

# *The Aplomado Falcon*



*Falco femoralis*

*By: Robert L. Giroux*

Flying a longwing was something I really was not interested in doing. I mean, driving all over the place looking for that perfect duck slip, or having that typical telemetry chase was not my cup of tea. I just preferred to put my chaps on, grab my beat stick and dog and hit the brush for some good old squirrel hawking. Nevertheless, if I could eliminate the things I dislike most about longwings I would certainly give it a try. So, what does that look like? I first need to figure out what to hunt, what would be a formidable and plentiful prey species. Game birds in and around Lancaster County are few and far between these days. I'm not really interested in ducks (not to say if we would catch one I would be upset). We do have pheasants when the game commission stocks them, or grouse if you want to drive north to find them. I could hunt doves, starlings or sparrows. What about pigeons? They are everywhere, and they are fast! Years ago I used to fly homing pigeons so I'm somewhat familiar with how capable these birds are at dodging predators like the Cooper's hawk. This seemed to be the most logical choice for me as it's a species that is more of a nuisance to farmers and they are in no short supply.



Now I have the what; I just need the with. Typically when I hear longwing, I think of peregrine, gyrfalcon, prairie falcon, merlin, or kestrel. Although several of these longwings would certainly be capable of handling a pigeon, they were not what I was looking for at the time. I remember reading about the Aplomado falcon in one of the North American Falconry editions. In particular, I remember reading that they were pursuit falcons. At first I ruled them out, however pigeons typically stay close to home, unlike the mourning dove that will fly clear to the next county. Being a pursuit falcon I could just imagine getting to watch these flights unfold right before my eyes. Unlike a peregrine that would climb 800 to 2000 feet just to smoke one out of the air, also cool, but far more unpredictable. If this would work the way I imagined it working it would make for some great hawking. After some time and a lot of research I took the plunge and ordered a chamber raised female Aplomado from James Ingram out of Nebraska and named her Shredder.



It was the beginning of June 2015 when she arrived. I won't bore you with the training details as it was straightforward and pretty much uneventful. Manning went fast and we were flying in no time. We started out with sparrows to build her confidence. This was short-lived as they were far too easy for her to catch and she carried almost everyone. I could tell this was going to be a fun hawk from the start. She would give chase to anything that moved, even my dog Daisy.



We quickly moved on to pigeons as they became a bit more challenging for her, not to mention she can't carry them. For those of you who have flown small falcons, know all too well how stressful it can be when every Coop, peregrine and red-tail have them on the menu, especially a young hawk finding their wings. In the coming months we certainly had our fair share of close calls; as she became stronger her confidence and ego also became more obvious. I recall one afternoon when she had a nice flight on a pigeon, as the pigeon went for cover it flew through a barn with my falcon hot on its tail. As they both exited the barn a Coop had apparently joined the chase. (Let me just say this: I don't think any falconer really gets to see just how capable their birds are until the predator becomes the prey.)

