

# A new leaf

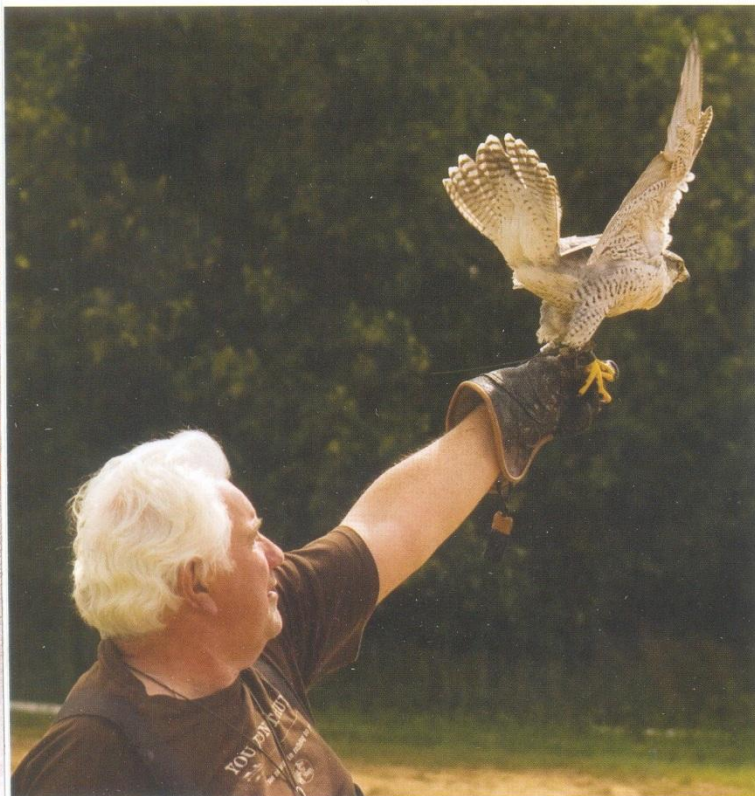
**Chris Shaw** looks at a modern problem with an ancient solution as she meets the falconer who protects Dorset's watercress

On a pale, chilly morning two sharp eyes and a wicked beak are just a couple of paces away. Megan, a peregrine falcon, swallows a quick snack and then she is faced into the wind and prepares for take-off. She scans the sky for predators – even a falcon is wary – then, effortlessly, she is airborne.

As she soars into orbit, circling a nearby clump of trees before coming back in a long, low pass above my head. Bob Dalton, her handler, watches intently as, in his words, Megan begins to 'mooch about a bit'. This is the pigeon patrol. In the heart of rural Dorset the ancient pursuit of falconry is being used as a pest deterrent by the very modern farmers of The Watercress Company.

Managing Director Tom Amery, on a tour of the main Waddock Cross site, talks about the various problems that commercial growers face. Pests, diseases, even the weather in the shape of a sharp hail storm, can play havoc with a crop. Specific problems are targeted with authorised controls in an industry in which nature conservation plays an important part. The Watercress Company is a member of

Bob lets slip one of his pigeon patrol



LEAF, Linking Environment and Farming, and other schemes which demand strict environmental standards.

Around the watercress beds, some weeds are allowed to thrive as they attract butterflies and also form a habitat for other wildlife. Insects shaken free by the harvesting machinery are returned to the land as many have a beneficial life-cycle. Pigeons, however, pose a very different problem. They need greens in their diet – and what could be more easily accessible than a watercress bed?

Watercress has been grown in Dorset since the mid-19th century and the county now produces around 300,000 bags each week. The Watercress Company supplies two tons of it per week to major supermarkets and chefs, commercial as well as domestic. Pigeons need no logistics infrastructure for their supplies; they eat watercress as it grows, moving as they feed and thus causing damage over wide areas. If rigorous quality control detects even a small amount of crop damage at the four-weekly harvest time, the produce from that entire bed is rejected. As losses increased, explained Tom, a solution to the pigeon problem had to be found.

Bangers, balloons, whizzers and kites had all been used, but with only short-term success. Thoughts turned to falconry and specifically to Bob Dalton, whose birds of prey had already been successful clearing bird nuisance from United States Air Force bases and Austrian vineyards. After a trial run at the company's Hampshire site, Bob arrived in Dorset in 2011 – ready to fly a carefully-choreographed pigeon patrol. In keeping with the company's conservation ethic, Bob was also tasked with mapping the area's wildlife.

He begins each day with a tour of all the company's holdings, which also include land crops such as baby leaf lettuce, spinach, rocket and peas. The nuisance at each is assessed. Are pigeons already feeding on the crop? Are they in small numbers, but building? The use of adjacent land often plays a part; whether it, too, contains crops attractive to pigeons or whether it may offer tree cover to wily birds. Bob's assessment decides what course of action is taken and which of his birds are employed. Falcons are open-space fliers; they clear the skies. Hawks are better in woodland and can rout out persistent offenders who hope to hide.

The birds of prey patrol about four times each day from April to September. They fly out and return on a food reward basis and, being better nourished than a wild predator, have no need to expend vast amounts of energy chasing food in the sky. 'No pigeons are killed', Bob stresses, 'they are deterred solely by the regular presence of a potential predator'.



One of the falcons protecting Dorset's greenery has an inter-patrol snack

Megan is distinctive in flight; she soars gracefully then Bob whistles her in and she comes instantly to the lure, landing by his feet and receiving another snack for good behaviour. She is moved up to his wrist and her beak tears the food apart; there isn't a pigeon in sight around the field of rocket.

In a field of young peas – pea tops are second only to watercress on a pigeon's menu – the birds are already feeding. Bob needs to convince them that there is an actively hunting falcon in the vicinity and he decides to fly Brabus, a peregrine/gyrfalcon hybrid that is every bit as beautiful – and potentially dangerous – as Megan. Brabus blinks as he is unhooded. His eyesight would be able to distinguish small newsprint from about one kilometre away – pigeons beware.

Bob walks away a short distance, holding the bird aloft on his wrist. Brabus takes longer to go, shaking out his feathers and settling them first in the 'rouse' to ensure

he is fully ready to fly. Suddenly he is up and away. Bob swings the lure immediately, calling him back time and again and encouraging dive-bombing swoops to reinforce the message that this is a bird which means business. Brabus performs to order, landing when called; pigeons away – job done.

In just one small area Bob has so far identified over one hundred and fifty bird species, all carefully listed and including cuckoo, redshank, greenshank, owl, Dartford warbler and a red-footed falcon; a couple of hoopoes have been surprise visitors. He also moves two infra-red cameras around the fields, gathering further information about wildlife on the move. Deer and rabbit are plentiful and there is talk of mink, but Bob has yet to see one. Are water-voles going to make a comeback he wonders? As for pigeons, well they are still around, but they are cautious. Having seen Megan and Brabus on patrol, it is easy to understand why.

What a feast looks like to a pigeon, when the skies are not patrolled by Bob's birds, at least

