

"The chapter of the modern Alethe has begun."

The above quote is from Jim Nelson's article, "In Search of l'Alethe," published in the 1996 NAFA Journal.



Aplomado falcon, Sargent Pepper, with bobwhite quail kill in Nebraska. Photo by Anita Johnson.

The *Versatility* of the High-mettled Aplomado



Penny Lane after taking a hen pheasant in Dumas, Texas. Photo by James Ingram.

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What are the capabilities of the aplomado falcon? I flew my first “terceletto” (male aplomado) in 2006 and had a fabulous time. I wrote about my experiences with Sgt. Pepper in *American Falconry* (Vol. 45, pp 30-36). I was so impressed with his performance and had so much fun that I always want to have an aplomado to fly. The season being over, I placed him in a breeding project with Jim Nelson’s female, Cuvee. Jim wrote about his experiences with this “alette” (female aplomado) in *American Falconry* (Vol.46, pp 6-16). The subsequent season, 2007, I started a new aplomado, but this time I decided to try the falcon. I was excited to observe what differences, if any, that existed between the sexes. By the end of the season, I did notice some differences and I will discuss this later.

Initially, I would like to list a bibliography of some articles about the Aplomado falcon that may be helpful and interesting:

- Hector, Dean P. Habitats Diet and Foraging Behavior of Aplomado Falcons. (Oklahoma State University, Stillwater. M.S. thesis, 1981.)
- McElroy, Harry. "A Falcon for the Bush." *Hawk Chalk*, Vol. XXXVI, No. 2. Pg28-35, North American Falconers' Association, August. 1987
- Nelson, Jim. "L'Alethe Revisited." *Newsletter*, Washington Falconers Association, December 1995
- Nelson, Jim. "In Search of the L'Alethe." *The Journal*, Vol. 35 pg. 23-29, North American Falconers' Association, 1996
- Nelson, Jim. "Correcting Weight Loss in Artificially, Incubated Falcon Eggs" *The Journal*, Vol. 43 pg. 90-93, North American Falconers' Association, 2004
- Hunt, W. Grainger, Cade, Tom J., Montoya, Angel B. "Home above the Range" *Natural History* May 2006, pg 48-54
- Ingram III, James M. "Hunting with the Aplomado Falcon in the U.S." *American Falconry*, Vol. 45, pg 30-36
- Nelson, Jim. "L'Alethe Reborn" *American Falconry*, Vol. 46 pg 6-16
- McElroy, Harry. "This Was Their Finest Hour" *American Falconry*, Vol. 48, pg. 6-14
- Aplomado Web site:
www.freewebs.com/americanbirdabatementervice

I received "Penny Lane" from Jim Nelson who lives in Kennewick, Washington. His aplomados are from Peruvian stock, *Falcon femoralis pichincha*, the darkest and largest subspecies, the Peale's of aplomados, as it were. Jim also produced Sgt. Pepper. I received my Penny at about 45 days and named her in keeping with my Beatles' tunes fetish. She was slightly older than Sgt. Pepper was when I received him the year before. The plan was to train her in a similar way. She was raised as a dual imprint by Jim—kept with her siblings for a period of time to ensure she would breed with other birds, but exposed to humans as well. Initially I placed live English sparrows in the chamber with her. She eventually killed and consumed them and I proceeded to quail, which she dispatched quickly and easily. Jim Nelson said the female had different capabilities than the male. He flew a female (Penny Lane's mother) that could easily fly down feral pigeons in fair flight, and his other female, Cuvee, could start from the fist, chase down and catch a

mid-winter Hungarian partridge. Harry McElroy, in his article in *American Falconry*--(Vol. 48, pp 6-14)--discussed how his female, Harlow, could easily take doves in fair flight and captured multiple quail every day.