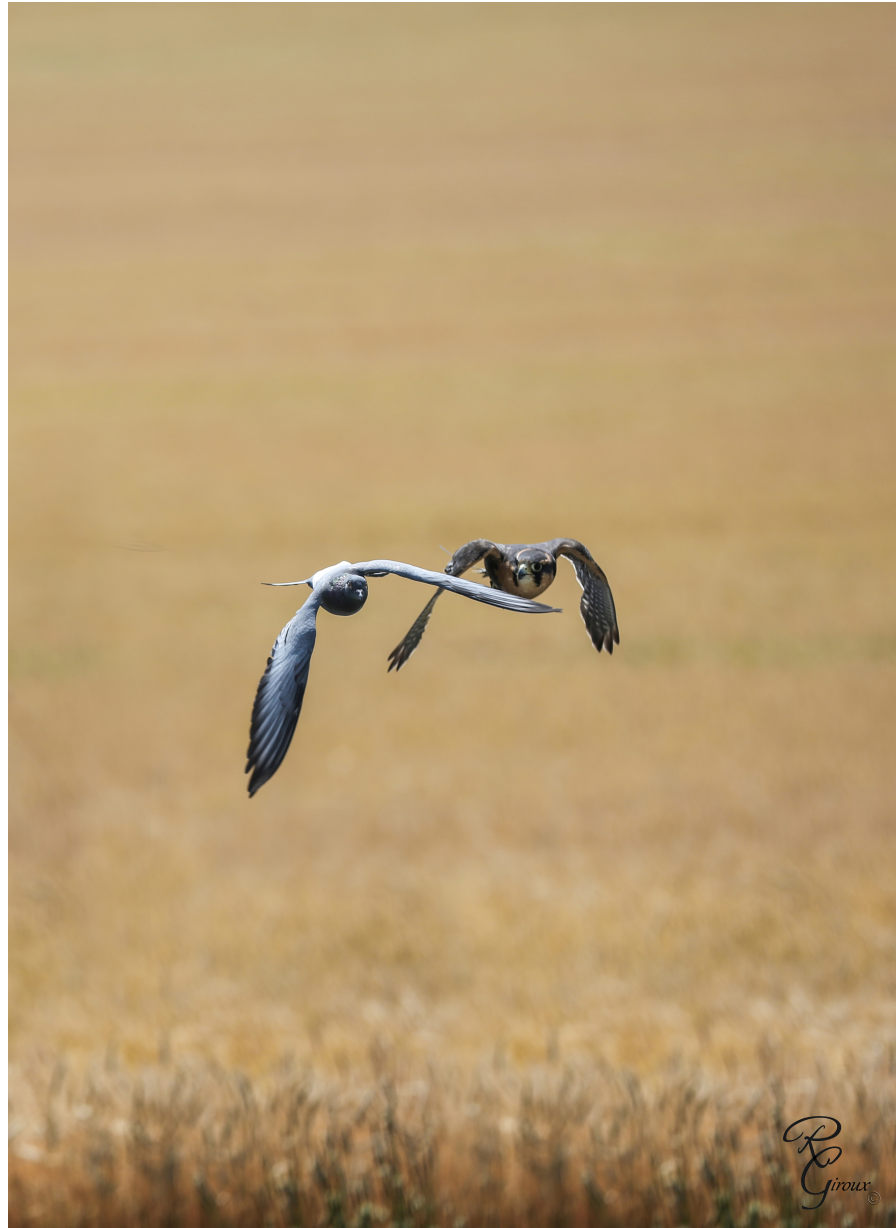
As that Coop chased her through the woods, she out-maneuvered and out-flew that Coop with what seemed to be with ease. She quickly turned the tide and chased that Coop out of her territory.

As our season continued she developed a fascination for rabbits. She would chase them every chance she got, but holding on too them proved too be difficult for her. These chases usually ended up with her getting raked off when the rabbit went into cover. This never really discouraged her as she continued to pursue them when flushed and eventually caught a rabbit in early January 2015. Although the thought of an 11 Ounce hawk catching 2 1/2 lb. rabbits was pretty cool, I figured it would just be a matter of time before she got hurt or destroyed her plumage, so we abandoned the rabbits and continued our quest for pigeons.





She went from flying with the pigeons, to half-ass chasing them, even antagonizing them for the fun of it. Then one day all the dots connected, the switch went on and her determination was undeniable. Pigeons are FAST, and I have a tremendous amount of respect for any raptor that can fly them down. Yes, I mean fly them down! Keep in mind this is not a ambush style of hunting. These hawks are not 1,000 feet up, spiraling down at a high rate of speed, or a sneak attack when



pigeons are on the ground feeding. These are hawks unlike anything I have ever flown; they break the will of their prey with speed, maneuverability, persistence and tenacity.

So, how could anything possibly be twice as exciting as hunting pigeons with an Aplomado? Flying a cast of Aplos, of course! Stay tuned for Chapter 2.

