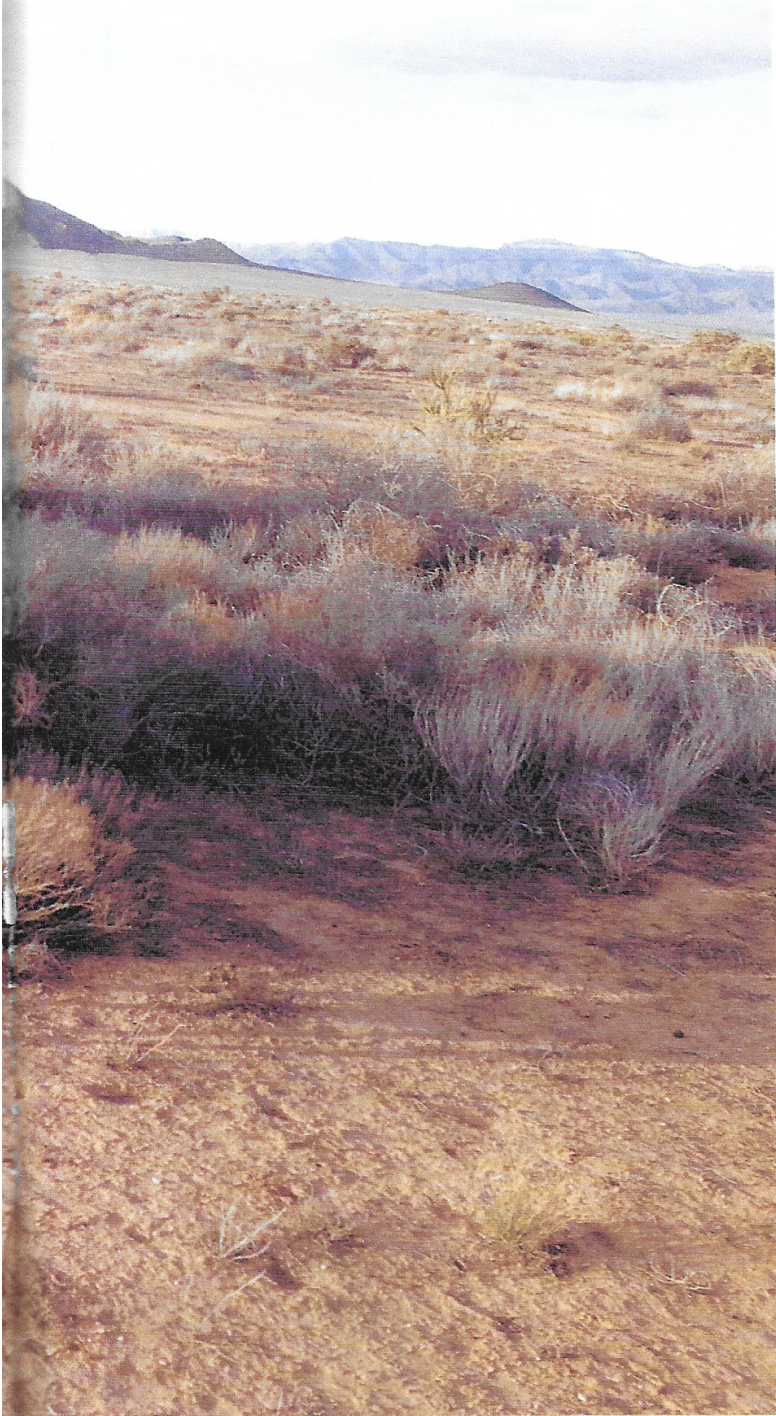


# Gyraplo: A Second Look

**Harry McElroy**  
**Photos by Beth McElroy**  
**Kingman, AZ**



Many falconers enjoy flying hawks over a period of years, watching their skill develop. With that in mind, I kept a sharp eye on this imprinted falcon during her second season. We again flew Gambel's quail in our relatively open desert. Our birds are found in expanses of cholla cactus (with mostly cattle tanks for moisture and an annual rainfall of nine inches). This was a second year with a poor hatch rate, so we were flying mostly mature birds. The scarcity of prey again slowed development for hawk and dog. To our dismay, we found no birds in some areas that had been the most productive in years past. Beth has become addicted to riding her spirited Peruvian mare, Belle, accompanying me on the hunt and helping in this complex sport of quail and falcon.

