

A Hundred and One Natural History Books That You Should Read Before You Die

5. Frederick von Hohenstaufen's *The Art of Falconry*

John G.T. Anderson

John G.T. Anderson (jga@coa.edu) is the W.H. Drury professor of Ecology/Natural History at the College of the Atlantic, 105 Eden St. Bar Harbor, ME 04609

Frederick von Hohenstaufen was born into troubled times. By one account, his mother gave birth to him in the public market place in order to convince the skeptical nobility of the legitimacy of the imperial heir.

While this tale is most unlikely, Frederick had to put up with continuous challenges to his authority throughout a tumultuous career. Orphaned as an infant, the future Holy Roman Emperor was raised by the Pope, who was convinced that in Frederick he would have the perfect surrogate to go on Crusade and restore the Kingdom of Jerusalem.

Unfortunately for the Pope, Frederick was much more interested in scholarship and in securing his own power base in Europe than on being a mere Papal tool. When Frederick finally set off for the Holy Land in 1228, he outraged much of the die-hard Catholic world by getting Jerusalem and many of the other holy sites returned to the Christians by a treaty with the Moslem sultan, rather than engaging in the then-standard practice of war and pillage. In the course of the treaty negotiations, he sent the sultan a copy of his remarkable book *The Art of Falconry*, arguably the first real ornithology text, which has survived to the present day.

The Art of Falconry; Being the De Arte Venandi cum Avibus of Frederick II of Hohenstaufen by Frederick the Second of Hohenstaufen, lovingly translated and edited by Casey Wood and F. Marjorie Fyfe (Stanford Univ. Press) is a really wonderful translation with commentary that belongs on the shelf of any natural historian even remotely interested in birds.

In spite of its title, *The Art of Falconry* covers a broad range of avian taxa and contains a wealth of information, some drawn from ancient authors including Aristotle but much from Frederick's personal observation and experimentation. (Even his worst critics acknowledged the emperor's deep scholarship.)

Frederick certainly gives us plenty about falconry itself, but he is interested in what we now call the "life histories" of birds in general, and the book bubbles over with intriguing pieces of information on clutch size, nesting habits, food sources... the list goes on and on. Wood and Fyfe have done a really remarkable job in preserving the book's readability while remaining faithful to the author's structure and goals. One can pick up *The Art of Falconry* (admittedly with some effort; the book is large-dictionary-sized, with over 700 pages!)

and read it cover to cover, or open it just about anywhere, secure in the knowledge that you will find something fascinating to divert you. In either case you will come away with a deeper understanding and appreciation both of birds and the science

of ornithology and also of one of the truly great minds of medieval natural history.

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