs move in and out of them like phantoms, giving rise to any number of outlandish stories, many of

which turn out to be true. There is, for example, the story that the late King Khalid of Saudi Arabia transported dancing camels in a C-130 to join him on his hunt. There is the story that Prince Sultan, who is the Saudi Defense Minister, slaughtered seventy sheep and lambs every day to feed his royal entourage.

It was well past midnight when Ahmed and I reached the airport. (The sheikhs of the desert have always preferred to travel in the middle of the night.) A Pakistani Army major met us in the V.I.P. lounge, where a small group of Arab diplomats, in tailored silk suits, sat in a corner, sipping cups of sugary tea. They shook hands with Ahmed and nodded politely to me. Then black stretch limousines whisked us to a remote section of the airfield, which had been cordoned off by Pakistani troops to assure the sheikh's entourage of total privacy.

As we waited on the tarmac, the arriving planes lit up the night sky. Flying in formation—observing protocol, apparently—an executive Learjet was followed by two customized Boeings and a fleet of reconfigured C-130s, which flew two abreast. They had all been designated "special V.V.I.P. flights" by the Pakistani government. There would be no customs clearance, no passport control—the royal entourage enjoyed extra-territorial status in Pakistan. The lead planes touched down, and a red carpet was hastily unrolled. We all hurried to it, and stood in a slightly dishevelled line.

"This is the sixth flight this week," one of the Arab diplomats told me, exhaustion in his voice.

"Do you accompany them on the hunts?" I asked.

"Good heavens, no," he said, smoothing one of his silk lapels. "I'm basically a fisherman myself."

Two military officers in dress uniform got off the executive jet and walked briskly toward us, carrying attaché cases and swagger sticks. They were followed by other members of the sheikh's personal staff—a purser, a physician, a royal chamberlain—all in kaffiyehs and flowing camel-colored robes. Security men in khaki uniforms hurried from one of the Boeings and fanned out across the field. The doors of the C-130s opened, and immense vehicles began rolling down the ramps.

From a distance, the vehicles were merely dots of color—canary yellow,

bright red, black and white. Then they lumbered by us: two-thousand-gallon water tankers and eight-thousand-litre fuel tankers—dozens and dozens of them—in militarily precise lines. Now planes were landing all around us, ramps were quickly dropped, and jeeps, Range Rovers, and Land Cruisers raced down. They had all been customized for the royal houbara hunts, to make areas once inaccessible easily accessible now. They had open backs and convertible tops, and were equipped with special gauges, special shock absorbers, and special tires. Their drivers were dressed in Bedouin robes, and wore exceedingly dark glasses, even though the night itself was exceedingly dark.

There was a din, deafening at times, as camp managers shouted instructions in Arabic, as gears ground and brakes slammed, as more and more heavy equipment was disgorged. Security men dashed back and forth. Cranes labored across the runway and carefully unloaded satellite dishes and communications equipment. From time to time, I glimpsed generators, air-conditioners, mobile bars, VCRs. "They're totally self-sufficient in the desert," the diplomat who preferred fishing said. "Some of them even drill their own water holes. Providing water for an entourage of three hundred people is a problem." He shook his head.

During all the commotion on the runway, I had become separated from Ahmed, and now I went in search of him. I found him among a group of agitated officials, standing in a tight circle beneath a wing of one of the planes. "The mobile palaces are new," he told me, "and they don't know how to get it down." Looking up, I saw an unwieldy dark-blue structure, about fifty feet long and perhaps thirty feet wide, stuck at the top of the ramp. It was a customized Mercedes, and prominent on its hood was a now slightly askew gold-plated royal crest. "When they first began coming," Ahmed said, "even King Khalid and Sheikh Zayed slept in a tent."

**I**N 1929, H. R. P. Dickson, a British colonial officer who had served in Kuwait, described the houbara's yearly arrival on the Arabian Peninsula as "a season for rejoicing." He wrote, "The rains are close at hand and . . . the hubara have arrived. They are verily, like

the manna of old, Allah's reward to those who have endured the summer heat."

By the nineteen-sixties, the houbara had been hunted almost to extinction in the Middle East. "There was near hysteria when the bird disappeared," an Arab ambassador told me. The kings, sheikhs, and princes hurriedly dispatched scouting parties abroad. They recruited British and French scientists to attempt to breed the houbara in captivity. They called upon Japanese technicians to develop special tracking devices and customized vehicles for the hunt. It was the beginning of what would become a multimillion-dollar industry. But none of their endeavors solved their most pressing problem: Where could they hunt the houbara bustard *now*?

