

# Opportunity *Knocks*

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**L**et it not be said that being a falconer for so many years at least some of what our raptors are about will rub off on you. I must say that some of my most enjoyable experiences in this sport have happened as a matter of opportunism, being in the right place at the right time. In late May of 2005 it came knocking again.



*Aplomado falcon, photo by Rob Palmer*

### Introduction

**M**y breeding season had not gone well at all and I was kicking back without an eyes to deal with in many years. I was contemplating exactly what I would do for the fall season. We seemed to be coming out of a long five to six year drought in New Mexico, which was a welcome change. It had been hard on everything, both raptors and prey had suffered dramatic declines. Throw in the fact that West Nile Virus had breezed through during the same period and the picture gets pretty ugly. Fortunately I did have birds that were intermewing that I could take up and fly after several seasons of being breeders. But I wasn't quite sure what the season would bring because we get the majority of our annual precipitation during the monsoon, which normally begins in early July and runs through early September. While we had been getting good rains during a time of year we normally wouldn't, it was no guarantee that the monsoonal rains would be good. I knew that the dove numbers would be adequate, but would there be ponds for the doves and later, the ducks? Would there be any rabbits left for them to have found each other to produce numbers to bother hunting? And how about the quail? Surely Gambel quail would be fine. But usually they are too close to houses to hunt effectively and they love dense cover. But what of the scaled quail? Would they be recovering as well?

**M**y thoughts were gearing toward something to hunt the smaller end of the prey range. I suspected that these prey items would make the quickest comeback. I did have my barbary x teita tiercel that I could try again, but his first two seasons had been very short due to lack of even decent dove numbers to continue. I would have to wait and see how things looked before I made the decision to pick him up again. He was also close to becoming a semen donor, so I was trying hard to find a reason to keep him in the chamber. And, of course, there was the old merlin that I suspected

was laid out of eggs at seven years old, and she would love to get back on the wing. But she wouldn't be ready for months yet due to the molt.

But, on May 26th, I got a call from my friend (and co-conspirator), Bill Meeker, down in El Paso, Texas. Bill and I talk every week whether we need to or not just because we like to use each other as a sounding board for any ideas we may have about birds, training, health, breeding, or the future. It tends to lead to lengthy conversations. This one was to be no different. This was to be a sounding board call.

In recent years Bill had been spending part of his valuable time talking to Jim Nelson up in Washington state. Jim and few others in his cooperative had been trying to produce Peruvian aplomado falcons that had been imported a few years earlier. And although they had begun to have some breeding success, they were in need of more experience in some of the finer points of incubation strategies and rearing young from day one. Because of Bill's advice and their determination, production was increasing. I believe that Jim was genuinely happy for the support as he really believes in the aplomado for falconry purposes in the U.S. In the process of this joint participation, Jim had helped Bill to eventually acquire some imprint aplomados out of his project, but Bill had not yet flown one or even seen one flown. He knew that I had a few scattered opportunities to see aplomados in the wild here in southern New Mexico, and we had many discussions about the sightings. For obvious reasons, there has been very limited information on how this bird hunts. What is its main prey, based on wild sightings or the writings of Harry McElroy based on his captive birds he had flown south of the border in the past? Jim Nelson's own writings explores the potential past of this species as a falconry bird when it may have been brought back to Spain during the time of the Conquistadors under the name of "alethe." Both Jim and

Harry had been flying aplomados with success on feral pigeons and quail respectively.

### Comparisons

**T**o be honest, I had some desire to try the aplomado, but I wasn't pining for one. The few instances where I had seen wild aplomados, I had not been overly impressed. One had been a young female that came in to my hack area in July a few years ago when I was investigating the potential of teita falcons for falconry. Eventually this female came to play with the teitas and afforded me some very close observation of how it flew. These two species represent the two extremes of what the falconidae can produce. The teita falcon is one of the heaviest wing loaded of all the falcons. The aplomado falcon is one of the lightest. A female teita falcon has a flying weight of about 300 grams, as does the aplomado female. But the aplomado appeared to be twice as large! The teita's wing beat was rapid and choppy as this was necessary for it to remain airborne. The aplomado was less rapid and graceful with sweeping strokes. Both species have been difficult to place with other groups of falcons, but with both the hobby is mentioned. I have not seen a hobby fly, but I have seen film footage and read extensively on all the falcons worldwide. The aplomado seems to have a flight style that is at least comparable to the hobby. The teita seems to be closer aligned to the peregrine falcon super species complex. I was later to learn that the teita resembles the peregrine falcon and even the barbary falcons in many ways, including voice, courtship behavior, egg laying, clutch size, etc. But the aplomado sounds nothing like the peregrine. In fact, it doesn't sound much like anything I have ever heard. I have yet to hear the voice of the hobby, so perhaps there is a hint there. I have not observed aplomado courtship yet, and I imagine their egg laying pattern is distinct. The aplomado apparently can bring off more than one clutch of eggs per season. But the hobby is not known for its guerilla tactics when it comes

to cover, and the aplomado departs significantly from the hobbies with this behavior.

