



Photo by Rob Palmer



Hunting
with the
aplomado falcon
in the
U.S.

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Photo by Rob Palmer



Author and Sgt. Pepper: Aplomado falcons leave the fist in a hurry. Their acceleration from a standing start must be seen to be appreciated. Photo by Rob Palmer

The following information is from Dean Hector's chapter in *Handbook of North American Birds Volume 5*, pages 317-322.

There are 3 subspecies of Aplomado falcons.

1. *Falco femoralis septentrionalis*: The bird that formerly nested in Texas, New Mexico and Arizona which is being introduced in Brownsville, Texas. Its distribution was from the southern US to Nicaragua.

2. *Falco femoralis femoralis*: The smallest and most pale subspecies, distributed from Costa Rica to Tierra del Fuego (which is the southern tip of Argentina, and thus South America) primarily the lowlands.

3. *Falco femoralis pichincae*: The darkest and largest of the subspecies, distributed in the higher elevations in the Andes. Cauca Valley of Columbia south to Tierra del Fuego. Higher elevation in northwest Argentina to sea level along the Chilean coast.

The average weights for males are 208-305 grams (260 grams) and females are 310-500 grams (407 grams). Aplomados have long accipiter like tarsi and longer tails and wings than a peregrine. In level flight the aplomado is extremely swift, capable of out flying such species as mourning doves, rock doves and killdeer. In addition, it is agile afoot and often runs down ground oriented

prey such as bobwhites. Aplomado falcons are social to the extent that mated pairs hunt together and can be found together throughout the year and they hunt cooperatively when chasing avian prey. Siblings remain together for some time after becoming independent and hunt together. In Hector's study, birds account for an estimated 97% of the prey biomass. Most birds are dove to robin sized with the smallest being a hummingbird. The most commonly taken birds were white-winged doves, great tailed grackles, groove billed anis and yellow billed cuckoos.

I had heard and read about aplomado falcons but never expected to have the opportunity to fly one. When I saw that Jim Nelson, a falconer in Kennewick, Washington, was breeding them, I thought long and hard about obtaining one. I currently fly a female peregrine on ducks, pheasants and prairie chickens in Nebraska and I recently lost my female barbury x merlin to a raptor. I love the stoop but I really missed the pursuit flights at small avian quarry. The advantage of flying a pursuit falcon is that slips at small avian quarry are plentiful throughout the year and it is fun to watch. I knew that purchasing an aplomado was going to be expensive and they are at risk of being killed by other raptors. I decided to proceed because there are so few breeders, and it may be the only opportunity I would ever have to experience this type of bird and flight.

I spoke to Jim Nelson at length and decided on a male aplomado. This bird was a *Falco femoralis pichincae*, and very capable of taking small birds up to the size of bobwhite quail, which is all I wanted. In addition, the male was quite a bit less expensive than the female. Jim and I decided that I would get the young falcon at 32 days of age. He arrived in a carrier and I took him into the mew and opened the door. He came running out of the crate and ran all around the mew. His legs were long and I could see why people compare them to accipiters on foot. I named him Sgt. Pepper



Aplomado falcon closing on a mourning dove, photo by Rob Palmer

and he could only fly about two feet off the ground when he arrived, but within three days he was flying up to the high perch of about seven feet. After a couple of more weeks he was flying around the mew without stopping several times and would even kite inside the mew. My mew is eight feet x ten foot with ceiling height of nine feet. His wing-loading was extremely light. This bird was a dual imprint, raised with his siblings before being shipped. The purpose of raising him in this manner was to allow him to imprint on other birds so he will mate naturally when he becomes an adult. I had never raised a raptor at this age, so I did not know what to expect as far as feeding, hooding or entering the bird to game. Jim Nelson was a tremendous resource because he has bred, raised and hunted several aplomado falcons. He also referred me to other falconers who were flying aplomados that would help me, Harry McElroy being the most

experienced in our country with this species. Harry is a great man, a tremendous resource and easy to talk to. THANKS HARRY!

