

Bird Abatement

Using Falconry Techniques
and the
Aplomado Falcon



Author and aplomado falcon.

**Photos and text by
Bob Payne**



Tercel aplomado with magpie.

The dictionary states *abatement* is the action of reducing, suppressing or lessening. I am fairly new to abatement, as are most of us; the things that I will share with you are things that I observed as a falconer practicing abatement for Jim Lotts and Jim Nelson at American Bird Abatement Service (ABAS) in Washington State. Abatement is implemented differently, depending on the individual and circumstance: lure flying by some, somewhat of a tame hack by others, and hunting by others still. Some combine flying falcons and hawks, with noise cannons and firearms. It's all much the same as skinning cats—to rid the area of birds—simple as that.

Using Peruvian aplomado falcons for avian agricultural abatement is the perfect line-up of predator and prey. There is nowhere for pest birds to hide from the aplomado; in wringing flight or rat hunt in cover, the aplomado reins supreme.



Aplomado and berry harvest.

I was fortunate to fly four falcons from ABAS and Flint Hills Falcons, part of the Washington State breeding cooperative. These were young, fairly inexperienced birds, not seasoned falconry birds. I must say it worked out well for all parties. The pest birds were abated from the farmer's fields without the danger of using cannons, poisons and firearms. The young falcons were allowed to chase prey, get plenty of exercise, vitamin D, and quality time interacting with others of their kind in the great outdoors.

Washington State has a wonderful mixed bag of avian quarry for falconry including quail, pheasants, partridge, ducks, chucker, dove and a plethora of smaller pest species. All these birds frequent the blueberry fields and are legal to abate.

Aplomados were successful at chasing each of these species from

the berries. That being the up side of abatement, the down side would be that I was restricted to releasing the falcons and pursuing prey only on what would be considered a very small acreage. One hundred and fifteen acres was the total size of the grounds I was responsible for during the duration of the harvest season. Flights that extended outside this area would be terminated when the prey skyed out or went to cover. Without a follow up flush the falcon(s) would generally return to the falconer.

All students of nature realize what happens when hunting the same 100 acres every day. Within days the game birds were scarce (if found at all), and all bird numbers soon diminished. Magpie, starling, robin, dove and the smaller birds still found food and refuge under the canopy of the blueberry bushes.

If the falcons were absent from a field, the bird's numbers would increase in a matter of hours. After exposure to the falcons, pest birds found it easier to forage elsewhere. Some days it was difficult to catch prey, but after all, it is the intent of abatement to chase hundreds of pest birds away, not to catch them one at a time.

My job was to protect the berries from the hordes of avian pests through the harvest. Each day hundreds of finches, starlings, and robins would come to feast and the aplomado falcons would turn the tide and chase them away. Days became a blur from one to the next. I used a journal to keep all the information straight.

Each day was a long one, with no days off during the abatement period. I arrived at daybreak. Each falcon was weighed and then read-



Weathering.

ied for release in the order of their target flight weights. The falcons were flown at each berry field until the heat of the day. We would then go to an area where I would take lunch, weather the falcons, and cool off.

Hydrating the falcons and falconer is paramount. A spray bottle and water bottle were always at my side. I would spray water into the bird's mouth before it appeared thirsty, or after any flights that might wind them. While feeding, I would spray down the food and the falcon's body and feet to help cool them down. The same procedures would be followed for the afternoon sessions. The day's work would end shortly before sunset after each falcon was weighed and fed its evening ration.

Evening was the best time to let the falcons be successful. Flights

this time of day ended many times with catches by the falcons. A reward of a large feed was given to reinforce the chase response. Due to fear of sour crop during the heat of the day, evenings were the only time I would feed a full crop.

One of the first things figured out when practicing abatement is that if your falcon is so hungry that she chases and catches the first thing that she sees, all real abatement goes on hold. I would tidbit each falcon during their hours on patrol. I would try to keep the falcons weight at a "flight" weight during the day. Afternoon and evening depending on each falcon's performance, I would let that weight slip closer to its "hunt" weight.

When the falcon makes a kill, the plucking went virtually unnoticed below the canopy of cover. Even with a trade off, time gets away

from you. Depending on pest pressure the release of another falcon to keep the area free of birds already driven from the field might be prudent. With four young aplomados, a balancing act between falcons and kills were normal. Too many kills and the falcons were out of action, too few and chase response was extinguished.