And this was one area that I was interested in this species. In this regard, the aplomado is known to be a bit more like a merlin and that can be useful in some of the areas where I find game. And one instance of wild aplomado interaction with one of my female merlins did impress me, when a passage female aplomado drove my still molting female Richardson's merlin into a bush. As I saw them coming my way, I was first thinking that my merlin was on a mourning dove, and when they put in I was all but convinced I would pick her up on a kill. But as I made my way through the mesquite thicket I was surprised to see an aplomado jump up on mesquite in front of me. At that point I became concerned for my merlin and began searching for her with the telemetry. The closer I got to the signal the closer I got to the sitting aplomado. Eventually I got close enough and she moved off. I found the merlin after another couple of minutes and she was sitting 'frozen' inside a very dense mesquite near the trunk. The look on her face could have been interpreted as "What the hell was that?" As I mentioned, the merlin was still molting her outer primaries which were only about halfway down at best, and she had only been flown a few times that early in the season. But to be fair to the aplomado, I have to say I was impressed. The difference between the July youngster and the September passager was obvious enough.

**W**hen Bill mentioned that he wanted to get an aplomado into the hands of someone that would fly it hard and who also had experience with other small falcons and could make a justified assessment of their capabilities for the falconry community, I think he knew who he was calling. I've known Bill a long time and I know he likes to play poker with guys when assessing their interest in something. I told him that it would be a good idea to get a bird out there because he

would be producing some of his own very soon and the bird needed some public relations to stimulate interest in this little known species in the U.S. That was when the poker game began. He threw out a

the female would rejoin the chase in the brush. To me, the tiercel seemed the better sex for falconry as I know for sure that I wasn't going to be intimidating anything out of the air even on my best day.



*Young aplomado falcon, photo by Pete Jungemann*

few names of falconers that I know that live in the warmer areas of the country and if I would contact them or had their phone numbers. Some of these names put me on edge and I suspect he knew that. I perked up a bit and told him that I had been thinking about what to fly this season as we came out of the drought. I knew some prey would be around, but perhaps not enough of the larger species to make a full recovery this season. He knew I wasn't a big aplomado fan, but he also knew he had me at that point.

He was suggesting a tiercel as there had been minimal discussion about them. From what I had read, aplomados were frequently together in pairs in the wild and the tiercel had the role in the pair of being the one to put prey into cover. He would generally remain aloft or perched above the intimidated quarry while the female would be the one to go into cover to force prey out or kill it there. If it got forced out, the tiercel would kill it or intimidate it in again, where

But I felt sure I could rout prey out of cover once it was pinned. I suggested to Bill that he let me test-drive a tiercel for him. He acted so surprised. I do have to discover his 'tell!'

#### **The Aplomado's Arrival**

**T**hree days later we were at the airport at 10 p.m. waiting anxiously for the cargo to be unloaded. It was all happening so fast I barely had time to anticipate what was to come. As I am an imprint specialist, I was expecting a downy, so when the crate arrived, the paperwork was signed and stamped and we could open the door, we found the crate was divided with two already standing large downies. That part didn't thrill me too much as it was clear they could get around quite well. But opportunists can't be particular by definition. As the chicks moved forward several things became more apparent. The down color was the first thing that caught my eye. It was dark sooty, unusual for most falcons I was acquainted with. The next

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thing was the overall build. Since the wings and tail feathers were only out about half an inch at best, the look of the bird was hilarious. They looked like fuzzy, blackish softballs on thin sticks with decent sized feet that were long toed but not thick. The talons were thin and hook-like and immediately the name for the



*Young aplomado falcon, photo by Pete Jungemann*

tiercel came to mind. I called him "Hooker," not so much because he had legs from here to there, but because of the claws looking like inverted treble hooks.

