

Aplomados

Observations and Useful Hints In Falconry of a Latin American Beauty

Carlos Tello Quiroz
Mexico City, Mexico

I have been studying and flying aplomado falcons (*Falco femoralis*) for the last few years, collecting data from my observations and experiences with passage and eyas birds of this unique species.

Biology (Brief Introduction)

The aplomado falcon is a medium sized raptor that is found in the southern United States, Mexico, and South America, distributed in the neotropical regions and coasts. Their body construction is of a lighter build than a peregrine and heavier than a kestrel. The tail is 1/4 longer than any of the standard falcons, the legs are long and serve them well in the bush and thick cover, and the wings are a bit less pointed. The hunting tactics are variable. They hunt in pairs, sometimes in families, or alone. About 60% of the time, they tail chase the quarry at tremendous speed. The remaining 40% is spent by chasing, by waiting-on, or a combination of both techniques.

Basically the diet is formed by birds of all kinds, from horned larks (*Eremophila alpestris*) to chachalacas (*Orientalis poliocephala*). Some of them, especially young or males, consume a portion of insects, such as dragonflies, which are rich in protein. This part of their diet is not a rule in the species.

Aplomados are great falcons with all the virtues and no defects. They have big brains and personality, similar to those of the psittacine family. They naturally recognize

social groups, which makes unique interactions and communications with the falconer.

Diet

My birds receive a daily diet composed of cotournix quail, small birds, and chicken. I have found that this covers the daily requirements for the species. Flying birds consume approximately 12% of its body weight in normal weather conditions (25° to 28° C or 77° to 82° F). Example: A tiercel aplomado of 230 grams (8.1 ounces) consume a daily portion of 27 grams (.95 ounces) food.

Behavior and Training

The methods I have used for imprinting aplomados with great success are the ones described by Bruce Haak in his book *The Hunting Falcon*. I have observed that in the beginning of training the weight needs to be reduced very slowly. Birds of the species refuse to respond until they are really hungry. This happens especially in eyas. They require a hard cut down in weight before the first free flight.

Around 20% of the weight has to be reduced, this could be attributed by the fact that young aplomados at first more resemble a 2-year old child's conduct, being extremely curious and playful with no interest in learning sessions, more remarkable than any other falcon species.

They refuse to jump to the fist or lure until they are really hungry. Bagged game has to be presented

at an early age with the purpose of accelerating their predator response. From the first free flight, the training sessions and hunting tactics are learned very fast. (Yoko, a female eyas aplomado, learned everything in a period of a month).

When introduced to the lure, there is an instant response to movement. They really love it. I have used all kinds. Actually the one I use with my birds is made of black rubber resembling a common grackle.

Conditioning

When the lure and fist response is appropriate, their weight can be increased from 5% to 8%, so the bird should hunt at 10% or 12% less than the mews weight. For the first two months, I prefer to fly my birds daily. Then I start flying four days a week with the rest spent by high vertical jump sessions. Two sessions of 40 jumps presenting the lure at the end makes more food consumption and pectoral muscles for a powerful aplomado.

Weight

An aplomado's weight is more variable in females. They range from 280 grams (9.9 ounces) to 420 grams (14.8 ounces). Tiercels range from 190 grams (6.7 ounces) to 240 grams (8.5 ounces). These weights are from Mexican species *F. femoralis* and *F. femoralis septentrionalis* at flying weight with no equipment. Yoko, my female aplomado, last season took a chukar partridge (*Alectoris graeca*) at 420 grams (14.8 ounces).

Resistance

Aplomados can fly for a very long period of time with becoming tire. They are very strong birds and weather does not make a difference on the quality of flights. They really tolerate heat. I have flown them constantly for a period of eight hours in semi-arid terrains and the falcons appear the same as at the beginning of the day.

Hooding

Hooding is not a problem; passage birds have to be hooded "E motuo propio" carefully at the beginning to prevent negative stimuli. With the appropriate manners and patience, they accept the hood as good as a peregrine. They also remain well made to it even if they are not actually hooded for any length of time, such as in the moulting season. Eyas birds accept the hood as part of their lives. I use a 4 gram Anglo-Indian hood on my tiercels and a 6 gram Dutch one on females.

Carrying Vice

Aplomados carry the prey to a safe place looking for protection. Falconry birds can look for this protection in our company in many ways. Some aplomados fly to the falconer with the prey after making a kill. Others remain on the ground for the falconer and start depluming the prey. They really learn fast the advantages that we provide.

Moulting and Feathers

Moulting occurs very fast. I have observed that humidity in neotropical species is as an important factor as sunlight and good quality food for proper and quick moulting. My aplomados moult in a free pen in an incredible short period of time. The pen maintains 34° C (93° F) heat and 45% humidity, less

than 35% humidity makes the moult slow and the quality of the feathers is not the same. Actually my birds totally moult in a period of 3

are flushed. The majority of time the hunting ends on a long tail chase where the aplomados gain speed every inch they fly. They really fly fast with tremendous velocity. I have seen them mounting on the tail to take horned larks.

Personally, I look for a clean open area to fly and contemplate all the potential of aplomados at quarry. On a reflush, aplomados wait on the bush where the prey is until I'm in place. I have experienced that if the prey is spotted first by the falcon, they start to vocalize telling me where the victim is. Both males and females go for all kinds of bird, but the large females can handle small rabbits perfectly.

My tiercels have taken a variety of small birds and one of them caught a chukar partridge. Challenging flights can be observed at horned larks and mourning doves. Yoko, my female aplomado, took a mourning dove (*Zenaidura macroura*) in her first month with the most spectacular style.

"Yoko," a female eyas aplomado at four months old.



1/2 months. They take a daily bath, require good sunlight in the mornings, and a lot of heat and humidity the rest of the day. Their feathers are very strong. The tail feathers are very elastic and do not need a tail envelope. Their plumage is extremely resilient, appearing intact all season.

The Field (Experiences and Observations)

I have flown aplomados in many ways (direct pursuit, free style, from a "T" perch, and by waiting-on). I have observed that if the weight is increased, aplomados wait-on for longer periods. It's a pleasure to see one of these beautiful creatures waiting-on at medium weight until the mourning doves

Conclusions

Aplomados have a very big heart and brain. Their beauty is extremely exquisite. With a unique anatomy, they combine the speed of the falcon and the maneuverability of the forest hawks. They are extremely intelligent and versatile, and they can be flown in any style. One time after I flew Tyson, my two year old aplomado, a falconer friend of mine said, "The only thing they need is to talk in our language." They already do when they vocalize to tell you where the prey is. Aplomados are great creatures with the virtues of the falcons and no defects.

