

How do you sum up the life of someone for whom falconry was woven into the very fiber of his being? In the words that follow, you will come to understand something of the depth and love Bryan Culbertson had for birds of prey—and most especially, the Peregrine Falcon.

Bryan Ray Culbertson, Sr. was born on November 21, 1945, and lived a life full of joy and wonder, dedicated to the art of falconry. Bryan became interested in falconry at a very young age after watching the Walt Disney program *Rusty and the Falcon*. He was so young that the State of California was unable to issue him a license, and his beloved Aunt Joyce had to drive him on his adventures because he didn't yet have a driver's license. He was only 14. But nothing would stop Bryan from pursuing his passion.

## Bryan Culbertson Sr.

In 1959 Bryan got his first bird—a Red-tailed Hawk he bought for \$15. That year, Tony Nunez introduced Bryan to the legendary Louis Davis, eight years his senior, who became his mentor. Louis had a Peregrine, and Bryan fell in love with them. Bryan learned the art of trapping from Louis and became so skilled that others would call to ask his advice. Together—and once with Bob Coleman—they made three trips to the Gulf of Mexico to trap what they called “beach birds.” Bryan was also a pilot, so he flew them down himself. He loved trapping so deeply that he wrote in his journal in 1992: “P.S. I shot a 6-point bull elk this year. The excitement doesn't even compare to trapping a passage Peregrine on a harness.”

Bryan grew up and into falconry in the Bay Area, a wonderful time and place to be a falconer before so many open spaces were lost to development. He would go to the east side of San Francisco, to the duck clubs and the salt flats, to watch, observe, and trap birds. He was also a duck hawkker, flying his Peregrines at seasonal rain ponds while fellow falconers gathered to watch.

At that time, the Peregrine population in North America was in serious decline. Bryan played an integral part in its recovery in California: he trapped the bird who would eventually be named Nugget, then gave her to Louis about a year later. Louis bred her with a male named General, and together Nugget and General are a significant reason the Peregrine population is thriving today. She passed in the late 1980s, and Bryan wrote in his journal that she had done well. He was so proud of her.



Bryan loved to work with and fly his birds. He would take them to work with him, and on the way home would stop to fly them. He was so attuned to his birds that he could feel their weight on his fist and know whether they were ready. He was well known for flying his Peregrines high—and for rewarding them generously when they did.

Bryan kept meticulous journals from the very beginning of his falconry life, including his rejection letter from the State of California. His detailed entries are a master class in the art: he recorded wind, weather, location, the number and species of birds observed, their stage of molt—down to the finest detail of a single feather out of place. And the very last sentence on the last journal page reads simply: “I love the birds of prey.”

Bryan was also an avid photographer who captured thousands of images of his birds, his friends and their birds, and falconry meets. If you were ever with him, chances are he has a picture of you—and your bird. He loved capturing every nuance of expression, every small movement, the grandeur of flight, the majesty of raptors. Were there more pictures of his birds than of his children? Let's not get into that.

He was equally devoted as a reader, building a library of over 500 books on birds of prey, falconry, and the people who have made the sport great—with multiple copies of his favorites. He was always reading, always studying, always wanting to know more.

As a falconer, Bryan was gentle, patient, and kind with his birds. He loved and respected them. He was the same way with people—loving, caring, humble, and funny. He is gone too soon.

Many thanks to Blair Anderson, whom Bryan mentored, as well as Steve Souza, Bryan's sister Barbara Culbertson, Richard Sutton, and Donna Culbertson for sharing their memories to make this biography possible. We also honor Snick Higgins, who would have loved to add the countless stories of all their adventures together. The two were the closest of friends, work partners, and falconers for a lifetime. If you want a true taste of Bryan's personality, go read Snick's remembrance.



Nov 1965. Bryan with rabbit eagle caught in field in Hayward, CA



Backyard Hayward, CA

Left: Bryan flew this eagle 2 years.  
Photo by Louis Davis near Milpitas, CA