There was some question as to the sex of the smaller, younger chick because the eggshell analysis came back calling both females, but it was definitely a tiercel when compared to the other one that Bill was keeping for his breeding effort. At the age they were shipped, they would not be growing much more in height or weight; it would mostly be feather growth from this point onward. Bill was a bit concerned, but I knew it was a pair for sure. Later I was to discover that he seemed to be an exceptionally large footed tiercel according to Jim, and may

have just been a big tiercel overall when comparing flying weights to other tiercels flown by Harry and others.

I thanked Bill for the opportunity and loaded Hooker in another crate for the hour trip home. Once I got him home I transferred him to a rubberized tub with a towel and gave him a late meal since he hadn't eaten since around noon. He had eaten a good bit of a sparrow that was in the crate, but he was hungry nonetheless. I provided him with ground quail which he consumed in an unhurried fashion, and we both went to bed.

The next morning I watched for a casting which came around 8 a.m.. I noticed that his mutes were still black and white, indicating that he wasn't all that hungry, but I offered him food anyway. He ate some but was more interested in looking around at the new place. He would 'foot' the towel and begin wing flapping. He was very steady on his feet even though he was very bobtailed. I surmised that he would become difficult to contain very soon, and I was not wrong about this fact. Raising Hooker was not unlike raising an accipiter. He was very agile on his feet and in only a few days was able to jump/fly to places he would not have been able to reach if he were any other falcon except perhaps a merlin.

Hood and lure training began in earnest. Making Hooker to the lure was pretty easy, although his appetite did make this a little difficult. He would eat so little and even then was rarely hungry. At this age I would say that although he was a little larger than a female Richardson's merlin, he was eating about half as much. The equivalent of three sparrows a day seemed to be adequate for him, and even then he was still muting black and white in the morning (12 hours later). I assumed that such a light wing loaded bird might have a more

efficient metabolism. His weight during this period was averaging between 250-280 grams. Later I was to discover that feeling his keel like I could with other falcons simply did not convey very much information to me about his fitness. I don't know why this should be except to say that their build is so odd and the distribution of their weight throughout their body is more even. With heavy wing loaded birds such as the barbary, teita, peregrine and even the merlin and merlin hybrids, most of the weight is in the pectoral mass that it takes to drive the engine in such birds. The aplomado simply does not have this sort of pectoral mass. Hooding Hooker was a bit different. He was so agile that getting the hood on was trying and difficult. Once you slipped it over his head, he was fine with it being there for a short period. As the braces are not drawn at this stage, it was all a matter of him standing up to the oncoming hood. But rarely would he do this; after all, he could run away now. While I continued to get the hood on when I could, I didn't push it hard as I figured I might have an easier time once I could get him on the fist and restrain him from running.

It wasn't long before I was looking to tie Hooker down. He was getting into places he shouldn't and it was only a matter of time before he broke something with his jumping flights to tables and shelves and lamps. He was quick to learn to bate from the block and return to the perch; about three attempts, I believe, was all it took. At night he was released in a spare bathroom that would become his mew until his feather growth was near completion. It was very hot by this time and I felt it would decrease the stress on his final days of growth as long as he could remain semi-cool. During this period I began offering whole food items and sometimes small live birds for him to kill. He killed and ate such offerings, but was playing pretty hard with the baggies. This is not uncommon for falcons at this stage.

### Flying The Aplomado Falcon

I normally begin an extended tame hawk about this time. While I am well aware of the usefulness of tame hawk with falcons, particularly with birds with heavy wing loading, as they need to develop so much more than just strength and agility, they need to develop stamina as well. Learning how to use the air to their advantage is the big plus of tame hawk for these other falcons. But with Hooker I could already see that he had the agility and strength on some level, but lacked stamina. Since aplomados are principally used as fist falcons, there did not seem to be much need for an extended tame hawk like I had been used to performing in the past. Hooker's tame hawk ended up being long walks with him on the fist, exposing him to various types of terrain and any prey that he might be expect to chase. As we walked he was unrestrained and would frequently set off after doves and sparrows, but generally they would elude him in the air or bushes. He would return to the fist without being called or needing a tidbit. Bagging him on prey seemed unnecessary as he was already very interested in chasing everything. By the eighth outing he took a wild sparrow that was about his same development stage. He did have to deal with the irate mother getting involved, trying to distract him from her youngster, but he was undeterred and managed to catch the young bird anyway. It went pretty much as expected. The young bird flushed and Hooker was in pursuit so quickly that it intimidated into a bush. He hovered over the bush for a few seconds and repeated this trick several more times as I tried to eradicate the prey from each successive bush. Eventually he even got inside the bushes, trying to snatch the bird from the branches, but it would slip away to the next bush. But he stuck with it, making little peeps when he could see it but couldn't reach it. Finally it simply was too far to the next bush and Hooker scored it.