Those who appreciate the direct pursuit of the aplomado would enjoy the thrill of watching this larger hawk sporting the gyr's flash. Boomer is more suited for the larger uplands and lacks the efficiency of the Harris', Cooper's and pure aplomado in the down and dirty rat hunt for quail. However, her sky-eating dash and top speed are enthralling. Paul Hilmo calls this hawk the giant aplomado.

Because the gyr half of her nature is not the best fit for quail, it is good to have Beth along for a second set of eyes and to serve as a perch. Boomer accepts sitting on Beth's fist during the reflush and as we ride along during the hunt. She frequently flies close to Belle and Beth to check on what they are doing. Boomer prefers breezy days where she makes frequent, short exploratory flights. Beth very often spots the wily quail sneaking out while I am on the ground reflushing. Catching quail is, after all, a reflush game.



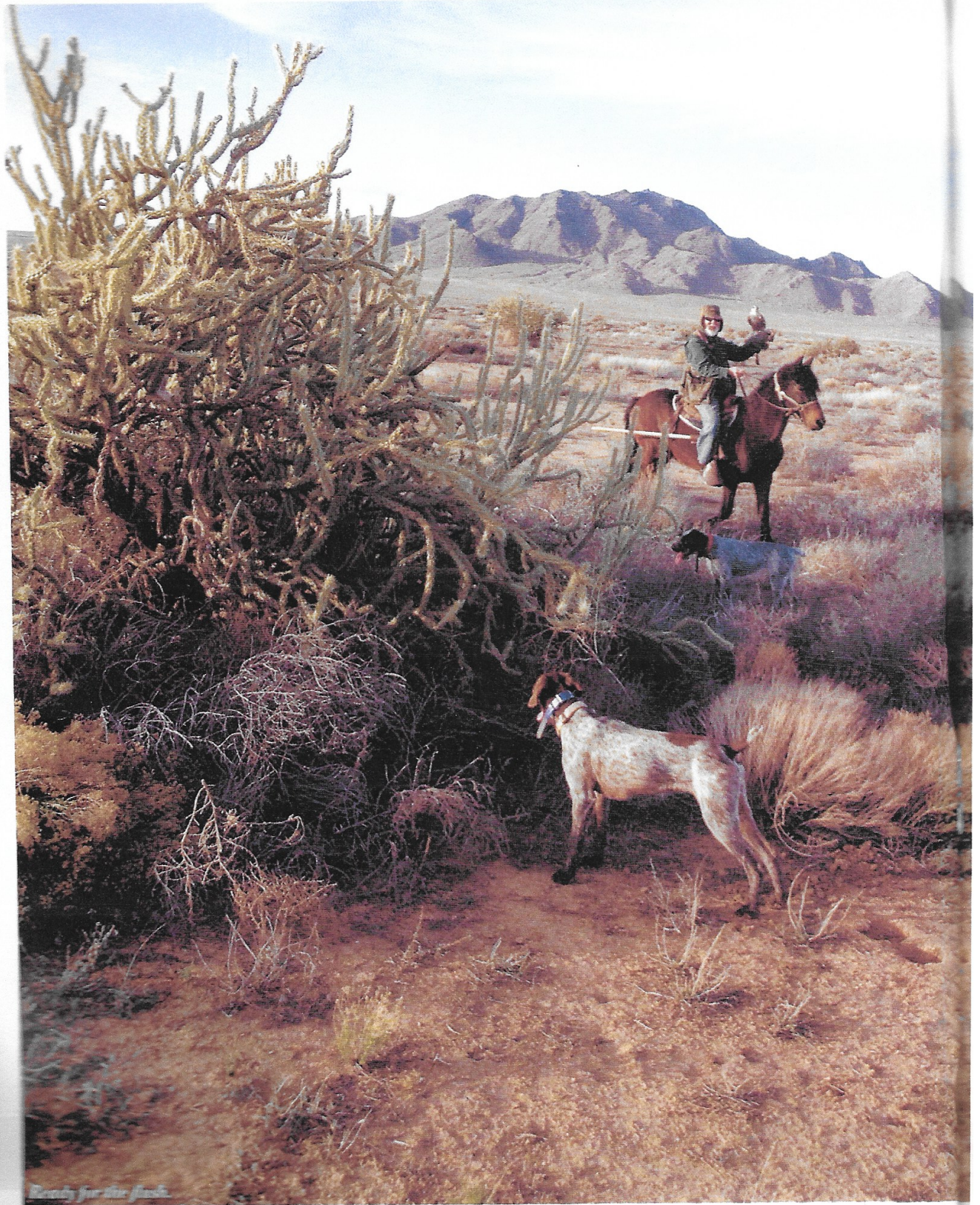
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# Falconry