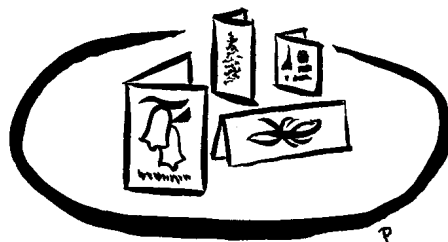
Pakistan was believed to have one of the largest migratory populations of houbara in the world, but no one was quite certain, then or later, how large it actually was. For although the houbara was declared an endangered species in 1975, largely as a result of the high-tech hunting of the sheikhs, no international conservation group had ever done a comprehensive study on the bird's distribution worldwide. After a good deal of debate, experts at an international symposium in Peshawar, Pakistan, in 1983 finally agreed that Pakistan's houbara population probably numbered somewhere between twenty and twenty-five thousand birds. In retrospect, the figure seems extremely low. The houbara reproduces at a rate that increases its numbers by only about five per cent a year, and the conservation officials I spoke with on this trip told me that the Arab hunting parties were bagging at least six thousand birds a year, and even that figure was considered a very conservative government estimate. (Sheikh Zayed alone brings a hundred and fifty falcons with him.)

Although General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq, Pakistan's President in 1983, supported the symposium, he ignored its unanimous appeal that houbara hunting

be banned in Pakistan altogether for at least five years. For while the number of Arab royal falconers was small—perhaps two or three dozen men—they were all immensely powerful, and immensely rich, and they put millions of dollars into their hunts. They also provided Pakistan—whose per-capita G.N.P. was only three hundred and fifty dollars a year—with some three and a half billion dollars annually in military and economic aid and in remittances to two million Pakistanis working in the Gulf. So, despite appeals from Prince Philip, who is the president of the World Wildlife Fund, and from other conservation groups, the sheikhs and princes continue to hunt.

**O**NE evening in early December, I was invited to a dinner for one of the visiting sheikhs. It was held at the elegant Karachi home of the Talpurs, one of the great feudal families of Sind. They were the ruling family of the district of Mirpur Khas and controlled vast tracts of land, where members of the royal families of Dubai and Qatar had begun to hunt, including Sheikh Muhammad, a Dubaian prince for whom the dinner was being held. None of the guests seemed certain of precisely who he was, although they all assured me that he was definitely a very influential sheikh.

A billowing *chamiana* tent of red, white, blue, and yellow had been set up in the middle of the Talpurs' lawn. It was filled with imitation-Louis XV wing chairs and upholstered settees arranged in a large rectangle. Bearers in starched white jackets served whiskey and gin in tall glasses that had been wrapped delicately in paper napkins. (Alcohol is forbidden in the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.) As everyone waited for the Sheikh to arrive, I greeted a number of Pakistani ministers and former ministers. It was an impressive gathering of Karachi's feudal, political, and financial elite, for, if the Arab sheikhs and princes were attaching greater urgency to the houbara hunt this year, so, in a sense, was the government of Pakistan. It had vacillated during the Gulf War, agonizing over what it could do that would be acceptable at home and yet would not displease its Arab patrons or the United States. In the end, ten thousand troops were sent to the Gulf, with orders not to fight. Officially, they were sent to Saudi Arabia to guard its religious shrines. But



no sooner had the troops been dispatched than Pakistan's zealous mullahs—whom Saudi Arabia had been funding for years—announced, with some flourish, that they had recruited thirty thousand volunteers to fight on the side of Iraq. Nobody knew for certain where Pakistan stood, and no government was more irritated than the government of Saudi Arabia. The houbara bustard was now a pawn on the geopolitical chessboard.

"We must find a proper seat for you," my host, Nawab Abdul Ghani Talpur, said to me. "You must not be so close to the Sheikh as to be conspicuous, but you must not be so far away that he can't see you and invite you to join him on his settee." It was finally decided that I should sit between a feudal landlord and a member of parliament. The landlord was a short, plump man with betel-stained teeth who was wearing a reddish-orange toupee. He said that the sheikhs had been hunting on his private lands for nearly a decade. We all hurried to sit in our assigned places as the Sheikh's arrival was heralded by screeching sirens and by guards scurrying to take up positions along the perimeter of the tent, their Kalashnikovs at the ready.

"His Majesty," the Nawab announced, and we all jumped to our feet.

