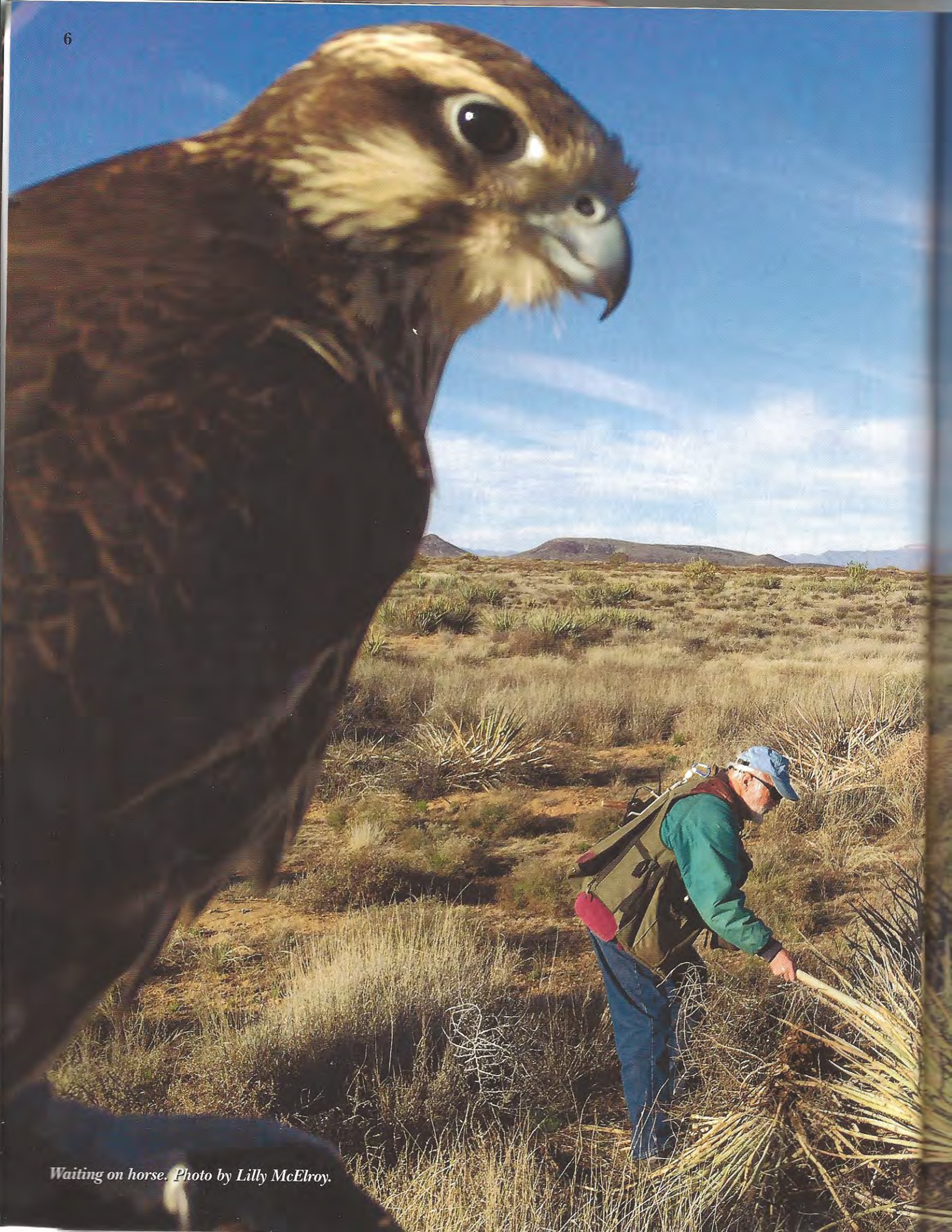


American

Volume 67

Falconry





Waiting on horse. Photo by Lilly McElroy.