Ready for the flesh





*Gyr x aplomado hybrid, Boomer, catching a ride.*





*The carry.*

Sadly enough, our old pointer, Hablo, has retired, and his replacement—now in her third year—had no idea about our mission during early season. Nina loves to run big but was reluctant to come in when a bird was flown to cover. It was a couple of months into the season when I asked Edison for help via the Garmin collar. With this encouragement she slowly began to develop into what I would call about one-third of a dog. Boomer, in her second year, is completely at ease with Nina and ignores the dog while on the ground searching for or eating prey.

Like last year, Boomer is flown on an every other day rotation. Jamaica Smith and I fly the HHs in between. Her high performance, Coulson-bred hawk is a quail machine.

In overall behavior and training, this falcon started the year where she ended the last. Boomer remained high-strung as ever and like a gyr hybrid in general, she demonstrated the speed to overtake most anything in front of her. There is little doubt that her aplomado half contributes to her top end. Toward the end of last year she no longer roared in behind other falcons, ravens, etc. to play tag. By now she ignored most anything in her space. On windy days Boomer began to hover for extended periods—just above the cactus—as we worked to reflush. There is something unnerving about a falcon locked in just above your shoulder. We began to wonder about a touch of Kestrel blood flowing through her veins. Being 50% gyr, I questioned Boomer's ability to tolerate our moderate

high desert temperatures, but flying in 40s through 60s has not caused problems.

One of her most endearing habits is sitting the fist, and she gives us a thrill by returning from flights on which she has gone out of sight by coming in unsighted from any angle to perch on my head, shoulder, or fist. Like last season, I continued to encourage the return by offering tidbits now and again; however, this season she modified her tendency to fly birds to cover and immediately return to the fist. Boomer began to go into cover with the prey more often and chase on foot, working with the dog. This was a welcome improvement.

Her most heartening change was in the pick-up. In the place of a reluctance to tolerate the pick-up after eating a quail, Boomer, well



into the second season, began to run to the fist for an offering. As time went by she gradually accepted the more traditional trade-off for the loaded lure.

**A**fter a second year, I am more comfortable in placing a label on Boomer. She is obviously able to perform like a gyr flying long distances at speed and stand on tail to shoot straight up several hundred feet, but her behavior in general is more aplomado-like. She is heat tolerant, with good acceleration and most impressively intent on being social. Boomer wants to be with me, and at the same time she is slow to accept training inputs. Perhaps Paul Hilmo has hit the nail on the head: the giant aplomado.

## Hunts

### Towering Up January 6, 2016

Of late Boomer has begun to bond more strongly, but today's behavior did not support that trend. It was in the mid 40s as we pulled into one of our more open areas with a breeze of about 15 mph. Boomer returned to the fist as I attached the dog collar and stayed with me for the mile ride to the area where the dog kicked up birds. Something made me hope she would cooperate during the pick-up on game. At the slip she roared off the fist to force the quail to cover and, to my surprise, she towered up straight quite high under full power. The bird reflashed while Boomer climbed and headed east with Boomer dropping down to ground level at her top speed. I saw the dog, Nina, running behind, but the hawk was out of sight in a few seconds. I put the horse in the fast gait and watched for her return. *No hawk!* I wondered if she had caught the quail in the flight.