"He's not 'His Majesty,'" the landlord whispered dismissively. "He's merely the brother-in-law and the cousin of the ruler of Dubai, and he's not a very good hunter, either. When he didn't find any houbara in my desert tracts, he moved his entire camp—servants, vehicles, falcons—into Kirthar National Park. He killed more than two hundred houbara in ten days, and he killed gazelles and ibex, too."

"Why was that permitted?" I asked.

"No one has ever written, either Jesus or the Prophet Muhammad, that Pakistan must be poor."

That was the way many of my conversations in Pakistan went. I met game wardens wearing jewelled watches that were gifts from the sheikhs. Politicians, chief ministers, and former chief ministers received lavish residences or customized cars. Some of them shopped frequently in London—flying back and forth in one or another of the sheikhs' private planes.

Sheikh Muhammad bin-Khalifa al-Maktoum swept into the tent. His face

showed no emotion as he went from guest to guest. A slight man with a Vandylke beard, he was dressed in a black robe trimmed with gold, and a white kaffiyeh. For some reason, he carried a shepherd's wooden crook in his hand.

After I introduced myself, he asked me if I lived in Pakistan.

"No, Your Excellency. I've come for the houbara hunt."

"We're not hunting," he said, rather tartly. "We're only training falcons." And he moved on.

I asked the landlord how much a typical royal hunt cost.

"Well, when you take everything into account—The hunting vehicles, minus their electronic fittings, cost at least twenty thousand dollars each; then add the costs of their falcons and private planes; and, of course, there are the out-of-pocket expenses." He laughed a guttural laugh. "The controller of Sheikh Muhammad's household told me that he paid about two hundred thousand dollars out of pocket for this particular trip. He's spent a total of about nine million dollars thus far, and he bagged about six hundred birds. That works out to about fifteen thousand dollars a bird."

He then quickly added that that figure was low. The sheikhs normally spent between ten and twenty million dollars for a typical royal hunt.

I glanced at Sheikh Muhammad, now sitting on a gilded sofa at the head of the tent. He sat rigid, seemingly bored, with the shepherd's crook held upright in his hand. The etiquette of the evening was that one was not permitted to leave one's seat unless summoned by the Sheikh. We sat for over two hours, and only three of the sixty-odd guests were invited to the royal settee.

"Have you ever been with a sheikh on a bustard hunt?" the landlord asked me as the evening dragged on. "It's the craziest thing I've ever seen, but it's like a religion to them. They're out in the desert from dawn to dusk, covered with dirt and dust. The driver is submerged in one of those jeeps, as if he were in an A.P.C."—armored personnel carrier. "The sheikh sits next to him in an elevated seat that swivels at a hundred and eighty degrees. I guess it's a good hobby, if you're into that kind of thing."

"What kind of thing?" I asked him.

He looked somewhat startled, then said, "My lady, these Arabs eat the hou-

bara for sexual purposes—it's full of vitamins."

A FALCON trainer told me that if I really wanted to see a hunt I should go to Balochistan, to Chagai district. It was a Saudi hunting area—a place called Yak Much. Bordering Afghanistan and Iran, Chagai is on one of two migratory paths by which the houbara enters the country, and is thus one of the most preferred hunting areas in Pakistan.

A sixteen-hour car ride, through desert and mountains and tribal lands, brought me to Quetta, the provincial capital of Balochistan—the only province in the country where the houbara is known to breed. And, in increasing numbers each year, eggs, chicks, and birds are being smuggled out, primarily to Taif, Saudi Arabia, where French scientists—in a multimillion-dollar effort of limited success—are currently attempting to breed the houbara in captivity. In the fall of 1991, Mirza had confiscated five such consignments—some five hundred birds in all—in just six weeks.

Shortly after my arrival in Quetta, I called on the provincial wildlife minister, Jam Ali Akbar. He told me that he really wasn't much of a wildlife person himself. He wrote pop music, and was the president of Balochistan's Roger Moore Fan Club. I asked him if the provincial government was doing anything to protect the houbara.

"It's impossible—it's a federal-government matter," he said. "And these sheikhs are extremely attached to this little bird. It's not a simple matter." He shook his head. "The wildlife people say this shouldn't be permitted. But then the sheikhs' agents come, bringing priceless gifts, like diamond-studded gold Rolex watches. And sometimes, I've heard, they dispense briefcases containing a couple of thousand dollars—and you can keep the briefcase, too. The sheikhs say that these are migratory birds, so we lose nothing. And if we don't permit it they'll simply go somewhere else."