Boomerang, the Austringer's Gyr

By Harry McElroy
Kingman, AZ

Hybrid falcon acquired June 16, 2014 at 21 days of age from a breeding facility in Oregon. Imprinted. A larger sister of this hawk took a variety of game off the fist in direct pursuit this season. My falcon (gyr semen into aplomado) was raised in the giant imprinting box in the great room looking over the bird feeder at dove, rabbits, ground squirrel, curved bills, scrub jays, etc. with constant exposure to our dogs. She was fed with a dog present each meal by hand via Steve Layman's method. We later named her Boomerang because of her practice of returning to the fist after flights.



At the time Boomerang (we call her Boomer for short) began to seek a higher perch at sunset, she was transferred to the mew for the evening. Later, when moved to the mew for the day, I spent about an hour with her per day plus time spent in feeding. She was raised using the same method that I've utilized over the last 50 years. On the wing weight was controlled via the 22-hour scheme.

Disclaimer

I want to make it perfectly clear that I am no authority on this hybrid falcon. This is the first one I have had and its behaviors may be far removed from other falcons of this cross. (For example, one tiercel is said to take duck from a waiting on position.) Not only do individual hawks vary, but the genetic mix from within a family can express different traits. Without delving too deeply into genetic theory, recent research indicates an environmental influence in genetic expression. My suggestion is the reader could take this article in the manner in which it was written: entertainment.

Reality

Once Boomer completed feather growth she was flown to the lure on the creance one day before free flight here at the house. A PowerMax transmitter was attached to the backpack. Later, when she began to roam, I installed the new Marshall UHF telemetry system in 434 Mhz. It has dramatic range, little background noise, and is especially directional in the search. A Holohil BD-2 transmitter was attached to the BP as a second transmitter; it weighs about two grams. This was when I began to realize that Boomer was not your average imprinted falcon. Boomer bated, screamed, footed, and bit now and again when the magnet was held to the transmitter. In fact, she entered this behavioral mode

whenever disturbed or surprised by the dogs or most anything. There are reports of similar behavior with other falcons of this cross. Her maturity and hunting development was not the most rapid I've seen and paralleled the progress reported in NAFEX by several falconers about the gyrkin. There were comments about having to wait until the second and third season before hawking satisfaction.



Photo by Beth McElroy.

