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6 Pheasant Hunting with Aplomado Falcons

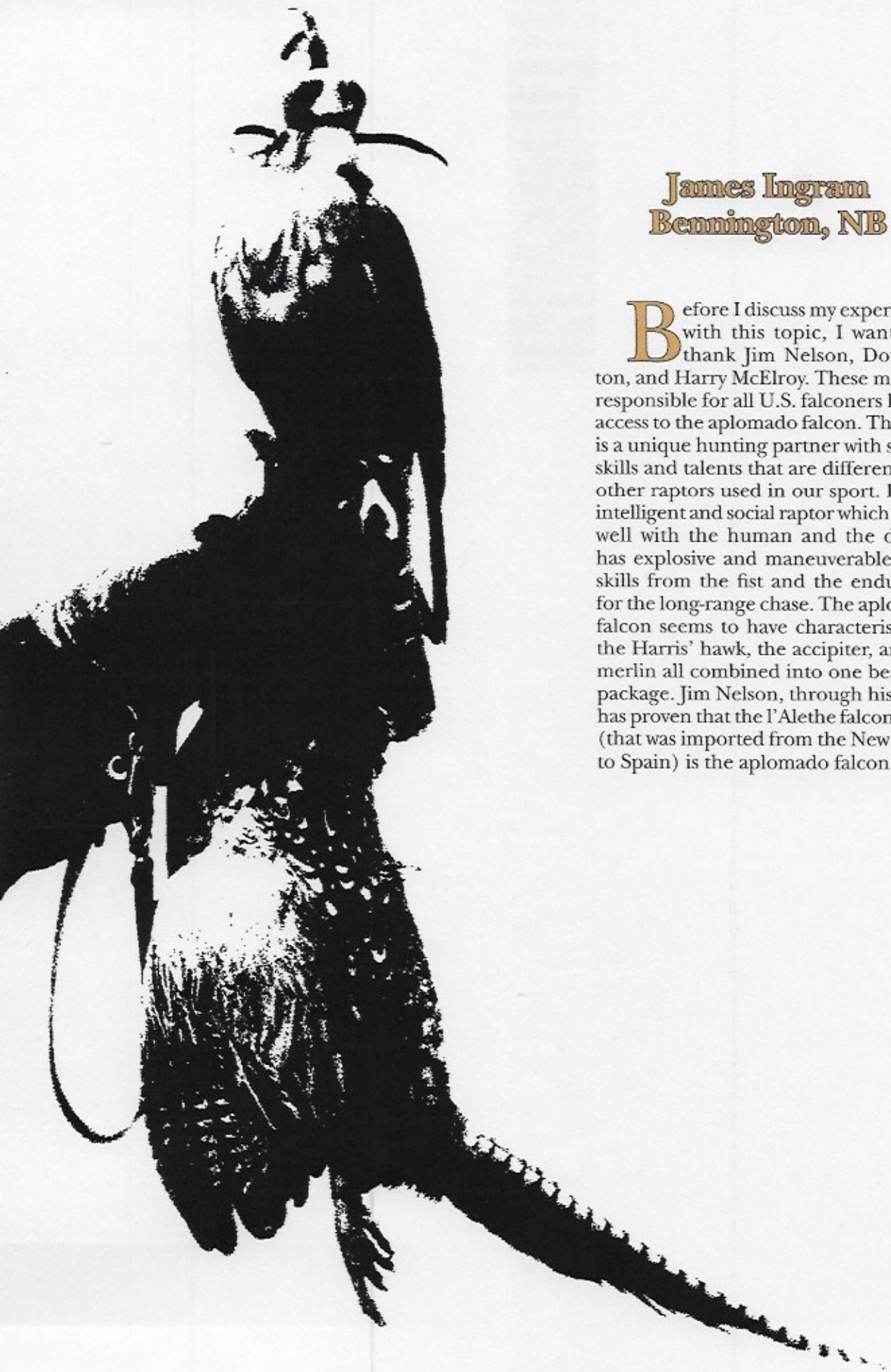
Pheasant Hunting with Aplomado Falcons



Photo by author.

