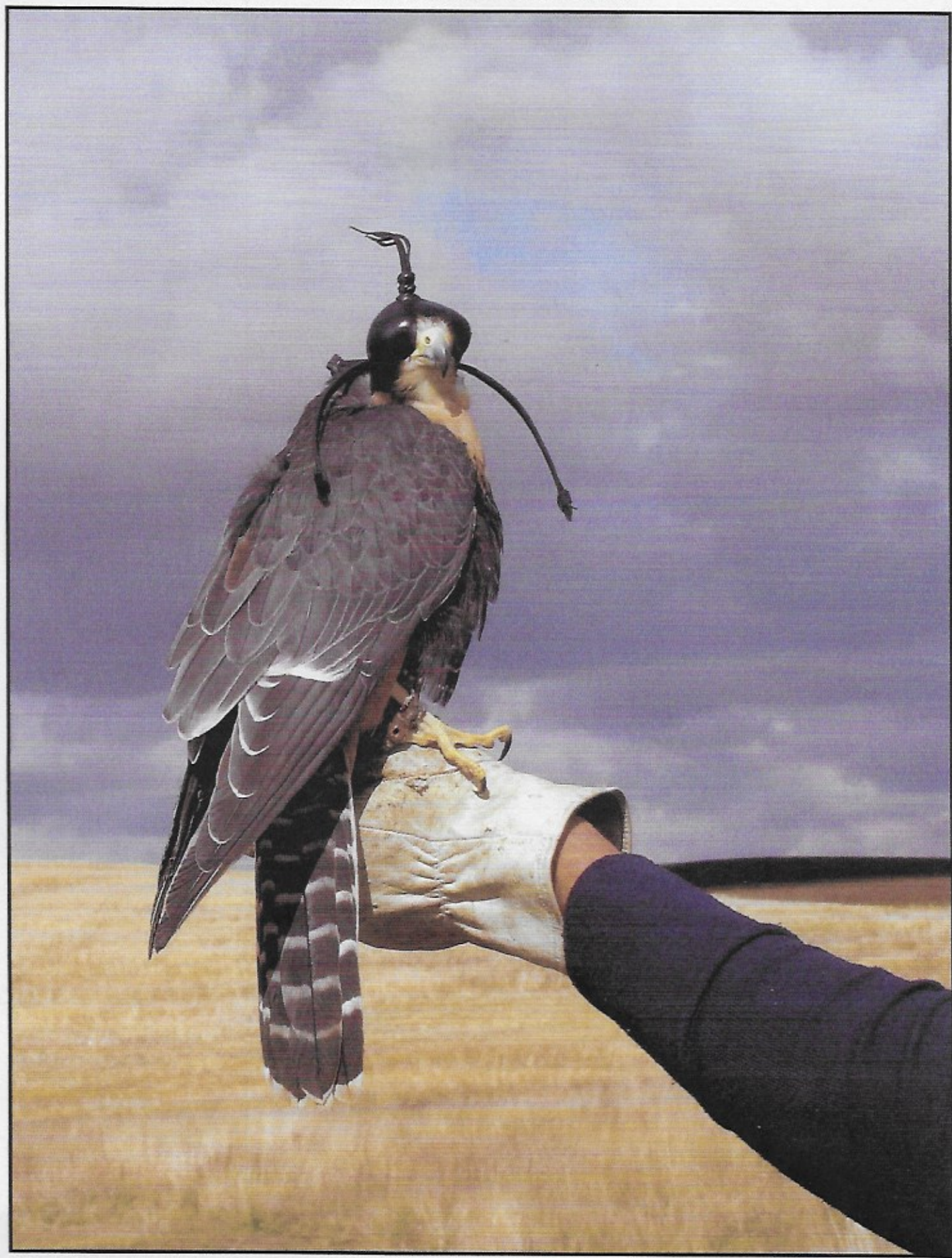


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"Partridge hawking." Being able to carry a hooded partridge alette is a boon for partridge hawking in wide open spaces. The alette is unhooded when a point is achieved and a flight from the fist is eminent. Photo by Chris Nelson.

Hood Training

Using High-Level Tidbitting With Alettes and Terceletos

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Based on more extensive information provided in an upcoming book on hoods:

Hoods, Hooding and Hoodmaking; by Jim Nelson; Western Sporting Publications.

This article is dedicated the Father of aplomados in American Falconry. . . Harry McElroy. Thanks for everything, Harry!!