Quite by accident, I met Balochistan's largest falcon dealer, Mir Baz Khetran, one afternoon in my hotel. His presence there shouldn't have surprised me. Royal hunters had begun arriving, en route to their hunting grounds, and falcons had become a familiar sight throughout the hotel. Mir Baz and his

brother, Lal Muhammad, dealt in falcons together, which was largely illegal in Pakistan, and Lal Muhammad also served as one of the chief minister's key advisers—on wildlife.

It was Lal Muhammad who trapped the falcons, Mir Baz explained when we chatted in my room at the hotel; their servants trained them, and then he himself sold them to the sheikhs. His falcon empire had insured him a seat in Parliament, and he had been a Cabinet minister in Benazir Bhutto's short-lived government. Mir Baz was in his early forties, and had a round, puffy face and dark hair. He wore sparkling rings and a good deal of cologne; gold chains covered his chest, which was half exposed.

"Such hectic times," he said, slumping in his chair. "The falcon season lasts for only four months." (The most expensive falcons migrate with the houbara from Siberia.) "But fortunes, Madam!—fortunes can be made. There is a huge competition between these Arab sheikhs. And if a sheikh sees a falcon that he judges to be *hurr*," or noble and free, "and if that bird is nearly white or

totally black—both are extremely rare—that sheikh, Madam, nearly has a heart attack. He simply must buy it, and he will pay *such* money for beauty."

"How much?" I asked.

"Nothing less than the equivalent of eight thousand dollars. The record price for Balochistan this year was twenty-five lakhs"—a hundred and twenty thousand dollars—"for a shahin, which was caught in the northern border area, near Zhob. By the time it reaches the Middle East, it will bring much more."

Mir Baz then said, "You know, Madam, these Arabs consider the houbara an aphrodisiac."

"So I've heard," I replied.

"But some of them, Madam, eat one houbara a day—sometimes two, if it's a special occasion. That means they may eat as many as *five hundred* birds a year!"

SEVERAL nights later, I was invited to dinner by one of Balochistan's tribal chiefs—Nawab Akbar Khan Bugti, the leader of the second largest of the province's seventeen major tribes. An aristocratic Anglophile who had

spent the last forty-five years in and out of government, in and out of favor, and in and out of jail, Bugti was now the leader of the opposition in the Provincial Assembly and one of Balochistan's most powerful men.

When I arrived at his home, I found his receiving room crowded with other tribal chiefs. Sardars, mirs, and maliks sat cross-legged on a Bukhara rug and lounged against pillows piled against a wall. The Nawab greeted me warmly; I had known him for some time. He then went from guest to guest, and each reported on the site of one or another of thirty or so royal parties hunting in his tribal lands.

"Where is Yak Much?" I asked the Nawab, after he had spoken to his guests.

"In the middle of God's country," he replied. "It's miles and miles from nowhere—nothing but tons and tons of sand. And it's totally off limits to everyone except the Saudis. Ask *them*." He pointed out two men on the other side of the room, and then introduced me to Ali Ahmed Notezai and Sakhi Dost Jan. They were the kingmakers of Chagai

district, of which Yak Much was a part.

Notezai was a member of the Provincial Assembly, and was allegedly involved in the smuggling trade. He reminded me of a penguin with stubble on its face. Sakhi Dost was a rather more distinctive type: a large man, he had a broad, menacing face, and his teeth were betel-stained. He wore a brown waistcoat over his *shalwar kameez*—the Pakistani national dress—and a white turban, cockaded and lofty, that tied from behind, so its folds of soiled cloth streamed down his back. His wealth, which was considerable, was also said to be grounded in the smuggling trade, and he had the reputation of being a bit of a Robin Hood. When I asked him about that, he said there was no point in robbing the poor.

Both men had known the Saudi Defense Minister, Prince Sultan, for years—ever since he began hunting in Chagai district, where he held exclusive sway over nearly twenty thousand square miles. They told me that the Saudi hunters would be led by one of the Prince's sons: Prince Bandar, the Ambassador in Washington, or Prince Khalid, who had commanded Saudi forces during the Gulf War, or Prince Fahd, the governor of Tabouk Province. But it would definitely be a son. "In this wild mavericking, they don't trust even their brothers," Notezai explained.

"What is so fascinating about the houbara?" I asked.