There were times that it seemed that two falcons flown in a cast were barely enough to keep the pests from returning in large numbers into the fields. Numbers of robins were found eating blueberries, in addition to worms and insects present due to the water used for irrigation. These birds would also use the canopy and freshly watered areas as a loafing area during the heat of the day, making them much more prevalent on the property. At my location, robins were the hardest to

abate when large numbers arrived and were comfortably hidden below the canopy of cover.

The average longwing would be useless in such conditions. Very loose unorganized flocks of hundreds of robins would arrive from high altitude, usually midmorning and afternoon. These birds would fly to a staging area off the abatement grounds, where they could overlook the field. This area would be twenty to thirty acres in size and in an adjoining hops field or orchard. The birds would fly in and freeze and look for danger before entering the field. This was the time to put out a cast and fly a lure, to impact the area with lots of aggressive falcon movement. If the robins weren't turned quickly they would fly into the berries in staggered groups of twenty or more and be lost under its canopy.

If the flock made cover in the berries it was necessary to walk them out of the field using one or more falcons on the fist or T-perch. When I walked the rows out anything could happen. Birds would erupt up at your feet and just as quickly disappear in the cover. Waves of robins could appear suddenly from under the bushes and move through the field. The falcons would chase, and with the approach of falcons and falconer, the stragglers would scream frantic cries. Such moments were surreal and reminded me of the scene in "Bambi" where the hunters entered the field and everything fled in terror. The larger the prey, the longer the flight may be. Typical flights could go anywhere from 20 to 400 yards depending on circumstances and pest species.

I found the use of a T-perch to be a great help, and quickly tired of trying to carry a falcon on the fist overhead for long periods of

time in heavy cover. I also found the T-perch an indispensable walking and flushing aid during the falcon's flights. Many times, with my eyes to the sky while moving through heavy cover, I would have gone head over heels after stepping into a badger or gopher hole had it not been for the T-perch to serve as walking stick and balance point.

local falcons and farmers with guns, using flock tactics that had worked for generations. The aplomado falcons and falconer were new to it all but aplomados go to cover well and enjoy ratty hunts. This was different than anything the 'pies had dealt with before. Add to the equation an extra one or more falcons released during long ongoing flights, and the game changed. I measured a flight in the beginning of the abatement period lasting thirty minutes while one the last week of the harvest concluded with two kills before the entire cast could be released. Aplomados are quite adaptable.

I compare the aplomado to avian leopards, sprinting both above and below heavy cover, sometimes seeming to spring from out of nowhere, overtaking prey that may well exceed them in size. Their focus on prey is intense. Their long distance speed is impressive. Against prey some might consider smarter than themselves, and given time to create tactics and counter tactics of their own, they excel. Whether its hundreds of starlings, or a couple dozen magpies, they are no match for the seasoned aplomado.

Abatement jobs end with the harvest. At the time of this writing, I have yet to return one of the aplomado falcons and am enjoying some early season hawking. The falcon works well in the temperate climate and quail numbers are up this year. The plan is to return her to her owner after the NAFA meet in November in time to be placed with a prospective mate.

If you enjoy avian prey, the aplomado is a predator you dare not overlook in your future falconry. If abatement is in your future, so too is the aplomado falcon.



Desert Hawking IV: Quail

This book is a continuation of the Desert Hawking series, and it could be viewed as a culmination of my hawking techniques. From the beginning of my falconry career, I have favored the direct pursuit hawks such as the accipiters, Harris and aplomado. Because of my senior status and the length of our

flights, I hunt with four good legs under me. My preference is the Peruvian Paso.

- Harry McElroy



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Harry McElroy
1324 E. Blue Darter Lane
Willcox, AZ 85643
info@deserthawking.com

www.deserthawking.com

During the abatement period I often observed flocks of magpies or "pies" heckling and chasing away local prairie falcons, Cooper's hawks, and redtail hawks. Magpies ruled before 2009, but we found out after we arrived that there is change on the wind.

I must admit that I enjoyed their flights the most. This prey species was smarter than any other I have dealt with in falconry. I'll go out on a limb and say that they were smarter than even the falcon and falconer in the beginning of the abatement period. Each was on its own separate learning curve. The magpie knew how to deal with the