

"This Was Their Finest Hour"

W. Churchill, Speech about Dunkirk in 1940



Quail Point, photo by L. McElroy

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For some years now, I have grouched about not having my fair share of exceptional hawks. It seems as if I always see the more advanced specimens in the hands of my friends. After the 2007 season, however, my friends are looking at the hawk in my hands.





Author flushing a quail that has put in, photo by L. McElroy.

JEAN HARLOW

I now fly the imprinted, once-intermewed aplomado falcon, "Jean Harlow." Dorothy Van Note, who hand-raises aplomados from Jim Nelson's breeding project, christened this hawk with its name. She raised this "hawk in falcon's clothing" just right. Not only was it perfectly tame right out of the box, it was also cooperative and fast-flying. Any aplomado that consistently and deliberately works close-in, I call, for want of better wording, "intensely bonded," and Jean Harlow was intensely bonded from day one.

DOVE

Harlow started her first season in our rather open southern Arizona desert by breaking my records on mourning doves. For the past few years, I have taken doves while the adults are still molting

and the young are not quite up to speed. During the early part of the season, these doves tend to bail out and plunge into the bush after a flight of several hundred yards, making them a most challenging prey. In these flights, the falcon charges after the dove in direct pursuit. Often, the falcon "tests" several doves before locking on to one and pressing it to the end of its life. Waiting-on and stooping are not part of the aplomado's repertoire. Flights at dove may be long and complex, with numerous charges from above with wings whirring, or they may cover only a few hundred yards before breaking off the pursuit. The flights may occur in the open or in heavy cover. The female aplomado will thunder into the bush behind an evading dove, and it is some help to have dogs to reflush or point during a chase in the bush. A few of the more

frightening pursuits cover over two miles, and many falconers know the mourning dove may seek refuge at human dwellings. My approach for several years has been to fly a pair of aplomados in this hunt, but so far I have not done well in this ambition. Thanks to Nelson's generosity, I'll include a tiercel again in 2008.

QUAIL

The 2006 season was the poorest for quail in 30 years of surveys made by the Arizona Game and Fish Department. Our southeastern state region, with both Gambel's and scaled quail, was particularly hard hit with 10 years of below-average rain fall. It was some relief to have near-normal rain during the 2006 winter and spring. Our 2007 quail season saw a slight recovery, but not enough to encourage shooters, of whom we saw very few in the field.



Female ailette on scaled quail, photo by B Linde

Early this season, the birds were very difficult to find, but after some time I had about 18 locations—carefully recorded—where birds could be found. When hunting with friends, we went to one of these locations, but when flying alone I often sought out various locals where the quail had been found in years past. Many of these ventures of the latter were birdless searches. Harlow started so late this season that the opportunity for flights at young or molting dove had past, so we concentrated on quail. She was flown off the horse in my usual free-flight style, accompanied by two pointers and a feist, Schubert, serving the reflush. Sadly enough, Schubert often ignored her flushing responsibilities and in cover caught many of the quail herself.

DESPICABLE CREATURES

The dog support during the '07 season was very nearly a disaster. Our old English pointer, Mozart, now 10, was in poor health and only run every third day because he would not retain weight despite special dietary and medical attention. He almost never fails to make finds with his unique ability to control the difficult desert quail. Because of his health problems, I had taken on two pups—a Brittany and another English pointer. Between the two pups I just about had to turn myself into the mental ward. I won't bore the reader with a detailed description of these two, but allow me to make a comment or two. At one point they ran away from home. We ran an ad in the paper and received

reports from locations several miles to the east. One rancher finally called to report them at her place 11 miles east of here. The Brittany returned after six days, and the English pointer after seven. Each was loaded with porcupine quills, and the English pointer required expensive extraction by our vet because many of the quills were deep in her mouth and around her eyes. Because this young pointer was so mystifying, I had a friend who is accomplished with dogs make a five-day evaluation of her. He was not enthusiastic about the prospects of home training, and his suggestion was to consider replacement or employ a professional trainer. However, I saw a glimmer of hope mixed in along with her unusual behavior and began the