I have been fascinated with hoods, hooding and hoodmaking since 1969. I developed my high-level tidbitting technique during the writing of *Hoods, Hood and Hoodmaking* (I initiated the project in 1995) for use with all raptors. I became interested in the aplomado falcon (as a candidate for l'Alethe) in 1982. I am now pleased to find that many other falconers share my enthusiasm for this unique raptor. Along with the most difficult cases of any other raptor (hawk, falcon or eagle), high-level tidbitting has worked extremely well with a large number of aplomados over the years. I have utilized several other hooding techniques with aplomados and each has its own merit. One such alternate method, hood training to-the-lure, I described (with Harry McElroy's gracious inclusion) in the most comprehensive work on aplomados to date, *Desert*

Hawking IV: Quail (McElroy, 2009). That method will work excellently with Harry's beloved dual socialized aplomados, especially if one is working with a single bird or a cast. But here I will describe high-level tidbitting as it applies to aplomados. The advantage of this approach is that it will work when all else fails, even with large numbers of birds that are under training, and with the hardest cases that you have given up on in despair. This same system can be applied to any trained raptor with a high degree of confidence for success.

Hood training for all raptors using any method will always be successful if three elements are present in the training. I developed, and am publishing in my upcoming book, a hooding formula to express these three factors: $H = F + R1 + R2$.

H is successful "hood training;" F is good "fit;" R1 is "restraint" (keeping the raptor in place for the first several hoodings so that they can be successful and then can be rewarded); and R2 is "reinforcement" (initially each successful hooding is followed by a rewarding experience).

Because the hooding of the terceletto (male aplomado) is typically more exacting than the alette (female aplomado) the fol-

lowing is a brief description of how these three elements work using high-level tidbitting on the typical hood-wary terceletto.

First, you will need a good fitting hood. Tercelettos wear a hood that fits a musket (male) Cooper's. Using the Rick Anderson-style sizing system in my book, it will be a 4.2 or a 4.3.

Second, You will need to train the terceletto to take the tidbit from your hand at or above the level of his crop. When he takes the tidbit, make a sound (I cluck my tongue). He will learn this trick very quickly, within less than three minutes and with about four to five repetitions. I describe a more cautious approach with large raptors in my book that I call "anti-lunging." However, a terceletto is small and dainty and, as long you hold the jesses, he will be eager to get the tidbit without being a potential danger to you.

Third, Desensitize. This desensitizing technique was first described to me by Jimmy Fustus of Wyoming, and then later—in another variation—by Steve Layman of Washington State. Both men are past masters of operant condition training with raptors. Desensitize the sharp-set (hungry) hawk by holding the hood a couple of feet



“Finger tidbitting.” High-level tidbitting is initiated by handing the tidbit to the hawk at beak level or higher. Jesses must be secured. When the hawk takes the tidbit, sound a noise to create an “event marker.” Photo by Sandy Burdock.



“Palm tidbitting.” After the hawk learns the high-level routine from fingertips, reduce the hawk’s tendency to lunge at the hand. The tidbit can be hidden in a fist that is swiftly raised to prevent teasing with a slow arrival. The fist is then opened and the tidbit presented on a flattened palm. Photo by Sandy Burdock.

out from him. When he looks at it, make the sound (cluck) and set the hood down and then high-level tidbit him (my contribution) for not bating from the hood. If he is sharp-set and was previously trained to take the high-level tidbit without the hood, he will be eager to take the tidbit with the hood in his presence. Do this over and over, but each time bring the hood closer and closer to his head. Do not try to hood him. Reward him each time for not bating from the hood as it approaches closer and closer. You will be amazed how quickly he learns to link the approaching hood with the tidbit. This may only take a few minutes and perhaps ten attempts (or less) with motivated terceletos. Soon you will be petting him on the head and neck and shoulders with the hood and he will ignore it completely while anticipating the arrival of the tidbits.

Fourth, restrain your terceletto from bating from the hood. This is critical in order to hood him those first few times. Unless using a guddi with brand new chamber reared birds, I restrain all other aplomados for this stage of hood training by wetting them down using a spray bottle until they are so wetted that they cannot bate easily. The term I coined for this in my book is "the liquid brail." Do not wet his head at all. Then, if he has been properly desensitized beforehand, he will hood while wetted and be rewarded with the high-level tidbit, therefore learning immediately to hood this way.

Once he is thoroughly wetted, very slowly and smoothly bring the hood to his face. The hood need not go all the way on this first time, but the hood is definitely "in his face." Cluck the marker sound and bring the hood away and then high-level tidbit him.

While he is still wet and cannot bate away from the hood, bring it more and more over his head, each time rewarding him in between by removing the hood and tidbitting. This will go faster and faster as he learns the trick. In just a few minutes he will be hooding nicely and getting his reward.

Do not tighten the braces during this phase of training. You are training him to take the hood. Tightening the braces will just slow you down and irritate him before you need to do so.

During following lessons you may hood him the same way, but it will require less wetting each time, until very soon you will be "dry hooding." You can begin tightening the braces for some of the initial dry hoodings, and then again at the end of each dry hooding lesson. Draw braces closed gently. Yanking the braces shut will upset and aplomado falcon and cause him to "buck" in the newly tightened hood.

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Side note: Be sure you do not place a wetted raptor in cold weather out of doors. They must be first allowed to dry completely. Unless the outside temperature is very warm, there is lethal danger to the little hawk from hypothermia if he is wet.