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Before I discuss my experiences with this topic, I wanted to thank Jim Nelson, Doug Alton, and Harry McElroy. These men are responsible for all U.S. falconers having access to the aplomado falcon. This bird is a unique hunting partner with special skills and talents that are different than other raptors used in our sport. It is an intelligent and social raptor which bonds well with the human and the dog. It has explosive and maneuverable flight skills from the fist and the endurance for the long-range chase. The aplomado falcon seems to have characteristics of the Harris' hawk, the accipiter, and the merlin all combined into one beautiful package. Jim Nelson, through his study, has proven that the l'Alethe falcon of old (that was imported from the New World to Spain) is the aplomado falcon.



My first experience with this species was in 2006 when I flew an awesome male, "Sgt. Pepper," and I wrote about him in a previous article for *American Falconry*. This article is titled "Hunting with the Aplomado Falcon in the U.S." and is available on my website www.aplomadofalcons.com. After his first year, we decided to continue his genetics by placing him a breeding project because, at that time, there were very few aplomado falcons in this country. Resources on this species are available on my website, but half of Harry McElroy's book, *Desert Hawking IV: Quail*, is devoted to the aplomado falcon, and Jim Nelson's website, artsandhawking.com, is a treasure trove.

I live in Nebraska, and I really enjoyed the excitement of small-bird hawking with my male aplomado; however, the winter comes and the numbers of available prey diminish significantly, and often times it is difficult to find a good slip. One of the game birds that become obvious and available in my location during the winter is the ring-necked pheasants. They flock up and their cover is greatly diminished—and they have to fly some distance to go from cover to cover. In addition, when there is snow, it seems the birds will hold tighter and not run as much, which makes it easier to get a point with my Brittany and follow their tracks in the snow. I discussed these issues with Jim Nelson, and he suggested I try a female aplomado for hunting pheasants. Jim related to me that his female aplomado "Cuvee" had taken late season Hungarian partridge and that a female is fully capable of taking pheasants. I was kind of shocked to think that a 350-gram bird could take a fully-grown pheasant that weighs between 1000 and 1500 grams, which is at least three times its size. With his encouragement and my dedication to flying an aplomado, I decided to give it a try.

The first female that I flew was named "Penny Lane." She was a dual-imprinted, creche-reared bird. I trained her in the usual manner:

manning, flying to the fist on a creance, introducing the lure, and finally on a live baggy. After free flying and calling to the lure, I gave her a young pheasant baggy from a game thrower. She flew it down but would not bind to it, and when the pheasant went to the ground, the falcon would hover over it and was hesitant to attack. The next attempt under the same scenario was different; I had reduced her weight some, and when the young pheasant was released, Penny immediately attacked it and bound to it in the air, brought it to the ground, and had it decapitated when I arrived.