This sort of flying continued for the weeks, but with the flights going

further away to bushes or further into the sky. He appeared to be tireless about chasing prey and it was not uncommon to spend upwards of two hours in the field flushing prey periodically for him to chase. Eventually I came to understand what he wanted most, a bird that would flush by going skyward or a larger slower bird with bushes too far apart to afford it protection. After a few kills I eventually saw



*Lure training a young aplomado falcon, photo by Pete Jungemann*

some amazing flights with him going nearly vertical to chase a bird flushed out of a bush. One flight had him chase a sparrow out of a bush, fly past two other bushes, then around a thin bush three times, then back to the original bush where it put in. I flushed with Hooker standing on a flimsy branch about halfway up and on the outside. The sparrow went straight up through the center of the bush and Hooker pursued it nearly vertically to about 80 feet where he simply flipped his feet over his head and snatched it from the sky. He floated down, circling me a couple of times before he opted to take it to the truck that wasn't far away. The roof of the truck was the only open area in that immediate area. He was a little covetous of his prey so I let him eat a good bit before offering some other food which he finally brought his sparrow to the fist for extra food. He was good that way about returning to the fist with certain prey items during this period, particularly if they were small. I got

video of that particular flight and watching it in slow motion really shows how intricate the movements are with this agile falcon!

As time progressed, he began to show amazing agility on various quarries, particularly small quarry, but he was getting more and more interested in mourning doves that were flying all around during the predawn morning. And mourning doves are a power quarry demanding a falcon with speed and stamina. A typical dove flight would have Hooker on the fist and some single dove either on the ground flushed ahead of us, or one would come clipping by low. Either way, Hooker would launch a quick attack and the dove would either rise or put in. If it put in, it was generally a dead dove. Most would rise and he would climb hard on them. At about 100 yards and perhaps 200 feet up, the dove might feel the pressure and try to get down. Hooker would then stoop using sweeping pendulum swoops or twisting falling snatches trying to grab the dove. Eventually the dove would bail out into a bush where he would take it fairly easily unless he got into a position where he got tangled in the bush and the dove could bolt out the opposite side.

Although Hooker seemed much more intent to fly in the evenings, and several Mexican and Peruvian falconers mentioned that aplomados fly much more determined late in the day, I wasn't ready to switch him to evenings as he was already racing around chasing about everything in sight. I was afraid he would get on a long dove flight and end up owl food. We don't have all that many great horned owls in the areas I typically fly as it is basically treeless, but they are there and I have seen them very brazenly come in on my merlin's feeding on the fist at twilight. So I was prepared to accept the lesser of two evils. Not to say morning was much better in the regard to raptors. There were kestrels for him to get involved with and sometimes as many as four would be trying to drive him out of the area during the early days. Swainson's hawks

were also common and some of these were a bit aggressive. There was also a tiercel anatum peregrine that would frequent the area as his nest was nearby and I'm sure he was hustling to keep his young fed. Hooker's first altercation with the peregrine was plenty exciting but I have learned that peregrines frequently aren't as bad as they could be, and he eluded the peregrine quite handily by evading the first pass and climbing at such a steep angle that the peregrine could not hope to follow. After the peregrine resumed its course off to the east and Hooker was up so high I could hardly see him anymore, he simply folded up and came back to the fist. This was typical of most altercations with larger raptors with the exception of Swainson's hawks and later with prairie falcons. For some reason Hooker really liked to bother Swainson's and would generally be the aggressor. Occasionally a male Swainson's would see him coming and would meet him head on. These males seemed determined to drive the aplomado from their territories and Hooker never seemed to try very hard to get out of their way. At such times Hooker would be driven off about a mile and I suppose took the hint and simply drifted into other areas.