The Gyr Aplomado

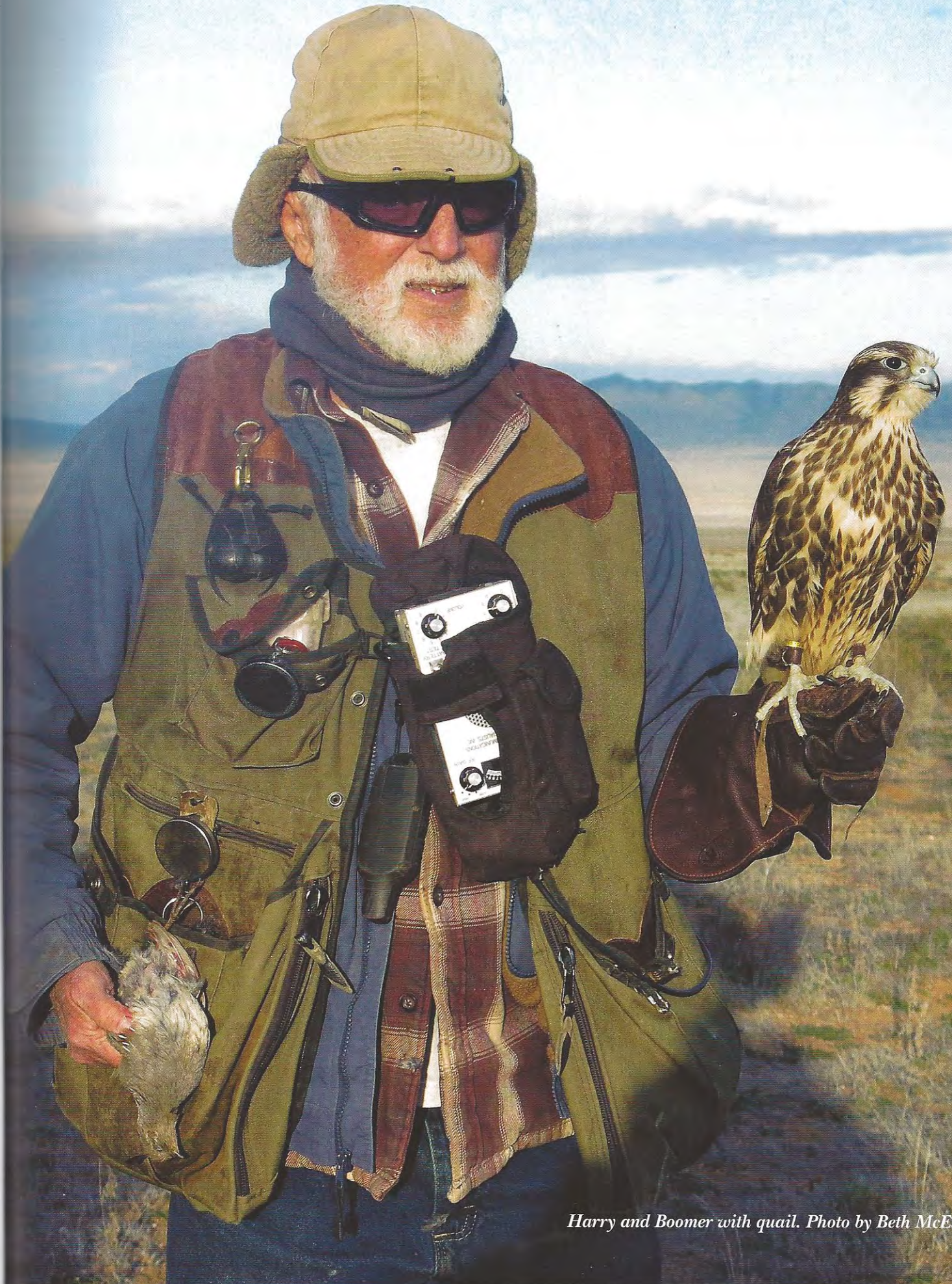
One might ask why this cross of species was selected. In truth, I had read about the flight of several specimens, and it sounded most intriguing. They were reported to have the speed of the gyr along with its temperament: reports had them as challenging to train. In the past I have flown several gyr crosses and found this easy to believe, especially the gyr x merlin and the tiercel gyr x prairie. However, the social nature of the aplomado (along with its propensity to enter cover, tail chase, durable feathers) along with indefatigable persistence made the cross attractive. We all know

the speed and tenacity of the gyr in the tail chase. Since the days of Ronald Stevens, many of us have appreciated their spirited nature, so it is not too hard to believe that this endeavor results in a generous portion of fire and brimstone. I must confess to some surprise at seeing how Boomer could flash off the fist in screaming fury, especially when it was directed at the very dogs with which she was raised.

She reacted to things such as the hood, horses, and the hawk box. My efforts to hood train were met with little more than frustration until late in the season. I designed a 27" hawk box to fit in the space between the truck's cab and 5th wheel hitch. She accepted it rather well and in fact is fond of stepping into it. There are a few brave souls who suggest that, because it is larger than the aplomado, the gyr half serves to reduce predation by other predators by being larger than the aplomado. Some take this to the next step and feel that the gyr carries innate defenses from our more northern predators. It is also possible that the gyr blood will influence tolerance to cold.