I had Boyd quail to feed the growing aplomado, which Jim Nelson uses for his aplomado breeding project. Harry said he likes to feed wild sparrow on a regular basis for a healthy development. I trapped many English sparrows to feed Sgt. Pepper at will. When I received the bird at 32 days he was eating from a partially cut-up quail carcass. I continued to provide the carcass to him daily to eat as much as he wanted. Jim thought it best to cover the food when you bring it into the chamber so the bird would not associate food with you. I would enter the mew and remove the old food and sit down and spend time in the chamber to bond and “play” with the bird. He would fly up to my head, run around on my legs and shoulders and sometimes would just lay down

on my lap or shoulder and sleep. When I left the mew I would remove the towel covering the food. Harry told me that he doesn’t even try to hide the food from the bird, because they are smart enough to figure it out. Jim also told me to have young live quail in the mew so that when the bird’s predatory instinct and physical ability kicked in he would have something to chase. Initially, he didn’t chase the quail; he just watched them, so I also put live English sparrows in the chamber, thinking that he might be less intimidated by smaller quarry. In time I also started to leave less food in the chamber and have less interaction with him. He eventually became motivated to kill and consume the live food rather than relying on me to provide. At first he started killing the sparrows and consuming part and then all of them. I stopped leaving the carcass and eventually only had the quail in the chamber. He eventually killed and



Sgt. Pepper and his first flight at bobwhite quail. Photo by A. Johnson

consumed the quail, so I decided to leave several in there for him to have at will. One day I went in to check on Sgt. Pepper and he had killed all the quail and consumed just the heads, so I stopped that program because it was too expensive. I gradually increased the size of the quail to a fully grown bobwhite. He could easily catch and kill the quail and would control it by grasping it by the head.

During this “isolation” period from me, where he had to survive by killing game, he started to scream whenever he saw me. This was not because he was hungry, and not a food begging call. He was as fat as ever and had as much quail as he wanted. In my opinion it was because of isolation, and Harry said the same thing. These birds are social animals and they like the company. When I took him up and had him tethered in the house where he could see people and dogs and lots of activities, his screaming stopped. When I returned him to

the mew, he was quiet all day and when he heard me or saw me he started to call. I introduced the lure to him while in the mew. I stopped putting live quail into the chamber; and substituted a lure with a whole quail on it. Within a few days time, I could throw the garnished lure into the chamber and he went right to it and consumed the food. I then took Sgt. Pepper up, hooded him, jessed him and put a backpack and transmitter on. I did not sedate the bird, or cast him to put the backpack on, I just kept him hooded and tethered on a perch and took my time and it all went well. I used a Marshall Micro, but I know he could carry the Powermax. He wore it for the entire season without problems. Next, I brought him outside on the creance and put him on a perch. I walked a few steps and threw the lure down. He flew to it and ate. He progressed very quickly and within a few days was coming immediately to the lure across the yard. Sometimes he would fly to me before I produced the lure in anticipation

and kite awhile and then if I didn’t produce it he would fly around and back to the perch. I noticed that the wind did not bother him. He handled high wind easily and if he flew by me he would back up in the air using the wind to accomplish his goal. Sgt. Pepper’s flight skills were amazing at such a young age.

I never hooded him consistently, which was a mistake. I needed to hood him to jess him and put the backpack on and change batteries. He didn’t like the hood so I used a giant hood to take him into and out of the field. He would jump from my fist into the giant hood as soon as I opened the door because he knew we were going to the field. When I picked him up at the mew he would scream, but once in the giant hood he was quiet. He could see out of the giant hood because I had a barred window in it. I used the Forest Hawk box made by Jim Heptinstall. I took him into the field for the first time and wanted success immediately. I set up a game thrower with a quail

in the middle of a wide open field. I walked up to within a few yards of the quail with Sgt. Pepper on my fist and released the quail. He was off my fist in a flash, chasing the quail across the field catching it about 50 yards away. I let him consume as much as he wanted. I continued this program with about 10 quail in various fields. This probably was overkill, but I wanted to wed him to quail busting out from around my feet.

