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Hawking Late Season Valley Quail in Eastern Washington With an Alethe

By Jim Nelson

The first key to success with any form of hawking will be quality of the slip. To oversimplify, an inexperienced peregrine on ducks will have better chances for success if first slipped over a small pond holding a single dabbling duck than if slipped over a large lake holding a hundred divers. Simply stated, to ensure success, the hawk must have a distinct advantage.

The second key will be physical conditioning. A hawk in excellent shape will fly faster, longer, be more intimidating and become less discouraged during a rigorous flight than one not physically fit.



How do these principles apply to hawking gamebirds with an alethe? Given a hawk in good physical shape, slip factors favoring success will be 1) the hawk's visual contact with the quarry for the duration of the flight, 2) adequate stretches of open ground between significant escape cover, and 3) reasonably small, penetrable islands of escape cover the quarry may put into but can be re-flushed from--as opposed to an ocean of cover into which quarry may be permanently swallowed.

Here, in Washington, we have one quail species that predominates, the valley or California quail (*Callipepla californica*). Though beautiful and the right size, it can be frustrating because it depends more on hiding from raptors than outflying them. Therefore, most flights end up with

quail scampering about playing tag through endless acres of moderately high cover (such as sage brush) or burying deep into an impenetrable mountain of high piled pruning branches or deep culverts choked to the brim with tumbleweed. Both the alethe (female) and terceleto (male) are easily capable of taking quail. To best enjoy this type of hawking one must seek coveys in areas where they are most vulnerable and where the resulting flights have high visual appeal. Unfortunately, this is where quail least frequent, making locating superior quail slips for aplomados in this state a real challenge. However, the resulting flights are so much better than the typical rat hunt that for the quailhawking aleterio (a falconer specializing in aplomados) it is as worth searching the extra mile for a good quail slip as it is for the duckhawking longwinger making the extra effort to locate that perfect pond. Long searches for good quail slips are worth the effort.

When game hawking with an aplomado, whether pheasant, partridge or quail, search in wide open and level spaces with unbroken terrain, interspersed with small patches of cover to which the quarry will put but can realistically be relocated and routed from cover. If level ground is not available, search for broad gently rising slopes at the base of steeper ground so the flight is visible throughout and will most likely end before the quarry disappears over the top. With valley quail, difficulty lies not in their flight power (though some on occasion can be impressive) but in their ability to vaporize into cover and bury themselves so deeply the hunt soon resembles clam digging more than hawking. The trick is to recreate as closely as possible here in Washington with valley quail the general hawking scenarios presented in Arizona where Harry McElroy has enjoyed so much success on Gambell's and scaled quail.

I recall three such "clean" flights on valley quail with alethes in Eastern Washington. The first took place at the outskirts of the city limits in Soap Lake. After a long day of searching elsewhere, we happened upon a large level area that had small islands of cover surrounded by many acres of open ground. Because there was snow cover, the quail tracks were visible and we knew there was at least one good-sized covey in the area. My English setter, J.D. ran about sniffing for scent and soon locked up. I unhooded "Cuvee" and walked toward the setter. It was late in the day and the cold sky was darkening. The nervous quail exploded outward like a shotgun blast just in front of J.D.'s nose. As soon as the covey, a group of at least twenty, appeared Cuvee was off the fist. My heart accelerated, matching her sudden flurry of wings. The covey raced across an expanse of grass, yet more exposed by snow. Now in the distant gloom, the alethe was rapidly closing and I could just make out one quail lose heart and drop to the ground. Cuvee flipped over and disappeared as well. She must have become nervous, sitting exposed, because when we found her by telemetry she relocated with her quarry to quite a distance. Inside a small but thick patch of cover she stood on her quail, quite still. Well into her meal, she allowed me to pick her up easily, and I let her continue to have her pleasure.

The second flight took place hawking with Dan Robertson in the Tri-cities. We located a large covey in a patch of sage brush between buildings in an industrial area. We were a bit hesitant because this was juxtaposed to a nuclear energy complex with high security measures. However, with the quail marked down in a good sized patch of sage and a snow blanket of least 8" in our favor, it was too hard to resist. Holding Cuvee on the fist I approached the spot the quail last were sighted. Suddenly, thirty plump grey forms buzzed out of the snowfield in ones, twos and threes going in all directions; peaceful winter serenity to complete pandemonium in one second. Cuvee focused on a trio and pushed them into a snow-blanketed fortress of sage.