From my observations she is strongly influenced by weight. Boomer was especially social and responsive

to the lure for her first month when flown on our property. She confined her flights to our hill and barn area, but as the weeks passed she began to play with the dove and pigeons in the community to the south of our property. Boomer captured a few mourning doves before switching her interest to the feral pigeons. In picking her up on the dove I learned that she had the typical attitude of the aplomado, a species noted for the carry. Naturally I attempted several training techniques to overcome but enjoyed limited success in the early months, along with Boomer's persistence in rejecting the hood. I was not filled with joy to discover



Harry and Boomer with quail. Photo by Beth McElroy.



Down and dirty searching with the dogs. Photo by Beth McElroy.

that she did not enjoy her meals on the fist. The amount of time spent in an effort to overcome is anyone's guess.

Weight Control

Starting in mid-summer Boomer was taken to the field daily and she immediately made low-level flights in a straight line at considerable speed far out of sight. Response to the lure was firm, so I continued on at a flight weight of 670-690 grams. (Note that several falconers reported their female gyr x aplo hybrids were hawking above the 700 gram range and, not wanting

a screaming maniac on my hands, I was reluctant to cut her down, but complications began to appear.) She was fond of playing with ravens or various raptors far into the distance and began to ignore the lure. Boomer was compounding matters by capturing large high-flying grasshoppers and becoming satiated. During the overly cautious process of lowering her weight she spent a few nights out (Charlie Kaiser chased her down twice along with help from Greg and Jamaica Smith), but eventually I worked her down to 640-655 gram range. At this weight she sat the fist and responded to the glove, lure, and

especially the whistle in a surprising turn-around. She did not begin to scream, except in the mew; or fluff. However, within the new weight range Boomer was prone to biting and footing from the scale, making her hard to weigh. She seemed to be in a hurry and became unhappy if the process was slow. If I delayed feeding until after dark, Boomer turned frantic and clutched the fist screaming and flapping, but her behavior in the field at the lower weight was markedly improved and she sat on the fist contentedly as we rode. There were no indications of low weight such as fluffing or slow flights. However, if flown



Lilly McElroy aboard Beth's spirited Peruvian; note the foot action. Photo by Beth McElroy.



Boomer in the transport box. Photo by Beth McElroy.

at the upper end of flight weight, only a few grams would send her over the top and control problems developed. Boomer would ignore fist and lure to fly about the desert as a free agent. Again the danger of spending the night out reared its ugly head. Any feeding while flying at top end flight weight presented a real risk, so caution is in order. Her metabolic rate drifts up and down more than other hawks I have flown. Using the 22-hour or fed weight system she varies from consuming 30 to 95 grams. (Note the mention of aggression in gyrfalcons if weight is too low in NAFEX.) Unlike my usual practice of weighing once per day, Boomer was also checked with weight adjustment at noon during periods of rapid metabolism shift.

The Pick Up

Making in and picking up a high-strung hawk such as Boomer on small easily-carried prey is done with care. Boomer views the dogs as evil creatures immediately after the catch and can carry a quail well over a half mile if she pleases. She tucks quail up under her feathers out of sight when carrying and reveals the catch with a curt rapid cluck as she flies away.

To each his own, but among the tools I have used is the aplomado pick-up stick with a large straightened fishhook on the end. After Boomer has finished depluming and is well into the meal, I begin the approach. When her head is down, one small cautious step is taken. The hook is pressed through

the quail into the ground. A portion of the bird is ripped off and tossed aside and the leash is attached to a jess. After the meal Boomer will not consistently respond to the garnished fist or lure, so caution is in order. The technique that has been more effective is to allow her to eat the entire quail and then pick her up from the ground.