Where I live in Nebraska there are no partridges and the doves head south as soon as the first cold weather hits. However, we do have pheasants, and Nelson assured me it was within the alette's capabilities to take adult hen pheasants. I was very skeptical. The aplomado falcon weighs 350 grams and hen pheasants are quite a bit larger. Even a female Cooper's hawk at about 500 to 600 grams has difficulty with hen pheasants. I proceeded, however, to gear her to take pheasants. In the chamber, before creance training, she was killing quail with ease so I started putting in young pheasants. She was somewhat intimidated by their larger size, even though they were younger and easier to kill than the quail. Eventually she killed a young pheasant in the mew and became more confident.

Nelson had trained Cuvee to hunt Hungarian partridges "out of the hood." He would run a setter and, once the dog was on point, unhood the falcon at the rising covey. With pheasants in my neck of the woods, this protocol was not going to work. Our pheasants rarely hold to a point and frequently flush at some distance out. In addition, if one did get a point with the dog, it could easily be a rooster. A rooster pheasant is a very tough customer and will fight hard to survive. As it was, I was very hesitant to attempt hunting hen pheasants with the aplomado because I did not want her injured. I didn't think trying to tackle a rooster would be at all prudent. Unlike Nelson, my flight technique was to free-fly Penny Lane from the fist to whatever flushed, be it sparrow or pheasant. I did give her a couple of bagged pheasants before hunting her properly. The bagged game was pen-raised and half-grown. She chased the first but would not commit to bind to it. After lowering her weight just a small amount, she chased the next about 50 yards, bound to it in the air, killed and started consuming it before I could arrive. However, I knew quite well that these pen-raised juveniles were quite different than wild adults in mid winter.

From here, Penny proceeded to catch several sparrows and miscellaneous birds. She seemed more inclined to chase larger birds than did Sgt. Pepper. Another difference was that the male always came back to the fist, ready for the next slip. This female wanted to hunt from the trees or a higher perch if it was available. This gave her a height advantage, yet she would follow me consistently from tree to tree as I walked along. In open country she tended to ride the fist much better. On one afternoon I hiked through a grassy field when a pheasant poult suddenly flushed up from the sea of cover. It was slightly larger than an adult quail. The aplomado flashed off my fist and snagged it in mid air. This happened again the next day, but the poult was then larger, about half the size of an adult.



Jim Nelson's female aplomado on a Hungarian partridge. Photo by Jim Nelson.

Our next success was awesome! A hen pheasant flushed about 50 to 100 yards out ahead as we covered the field. I did not see the flush until Penny was off my fist. The pheasant was flying low across a cut field toward a creek bed. The falcon was on the deck, pumping hard across the field toward the creek at an angle to intercept her oversized quarry. Aplomado and pheasant arrived at the creek simultaneously and both vaporized into the creek bed. The creek was approximately 200 yards away. I ran toward it, but secretly awaited her return, not really expecting success. She stayed down.

Arriving at the spot, I pulled out the telemetry and tracked her to the opposite bank of the creek where I found Penny already breaking into the head of a 2/3 grown hen pheasant. This was when I realized it really was possible for

a slender, undersized aplomado falcon to regularly catch and kill a rotund, oversized pheasant.

Over the course of the 2007 season I flushed many pheasants, hens and roosters. She chased them all and eventually caught two fully grown hens in open grassy areas. Typically, after the flush, the pheasant seemed to out-fly the falcon, but inevitably the aplomado would catch up and take the pheasant as it went into the cover. In my part of Nebraska, cover can be quite dense, and several times Penny was unable to bring her pheasant to bag. After giving up on fair flight, the pheasants would hit the ground running and then vaporize into the vegetation. I was more than impressed with my alette's abilities because her flight weight was about 350 grams and each pheasant she caught weighed in at 950-990 grams, almost three times her size. The

flights were fairly long and every time I arrived she had dispatched the hen and was feeding on the head and neck. Success became dependent upon the density of the cover. She was not put off by going into cover, but she was not able to crash through thick cover easily, so in thick cover the pheasants had the advantage.