#### The Aplomado Is Not Immune To Telemetry Drills

It was during one such altercation that we had our first real telemetry drill. It was in mid-September and we had our first windy day in months. I was well away from our normal stomping grounds searching for a covey of scaled quail. Almost immediately when we began walking Hooker spied a Swainson's hawk and launched an assault. But this Swainson's was not in the mood and met him midway and began its own assault. The aggressor position

changed several times over the ensuing minutes, but eventually the Swainson's seemed to gain control and was forcing Hooker away. My area is not particularly well traveled and roads can sometimes be hard to find into certain areas. The area where Hooker was going was one of those areas. With a low mountain range in the background, I was unsure what was happening as both birds were low on the horizon. I waited for quite sometime for him

Hooker would generally be ahead of me a few miles and up very high as it was approaching midday. Eventually he went down into an area where the road in was blocked by a locked gate. I knew another road on the other side that might get me closer but I had to swing well south to access it, which meant I would lose the signal for some period of time. I had little choice since I was sure he would continue along his course and eventually get into the

area beyond this locked parcel. After about a half hour without a signal and backtracking to the opposite edge of the parcel, I got his signal down in the middle of the parcel. This is not ideal because the parcel was several miles across and a hike was likely to be disastrous if I was on foot and he again went airborne. I knew of another access point to the parcel and perhaps that gate was unlocked. I drove in that direction and eventually got to the gate. It was locked of course. Since I was in between the three locked gates I opted for returning to the first gate because a large transmission line ran through the parcel from that side and I suspected he was actually sitting on that pole line, but too far out for me to see him. I had hopes that he might return along the same pole line as it

appeared that his course had been following that line generally. He had never been exposed to poles of any sort where we normally fly and I had no idea if he was interested in them or not. Back at the next gate I waited most of the afternoon with little or no movement by Hooker. He may have scored a kill and had fed up and now was simply loafing around for the rest of the day. The problem was that I had about 12 falcons at home waiting for their evening meal and I couldn't be in two places at the same time. Reluctantly I had to leave Hooker

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to come back as I monitored the telemetry to give some idea of his general whereabouts. After about a half hour, it was clear he was going to go over the narrow ridge in the background and the road through a pass was a few miles south of me. I packed up and cruised down that way listening to the telemetry with the omni antenna mounted on the roof.

Periodically I would have to stop to determine direction because an omni is useful to let you know the transmitter is close but not what direction. When I would check

where he was at about 5:30 p.m. I was definitely aware of how Hooker could be at home in the last hour of light and I imagined he would really be moving around in the next couple of hours. I crossed my fingers that he wouldn't go far and would not be owl bait by morning.

**T**he next morning I was out before light at the same spot and there was no signal! It was not the end of the world, but definitely made for a major complication. The question was, was he still out where he had been but simply was now so low to the ground that his signal could not be received? Had he disabled the transmitter? Or was his transmitter in a developing owl pellet? Or was he no longer in that area? And if not, which way would he have gone? Not knowing that much about this species, I had to make some guesses. I guessed he was down low but perhaps not in the same immediate area. The area behind the direction he had been was sort of foothill terrain with larger mountains to the right. To the left and toward me was flat grassland with scattered yuccas and mesquite thickets. I speculated that the second area would be more to the liking of any falcon and I proceeded to drive and inspect the area. After several hours I still had no signal and I had checked a vast area. It was now around 1 p.m. and I figured that if he was around that immediate area he would have gotten high enough in the air at some point that I would have picked up his signal. It was a bit windier than the previous day and perhaps that was keeping him down low. Regardless, I opted to return home, feed the other birds early and be out in the area later in the day when he might be more active.

I returned around 5 p.m. and had planned to drive well past

where the flight initially began and begin working the area about 25 miles west where he was last known to be. For some reason I told myself that it was silly to go by the area where we began since it was closer and what if, like most young falcons, he had returned to where we had begun the flight. I know it was a great distance between the two points, but I had many falcons do this same thing in the past and went further than 25 miles. But

the hill on the other side and past the mesquite thicket and checked again. The signal was definitely not in the bottomland. Up the hill I went with the omni on and the signal gained as I climbed. I came around a bend in the road between two hills and saw the familiar dike of a pond I knew was in that area. I had checked the pond a few days earlier but it was mostly mud. As I crested the dike, I found that it was now full of water from one of the late

monsoonal storms that had gone through the area a few nights ago. There were many swallows working the surface collecting insects and water. And on the opposite shore was a familiar silhouette of an aplomado. Of course it was Hooker. I was elated to see him, but he was somewhat less happy to see me. He wouldn't jump five feet for a tidbit at first, but eventually he did. I leashed him up and gave him a little to eat as I wanted to see what being out had done to his weight to determine if he had scored the day before or perhaps earlier that day. After I got him home I found that he likely had not scored either day. It was good to know that, like other falcons, he would return from long distances. Drawing a simple line between the two points made it a 50+ mile round trip, but clearly there was

more distance involved as he didn't go straight. It also let me know that he was in pretty good physical condition at this point.

Overall I would say I had considerably less telemetry drills with the aplomado than other falcons I have flown here. In the field guides on birds, they mention that aplomados may have home territory sizes of only a square mile, so I assume they are home bodies.