Author calling aplomado falcon to the fist, photo by Dr. Charlie Kertay

long and painful process without professional assistance. I have to confess that I am rather fond of this large white pup with her outlandish behavior, but Lord only knows why. Month after month she ran off while hunting and would return to the truck after dark, or had to be chased down with telemetry. When quail were flown to prickly pear cactus, she seemed to enjoy eating her way in to find them, and when they sought refuge in packrat dens, she loved to pause a moment and then dive in as if a fish in the ocean. It was at this point I realized I should have named her Sherman, after the tank, but I had already labeled her Sousa, after John Phillip Sousa. I pray that his spirit will forgive me. Finally, toward the end of the second season, she began to find and point birds occasionally.

STYLE

As the season wore on, the alette, Harlow, began to polish her style in pursuit of our small upland game, and from about mid-season on she took them with remarkable gusto. Her chases covered the spectrum from following quail down holes, crawling over the backs of the dogs, to high and long flights from distant slips. On close slips, she began to fall in below her prey and fly as low as possible and would have needed a shovel to have flown any lower. It was some surprise to see her at top speed skimming along the desert floor, dodging in and around cover, behind quail that were flying high above the shrub. How she could keep them in view was beyond me. Quite like the Cooper's and Harris', she often ended her flight by

tossing high to float down. In the low flights, this was our only clue of her location because she quickly disappeared in the bush. Another exceptional quality was her tendency to take birds in areas where my other hawks, for some reason, had been unable to score. I don't mean to imply that she was a perfect hawk, because all have some fault or another. Harlow was most rambunctious and threw herself into the game with resultant feather, cere, and foot problems.

Because our quarry is so scattered in this desert, it is typical to score only a single quail every other day, but, to my surprise, Harlow began to score daily. It was even a greater surprise to see her taking doubles on many days. On several hunts, I found myself completely overcome by my



White winged dove and aplomado falcon, photo by B Linde.

inherent gluttony, and I allowed her to take several more than doubles, but her behavior on following days made me return to more sensible hawking with a two-quail limit. Even toward the end of her second season, Harlow redoubled her effort to fly with increased determination and speed. She became what I call "wedded" to quail—she could be called off small birds in mid flight and would bank around at the whistle.