In January of 2008, I took Penny Lane to Dumas, Texas to hawk pheasants in the *real* wide open spaces. Here there was much more open ground and far less dense cover. Pheasants—lots of them—hunker in the tail-water pits on the edges of the crop fields. When you flush them, they have no choice but to cross wide-open cut crop land. While there, I found a strip of CRP holding a flock of over 100 pheasants. The birds erupted in all directions and the chase was on!



Sherrie and Justin Stoval's cast of first year aplomado falcons on a hen pheasant. Photo by Sherrie Stovall



Female aplomado flown by Dave Baker on one of several pheasants of the year taken with this bird in the fall of 2006. Photo by Jim Nelson.

The aplomado chased pheasants 500-1000 yards, always driving them to cover. She did this time and time again and never seemed to tire. She tagged several hens when they hit the ground, but they would flush and the chase was back on. Impressed by the flights, but at the same time a bit disheartened by the lightness of my game bag, I was beginning to think maybe wild pheasants were not a genuine mainstay for an aplomado.

The next day I set out with about 10 other falconers. Our mission: pheasants. I decided to lower her weight slightly, from 340 grams to 330 grams, to see if

it would make a difference in her tenacity. We arrived at a tail-water pit that held several pheasants. I walked up the pit, alette on hand, and pheasants exploded everywhere—right across open ground. Penny came off my fist in a flash and, fortunately, locked on a hen. Initially, her quarry pulled away, but the aplomado was determined and pumping hard. She caught up to the pheasant about 1000 yards out and bound to it on the ground. I sprinted off as the other falconers watched the battle through the binoculars in sheer amazement. By the time I reached her, she had vanquished her monstrous prey and had broken into its head. No one

could believe such a small falcon could tackle and kill this pheasant, almost three times her size.

Early on, when Jim Nelson told me an aplomado falcon was capable of killing a hen pheasant I was skeptical. When Harry McElroy told me he would be surprised if it could take something that big, I was worried about traveling down this road. But after witnessing this event in Texas, I have no doubt in my mind that female aplomados can easily chase down and kill hen pheasants. Aplomado falcons have tremendous endurance and an incredible will to catch and kill. They are fearless in a ground tussle. The pheasants she



Sherrie and Justin Stovall bag a big rooster pheasant with their cast of aplomado falcons. Photo by Spence Wise.

took were hard-conditioned wild winter-birds, strong and—until meeting Penny—proven survivors. There is no doubt in my mind that in this wide-open, sparsely vegetated environment—or in any other area similar to it—the female aplomado could take a hen pheasant any time she wanted to.

The aplomado falcon is a very capable predator. I did notice some differences between male and female aplomado. The male always wanted to hunt from my fist and would immediately fly back after missing the quarry. The female would rather

hunt from a higher position, like the trees, and would frequently mark the quarry after a miss and wait for me to reflush. The male was a more capable and successful hunter of small birds. The female caught several, but later started to refuse them for larger quarry. When flying the male, weight control did not seem to be an issue. Of course, both sexes were dual imprinted. The male could be flown at any weight and was at moulting weight most of the time. Regardless, he chased birds with equal vigor and intensity. The female required weight management.

She was much more aggressive at a lower weight. The day she tagged several pheasants in Texas, she was 340 grams. However, when lowered 10 grams to 330 grams, she caught and killed the next pheasant that crossed her path. Both sexes are equally capable and intense quail hunters. My friend, Justin Stovall, flew a male aplomado in Florida during the same 2007 season and caught several quail. “Chase” behaved in a similar manner to Sgt. Pepper in all respects. During one memorable flight, Chase flew a wild adult bobwhite to cover, dropped down through the tall weeds, and



The Stovalls with their cast of aplomados and the game caught on a recent trip to Texas. Photo by Spence Wise.

ran the quail down on foot. That was an amazing feat for a long-wing, but maybe not so amazing for the versatile and high-mettled terceletto.

