Since Sept. 20, Mike Kaczmarowski of the Town of Belgium has been spending much of his free time sitting in a blind, hoping a young peregrine falcon will be lured to his pigeon decoys and caught. Kaczmarowski, a master falconer with 43 years experience, has one of two licenses from the Department of Natural Resources endangered species program to trap a peregrine, which he will use for hunting.

Although still on the endangered list, the species is making a comeback due to successful breeding programs and a ban on DDT.

This is the second year the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has allowed a limited number of peregrines to be trapped by falconers, said Sumner Matteson, the DNR avian ecologist who issued the permits.

This year, 36 peregrines can be caught nationwide, with 12 allowed in the entire Mississippi flyaway, which includes Wisconsin. Only master falconers can apply for a permit in Wisconsin.

The other licensed falconer caught a peregrine near the Mississippi River early in the season, Matteson said.

Kaczmarowski came close to catching two females. One eluded the net when it attempted to take the live pigeon. The other just flew over his head. Technically, only female peregrines are called falcons. The males, which are one-third smaller than the females, are tiercels.

Kaczmarowski has been moving his blind and trapping gear between Lake Michigan beaches and marshes near his home. Two live pigeons are used as bait to catch a peregrine in a net or harness without injuring the pigeons, he said.

Kaczmarowski has until Oct. 20 to complete his quest. If he’s not successful, he will have to wait until the next fall migration for a peregrine, but he can trap other falcons and hawks until Dec. 31.

However, he’s only interested in catching a peregrine or gyrfalcon, which is native to the Arctic and rarely found in Wisconsin.

"I saw two peregrines today, but they weren't hungry," Kaczmarowski said Oct. 10. "I saw hundreds of hawks — red-tailed, goshawks, cooper's hawks and sharp-shinned."

Falconers are allowed to take only a first-year falcon, called a passage falcon. Peregrines fly 8,000 miles to South America for the winter, and many of the young peregrines don't make it.

Only 30% to 40% of first-year falcons survive in the wild, Kaczmarowski said.

"If they survive, they have a good chance of lasting a long time as long as they don't pick up any diseases," he said.

Peregrine falcons are elite hunters that can dive at 200 mph to catch a bird in flight. Kaczmarowski would like to experience that prowess as a team with the bird.

He currently hunts with two raptors — a female gyrfalcon named Bobby Jo and a male gyrfalcon-prairie falcon mix named Tony. Both came from breeders.

Falconry is one of the oldest hunting sports recorded, with early accounts dating back to 2000 BC.

In ancient times, gyrfalcons were reserved for emperors and kings.

Kaczmarowski acquired Bobby Jo from another falconer. He is teaching her to trust him.

He acquired Tony in July when it was 14 days old. The baby hawk, called an eyas, lived in a basket in the family room and thinks it's a human, Kaczmarowski said. Because it is a crossbreed, the bird cannot mate in the wild, he said.

Although Tony now lives in a screened enclosure outdoors next to Bobby Jo, it still occasionally comes indoors and perches on a stand.

The bird is a loud squawker, something a wild hawk would never do, Kaczmarowski said.

"A wild hawk would be silent," he said. "It took after a peregrine recently and started squawking at it. They tussled a little in the air, then the peregrine flew off."

Both falcons have blue beaks and feet, which will turn yellow by age 2, and are mostly white with brown stripes.

Bred hawks and falcons have to be taught to hunt, Kaczmarowski said. He is hoping to have the chance to train a wild peregrine soon.

It will be an round-the-clock effort.

The bird will be hooded and leashed, and Kaczmarowski will carry it around day and night.

"No loud sounds or sharp movements. You get them to trust you, and you're feeding them," he said.

"Once they lose their fear of you, they come back because you're feeding them."

The equipment used in falconry is almost identical to that used in medieval times. A leather hood with a tuft that covers the raptor's head and eyes, leather ties called tresses around the legs and heavy leather gloves to protect hands and arms from sharp talons and beaks.

There is one high-tech addition — a radio transmitter on the tail feathers used for tracking should the hawk not return.

The falcons' diets are controlled and they're allowed to hunt only when they're the right weight. The birds eat what they catch, either immediately or over the next couple days.

Kaczmarowski has trained almost every type of bird of prey to hunt with him, including red-tails, goshawks, sharp-shinned and cooper's hawks, screech owls, great horned owls and kestrels.

And he's loved every bird, he said.

"I think I like them so much because I'm kind of a loner and birds of prey are pretty solitary," he said.

"They have to be excellent athletes to catch the prey they live on."

Kaczmarowski became enthralled with hawks and falconry when he was in the eighth-grade and raised pigeons in South Milwaukee.

"Hawks would always be circling over the chicken coops," he said. "Nobody knew much about them then, so I started reading everything I could find on hawks."

He decided the best way to become a falconer would be to have a baby bird to train. He took a baby screech owl from a nest, something that is illegal today and probably was then, but he was only a kid.

"I was always bringing things home from the woods," he said. "My mother would say, 'What's the boy got now?'"

That early effort led Kaczmarowski to get a falconry license from the DNR.

There are three levels of falconry permits in the state — an apprentice who must be at least 14 and train under a general or master falconer for two years and is allowed to have one kestrel or one red-tailed hawk; a general falconer who has two years experience and can have two raptors; and a master falconer who has five years experience and can have three raptors, but only two from the wild.

Kaczmarowski was also a falconer in Colorado. He quit for a while, but moved back to Wisconsin a year ago and resumed the sport he loves.

“I decided to do what makes me happy,” he said.

What will make him happier is catching a peregrine. Between Sept. 20 and Oct. 10, he went out every day and saw 16 peregrines. Even if he doesn’t capture one, he told Matteson in a recent e-mail, it’s been worth it.

“All I have to show for it so far is some wonderful memories and a terrible cold,” he wrote.

Image Information: A GYRFALCON AND prairie falcon mix named Tony was raised by Mike Kacsmarowski since it was 14 days old and was trained to hunt with him. Photo by Sam Arendt