Flight Style and Development

As previously mentioned, Boomer began her adventures in the field making long, low direct flights out of sight. Often enough she also sailed about just above the ground in exploratory flights, checking out the dogs while dodging around the cholla with low-level slope soaring in uneven terrain. Her habit during the first couple of months was to

harry most any raven or raptor until far from vision, but as the months passed she showed less interest and, if on the fist, only made a guttural growl as they passed. She tapped one, and late on an afternoon took another to the ground and held it a while. Boomer has not tended to go up like a peregrine to stoop but only tail chased and made low-level direct flights as is common with the aplomado. When carried on the fist for an extended period of time in strong wind, she tires and goes to the ground to perch. As the months passed, she made sharper twists and turns, hovering now and again. With help from the dogs, she frequently catches birds on the ground and in the bush in a long series of runs, jumps, and leaps into the air. Boomer began to fly as if light wing-loaded and especially in pursuit of quail in the bush. In general, during quail hunts with repeated reflashes, she perched on the ground as opposed to the accipiters that tend to perch on dead cholla; it was late January before she began to perch on dead cholla. During the nights when AWOL, Boomer perched on the ground, drastically reducing the radio signal. My old friend Ron Kunitz, the telemetry guru, suggested bending the transmitter antenna up slightly to avoid having it rest on the ground. This resulted in a dramatic range increase.

To repeat, Boomer is free-flown in the search for quail (we have only Gambel's in this area) and sits the fist more religiously than an aplomado or Harris'. She takes flights out and about the area checking on Beth, the dogs, etc. These flights are at a reduced speed, dodging around the cactus, down into arroyos, etc., resulting in a return to the fist. Because we hawk from the saddle in the free flight system, this hawk is flown from the fist: the lure is seldom needed. This is not my first venture into flying longwings off the fist. In the past I have flown five imprinted prairie tiercels and a lanner falcon in free flight. Boomer's bonding to me is influenced not only by the social

inclinations of the aplomado but the gyr as well. She spots quail from the fist, making the free flight system rewarding. During slips at quail she bursts off the fist, pedal to the metal, displaying acceleration similar to the aplomado with a top speed approximating that of the gyr. In general, Boomer overtakes anything in front of her, including the occasional prairie or peregrine. Similar to fast hawks in general, she forces quail to cover in close slips, but when the prey is sighted from some distance, she climbs up to follow to their refuge. She may

During slips at quail she bursts off the fist, pedal to the metal, displaying acceleration similar to the aplomado with a top speed approximating that of the gyr.

flash off the fist and whip around within two or three feet, returning like the light wing-loaded hawks. During most of the season she was not flown in any area deemed questionable or weather such as strong wind. However, late in the year we found wind above 20 mph did not affect her in the least. Beth and I hawked her near a series of hills with steep ridges for the first time in December. There was a breeze of about 15 mph that day, and Boomer went up to slope soar for over 10 minutes. She covered the area flying just above the ridges with a raven following her from above. I was rather relieved when she returned to the fist. Because of her ground perching habits and refusal to perch on the saddle, Beth's assistance is required to provide a perch for Boomer on the fist during the reflash. During the long flights,

if the quail drops into heavy cover, Boomer wheels around seeking the fist. She prefers they seek cover in an isolated bush where she follows them in to race about on foot. In strong wind she is more inclined to return to the fist after prey is flown to cover. During the first few months in the field, I often wished for a good luck charm.

Although Boomer is prone to outlandish behavior for little cause, she is true to her breeding of gyr and aplomado. As the season swept through she became more relaxed with the trappings of the sport, and we saw a dramatic increase in bonding. Toward the end of the season we also noted a large increase in exploratory flights and low level soaring. When returned to the mew after dark, she hops down into the bath for a drink under illumination of the solar light. Similar to a young gyr, Boomer likes to play with the prey. Early in the hunt when birds are flushed, she flies them to cover and returns to the fist. As the day wears on she storms into cover to chase on foot like the austringer's hawk.