SOMETHING WITHIN

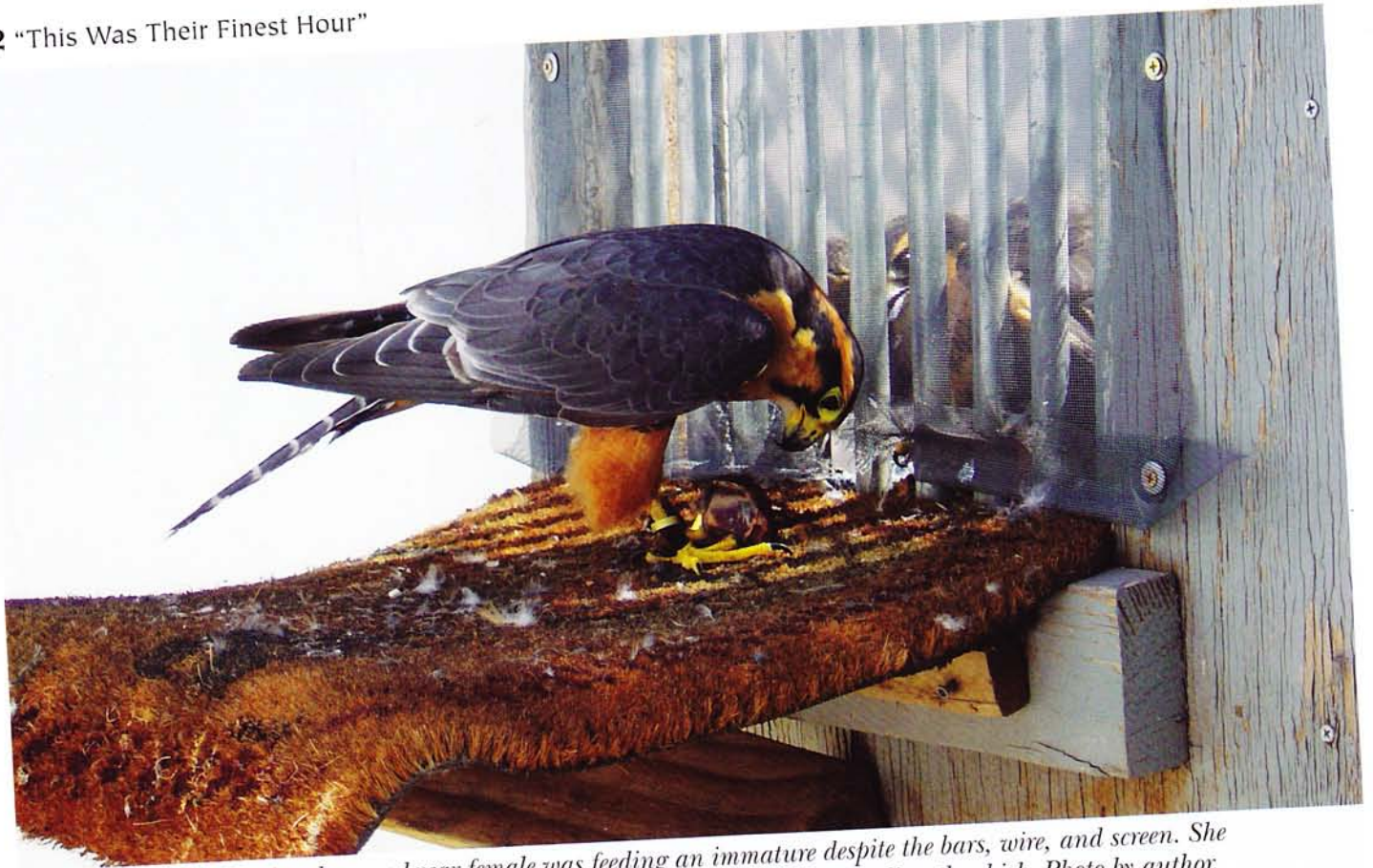
Falconers seem split down the middle on the reason some hawks are exceptional performers. Some state that heroic technique is

involved while others merely shrug their shoulders and surmise that it is the result of individual differences. To each his own, I suppose, but I tend to go with the latter because I use the same general conditioning and training approach with each, while allowing for differences. So, when I have an exceptional hawk, I think in terms of the individual.

THE LAST HURRAH

Flights on the last two days of the season were not remarkable—but presented the usual entertainment. On Sunday, February 10th, the day before the end of the season, friends came by to watch Harlow one last time.

With our assembly of dogs and horses, we headed for the open area beside the rail road tracks east of home. This grassy domain offers easy walking and normally a clear view of the flights. In the group was: Ron Palmer; Tim Riordan; Bob Carlson; his two apprentices, Sean Canterbury and Lane Ellwood; Nathan and Claire Charlton and their baby Isaiah; and Steve and Dorothy Van Note. I walked, turning the horses over to the guests so they could experience the thrill of the spirit and smooth gait of the Peruvian Paso. They took turns and cruised all over the area. We were all surprised to see that they were accomplished riders.



This imprinted, second-year female was feeding an immature despite the bars, wire, and screen. She messed up the author's weight control daily until he caught her feeding the chick. Photo by author.

After a walk of some distance, we were scattered all across the desert, with the main group headed east along the tracks, when I realized that I had not seen for some time the old pointer, Mozart. I consulted the receiver and heard an "on point" signal far behind us near a slight drainage. We found him locked up in heavy grass, and as we moved in Harlow went up a few feet. At our approach the covey dispersed, some flying and others running. Harlow dove in to take a bird on the ground. I'm not entirely sure what happened on the second quail, but one of the dogs caught it, so we decided to continue hawking. The third slip with reflushes back and forth occurred in the area parallel to the tracks, with runners, riders, dogs, and the hawk racing along in mass confusion amid the laughing and yelling. One falconer saw the hawk sweep in to take the bird on a reflush, and another remarked that the feist had taken it. So, who knows? At that point, we decided to head for home; the trucks were

miles away. For the evening we had a quail fry, a touch of hair off the dog that bit us, and Bob Carson playing guitar tunes of his own composition. It was a fitting end to the season with friends.