Ilove this species of falcon. It is intelligent and easy to work with, a joy to fly and watch. Aplomado falcons will carry small birds, as do most small falcons. They cache the quarry many times if they do not consume them. Picking up an aplomado on a bird that is too large to fully consume, but small enough to be carried, is the biggest challenge. Eating a sparrow or two is no problem, nor is catching a pheasant (gravity takes care of that). But

a quail could be a problem. I plan on focusing on the “pick up” after a kill with my next bird.

Concerning the two birds I trained, I did allow them to kill live quarry in the mew and consume them without me being present. I think this procedure may lead to carrying the quarry away from me in the field. I believe the imprint wants to carry the quarry away from you because it views at you as a sibling. It won’t go far, though. Once you are out of sight, it will eat or cache more expediently. If you enjoy flights off-the-fist at avian quarry, the aplomado is an awesome and capable falconry bird.

No doubt about it, the aplomado falcon is as capable, versatile and high-mettled falcon, as Jim Nelson has discovered. This bird can easily take grasshoppers, dragonflies, sparrows, doves, quail, feral pigeon, grey (Hungarian partridge), and female ring-neck pheasants as well as any miscellaneous bird in between. I would say that is versatile! The aplomado is very intelligent. It has speed, endurance, persistence and flare. It will take short slips or very long slips. The aplomado is also very accepting of multiple hunting partners. In my experience, it doesn’t matter how many

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people are in the field with you, the bird will work with everyone. I once found myself at a meet with fifty people in the field with me. My aplomado male flew from person to person, utilizing them as perches to launch his attacks.

In the wild, aplomado falcons have been consistently observed to participate in cooperative hunting. Mated pairs will work together which improves success rate, efficiency, size of prey captured, and reduces risk of injury. The siblings have been seen to hunt cooperatively for a significant period after fledging. Individual aplomados have been observed following maned wolves, capturing quarry flushed by the canine. In his thesis at the University of Texas at Austin in 1975, Dean Purdy Hector mentions that the success rate of pair-hunts involving avian prey is more than double the success rate for solo pursuits: "...the average size of prey captured in pair hunts is nearly triple the average in solo hunts and the efficiency with which the highly maneuverable birds like the Columbidae are

captured. When falcons hunt in pairs they seem to chase the more difficult to capture prey more persistently than hunting alone. It may be advantageous to continue pair flights over longer distances and periods of time than solo flights since the average success rate is higher and the size of the prey captured in pair hunts is much greater than average." Justin Stovall, in Florida, is currently raising and hunting a male and female aplomado together this year, entering them on game together in hopes of flying a cast of aplomado falcons that will cooperatively hunt. Harry McElroy is doing the same in Arizona. In Washington, Jim Nelson is attempting to train multiple cohorts of four to fly together for future abatement work. It will be interesting to see the results of all of these efforts and to see what can be accomplished, and also to find out if there is an advantage to this for the falconer. With the exception of Nelson, who prefers the quieter parent-reared or chamber-reared alettes, the birds we are flying are dual imprinted, raised with siblings for a period of time so they will even-

tually breed with other aplomado falcons, but exposed to humans and very tame. This tameness allows falconers to hunt the dual imprints at a higher weight.

The aplomado falcon has been utilized successfully by Central and South American falconers for a long time, and the alethe was utilized in the distant past as a tremendous falconry bird in Europe. I do believe, as Jim Nelson put it, that the "chapter of the modern alethe" has begun. The aplomado falcon is the whole package. It is the ultimate falconry bird with tremendous versatility and potential. I guarantee that if you choose to fly one at avian quarry you won't be disappointed. There is still so much for us to learn about this species and its capabilities. Thanks go to Jim Nelson (with strong support from Harry McElroy) and Doug Alton for their efforts and persistence in bringing this species to us so it can be utilized and enjoyed by falconers here in the United States.