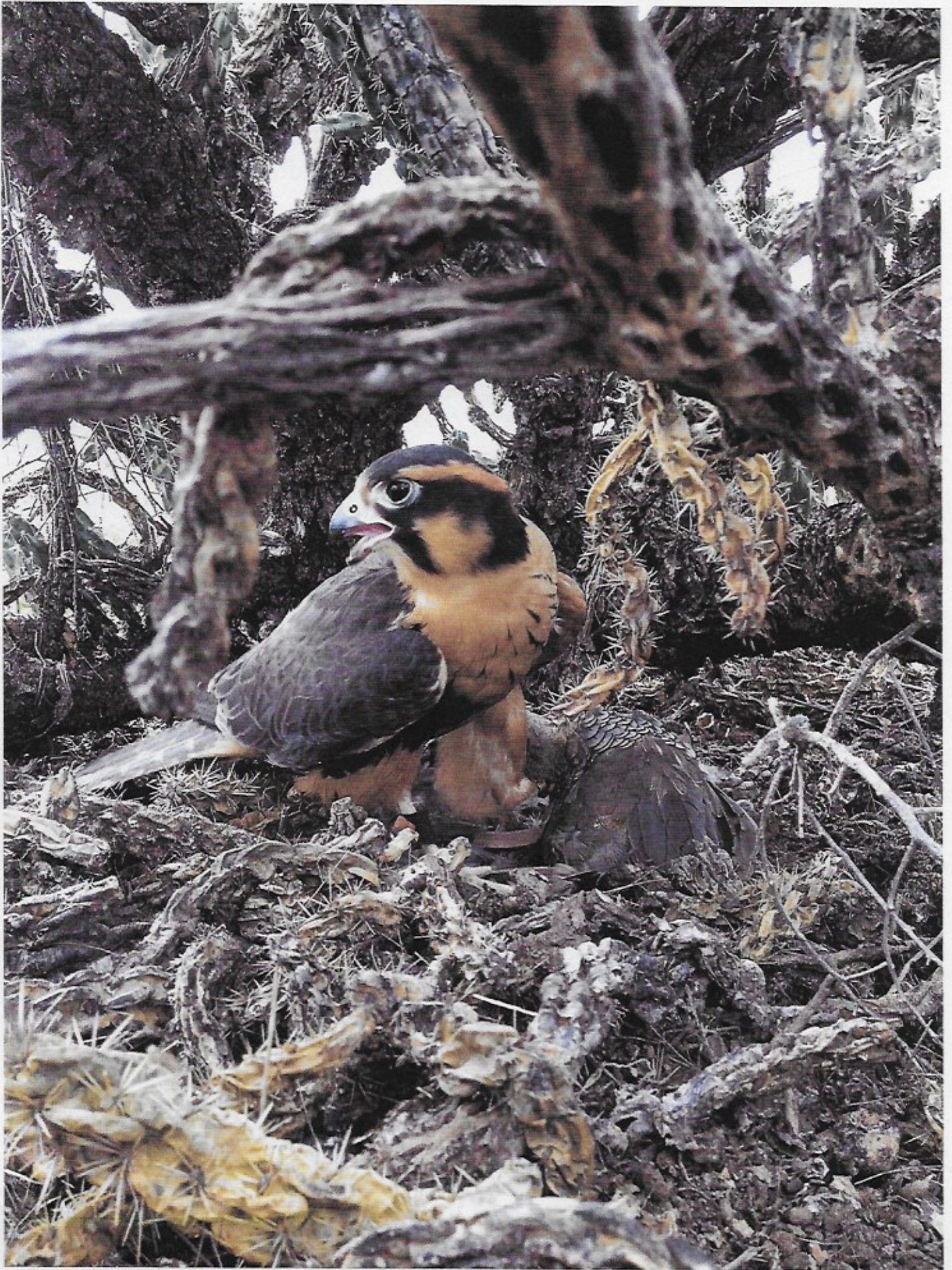
My colleagues were amazed—could not believe what they just witnessed. All became believers of the capabilities of the aplomado falcon that day.

Her second experience with a pheasant came one day when I was walking a grassy field with her on my fist and, luck would have it, a group of pheasant poults flushed right in front of me, and she snagged one out of the air. That has never happened to me since. Several days later, I was walking the same section with her on my fist and she suddenly bolted from me. I looked out to see what she was chasing, and about 50-75 yards in front of us was an adult hen pheasant flying across the field and headed towards a creek bed. This was her first exposure to a wild adult pheasant. She cut across the field on a diagonal to intercept the quarry at the creek. This behavior was amazing to me for a young falcon with no experience. I felt for sure she was

not going to catch it, so I walked several hundred yards towards the creek. I could not see Penny, so I pulled out my telemetry, picked up a signal, and found her on the opposite side of the creek plucking a hen pheasant! Truly amazing! Wild pheasants are survivors: they run, hide, and flush, but they always know exactly where they are going and are difficult to take.