After some distance, I hauled out the antenna and continued riding east. It wasn't long before the reading came from the rear and Juanito took only a few steps back before I spotted Boomer depluming the quail beside a yucca cactus! My faithful pointer ran in imme-

diately to start digging in a hole beside Boomer, who demonstrates no reaction to this dog when on prey, but I called Nina off anyway. I began the usual conditioning, walking the horse around Boomer, etc. I have begun calling her to the fist after the quail is eaten with limited success. Today she pulled at the chunk of meat on the fist and turned to fly away several hundred yards. I found Boomer perched on bare ground with two ravens joining her. I picked her up using the Pick Up Stick. Obviously the advancement in bonding does not include advancement in the pick-up.

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### East of Long Mountain January 10, 2016

It looked like all the ducks were in a row today; the temperature was 45 degrees, there was a hint of a breeze, and the gyraplo was at weight. I was hawking alone and headed for an open area east of Long Mountain, which is a beautiful spot. Since the old dog, Hablo, retired this year and our quail population is down for a second year, hunting has taken on a philosophical tint. We should all appreciate the desert and expanses of publicly-owned land.

I rode for a mile to the southwest and turned to the east, searching the scattering of cholla where the quail are found. I had been following a shallow drainage ditch for

some time after a mile of drifting that direction now and again trying to locate the dog. Nina, a marathon runner, had only recently begun to demonstrate a hint of promise and was beginning to come back in when called to locate birds flown to cover. Garmin makes a good collar. Far ahead, Nina pushed several Gambel's out of the tumbleweed covering the drainage ditch and the falcon burst off the fist for a flight far out of sight, but as usual, I was able to spot Boomer when the quail put in, and she was turning to make passes over the area. I set the horse into the fast gait and Boomer returned to the fist for the ride back!

**I**selected a large cholla with a raven nest toward the top as the most likely site. The dog searched for some time, finally ranging out of the area. Nina was unable to relocate, and I turned the horse back to the area where the birds had been found. Just as we reached the area, Boomer left the fist to fly out to the northwest. Within a few steps, I stopped watching the flight and turned back when I heard the explosive flush of quail just to the rear of the horse. It was some shock to twist around in the saddle and see Boomer right over my head flaring in an attempt to strike one of the birds. She swung around behind a quail and flew it back to the same cholla with the raven nest. Boomer circled the cholla several times, then returned to the fist as I charged the horse in. Nina fell into staunch point on the large cholla with its mass of tumbleweed collected at its base. I put Boomer on my head, one of her favorite perches, and took a swipe at the weeds with the flushing stick. The quail burst out, flying back down the drainage with his newly found friend on his tail feathers in hot pursuit. The bird dropped into another cholla 150 feet out with the usual array of dried tumbleweed and a large pack rat den. Boomer dropped to the ground to run about the base as Nina froze in place on the downwind side. Boomer had no perch in the area and flew to the fist as



I ran the 150 feet. I placed her on my head again and began to pull out weeds. Boomer took the bird as it blasted off.

Not content to end the hunt on a happy note, Boomer carried the quail for something approaching half a mile after eating most of it. She then scurried about with it refusing to eat. I wondered if it was an indicator that her aplomado breeding was nudging her into caching?

### **A Cloud of Quail January 16, 2016**

Beth and I entered the open area east of Long Mountain, enjoying the mild temperature of 53 degrees and a modest north breeze. We covered the area riding from north to west, then east, and finally back to the west. Eventually we were beginning to feel sorry for ourselves when Nina snaked around to point while in mid turn. A single lifted off, flying to the northeast, when a cloud of quail arose from the open. Boomer turned sharply to follow them in a long flight ending with birds dropping out of the sky in singles and doubles. There was scant cover and they went to ground over several hundred feet. The falcon returned to the fist as we charged the horses toward them but immediately burst off for a single headed east. I marked the lone bush well and ran Juanito that direction as I heard Beth sing out, "She's on point. Nina is on point!" Conflicted, I turned to look as Boomer came swinging back to the fist.

**W**ithout thinking, I pulled Juanito hard left and rode to the site with Beth. Sure enough, the dog was immobilized at a bush. I jumped to the ground, handing Boomer to Beth. As I tapped the cholla, the quail took off eastward. My view was blocked by the cactus; I shouted to Beth to keep the hawk in view since she was in the saddle. Boomer followed the quail to cover, pressing hard as it plowed into the scant cover; the falcon flew above swinging back and forth several times. At the site, the dog did not



*Boomer is back on the fist with full crop ready to go home.*



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relocate and, as is her custom, began to work wide. Beth said she was sure of the location, which had low growing weeds with one small bush in its center.