Next, I want to discuss this bird's flight weight a little. Initially, Jim Nelson told me his male flew at about 225 grams. This is the weight I was shooting for. However, Sgt. Pepper was responding perfectly at higher weights. I was flying him around 240 grams. When his weight was lower he seemed to be more likely to scream, so I kept his weight higher. Most of the time I flew him at 250 grams and above. I came home from being on vacation for a week and my daughter had been feeding the bird what I prescribed. I weighed him and he was 272 grams. I decided to take him into the field anyway and see what happened. He performed exactly the same as he did at 250 grams; he flew with the same intensity and had the same response to me. I continued to test his flight weight even up to 300 grams and I found no noticeable difference in behavior. I think this must have something to do with being a dual imprint, and our relationship. People would ask me what his flight weight was, and I would say, "It's right on the money." He responded the same no matter what his weight was or what time of day it was.

Each time I flew Sgt. Pepper on the released quail he improved. Then I started hunting game. I decided to walk big grassy fields with lots of spar-

rows in them. This would give him many slips and lots of experience to develop flight and footing skills. I would walk for about an hour and get about 30 slips. Each time he would fly from the fist and chase the birds and, when they escaped, he would come right back to the fist to continue the hunt. Some slips were long chases and some were very

he turned right around and came right back to land on my fist. We concentrated mostly on small birds in the grassy fields.

After he caught the first sparrow I tried to approach him and transfer him to the garnished lure. He flew initially to the lure but would not give up his catch. I was nervous because these small falcons are known to carry their prey. Instead of trying to approach him, which made him want to carry even more, I just stood still and let him consume the catch. When he finished, he flew right back to my fist to continue the hunt. Initially I ended the hunt after one kill, but later I continued to let the bird hunt as long as he wanted to. Day after day we walked the field and he flew from my fist to chase the sparrows and then fly right back to the fist to continue. Soon he was getting better at catching the game and most days he would catch between three and five sparrows in an hour. He would consume two or three and he started to cache two to three sparrows. Sometimes he would take the first sparrow that he caught, and immediately fly around and look

for a place to cache. Obviously he was not that hungry but he wanted to hunt. Frequently he cached the quarry within about 30 yards of me, he would land on the ground and put the dead sparrow in a clump of grass and immediately fly back to the fist to continue the hunt. When I walked back to the car, Sgt. Pepper would recognize that we were finished and take off from my fist and fly around, not wanting to get back in the car to go home. I would call him down with a tidbit and open the giant hood and he would jump right in.

Late in the fall I attended the Nebraska Falconers Meet. I went out into the field with about 10 to



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short with the sparrows bailing out into weeds, several feet away.

He started out chasing doves that sprang up from the grass, but he broke off the chase after several long flights. Eventually, he ignored the doves coming off the ground. However, later in the year he tried different tactics to catch doves. First he tried a stealthy approach coming in low and breaking into a group of doves behind a dirt mound at a watering hole. Next, he tried coming in low and busting into trees that the doves were perched in. He put in several quarter to half mile chases on doves pushing them into cover and when they escaped