Texas

Every year I have been going to the panhandle of Texas for a hawking trip with some of my best friends. I had told these guys that my female aplomado had taken pheasants in the field, but it was difficult for them to believe. In the panhandle at that time, there was a plethora of pheasants. It seemed like every tail water pit had some in it, so I was excited about giving my aplomado multiple shots at pheasants during our trip to Texas. We all met and went out in search of pheasants because everyone wanted to see if it was true that this little bird could do it. We found a pit, and I had Penny on the fist when we walked in. Pheasants exploded in all directions, the aplomado picked one, and the chase was on. The pheasants flew out over cut crops, so there was no close cover for them to drop into; they tried to outfly the aplomado and put distance between them. This tactic did not work: the aplomado had the stamina to chase and follow the wild pheasant to the end. There is a lot of wide open space in that part of Texas, and eventually the game bird came down. The aplomado was immediately on it; the pheasant got up and tried to fly away with the falcon on its tail. There was nowhere to hide, and it came down again and the *coup de gras* was delivered by the female falcon. My colleagues were amazed—could not believe what they just witnessed. All became believers of the capabilities of the aplomado falcon that day. The female would kill the hen pheasant by biting into the head and neck. After that season, like Sgt. Pepper, Penny Lane was placed in the breeding project. Yes, I am a Beatles fan!



Jimmy Walker's female aplomado falcon on a scaled quail. Bred by Jim Ingram.



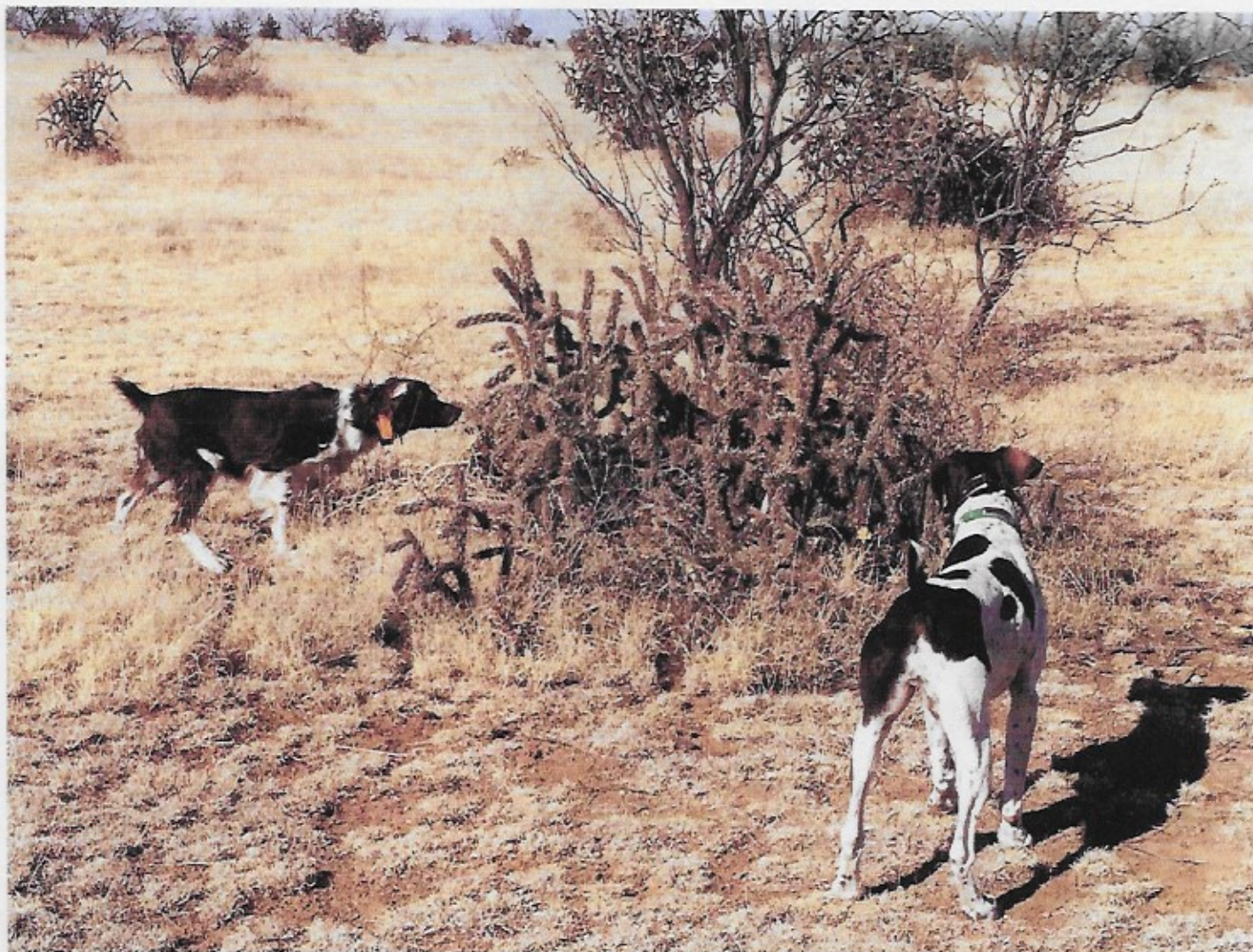
Male and female aplomado cast on pheasant over point by Justin and Sheri Stovall.