Dogs

In the last few years I have had a peculiar run of bad luck with dogs. The two pointers I am running with Boomer seem cut from the same cloth: both have a hard head. The pup has a motor and may learn the trade in the future. The old dog specializes in relocating birds that have run after being flown to cover. It was late January before Boomer began to develop a bond with these two. She now responds to their yelping; during the chase she watches them closely and takes birds away from them. By the end of January Boomer was defending the kill site and driving the dogs away. Hunts

Paul's Help

Paul Hilmo and I hawked south of Dead Man's Field along the large deep wash. He was walking and I rode. The dogs flushed birds far ahead to the west in this large deeply cut arroyo. Boomer made a



Jamaica Smith reflushing. Photo by Beth McElroy.

long flight at them that continued out of sight. (I was a bit concerned to find her playing around the bush near the ground with a redtail perched on the top of a nearby tree.) She returned after some time and we continued west until the old dog flushed a single to the rear that flew far back to the east with Boomer following high. She returned immediately to sit the fist when another single flew from close in to the east with the falcon pressing it all the way. This quail dove into tumbleweeds on the south side above the wash along a connecting drainage, but this time Boomer flew around the site a few times at a low level. Forever the optimist, I began to wonder if Boomer was on the cusp of waiting-on. The old pointer searched for some time in the string of thickly matted tumbleweeds, and Paul dug in and pushed the bird out. The falcon burst off the fist and struck the quail as it flew back to the wash. It was a glancing blow and the quail escaped into more tumbleweeds high on the bank

of the arroyo. Boomer plunged in behind (as did the dog) and a different quail flew out and down the wash. During the reflush she ran about on the ground next to Paul like an aplomado.

The dog pointed, so Paul dug down into the weeds and, to our delight, the bird flew out and back into the same stand of tumbleweed where it first put in. Boomer entered into a series of attacks but could not penetrate the cover. Paul began to remove plants, and after a while the bird made a move across the ground, and the falcon scored from of the fist.

She carried far down the wash, and each time I approached she carried again. It was a simple matter of following the signal with the Marshall UHF and good practice using the various modes in the receiver: far, near and close. As usual, direction was exact, unlike other telemetry receivers that do not have this feature. At this time it appears the most effective pick-up system for

this falcon on quail is the simple approach: allow her to eat the entire bird and step her to the fist.

Loco Dogs

It was in the 40s with a slight breeze, and Boomer was responsive at 650 grams as we entered the practice area. We rode along and she perched on the fist in her usual manner, making flights out and about every few moments, drifting past Beth on her horse or checking on the dogs in a slow, easy manner. Riding into the far eastern range of the area, Boomer burst off the fist heading southwest up about 30 feet kicking in the afterburners. I yelled to Beth that we had a slip but saw no prey; as the horses shifted into the high-speed gait, several quail flew out to the right and left. After a flight of considerable distance I saw her cut in at an angle plunging into the scant cover. The dogs were running fully aware of the slip, and as we sped along the hawk and dogs suddenly appeared heading back our direction but still some distance

ahead. They danced around a lone cholla as Boomer flew from one side to the other bouncing off the ground and back up again. At this time we were still too far out, and I had not identified the prey. The falcon veered off, making repeated passes at something moving out from the cactus. The pointers remained at the cholla, frantically running about. In an instant I saw something lift off the ground in front of Boomer, and she overtook plowing into the surface dust flying. The dogs, still in a state of confusion, began to work in her direction. I called them off as Boomer commenced depluming with quail feathers drifting along the desert floor.

Witnessed in Brief

January 22, 2014, with a temperature 50 degrees and a slight breeze, our crew included Craig Golden, Loren McGough, and Jamaica Smith. Craig was the only walker and carried his large heavy professional camera. Our two pointers played backup. We rode from the east side through the practice area and saw not a single bird; turning back toward the trucks we deviated slightly to check an area with a good stand of cholla. Boomer had made a few flights, including a pass at a redbill, but sat the fist mostly. That little dark cloud began to develop, and I suspected that we were facing another day of this poor season: no birds. The group rode through the cholla stand to the east while I turned toward the truck. At about 200 yards from them I heard a yell and whirled the horse around as Boomer launched off under a full head of steam. The dogs had flushed a covey of 25 and Boomer flew one to cover along the east fence and promptly returned to the fist. It was quickly reflushed and flew some distance north to a large isolated cholla. Boomer was

pressing it hard every inch of the way and dove in running about under, on top, and through the cactus before the dogs could arrive. Boomer reflushed it for a third flight back along the fence toward us. She was on fire (traveling at top speed) and overtook as the quail plunged into a stand of low growing grass. As she bounced around with some running and some brief lift offs, the