"The sheikhs tell me it is the ultimate challenge for the falcon," the Nawab replied. "Much of the fascination is in the flight; it can go on for miles. The falcon is the fastest bird on earth, and the houbara is also fast, both on the ground and in the air. It is also a clever, wary bird, with a number of tricks. Part of the lure is in *finding* it. You can spend half a day following its tracks. It's a contest—your wits against its. Then, there's the contest between the two birds. The houbara tries to stay on the ground, where it is difficult, sometimes impossible, for the falcon to strike. The falcon tries to coerce it, cajole it, frighten it into the air. There the falcon reaches for the sun, and then comes down on the houbara—but it must stay above. Otherwise, the houbara, whether as part of its defensive armor or in its reaction to fear, emits a dark-green slime violently from its vent.

Its force is so strong that it can spread for three feet, and it can temporarily blind the falcon, or glue its feathers together, making it unable to fly. The sheikhs have told me that, once that happens, many falcons will never hunt the houbara again."

The Nawab called for a servant and gave him instructions in Balochi. The servant left the room, and he returned carrying a custom-built leather case. He placed it at my feet.

"Open it," the Nawab said.

I did. Nestled inside, protected by a fur lining, was a 24k.-gold-plated Kalashnikov. It was a gift to the Nawab from the Minister of Defense of the United Arab Emirates, who hunted in Balochistan each year. It was the size of a normal Kalashnikov but was perhaps three pounds heavier, because of the gold. It was engraved with the royal coat of arms, and its two magazines were also plated in 24k. gold. The Nawab handed it to me. I had held a Kalashnikov before, but I had never held three pounds of gold.

"In the old days, we would hunt the houbara on foot or camelback," the Nawab said. "We would try to outsmart it, using the camel as a shield. The houbara knows the camel, since the camel grazes in the areas where the houbara feeds. You couldn't go directly for the bird, or it would flee. So you circled it on camelback, making the circle ever smaller. The houbara would watch, mesmerized, confused. But now customized vehicles have replaced camels, palaces have replaced tents. They use radar, computers, infrared spotlights to find the bird at night. What is the challenge? What is the thrill? The odds have changed immensely for the houbara. The poor bird doesn't stand a chance anymore."

**YAK MUCH** ("One Date Palm") is a desert village of about a hundred people, one gas station, and a few little food stands and shops. And, on close inspection, I found that it now has five date palms. Its most distinctive feature is a large green board at the village line, which in bold lettering announces "NO HUNTING PERMITTED." Since the houbara breeds here, Yak Much is, in principle, a protected sanctuary.

A mile or so beyond the sign was the Saudi royal camp. My driver was the

first to spot it. There was nothing around us except desolate miles of sand, but then, stretched along the horizon, we saw lines and lines of tents. If we hadn't been looking for them, we could easily have passed by. The camp was deep in the desert, five miles off the road, and as we continued along the highway we could see the tents one moment, and the next moment they would disappear.

We left the highway at an unmarked point—there was no road—and careered across the desert, lurching around bushes and shrubs. Then the camp came into focus—scores and scores of black, brown, and white pyramidal forms. Against the flat emptiness of the desert, the tents suggested a gathering of giant dinosaurs. The camp sprawled over some ten acres, in two concentric circles, bringing a medieval city to mind. The inner tent city, of forty-four *chamianas*, was surrounded by perhaps sixty smaller tents. They stood like a wall, as if to keep all outsiders out. The perimeter was guarded by Pakistani levies and border militiamen, dressed in blue or gray sweaters and berets. Some were swathed in blankets against the desert chill. The inner city was guarded by security men in the retinue of Prince Fahd, who would lead the Saudi royal hunt.

Vehicles were lined up in neat patterns on the perimeter of the camp: water tankers, oil tankers, petrol tankers, and a fleet of customized hunting jeeps. There were immense yellow cranes, to pull the vehicles out of the sand if the need should arise; a mobile workshop, which was fitted with everything necessary to overhaul a car; and huge refrigerator trucks, to carry the hunting bag out. Silver satellite dishes were anchored in the desert rock. From inside the camp, you could make a phone call to any place in the world. I spotted two royal falcon trainers whom I had met at my Quetta hotel. They carried mobile telephones, and their falcons were perched upright on their arms.

There were now about a hundred falcons inside the camp for the seventy or eighty royal hunters who would accompany Prince Fahd. Only the Prince's favorite falcons would arrive with him. I asked the chief of the Pakistani security detachment how long it had taken to assemble the camp, and he said only four days. The hunting vehicles—there were



sixty—and the heavy equipment, tents, generators, and fuel had all been transported from Jidda by C-130s to the airport in Dalbandin, which was the closest town to Yak Much, thirty-five miles away.