The next year one of my falconer friends, Justin Stovall, and his wife, Sherrie (also a falconer), decided to fly a cast of aplomado falcons in Florida. They had two unrelated first-year birds that they were going to eventually breed. Billy and Stella were an awesome pair cooperatively hunting, taking all kinds of mostly small quarry in Florida. Justin and Sherrie were excited to go to Texas with their pair and see what would happen when their birds were exposed to wild pheasants. They did give Billy and Stella a pen-raised pheasant prior to their trip. Off to the tail water pits of the panhandle in Texas we all went. The wind was howling that day, which I think is the norm in northern Texas. The falcons were free flying without difficulty and playing in the wind;

it obviously made no difference in their ability to go where they wanted. Justin had his German shorthaired pointer out running a CRP field and it locked up on point. He went in to flush, and out came a few hen pheasants. The aplomado pair was all over them, chasing long distances because of the lack of cover. The female hit the pheasant first and then the male came in to assist—success on their first exposure to a wild and strong adult pheasant! Throughout the week this pair took seven pheasants, both hens and roosters, some quail, and a rabbit. We all started to feel bad for the pheasants because they could not escape the aplomados in that open country—very impressive for a first-year cast of aplomado falcons.

One item of note: In that region, there are many wild raptors

that can kill falconry birds in a heart beat. With the pheasant slips ending far away from the falconers, we were all worried that our birds could be killed. After a long flight on pheasant, we arrived to see the aplomado pair plucking the dead pheasant with two redtail hawks standing by on the ground and watching from about 10 feet away. The hawks took off when we arrived, but I thought it was curious that they didn't rob the kill or kill our birds. The hawks seemed hesitant to go in, and I believe it was because of the cast. There were two raptors on the kill, and I think that this was a deterrent for the wild raptors to come in. We all know that aplomado falcons have been killed by wild redtail hawks. It may be that flying a cast of aplomados could be protecting against attacks by wild raptors.



Hawking scaled quail in the Texas Panhandle.

My Next Female Aplomado

I had so much fun with my first experience with pheasant hunting that I thought I would try it again. This time I started a female from my own breeding project. I had never bred falcons, and because of the help and support of Jim Nelson, I have successfully had offspring from my aplomado pairs. I have a website that compiles all the articles I could find that were written by falconers on flying this species (as well as basic research and pictures): www.aplomadofalcons.com.

My next female was a parent-reared female whose parents are Sgt. Pepper (my first aplomado) and Cuvee (Jim Nelson's Hungarian-catching female). I named the youngster Crystal because, when the pair laid the eggs that year, it was below zero at night, and I

thought for sure the eggs would freeze and nothing would hatch. To my surprise, I got a beautiful parent-incubated and -reared female. I trained her in the usual way after removing her from the chamber at hard penned. I brought her into the house on a tall perch and exposed her to the activity and noises of the family room, people, dogs, TVs, etc. I would "tidbit" her regularly without picking her up, and she became very tame.