15 other falconers. We were going to find a wild covey of quail to fly. During the hunt Sgt. Pepper hunted from several people, flying from fist to head to shoulder to fist. He didn't care how many people were in the field and he didn't care who he hunted from. We found a covey of wild bobwhites and he shot off the fist, picked one out of the covey and chased it into cover, catching the quail as it went into a yucca plant. It was the first time he had seen quail since the baggies, and he caught a wild adult male bobwhite. Every quail slip after that he put in maximum effort and caught three during his short season. The last one was at the NAFA meet in Kearney after about a 500-yard tail chase. We walked along a ditch that was full of dead tall weeds. We saw the covey running ahead of us and I had Sgt. Pepper on my fist. We continued to push the quail and then they broke. He was all over them and they immediately bailed out into the cover. This procedure continued several times; it was obvious that Sgt. Pepper had the quail intimidated. We came to the end of the ditch and the quail broke and the majority of the covey flew around us back into the cover but one bird tried to make a break for it across a wide open field. Sgt. Pepper picked him out and was right on his tail. The next cover was more than 500 yards away and the chase proceeded down along a fence line and over bails of hay and finally the quail was overcome by the power of the aplomado. We all watched the flight in awe with binoculars. When we finally got to him he was consuming his catch. This flight was truly remarkable and once you experience it you will be hooked on aplomado falcons.

As the winter progressed the numbers of small birds diminished and Sgt. Pepper started chasing the only birds we could find. The most amazing thing about this bird was that he flew from the fist, chased game and immediately came back to the fist to continue. Everything he caught started out from the fist. I never used jesses to restrict him.

Sgt. Pepper's time line is as follows:

June 14, 2006 - Received him at 32 days.

July 3, 2006 - Hard penned at 51 days.

Aug 1, 2006 - First free flight, on a baggy quail at 79 days.

Aug 9, 2006 - First hunt, on sparrows at 87 days.

Dec 15, 2006 - Returned to Jim Nelson for breeding.

He caught all his game in 133 days.

His flights initially started out short, but by the end of the season they were long and complicated, but every time the prey escaped he immediately flew back and ended up on my fist. Later in the season Sgt. Pepper would see birds flying overhead about 100 to 200 feet high and he would take off from the fist, go up and push them out of the air and into cover.

One of the risks of flying a small falcon is that every raptor wants to kill it. Some people say that non-native species are more likely to be attacked and potentially killed by a native raptor. The following birds tried to catch my aplomado: redtail hawk, harrier, male peregrine, kestrel, merlin, prairie falcon and finally a male Cooper's hawk caught him when he was down on game. Luckily, I was close by and scared the Cooper's hawk away. I know of other falconers who have had their aplomado falcons killed by redtails when down on game. Sgt. Pepper chased many different species of birds, mostly small birds, but he did chase several hen pheasants and a teal. He also chased a few rabbits believe it or not. He caught 80 sparrows, four quail, and four miscellaneous.

The things I loved most about Sgt. Pepper:

1) No need for weight control, he flew the same at any weight.

2) He flew from the fist and came right back to the fist if he didn't catch something.

3) In the field he flew with all kinds of people and would perch on anyone to hunt from. One day at the NAFA meet in Kearney, Nebraska we had 55 people in the field.

The mistakes I made with Sgt. Pepper:

1) I never hooded him unless I needed to change the backpack battery.

2) I didn't have a dog to introduce him to, so he wasn't keen on dogs in the field. I do believe with time he would accept a dog in the field.

I had mixed emotions when Jim Nelson asked me if I would send Sgt. Pepper back for breeding. I loved that bird. Some of the best times I've had in my falconry career have been in the field with this aplomado. He was well-trained and intelligent enough to know what the game was and how to play it. I will miss Sgt. Pepper, but I have decided from this experience that as long as I have the means, I will fly an aplomado falcon. I love the flight style and the performance. This bird is now with Jim Nelson's female, Cuvee. They are getting along well and courting at this time. It appears they will be a pair and breed. I'm sure their offspring will be some awesome hawks. I hope to have one of the offspring to fly someday. I am replacing Sgt. Pepper with another one of Jim Nelson's birds and look forward to starting it all over again this summer in 2007. I can only hope that the new bird will bring me the same excitement and enjoyment.

Aplomado falcons are a very intelligent and capable falcon with a unique flight style. I highly recommend them to any falconer who is excited by the branch of falconry that involves the direct pursuit of avian prey.