Officials in Dalbandin had told me that the Saudi royal parties—which usually hunted two to three thousand birds during their monthlong stay—had no beneficial impact on the local economy: they'd given residents only two generators (which didn't work), a mosque (which they didn't need), and the airport (which was used almost exclusively by the hunters themselves).

At the camp the following evening, after Prince Fahd himself had arrived, I sat in a Land Cruiser next to the dining tent, whose vast brown folds, with intricate gold stitching, billowed in the wind. The tent was surrounded by some twenty-five security men, who stood at smart attention with their Kalashnikovs.

I sat in darkness, my head covered with the hood of my cape. It was bitterly cold. The wind was ferocious. Land Cruisers and Range Rovers began to arrive. As I waited for Prince Fahd's personal physician, whom I'd met earlier in the day, I watched Dalbandin's notables saunter toward the dining tent, where they had been invited to dine with the Prince. The visiting wildlife minister, Jam Ali Akbar, was flanked by servants and guards carrying two carpets, which were gifts for Prince Fahd. Ali Ahmed Notezai strutted like a peacock as he entered the tent. Sakhi Dost Jan, wearing his brown waistcoat and flowing white turban, shouted instructions here and there. Earlier that day, I had spoken to both men about the possibility of my meeting Prince Fahd.

"Impossible," Notezai said. "The Prince doesn't want to meet any women this time."

"I'm not a woman. I'm a journalist."

He shrugged. "It's all the same," he said.

The Prince's personal servants ferried bottles of mineral water and huge trays of food between the tents: roast lamb with dates and rice; hot nan bread; hummus; tahini; baskets of fruit. I watched two trainers open a large wicker basket near my jeep and pull out two baby houbara with clipped wings, to be used for training falcons. Carrying the little birds in their left hands, they

walked off, each with a falcon perched on his right wrist.

I left the jeep and stood in darkness near the entrance of the dining tent. Inside, Prince Fahd, dressed in a camel-colored woollen robe embroidered with gold thread, sat cross-legged on an Oriental carpet, receiving his guests. The floor of the *chamiana* was covered with exquisite Kashan and Persian antique carpets and rugs; bolster pillows, in silk cases sewn with gold thread, lined the walls. In a far corner, there was a network of cellular phones, and other communications equipment hooked to a satellite dish. Behind the Prince, like a ceremonial guard, thirty-five hooded falcons stood at attention. They perched on specially designed, hand-carved *mashrabiyya* stools, etched with ivory and gold. The falcons were of three different kinds—different in color, age, and size. Despite their magnificence, however, all were dwarfed by a peregrine that stood at the Prince's side, on the arm of his chief falcon trainer. She had travelled with Prince Fahd on the royal flight, and during the entire evening she never left his side.

Sakhi Dost Jan was the last of the V.V.I.P. guests to depart. He stood outside the dining tent, flanked by bodyguards and aides. He gesticulated, then shouted. A Saudi intelligence officer flailed his arms. Other Saudis came up and encircled the two men.

"What is happening?" I asked one of the guards.

"Rupees, Madam," he said. "Lakhs of rupees." He rolled his eyes.

After some ten minutes of negotiations, an aide of Prince Fahd's appeared, and presented Dalbandin's godfather with two bulging leather saddlebags. Sakhi Dost smiled his toothy smile. He then got into his Range Rover and roared away.

One of the guards brought me a plate of food and a cup of tea. I looked down at the dark meat, which was surrounded by rice. "Is this the houbara?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied.

I hesitated momentarily, and then took a few bites. The meat was tough and stringy—it reminded me a bit of goat—and left a bitter aftertaste. Far from arousing amatory impulses, it had an irritating tendency to stick in my teeth. How could anyone eat five hun-



dred of these birds a year? As I pondered the mysterious ways of the desert, Prince Fahd's physician came over to chat.

"Is it true that the houbara is an aphrodisiac?" I asked.

He looked amused, and shrugged his shoulders. "No," he replied. "It's basically a diuretic. But they *think* it's an aphrodisiac."

THE howling of dogs and the chanting of mullahs woke me at dawn. No sooner had I started a fire in my tiny fireplace, in Dalbandin's government guesthouse, than one of the royal trainers whom I'd met in Quetta the previous week—I'll call him Farouq—pounded on my door. "We're taking the falcons out!" he said. I was to accompany him back to the Saudi camp.