#### **Aplomado Behavior and Flying Weight**

At this point he had been flying for many months and 10 head to

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would an aplomado? I drove to the place where I had parked where the Swainson's had come in. And, of course, there was the delightful sound of the transmitter beeping away! It was actually very close but I wasn't sure if he was down in low area with heavy mesquite or up on the hillside beyond. I took a two-track road that went through the area and once down in the bottom I didn't get a good signal. The mesquite was quite heavy in that area, so perhaps the signal wasn't clearing it too well. I proceeded up the road until I was about halfway up

show for his effort. I had suspected all along that I was flying him high, but I wanted him strong because I knew what lay ahead of us: prairie falcons, Cooper's hawks, redtail hawks, winter doves, snipe and bewildering coveys of scaled quail. I should mention that about this time that I began to cease hooding him. He had become resistant to hooding in the previous month. He would dodge it to the extent that eventually I would have to cast him to get it on. He was not particularly put off by this action, and would ride well to the field. I think that initially this was due to his excitement of getting to go fly and he simply didn't want to be bothered by this step. But eventually it got to where he didn't want it to go on after eating either. And it was driving a wedge between us. He did adapt quite easily to a travel box, although he was more active moving around in there when we would be heading to the field than I would have liked. He didn't damage feathers so I continued to use the box.

**A**plomados are pretty laid back falcons, but they do have the side of them that has allowed them to somewhat interject themselves into the accipiter niche and that doesn't come without a price. They can be very quick to bate and be evasive about things they don't like. They are, by no means, anywhere near as batey as a sharp-shinned hawk or goshawk, probably being closer to a Cooper's hawk in their acceptance of things associated with man. Even then, they are not as difficult as a Cooper's and I found him to be very easy to train and handle in most instances. I would probably rate his personality to be up there with a tiercel Harris's hawk. The aplomado seems to genuinely want to be near you, and I have little

doubt that some of the difficulties I had were weight related. If he was lower perhaps he would be more tolerant? I was in contact with both Harry and Jim during this period. Harry said they were hard to hood which was in agreement with some of the Mexican and Peruvian falconers. Jim said they weren't hard to hood which was in agreement with other falconers south of our border. Some of this may depend on whether it was a passage bird,

field and often would use the head of a complete stranger as a perch after an unsuccessful flight, but he is not fond of dogs or cats.

**T**here has been some controversy about the speed of the aplomado. Harry suggested that they were faster than merlins. I found that hard to believe as I have flown many merlins in my falconry career and they give the appearance of being very swift indeed. When I look at what the aplomado

brings to the table, they have soft feathers that are very long on both the wings and tail. They are also much bigger-feathered with the tail feathers looking like they belong to much larger falcon. If I was to have flown Hooker at the weights that Harry was flying his, that would put Hooker in the flying weight range of female Richardson's merlins, but with twice the feather length and at least a third wider. When looking at a merlin you see essentially a chest with long legs and perhaps a longish tail. But with an aplomado you see wings, tail and feet/legs. The chest is not a prominent feature. It is difficult to see how something with such a small engine and large props can be as fast as the merlin. Perhaps the distinction should be made as to what is the difference between "quick"

and "fast." To me a bird is quick when it can accelerate and reach top speed in a hasty fashion. A bird is fast when it can get going fairly speedily but does not reach full speed until some distance from its starting point. What I observed with the aplomado was that it depended on gaining advantage by quickly getting on quarry and forcing it to relent or seek cover in the shortest distance possible. This should be very effective on quail as quail do get rattled very quickly, as can doves. But while observing Hooker on doves, he would frequently pin

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a chamber bird, or imprint. To my knowledge, I was flying the only imprint at the time. Harry was flying two tiercels that with backpack mounted transmitters were flying around 210-230 grams, considerably below Hooker's flying weight of around 270. Jim was flying a female that was flying around 300-310 grams I believe. Harry was in a different position in that he was expecting his birds to accept dogs and traveling by mule to the field. I was not expecting that sort of thing. Hooker had always been very friendly with other falconers in the

them very fast and could easily force them in after a climbing tail chase, provided he could close enough to them. Many doves simply pulled away into the sky. A female merlin can perform almost as well at the beginning, but if the dove begins to pull away the merlin grabs a gear that the aplomado doesn't seem to have and hauls up behind the dove a second time much farther out and forces it down. Hooker would catch doves within a hundred yards or so, or not all. He also showed, on occasion, that perhaps he could be flown in traditional 'waiting on' style as he could go up in the sky and just cruise around quite easily. And, on a few occasions, I had him in a high position overhead when he had missed a dove on a long climb and was coming back and another dove was flushed beneath him. He would stoop these doves, although it didn't quite look like a falcon stoop as it was so controlled. In fact, he would use his height to gain speed on the dove, fully intending to intimidate it in before it got up to its best speed. This did work a couple of times.