Side note: In my experience, I have found that the parent-raised bird will accept the hood more easily than the dual imprint, but on Jim Nelson's website (www.artsandhawking.com) he has described the process of hooding even the most difficult raptor. All small raptors have a natural tendency to carry the kill to a safe place to consume, but I have also noticed that both

screaming and carrying issues are less likely with a parent-reared bird. The dual imprint seems to carry because it thinks of you as a sibling and does not want to share the kill with you (rather than a wild raptor that carries for fear or protection). I also feel that if you keep the aplomado in the house with you for the first hunting season, you will have less vocalization. When I had my dual imprints, they were free lofted in the mew, and the only time they saw me was for feeding or hunting. They became very vocal when they saw me, but in the field they were quiet as can be. Even with a full crop in the mew, they were vocal when they saw me, but not when I was out of sight. They are very social birds, and I think it helps for them to see you regularly when they are not being hunted or fed, at least for the first year. You can bring them to



Justin with pheasant in Texas.

the mews for jump-ups during the first year so they are used to going in there and being picked up. After the first season, I put them in the mew for molting and free lofting. When they are fat, they can become very independent and not want anything to do with you. Taking them out of the molt and dropping their weight gradually, they may start the vocalization again. I brought my bird back into the house on a tall perch and they remembered it and became quiet again.

This time I tried to expose my female, Crystal, to a young pheasant in the mew chamber, similar to what I had done with my male Sgt. Pepper (when I put live young quail in his chamber). This was a mistake: no matter how young a pheasant is, when it is not allowed to fly for escape, it will jump at the predator to scare it away. I observed this behavior in the field when my peregrine female knocked down a rooster pheasant and then came in for the *coup de gras*. That rooster was in the middle wide-open dirt field with no where to go. When the falcon was coming in hard, the rooster stood straight up and jumped at the falcon with its feet and spurs in the air, trying to fend off the attack and intimidate the raptor. This behavior repeated itself several times while the falcon tried to get it to fly until the falcon gave up and landed; the pheasant immediately took to the wing and escaped. The young pheasant must have this innate protective behavior of first trying to escape by running or flying, but if cornered, of attacking the attacker.

So now my female aplomado wanted nothing to do with a baby pheasant. I went out to the field after creance, free flight, and lure training to try it again with a young pheasant. This time I released it from a game thrower and was hoping for a good result. Yes! Crystal flew it down and killed it immediately and was rewarded with the meal. I exposed her to pen-raised quail as well to practice a pickup routine in preparation for the yearly Texas trip where both bobwhites and scaled quail abound.



Cast flying with aplomados.

Side note: As I mentioned earlier, with aplomado falcons, you want to prevent carrying at all costs. That female or male can carry a quail as far as it wants to get away from you, so you want to make that bird comfortable with you on the approach and trade from the very start. Some falconers have never taken the kill away from their aplomado so the bird trusts them implicitly. This may be the best procedure in the end for maintaining that relationship; however, if a kill occurs near dark, it may be that you need to trade off the kill. Two "tricks" related to me by other falconers that are nonthreatening and seem to help are the following: when your bird makes a kill, let it eat the head and start to pluck; when it is plucking, approach the bird with a quail in your hand and pluck it at the same time. This seems to make the falcon think that because you have a kill, you are not going to take its kill. Next, when you get close to your bird, take out your lure that is garnished with a big chunk of meat and dangle it, drop it on the ground, and drag the lure to the bird while you are walking away from the bird. It sees the lure and meat and already knows and loves it, and it will jump onto the lure to

eat. Next, drag the lure and falcon away from the kill and then go pick up the kill while your bird eats. After the food on the lure is gone, it will look up to you, and then give it a tidbit on the fist. Done!

One evening I was hunting with Crystal and my Brittany locked up on point. It was right at sunset as I walked in for the flush with my female on the fist. A pheasant exploded and flew across a darkened field. I tracked her down and found my bird on a mostly-dead rooster pheasant. I was so excited that my young bird had killed her first pheasant—it was a rooster that weighed 1500 grams! Little did I know what was to follow as a result of this success. Over the course of the next few weeks, we had multiple pheasant flushes and my aplomado would start the chase and then break off. I began to understand that she was not interested in pheasants any more probably because, unknown to me, the rooster pheasant she caught fought her hard and made an impression on her that she did not want to repeat. From my successful experience with my last aplomado female, Penny Lane, I knew that this was a mental thing for my new bird. I decided to