We left the highway before we reached the main turnoff to the camp, and drove into the desert for perhaps a mile, to a spot where another trainer and a driver waited in a customized, carpeted Range Rover. Both men carried hooded falcons—one a shahin and one a saker—on their gauntleted right arms.

I was instructed to sit in the back seat of the open jeep, with the other trainer and the hooded saker, which seemed dangerously close to my left knee. Farouq—with the hooded shahin now perched on his black-gloved wrist—took the revolving bucket seat in the front. He adjusted it to its maximum height, and towered some three feet above us, in midair.

The sun was just beginning to rise, and the sky was violet-pink. All around us, the flat emptiness of the desert stretched endlessly. The silence was broken only by the wind and the grinding of the Rover's gears. From time to time, we passed black slate formations that resembled giant marshmallows burned in a bonfire.

The trainer next to me, whom I'll call Mahmud, wore sandals and bright Argyle socks. "Her name is Ashgar," he said of the hooded saker on his arm. "And she's just a year old. That is the perfect age for this particular bird."

Ashgar was extremely light in color, almost blond, and measured perhaps thirty inches from her head to the tip of her tail. White spots on the tips of her feathers, which resembled polka dots, blended quite smartly with the red leather hood and jesses she wore.

"Her talons are like steel if she grabs you. That's why we wear gloves," Mah-

mud said, stroking Ashgar and giving me a pleasant smile. He then told me that Ashgar was from Iran, and had been a particularly sought-after bird, not just for her color but for her "soul."

I studied the falcon more closely. A tiny solar cell, covered by glass, was attached to her tail feathers, and a thin metal aerial affixed to it rose from her feathers up the bottom of her back. It was a French-made radio transmitter, a tracking and homing device slightly larger than a watch cell; it had an especially sensitive receiver that had been devised purely for the houbara hunts. Mahmud said that the transmitter weighed about five grams and had a radius of some eight miles. It gave off a constant beep once the bird was on the wing. "If she is lost during the hunt, we can retrieve her by the next day, maximum," he said. "Even when she parks for the night, we get a constant signal in our jeeps."

"Can the transmitter be used to track a houbara?" I asked.

"Only indirectly," he replied. "If the falcon catches a houbara, the beeper tells us where they are. But, basically, we track the houbara by radar or two-way radio."

The wind became fierce as we raced across the desert at eighty miles per hour, searching for houbara tracks, and knocking down everything in our path: shrubs, bushes, even tiny trees. I glanced ahead at the driver, who was wearing goggles and a crash helmet and was bent over the wheel intently. I suspected that at one time or another he had driven a tank.

A friend had told me earlier that the Yak Much desert was more like the Middle East than anywhere else in Pakistan was; you could travel for days without seeing another human being. We had travelled for more than forty miles, and although I'd seen no human beings, I had certainly seen their traces: plastic bags, abandoned jerricans, and discarded tires. There were some areas where the hunting vehicles had so flattened everything in sight that a plane could have landed with ease.

Then Farouq shouted, "There are the tracks!"

They were unmistakably those of the houbara—three-toed footprints dotting the sand.

Farouq stroked the shahin's underbreast, whistled softly in her ear, then raised his gauntleted arm above his head.

"A-hoh, a-hoh, a-hoh," he chanted, above the noise of the wind, as he removed the shahin's jesses and hood with a single quick movement of his free hand. "Strike! Strike! Strike!" The shahin cast her piercing eyes incessantly around, bobbed her head, and then lurched forward, leaving Farouq's arm. She soared into the air, her radio transmitter and aerial visible in the feathers of her tail. She flew low—barely off the ground—to conceal herself, and was often out of our sight as we raced across the desert, following her path. We were guided by her radio beeps.

"It should be four or five minutes," Mahmud said, and he explained that the shahin had extraordinary vision: she could sight for over a mile. But we raced along for twenty minutes before we spotted the shahin and a houbara, on the ground. At first, they were tiny, indistinct forms in a mustard field. Then, as we surged ahead, I lost sight of the houbara.

"There she is!" Farouq shouted.

"Where?"

Even with high-powered binoculars, I couldn't find the houbara, and it was perhaps only ten yards away, concealed and camouflaged—its contours and buff-and-sandy-gray coloring blended perfectly with the desert and the bushes and shrubs. When I finally did spot it, it was frozen behind an absurdly small bush, and uttered no sound. It was a baby, weighing perhaps two pounds. The shahin circled overhead, then swooped down, attempting to frighten the houbara off the ground. The houbara tried to enlarge itself by spreading its wings, and watched our every movement with unblinking yellow eyes. Then, in an instant, it had taken off. It darted across the desert like a roadrunner; its long legs seemed not even to touch the ground. Its tail was spread like a peacock's, and its chest was thrust out.