Other quail had dumped into similar fortresses, but we locked onto the trio. I called Cuvee from a sage bush and she took stand on my upheld fist. Dan and I trudged about and then there was whirring. Cuvee shot off the fist, locked onto a single. The aplomado was swift and the quail bailed into another much larger fortress. Relocation required a dog. Dan returned to the truck and led J.D. to the spot. The setter loped about then locked up at the edge of cover.

I gathered Cuvee onto my hand and approached. In situations like this, I prefer to let my dogs flush, though some call that bad form. J.D. made the whole thing easy by lunging in at the spot, forcing the quail into flight. Not having to poke around inside the soggy bushes on our hands and knees, Dan and I witnessed every wingbeat. The quail clattered its way upward through the snow-burdened branches then burst out into full flight. Alerted by the clatter and tensed for action, Cuvee blew off the fist the instant the quail cleared the branches. She streaked from my fist as straight and true as an arrow...for about 15'. The alethe struck the quail full force mid-flight and her momentum carried her forward, prey in hand. To our dismay she winged straight toward the high fence surrounding a nearby high-security warehouse. Forbidden! Then, to our immense relief, she cut hard to the right and landed with her quail at the base. There was a small opening there, too small for a human to crawl through, but no problem for an aplomado. I was careful to approach such that her typical defensive maneuver, hopping away dragging her kill, caused Cuvee to move further and further away from the opening in the fence. An irritating behavior aided me for once. When I was certain we were out of danger, I backed away and allowed her to calm herself and break in. After she had eaten the head and neck she became easier to approach and soon she sat on my fist secured for the happy ride home.



A third "decent" quail fight occurred during my winter break last year. Still a Washington resident at that time, I had returned from Alaska for a few days visit and wanted to fly some of my aplomados before heading back north. Raul Ramirez and Polo Ponce had done a great job readying them by getting them down to weight and doing some preliminary kiting. I requested they prepare a favorite of mine, Kit Kat. Not very big and somewhat noisy, she was nonetheless a motivated huntress.

My visit coincided with unusual weather. There was snow on the ground, but temperatures had warmed and there was also rain. I had little time for hawking, so I wanted every moment to count. Luckily, Dan Robertson and I encountered a calm afternoon when the rain abated and yet snow cover remained. We grabbed Kit Kat and Dan's peregrine, Dalva, and we began cruising the area for huns and ducks. After an extensive search and with the light waning, Dan mentioned a large covey of quail he consistently encountered. I dropped my sights from partridge to quail, feeling I would rather have a quail flight than no flight at all. The quail were indeed where Dan stated, a large covey, perhaps fifty or more. The rain liquified the top layer of snow, then temperatures dropped and a fine crust formed at the top. One could not ask for a better slip on quail in an other-

treed and heavily covered spot. The crust on the snow prevented the quail from burying themselves beneath and in between the roots. This would be an open hunt.

The flight itself was no big deal. There were trees in the distance and, flushing in front of them from the sage, the covey made for the grove out of habit. Hot on their heels, Kit Kat took a perch on a bare branch and surveyed the surrounding snowfield and the open patches of white dirt beneath her. Those who have lived this kind of quail slip know the outcome. It is almost too good and is offset only by the hard work one must endure to happen upon it. Such circumstances do not come together every day. Predictably, moments after we began to work the dog beneath her, Kit Kat was on the ground plucking her quail. Daylight was running short and we had a peregrine to take (Balva took yet another a drake that evening). The next day we returned for Round 2, but an easterly Chinook wind took the snow away and the quail moved *en masse* across a fast moving high-altitude area surrounded by dangerous power lines and transformers. I returned to Alaska with a smile on my face. I had a very short hawking season that year, two days, but ended at 50%. Not bad.

Valley quail are abundant, beautiful and a good sized quarry for the aplomado falcon. Unfortunately, throughout much of its range here in Washington, habitat does not favor open flights with long endings. If that is what you desire, you must make an intentional effort to locate California quail in slip situations that promote such an outcome. Look for quail in wide open areas where cover is broken, not vast and unbroken. Hunt on level ground or on broad gently sloping hillsides. Use the wind as an equalizer. It inhibits the random scurrying about by the quail and increases visibility for the hawk and is generally just a blast to hawk in.



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