try and change her mind by giving her pen-raised hen pheasants to show her that success comes with rewards. In my experience, a wild hen pheasant tries to escape and, once caught, attempts to fly off by exploding wing beats but will not fight the raptor and gives up; however, I am sure the rooster's behavior is different in that it will fight. I set up hen pheasants in game throwers and made it easy for the aplomado. She eventually started taking them at any distance, flying them down hard and being rewarded; however, when we would come up to a wild pheasant flush at our feet, she would start to chase and then break off. I had given her eight pen-raised birds. She caught them all and she knew the difference. A pen-raised pheasant just flies; a wild bird knows where it is going and is intent on getting there—big difference. I tried a pen-raised rooster in a game thrower, and she would see it flush and turn her head the other way, ignoring it. In the end, for her it is best to not fly roosters: none of us want our raptors injured, and this can happen with a rooster.

I decided at this point not to ever give her another pen-raised pheasant because breaking this habit may be difficult. Starting from this day forward, all opportunities were going to be wild pheasants with a dog. Eventually, over time, we finally had success after three separate flushes on the same pheasant we found over and over. Each flight was over 100 yards and, without a dog, it would have been impossible to find the gamebird. After that successful capture and reward, Crystal was back in business. From that day forward she caught many hen pheasants over the next few years, but she always ignored the roosters, which I accept graciously. I loved this female, she took quail, pheasants, pigeons, and other small quarry in exciting and stylish ways. She was great with the pickup (lure drag), loved my dog, and was good with hooding. She was quiet in the mew, house, and on the road in hotels—a beautiful specimen!

During her fourth year as a hunting partner, we were after

pheasants near my house in Nebraska. My Brittany was locked up on point, the bird was on the fist, and we flushed a covey of pheasants. She exploded off the fist and chased it to a tree line about 100-200 yards away. The dog ran around and locked up again. I was waiting to see if Crystal would return to the glove for another chase, and after a bit, I did not see her flying around or coming back, which she does religiously, so I figured she must have been successful and decided to go find her. I had great signal and it appeared to be in one spot, not moving around. I took my dog off

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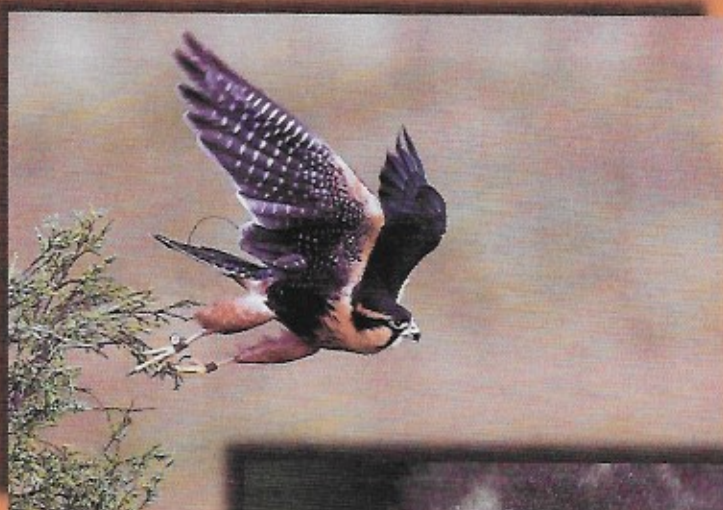
point, (another pheasant flushed) and went to find my girl. When I arrived at the tree line with my telemetry, I noticed a screaming redtail hawk flying above the trees. I found Crystal dead on the ground with a single puncture to the chest, blood coming from her mouth: I knew what happened. Crystal has been chased in the past by many different wild raptors, and she had the skill and strength to evade capture. I am sure Crystal had caught the pheasant and was battling it on the ground with complete focus on the kill when the redtail hawk sitting in the tree above her came down on her and did it (while the pheasant escaped). The wild bird was not interested in eating my bird, just protecting its territory. There was another redtail in the tree, so I am sure they were a mated pair. I was heartbroken and, although I know that wild raptors kill falconry birds, I had never experienced it. It was

like losing a friend—like losing my dog. Aplomado falcons are so social, they become like your hunting dog.