I called the dog back to search the site again, and in a few moments Nina locked up, towering above the small bush in the center. Boomer was on the fist, and I asked Beth to ride in for the flush. Boomer charged as the quail flew, forcing it to a cactus where she went to ground, then reflushed it to overtake as the quail entered another cactus about 30 feet out.

### Quail in the Open January 19, 2016

Beth and I hawked Utopia today. The temperature was in the 40s with a modest breeze out of the north. This area has a long strip of moderate to thick cholla running east to west, and it is open to the north and south sides. We find quail here about 90% of the hunts, and we're quite fond of the place; plus, it is only a 20-minute drive from home. Today we are running the pup with our three-year-old pointer, Nina. They love to run big and often enough must be recalled when quail are flown to cover, but this afternoon, surprisingly enough, they stay in closer and work with us as if birds are in the area.

After parking the truck in a different location, we started off by riding from west to the east fence through the string of cactus. We then turned south into the open and, after a ride of some distance, the dogs flushed a covey of 15 birds from along the fence. Both the dogs followed the falcon as she poured on the coal to the south. Strange as it may seem, the covey was far into the open and no place to go with a falcon known for its speed rapidly closing in on them. They dropped into the scant weeds with Boomer

crashing in where she made a few leaps and bounds before a single burst out, flying back toward us to the north. She overtook her bird near a lone cholla where the only cover was a scattering of ankle-high weeds. Beth and I glued our eyes to the chase as we raced the horses toward the site. This quail was a past master on its feet and ran, jumped, twisted, and turned for an extended

two hours in the search. Saddle sore was the expression that came to mind.

Toward the end of the day, the pointer, Nina, locked in on a single with the pup beside her. We both watched as the pup walked all around the area obviously curious about the point but totally oblivious. After some time the quail lifted off to seek refuge in a deep wash very nearly covered from top to bottom with dried tumbleweed. I stood the horse high on the north bank, hawk on fist, watching the pointers work. It was some surprise to see Nina find and flush the quail from the nearly indescribable collection of weeds. The quail headed south into completely open desert with a very determined "giant aplomado" behind building speed. Boomer flew in her usual manner, low to the ground, and was quickly out of sight. We watched for her return but finally marked the area carefully where she had last been seen. After quite a search we found a passage where we could climb the horses through the steeply sided wash.

We raced along until I decided to pull out the radio just as Beth spotted the falcon flying at ground level back to the north. We both thought her flight performance was somehow peculiar, but soon enough she was lost from view and we began to follow the signal. I dialed the R 400 down from three to one as we covered the distance and found her well into the meal over one-third of a mile north of the wash. Our assessment was Boomer had caught it in the open and, after being harried by a raptor we saw in the area, carried the quail back to cover in the cactus.

*My thanks to Jamaica and Greg Smith for editing.*

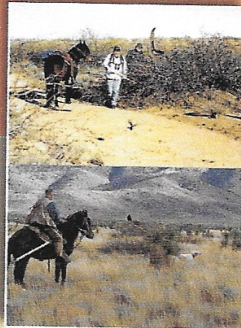


## Desert Hawking IV: Quail

This book is a continuation of the Desert Hawking series, and it could be viewed as a culmination of my hawking techniques. From the beginning of my falconry career, I have favored the direct pursuit hawks such as the accipiters, Harris and aplomado. Because of my senior status and the length of our

flights, I hunt with four good legs under me. My preference is the Peruvian Paso.

- Harry McElroy



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time before the falcon was able to catch it.

I am not sure when I have seen a covey of Gambels' quail in an open area so far from cover. That hunt made the next hunt even more surprising.

### Reflush in the Russian Thistle January 21, 2016

We flushed a covey just east of the high power lines along Bank Street as we drove in. Because this falcon is so fond of high perches, Beth and I ignored them and drove on past to the open area. We had second thoughts when we rode over