

Delighted to take up the gauntlet



STEVEN Charlton counts himself a lucky man. Not everyone has the chance to make a living doing what they love, but he has been able to do just that.

The falconer, who is based at Fair Oak Farm, in Mayfield, East Sussex, has long had an affinity with nature.

He said: "I've always been interested in animals and while my lifelong dream of being a vet never came into fruition, this has been just as great for me.

"Here at the farm, customers come along and spend time with us and the birds. They get to see them close up, handle and fly them and enjoy the lovely surroundings of the farm. It's really inspiring to see how people

enjoy it, often from being quite nervous at the start."

Mr Charlton's job takes him all over Kent and Sussex. He often hits the road to hold displays as entertainment, taking a selection of birds of prey to venues to please the crowds and educate them on the birds' role in the country.

"I have an eagle owl, Harris hawks, peregrine falcons, barn owl, tawny owl, kestrel and quite a few others to choose from. Getting out to meet the public has given what we do an added dimension."

Taking care of the 12 birds he owns is more difficult and time-consuming than many might assume.

Mr Charlton said: "It's an extremely precise and exacting thing to do. Husbandry of the birds has to be of the highest standards. It's difficult as – even though they are hardy

creatures, at the top of the food chain – they can fall foul to disease if the conditions aren't kept just right.

"You have to be very exacting in inspecting their surroundings. You have to be on your toes all the time. The actual care of the birds is a science in itself, you really have to know what you are doing, which may surprise people. The job is 95 per cent caring for the birds and five per cent flying them. When birds get ill they don't show it as they're wild animals and they hide it until the last minute when they will fall over. It's learning to notice and look out for the signs and build up a relationship with them."

Mr Charlton said that despite wanting to become a vet when he was younger, more than a decade with his birds has been an enjoyable time. "I'm now in my 14th year as a falconer, and it's something I love doing.

It's like I have found a calling in life. It seemed like a natural progression and I got totally hooked," he said.

"My main passion is the demonstrations we do. The medieval ones, where we dress up and create a theme, are especially fun.

"It's great when you have the birds performing well and a real buzz to be out there. That's been part of what we do for seven years and it's still as much fun as when we started. It's great to be able to educate people while enjoying what you are doing.

"People are often unintentionally misinformed about birds of prey and it's interesting to be able to dispel a few myths and correct them and educate them.

"Birds of prey have quite a tough life in general, they are often unjustly seen as being bad or unwelcome but that's quite the opposite in reality."