I have a great friend, Nick Morris, who is a falconer and lives close by. I related my story to him that day, and he immediately offered to give me his female aplomado falcon, Piper, which he bought from me out of my project. His bird was from the same parents as Crystal, and I was so excited! What a friend! Piper was already free flying and hunting as a first-year bird. Once I got her used to me, I decided to expose her to my Brittany, Abbey Road (yes, The Beatles again). Piper really didn't care for Abbey because she wasn't exposed to her earlier; however, over time, she accepted her as long as the dog didn't get too close. Next came Piper's first exposure to a wild hen pheasant, and she flew hard for several hundred yards. I was super sensitive and was worried about redtails. I followed her signal and found her sitting in a tree and figured the pheasant escaped into cover below the tree. The dog was searching the area and locked up on point. I walked in for the flush and nothing happened, the dog continued the point and would not move. I reached down in the grass and uncovered the hen. It would not move. I picked it up and threw it out and it just hit the ground like a rock. The aplomado came out of the tree and landed on it. Piper had to have caught it initially and battled it and then let it go. The pheasant was spent, no energy. I thought to myself: This is great—she caught her first wild hen after her first exposure without a baggy! However, throughout the rest of the season, anytime we found a pheasant and flushed it, she would start out and then break off. She obviously did not have a good experience the first time and wanted nothing to do with the pheasants. I thought long and hard about what I should do. Should I get some easy baggy pen-raised pheasants? Will I get into the same situation as with Crystal? Do I really want to hunt pheasants with my aplomado

Falcons of Steel

HUNTING
APLOMADOS
FOR US FALCONERS



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Peruvian Aplomado falcons for American falconers

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for great articles and pictures

because of the presence of so many wild redtail hawks? I decided to let her choose: if we flushed pheasants and she wanted them, then go for it. Otherwise, she loved smaller birds and especially quail, and so that is what I let her do. I love this bird: she's quiet, accepts the hood, doesn't carry, allows approach, and transfers to the lure drag.

Where I live, there are no great quail populations, which is the ultimate game for aplomado falcons. We have pigeons, which are amazing flights to watch, but pigeons live on buildings and your falcon can end up on top of the roof. In the winter, most of the small birds have migrated out and what we have left are pheasants. Now, the ultimate question: What bird should I hunt with? I love aplomado falcons, so much so that I have a breeding project and I always want to fly one. Aplomado falcons can take pheasants—proven! I know my peregrine (and any big falcon) can take pheasant, and I have done so many times. It's a

bit more difficult with a waiting-on bird because the pheasant run and flush low and get into cover. The pheasant escape behavior is better suited for the hunting style of the aplomado. A goshawk is great for pheasant, but I am not an accipiter falconer, not experienced at all in those species, and because of that, I am hesitant; therefore, I decided to try something new. After reading Harry McElroy's article, "Boomerang, the Austringer's Gyr," I have decided to try a female gyr x aplomado. This bird has the size and strength to pursue and subdue a wild pheasant. It will be able to better handle a rooster, and may be able to more quickly kill the quarry. A pure aplomado takes time to control the pheasant and while focusing on the kill—it is at risk. The quicker the kill, the more aware of the environment our falconry bird will be and, therefore, more aware of other predators. The gyrmado, according to those who fly them, are like "big aplomados" and thus have the same hunting style—similar to the aplomado,

similar to the pheasant, and similar to a goshawk. They also reportedly have the bonding characteristics of the aplomado as well. They have the size and strength to control the quarry and may be at less risk from a wild raptor. This year, I am going to give this a try. I am putting Piper in a breeding project and I'm going to train a female gyrmado. I will let you know what happens in a subsequent article. My hope is that the gyrmado female will be to pheasants as an aplomado is to quail. Or, I could be totally wrong—it's worth a try. Another possibility is hunting an aplomado cast on pheasants. There are several people I know hunting aplomado casts with success. The cast leads to competition and intensity to hunt and kill. Similar to what I witnessed in Texas, maybe the cast will be more successful and less at risk from other raptors. It might be safer to fly aplomado in casts all the way around. This is something I want to do, but first, let's try the female gyrmado.