The following day, February 11th, was the last of the season and I hawked it alone, riding my horse, Juanito, and running the two pups with the feist. This area is in gentle open hills with cover in the drainages. I started early in the afternoon, with about three hours of light remaining, and actively searched through the usual areas where quail had been found during the season. We found no birds there. I decided to ride a few miles to the north to an area along the tracks again, notwithstanding that location usually proved too rough for consistent and comfortable hawking. Over the years I had taken few birds here, what with the deeply-cut ravines, a few well over the horse's head. There, some ravines ran parallel to the tracks, and others from drainages in the hills, but there were

few places for the horse to enter or exit. There were cattle trails leading along narrow crumbling ridges, but a good memory is necessary to locate them, and riding the narrow ridges carries some risk. It all but carried the odor of the owl. This area has heavy cover, and I well remember losing a previous falcon here late one afternoon—she drifted far down the tracks during the night and came in the next morning before light, I suppose by hearing the beep of the receiver. We were running low on luck and time was passing in this last day. I could think of no alternative for the last search.

At our approach quail lifted up in a cloud with some flying overhead and others scattering in all directions. As luck would have it, Harlow selected one that flew toward the heavy cover and she dropped down in a low flight and was out of sight instantly. The radio led me toward the tracks, and I worked my way through the ravines along a cattle trail following the beep

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I approached the very hackberry tree where I had lost the falcon years before just as the signal grew loud. I slipped out of the saddle and pushed my way into the heavy brush, trying my best to locate her quickly. The fear of the owl had me in its cold embrace. After a few circles I found her eating the quail under the hackberry on bare open ground.

There was plenty of light remaining, so I decided to try the open desert to the south where part of the huge scattering of birds had flown. The pups were going nuts with scent everywhere, and before we could get into the open a single flushed, and it too headed for the heavy cover back toward the tracks with the hawk in pursuit. This time I could not sort out the signal, but some time later I found Harlow in a tree just above me. The ground was covered in a large stand of tall grass. I must have walked through every blade of that grass patch three times. We could not find the bird and the pups kept streaking

out when called in to search. The odor of so many birds had them completely unhinged. Only the feist stayed to search in the grass.

Back in the saddle, I rode out toward the open again, but the hawk returned to the cover. I rode back to check and saw her make a long slow flight across several drainages to perch on the top of a large tree. I had not seen a quail but suspected that the long high flight was made with birds in mind. I saw the pups run in and charge toward her, but before I could get close, the dogs flushed a bird at the base of the tree. The hawk made another high flight back toward the hackberry. I had to backtrack to find the cattle trail to get through the main drainage so I was quite late in arriving at the site. The radio led me back to the hackberry, and I found her hovering above a generous stand of cockle burr weeds beside the tree. The feist was inside chasing the quail around, and Sousa stood outside the weed patch on staunch point. The Brittany, Rachmaninoff,

stood well to the side, as usual, only mildly curious about the commotion and refusing to get involved. I ran in with the flushing stick as the hawk repeatedly dove in and then back up to hover. Before I could do more than enter the weed stand, the feist pushed the bird into the air and the alette took it just above the ground in a stoop from 10 feet.

And so ended my personal season of seasons representing, "Their Finest Hour." This hawk had taken over one-third more quail than my previous records set years ago during better quail years with either the passage Cooper's or passage Harris'. Not only had she started the season late, but I had been out of the field for a full two weeks with a respiratory infection. Considering my age, well into advanced senility, any claims by me of heroism would be completely ludicrous. It is only my opinion, of course, but I see this record established by an unusual performer, Jean Harlow, the alette. Long live the alette.