I must admit, the accipiter side of the aplomado is what appealed to me most. He was generally very eager to chase and his flash attack was very nice and generally consistent. Taking him to any field that might have an abundance of game was simple. He would ride the fist as I walked, and likely would love to use a "T" perch that could be carried. Anything that would flush within very close proximity would be chased very hard, which lead to some annoying incidents on jackrabbits and cottontails, but it was near perfect for quail. Although we never caught a quail, he was getting close when we had to stop early. I will discuss the reason for the early stopping below. His

ability to see quail was amazing. I would be walking along in an open grassy area near the edge of some mixed covey of mesquite, yucca, tar bush and scattered salt bush. He would be looking way off and away he would go, sometimes hundreds of yards, at which point I would see him hover a great deal before alighting on top of a small bush. I would hustle over there and peer into this nothing of a bush and see nothing. I would give it a kick and

than that, so I just kept showing him quail. I'm sure he would have taken them easily though as he was so quick and maneuverable.

### The Two Scourges of the Prairie

Now, before I paint too rosy of a picture, let me take the rose colored glasses off for a moment. Earlier I mentioned that our principal time for rain is in mid-to-late summer. The rains were kind and even a bit over-generous in some areas. This

did provide us with ponds for doves and quail to use to keep prey local. It even afforded me opportunities to see what Hooker would do with ducks and snipe. Both of these he chased very hard, but the former he didn't want to grab early on and the latter were sporadic and he looked as though he could catch them if the slip was close enough to start with. I know he found the snipe very enticing and would take a 60-foot flush on any snipe and rise high into the air on its tail before losing it. Perhaps next season he'll do better. Getting back to the rains, they set into motion something that falconers flying this species will have to deal with at some point. That is the dreaded grasshopper, scourge of the prairie, whose numbers are legion! Most falconers might have to deal with

them at the beginning of flying an aplomado in its first season, but when I started Hooker, they were not around at all. They simply had not been produced yet, so Hooker started off on birds, and brilliantly at that. But once the hoppers got some size and began to fly...well, things began to change.

The insect horde didn't come on until mid-October, but when they did you couldn't take a step without flushing one. It is not to say that even merlins don't do this sort of thing and if you are ever flying a



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out would come anywhere from four to ten quail, which he would pursue one very quickly and put it in in under 10 yards. As I would walk to him for the reflush, more quail would be blowing out all over the place. At my approach the quail he had pinned might try to run, but he would be on it and hovering to and fro holding it down. He could have pounced easily but just didn't seem to have the confidence yet. I asked Harry about this and he said most tiercels he had in the past would not grab their first quail until December. This was earlier

merlin at the time of day when grasshoppers are flying, they will switch and take them. I began having to concentrate my flying to the very earliest bit of light in the morning when it was maybe still a bit chilly to keep the hoppers lethargic. Even then, Hooker could see one on a blade of grass at quite some distance and just zip over and take it. Even with a merlin, hopper flights are not entertaining at all as merlins typically zip through them and if they miss, they outrun and bank and run through them again in typical falcon pendulum style. Not the aplomado. The aplomado can stop on a dime, stall, regain speed, stop again, turn, stall, hover, regain speed. These were aerial chases not unlike what you might see a flycatcher or bat perform when chasing a moth. I tried to look on the bright side telling myself that he was learning great skills in maneuverability and footing. But after six weeks of it, I was glad when we finally got one of the latest freezes I have experienced in these parts. I also found that I had to worm Hooker frequently during this period as some worms spend part of their life cycle in a grasshopper. Keep an eye on the mutes if you begin to take grasshoppers regularly.