We raced, dashing, lurching, and jolting, in huge zigzag circles, following the two birds. Then both took to the air—an absolutely cloudless blue sky. You could distinguish the houbara by its white undersurface and wings. The shahin soared and dipped, her vast wingspan spread majestically. The houbara eluded her, and tried to gain altitude. From time to time, the birds almost disappeared, becoming tiny, inky webs, but they were never completely out of sight—



we had our high-powered binoculars in addition to our radio beeps. This hunt was a far cry from the romantic image of the lone Arab walking across the desert in his flowing robe with his pet falcon perched nobly on his arm.

The shahin soared for the sun, and came down on the houbara, attempting to break its neck. The houbara flew on furiously, and the shahin struck again. The two birds spiralled downward. We found them near a tamarisk bush, struggling on the ground. The baby houbara lay exhausted but was still trying to kick. The first thing that the shahin had done was blind its yellow eyes, so that it could not run or fly away. Farouq cut open the houbara's stomach, retrieved its liver, and fed it to the shahin. He then hooded the falcon and ritually slit the baby houbara's throat, to conform with dietary laws.

"Now it's *halal*," he said—permitted in Islam.

THERE was a time, Wahajuddin Ahmed Kermani, Pakistan's retired Inspector General of Forests, told me, when the houbara had been so plentiful in Pakistan that you could count them from the roadways "like butterflies in a field." But that was in the nineteen-sixties, before the great sheikhs and falconers began hunting in Pakistan.

I called on Kermani, one of his country's most respected environmentalists, at his Karachi bungalow. If any Pakistani had attempted to save the houbara, he was that man. As we sat in his drawing room one morning, sipping cups of tea, he described his efforts to save it as "the only failure of my life." He went on to say, "For a quarter of a century, the hunting has been intensive and sustained. They go through the desert like an invading army. It's slaughter, mass slaughter. They kill everything in sight."

When I asked him why the government of Pakistan had done so little to deal with the situation, he replied, "Because we lack the moral fibre and the moral courage."

Kermani applauds the efforts of Tanveer Arif, the president of the Society for Conservation and Protection of the Environment, or SCOPE, a Karachi-based group that challenged the houbara hunts' legality in the Sind High Court. "The hunts are sheer hypocrisy, and totally contrary to our laws," Arif told me

one afternoon. "Since 1912, in the days of the Raj, the houbara has been a protected species. Yet, while Pakistanis are being arrested and prosecuted if they're found to be hunting the bird, Arab dignitaries are given diplomatic immunity." Although in September the Sind High Court ruled in SCOPE's favor, its decision has had little impact on the Pakistani government.

Like Kermani, Arif is deeply upset that international pressure to ban the royal hunts is not being brought to bear on the government of Pakistan. Twenty-three countries, including India, Iran, and the former Soviet Union, have legislation that protects the houbara, or bustards generally, and in the vast majority of these countries there is a ban on all hunting.

After making my trip to Pakistan, I asked Paul Goriup, the leading houbara expert at the International Council for Bird Preservation, in Cambridge, England, whether he thought the international community was doing enough.

"International efforts are exceedingly scant," he replied. "The houbara is merely a distraction, not a priority. There's no doubt that in the Pakistani provinces of Sind and Punjab the population, which was once sizable, is now terribly diminished. Balochistan is thus the only area left that is worth hunting in—and the problem there could be severe. There's a breeding population, and if the sheikhs hunt after February"—they always do—"then it's a disaster, for they impinge on the breeding population for the next year.

"It's a stalemate in Pakistan," Goriup went on. "The Pakistanis see the Arabs breaking Pakistan's own laws, yet huge sums of money are involved. As for the Arabs, they realize that the houbara is declining outrageously, yet they continue to hunt. Still, they're worried, and I'm absolutely convinced that they would accept regulations if the regulations were there." He thought a moment, and then said, "I've maintained consistently that the houbara should be protected by the United Nations' Bonn Convention on Migratory Species, because such protection would elevate the problem to an international level. We could set up protected areas. Money would flow the right way. We must restore habitats and breeding grounds. This is the only way the houbara can be saved." ♦