After initial high-level tidbit hood training, I continue to reward aplomados for hooding at least once for hooding. I find it useful to reward the first hooding of the day, for after that first reinforced hooding they are reminded of the possibility of reward and are easier to hood throughout the rest of the day. When out hawking, if I suspect a moment will be a bad one for hooding, I take the time to desensitize once or twice with tidbits, and then I hood all the way to completion. This extra attention to detail pays big dividends.

Aplomados seem to be restless in the hood when left alone and

isolated for long periods. With their falconer, hooded on the glove, most seem quite content. I have had two different alettes that slept in the hood on the fist while we followed the setter about the field on partridge hunts. One of these, Cuvee, was so unhappy when in the hood (but not on the fist) that she would hop off the scale hooded and flutter to the kitchen floor. There she would blindly tromp toward the sound of my voice, the hood being completely "light tight." When she reached my feet she would grab my pant cuff with her talons and then scramble up the pant leg as though it were the screen of a screen perch. She would continue up my shirt until she found my glove and then became quite relaxed once upright and perched upon it. She did this every time, and many friends were witness to this astonishing behavior.

A word about hooding for the field: In my experience, hooding the aplomado falcon is most useful in situations where control of the hawk's flight is critical for success. If the aplomado is to be turned loose to fly about, perch, and then have game flushed for him; there may not be a viable reason to hood. Furthermore, aplomados are small, have flexible feathers and transport easily. They can ride in a transport box, on a car perch, or even loose in the cab if they are reliable enough to do so without creating a driving hazard. However, for hunting in open areas that have few or no perches but the ground, and when following a pointer to locate partridge, it is best to have the alette hooded and upon the fist. Also, for aplomados that are very flighty and bate at the slightest provocation, the hood can make handling vastly easier and prevent broken train feathers in situations like all-day-long transport during commercial bird abatement.

A word about aplomado falcons and their reactions to hooding: I have found that aplomados, once they are convinced that hooding is in their best interest, can all be hooded with ease. However, counter-intuitively, it would seem



“Wetted and watching.” Desensitizing to the hood is accomplished as described in text. Before attempting to actually hood, be sure the hawk is comfortable with the approach of the hood while dry and while wearing a “liquid brail.” Photo by Sandy Burdock.

“Wetted and hooding.” The first actual hooding should be attempted after desensitizing has proven to be successful, both while dry and when wetted. The hood should be carefully brought up to, then eventually placed over, the hawk’s face. Each increment forward is rewarded by a marker signal followed by a high-level tidbit. Photo by Sandy Burdock.





"Dry hooding." After hooding/high-level tidbitting reaches to the point of casualness (this can happen in one lesson, but might take more), reduce wetting and transition to hooding while dry feathered. Photo by Sandy Burdock.

that the tamer an aplomado is, the more he/she resents not being able to see the world. Therefore, my experience indicates that social imprints (raised alone) are most restless when hooded and most likely to "popcorn" in the hood. Dual imprints (raised by humans with their siblings) are not as bad, yet may be restless on a regular basis. Parent-reared or sibling-reared without human interaction are the most patient in the hood. I do not live where I can experience

them, but I imagine passagers and haggards would tolerate the hood better than all other types.

A word about hooding and the molt: There are many diverse thoughts on this topic. Here are mine. I allow my hawks freedom through the molt. I do this because I am extremely busy during the summer and cannot maintain a training regimen on a daily basis. Therefore, rather than risk mediocrity, I leave hooding alone until it is time to reclaim the hawk for

hunting. When I am ready to take the hawk up again, I leave him in the chamber and slowly reduce daily rations while watching for behaviors that indicate readiness to retrain. When the hawk will hop to the glove again—the molt now being over—I know hooding will soon resume as before. I simply revisit all the steps of initial training steps described above and we are soon back-in-synch. First, we desensitize without actual hooding with lots of high-level rewards. Then, we use the liquid brail (wetted) for the first hooding of the new season (followed by copious high-level rewards). Last, we practice a few times with and without rewards to reestablish fluidity.

To summarize, aplomado falcons are intelligent little falcons that can either resent the hood or tolerate it, depending on whether or not they can see a value to it in their life. For the average aplomado, food is a quick and certain way to link hooding to a positive experience. The Big Three hood training components of "Fit," "Restraint," and "Reinforcement" will always win a trained raptor to the hood. In the case of the aplomado falcon, a good fitting hood (fit), desensitizing and wetting (restraint), and high-level tidbitting (reinforcement) will quickly result in a hood trained bird. To maintain this training after you have introduced it successfully, be sure to randomly reward hooding with high-level tidbits throughout the aplomados service with you over the years. The first hooding of each day should be rewarded, and if you think other hooding episodes might be difficult, take the time to desensitize with tidbits in the field prior to hooding. Remember that aplomados, unlike most large falcons, become frustrated when hooded and left alone. Hood an aplomado when you are going to be actively working or hawking with him or her. Be gentle and sensitive in your movements, in bracing, and in handling and you will hood train your aplomado falcon successfully.