Weighed and fed, end of hunt. Photo by Beth McElroy.

dogs were racing toward her full bore. We all thought they would spoil the hunt by catching the bird, but Boomer put it in the bag just as they arrived. The whole thing had played out right before our eyes in less than a minute.

Free Flight

February 27, the last hunt of the season: it was in the 60s with a breeze of 12 mph as we entered the practice area. Lilly joined Beth and me today, with Lilly getting in her second hunt riding. We had ridden over an hour with Boomer prospecting every few moments, sailing

about on the wing so much to make very nearly low level waiting on.

She spotted a covey moving through the bush in the northeast corner of the practice area and flew over to drop in. The quail scattered in all directions, and Boomer lifted straight up out of the grass to lock in on one flying downwind. The flight was long, but I kept her in sight as Juanito pulled forcefully to enter the canter. I saw Boomer

cut hard left and dive into a string of cover with a mixture of tall grass and cactus. I glued my eyes to the spot as we sped along knowing full well that she would move out before Juanito and I could arrive. I kept thinking about the dogs but resisted calling them for fear of calling her off the bird. I rode into a stand of waist high grass and a scattering of cholla finding neither the hawk nor the dogs, but as I began to tune the receiver Lilly rode in to tell me the falcon was perched on Beth's head while she walked in our direction. Beth was about 50 feet out as I rode in her direction, but she only went a few feet before Boomer flew over to me. At this point I was a few feet to the south of the site, and Boomer turned around backwards on the fist, looking back to where the quail put in. A

few seconds later she flew towards this site, dipped low, then returned to the fist. I rode back to check and found both dogs locked up in the heavy grass with only the top of their backs in sight. Just as I slipped to the ground to pull the dogs off, the pup lunged forward to catch the quail—a female Gambel's.

Summary

Toward the end of the season I asked several observers their opinion about Boomer's hunting style. Beth accompanied me on the majority of hunts. Beth McElroy said, "She's



Eating her quail. Photo by Beth McElroy.

cool, fast, powerful, well trained, and responsive.” Craig Golden chimed in, “Flies fantastically, out flies all the quail; her big issue is in returning to the fist after flying a bird in.” Jenny Claus suggested, “A fabulous flier, she goes out of sight then quickly returns to the fist.” Paul Hilmo added, “She flies like an aplomado.” Lastly, Jamaica Smith summarized, “Fast, persistent, lacking overall experience; more and more worth the effort she required earlier in the season.”

Boomer moved from being wild and wooly in the beginning to high-strung, strongly bonded, prey dedicated, and a cooperative birder by the

end of the season. She retains some management issues. It is worth considering that many who raise this hybrid prefer them chamber raised, and that may be my choice when considering another hybrid of this cross. To the best of my knowledge, the change in her temperament came about from common falconry techniques. She was not trained to wait-on. Boomer responded slowly to various techniques used to counter carrying, encourage hooding, and develop trust while being fed on the fist. Weight control was tight and consistent. In our mild climate Boomer was kept at flight weight throughout the season with a high-quality ration. She has

developed into a joy to hawk, is consistent on quail, and dramatically bonded, if unconventional. Boomer’s development has, no doubt, been slowed by the paucity of quail this season. Like any down year, we have flown mostly mature birds. Will this hybrid enjoy the respect as does the gyr x peregrine with its speed (Mark Williams reports the gyr x peregrine as the consistent winner in the Saudi Arabian races.) and hawking abilities? Is she the austringer’s gyr? To each his/her own.

My thanks to Lilly McElroy and Jamaica Smith for editing.

