



The article *Wings Over the Vineyards; Raptors to be Utilized as Pest Management Professionals in Central Coast Vineyards to Battle Grape-guzzling Starlings and Finches* was written by Anne Quinn and published in the **Paso Robles Gazette**, June 20 - 27, 2003, Volume 4, No. 45, page A4

One of civilization's most ancient arts may save the Central Coast's newest cash crop.

Falconry, the art of hunting wild prey with trained raptors is reputed to be the oldest sport in the world. Now an Atascadero man, Brad Felger, is introducing falconry as a modern pest control management tool to help vineyards reduce the damage done to grapes by flocks of starlings.

Felger is owner and master falconer of Air Strike Technologies, a company that performs bird control using falconry.

House finches and starlings are the primary bird pests in vineyards. Descending in dark clouds, starlings have a voracious appetite for grapes and are difficult to eradicate.

Traditional methods of controlling starlings suggested by the University of California at Berkeley includes frightening birds with noisemakers such as cracker shells, propane exploders and electronic devices. Distress calls also work.

Because the starlings quickly become accustomed to sounds and simply keep eating, different devices need to be used daily and noisemakers must be rotated to be effective.

These methods are equally frightening and upsetting to people living in and around vineyards.

Felger believes he offers a better solution. When a falcon is released in a vineyard the only noise is the wind whistling through its wings as it dives after its prey at speeds over 240 miles per hour.

It's an amazing thing to see the response the falcons get from starlings. They clump up in a huge ball and then the bird chases them off" said Felger.

'I am not talking about just going to a vineyard once and releasing the falcons. Once I contract with a vineyard, I go every day for a week to two weeks, and handle the birds during the time of day that the starlings are a problem, in the early morning until it gets hot and again every evening until the birds are gone. Starlings have a natural inclination to fear falcons. It is something they never get used to the way they do man-made deterrents like noisemakers.'"

Felger is a thoroughly modern man who excels at two ancient arts: blacksmithing and falconry. He possesses falconry licenses from both the federal and state government. Birds he has bred in captivity have been sold to airports and the military.

Said to have originated in the Far East as a means for hunting food, falconry is a synergistic relationship between man and magnificent bird. Felger and his wife, Valerie, raise several varieties.

Felger gets the birds to “stoop to the lure.” This means he releases the bird and then tosses out a leather pouch containing food that swings on a line. The bird swoops for it. Felger said the art is in “presenting it in such a way that it the bird must accelerate to touch it. It mimics aggressive behavior.”

“It becomes a game,” said Felger. “They actually seem to enjoy it and a bird will stoop to lure 20-25 times. Starlings see that and think ‘he’s after us.’”

The fear that starlings have for falcon is so intense, Felger said, that after a week or so the starlings begin to fly away just at the sight of his truck, a modern twist to an ancient art.