Earlier I eluded to the fact that the season was cut short. Hooker had this thing for chasing other raptors which began first with kestrels, then with Swainson's hawks, and once those were gone or much fewer in number, they were replaced by very plentiful harriers. Also, it was getting closer and closer to spring, which comes early to my part of the world and native aplomados are known to breed in February around here. I began to notice that much of his chases on harriers seemed to be taking a different tone toward the end of

November. He would chase them hard, but only a certain distance before returning to rout off another interloper. I also noticed that about this time his cere and lores were becoming very bright yellow with each passing day. He was also starting to molt in scattered feathers on his head, which were giving him an adult appearance. I knew from experience with other imprints that he was becoming sexually active and it would only be a matter

encountered. He still could outmaneuver and out-climb them, so I wasn't too worried. One day his luck ran out. It began with him pinning some doves in a mesquite thicket. His hovering drew the attention of couple of harriers that came flying in hastily. He ran one off and was working on the other when suddenly a tiercel prairie falcon was joining in and had Hooker in the cross hairs of its sight. Hooker was doing fine showing the prairie that aplomados were no pushovers when it came to flying. The tiercel prairie looked a bit sad next to Hooker's moves. But then my heart sank a little as a female prairie came in on him as well. Hooker was double-timing trying to avoid them both, but eventually I saw where contact was made with the two tiercels and they were tumbling the 100 feet to the ground. As they neared the ground Hooker was able to break loose and stall just above the creosote bushes, but the prairie hit the earth. Hooker bolted and evaded the female and began his tail climbing stratosphere run, leaving the prairies to each other as the female began to focus on the once again airborne prairie tiercel. They fled the immediate area rather quickly and once gone Hooker stooped to a mesquite within 30 feet of me. He was a little rattled but nothing to worry about. I looked him over, didn't see any blood or punctures in his feet and legs. So he appeared none the worse for wear. Understand this though...it took two prairies in tandem to get my little guy in a jam!

The next day I didn't fly him as it was very windy. I just fed him and he was acting fine. The following day we were out in the same area chasing doves. He seemed a bit slower than normal though. I thought he

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of time before I would have to put him up for breeding. Usually I have had to do this by early January with barbaries for the same reason, so I knew my days were numbered. I was satisfied that Hooker had learned a great deal, had scored 16 head without having to push him hard at all. And I still had him, which was a big plus.

But as time progressed he began to meet his first prairie falcons. As is typical with that other scourge of the prairie, his interactions with them tended to be a bit more scary than with any other raptor we



*Plomado falcon, photo by Rob Palmer*

might be sore from the interactions with the prairies, so I kept hoping to loosen him up a bit. After a few more minutes, I was convinced it was something more than stiffness. I got him on the fist and while I was feeding him I felt around his upper thighs, his back and finally his breast. Under the feathers about mid-body I felt rough feathers and with more probing I found an opening in his skin. Feeling around more I found that the opening was a tear in the skin about the size of silver dollar at least. Off to the veterinarian we went. Hooker got gassed and I was allowed to watch as the vet inspected him closely and found that the tear I found was the only injury and it wasn't deep but the hole was sizable. Ten stitches and a few minutes later, he was awake on the fist. The vet said to let him heal for about three weeks and he'd be good as new. I was thankful of course, but this was mid-December...three weeks from then would be January and I would have put him up for breeding anyway. Besides, he would be a bit out of shape by three weeks and I'm sure the prairies would be aching for a rematch with a less capable aplomado. I decided that next season would be soon enough to continue my exploration of the capabilities of these falcons.

**I**n the final analysis, I had a fun time flying this falcon. The ease of getting into hunting was a welcome break from the trials and tribulations of start-

ing traditional 'waiting on' style longwings. He was very responsive and easily trained. It did take some getting used to his style and his capabilities, but once understood he was found to be delightfully versatile. Even out in the field he remained playful and fun to be around. And yet, when he turned his eye toward quarry he had a relentless side that did not want to give up. Their quickness and agility has to be seen to be believed, but they retain an elegance to their flights that was unexpected. They are one of the more beautifully colored and patterned falcons and with their long legs, wings and tail they sort of have a statuesque quality when perched. Their personality is forgiving and their desire to be with you is an added plus. I imagine that this bird will eventually have quite a following, particularly to those that like what accipiters can do, but just can't handle what accipiters are. And while the aplomado has a strong crepuscular behavioral pattern (early and late parts of the day), they are by no means limited to it. I would try to shy away from the very late day flying with them as I can imagine that it would be a matter of time before disaster would strike via loss or great-horn owl attacks. Give yourself some plenty of time if flying in the evening and you probably should call it quits a half-hour before sunset, whether you have killed or not. And while grasshoppers will likely get in your way at some point, for most of us

they will be just a passing nuisance that will be overcome with time. I am told that the adults are not nearly so interested in grasshoppers, it appears to be a first year problem and is just part of their development. Don't let it discourage you. This falcon is a game hawk!

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