



# Hawk Chalk

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# ON CHOOSING AN APLOMADO: PART ONE

BY JIM NELSON

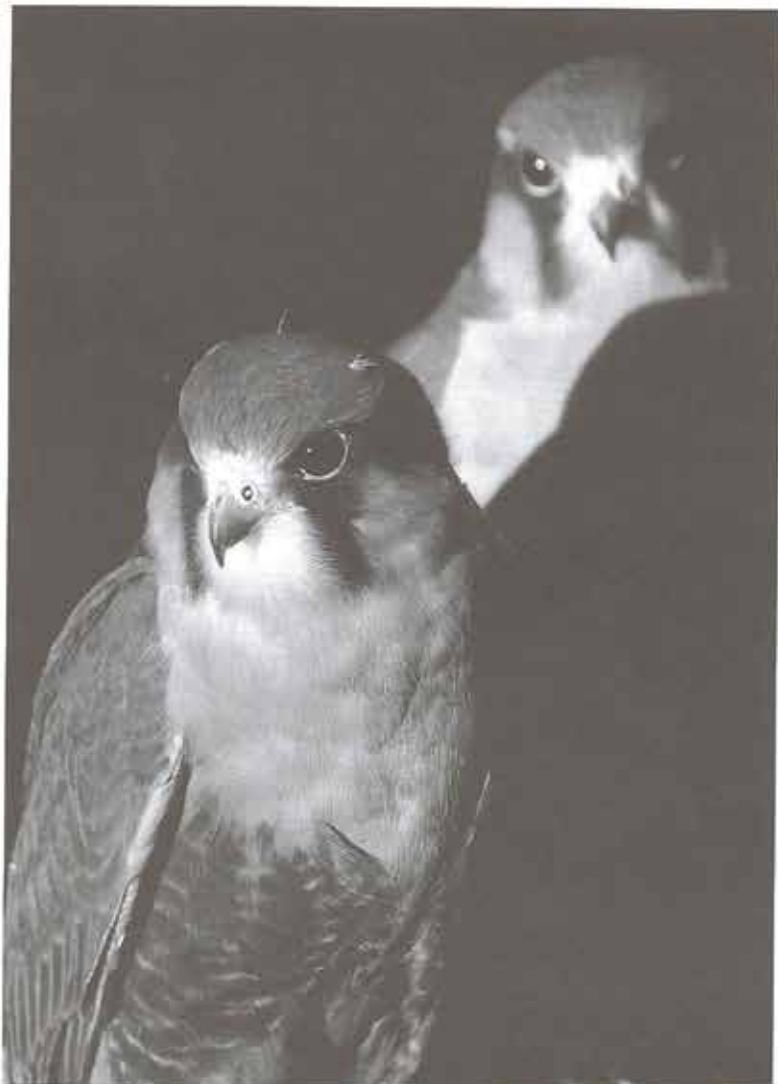
*Editor's Note: This article is excerpted from a currently developing manuscript on the training of ramage aplomado falcons by Jim Nelson. Copyright 2015*

The difference between *choosing* and *selecting* is the difference between making the choice to fly a type of bird, and the selection of a specific individual from a larger group.

When choosing to fly an aplomado you must first consider your legal status to do so. Here in the US, depending on the state involved, it may require you to be a licensed general or master class falconer to own, train and hunt with an aplomado. If apprentices are allowed to fly aplomados in your state, then you must consider the level of experience needed to succeed with this species is considerably higher than their *gentle* appearances would lead one to believe. They are *not* giant kestrels. Aplomados can be high-strung and at the same time somewhat delicate, making them a dubious choice for an apprentice or even a newer general class falconer who has not already flown a merlin or an accipiter.

Another critical consideration will be availability of legal quarry to hunt and accessible grounds to fly over. Male aplomados perform well on English sparrows, starlings, and open-country quail. Females perform well on starlings, feral pigeons, doves, open-country quail, grey partridges, chukars, and (believe it or not) pheasants. Aplomados can be quite dynamic in flight and by nature come from habitats that are wide open and interspersed with broken cover. The closer to this description the land you hunt over, the more likely you will experience success with one. Think in terms of hundreds of acres of reasonably open and accessible ground, not small fields surrounded by forest or human businesses and dwellings.

Finally, there is the issue of wild raptors in your area. I have heard a number of individuals considering an aplomado express concern over the presence of larger raptors where they fly. In my experience, and that of falconers who have flown aplomados and whom I am in contact, red-tailed hawks are the clearest danger to the aplomado falcon, followed by great-horned owls, should your alethe be left out



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overnight. Ravens can also be very dangerous and potentially lethal. Wild female prairie falcons and female peregrines present a significant threat, though my personal experiences with both species have not led to serious trouble for the aplomado. In fact, very recently the female aplomado I am currently flying skirmished with a passage female peregrine and basically chased her out of the field. Earlier this fall, this same aplomado spent quite some time in aerial play with a haggard tiercel peregrine with neither bird showing real signs of aggression. In fact, since I had a covey of huns pinned beneath the two, I commenced to flush and got to see both a wild peregrine and a trained aplomado in full pursuit at the same time. Neither hawk scored, but the flight was pretty.

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Cooper's hawks would seem to be a threat too, but I am not aware of any aplomados actually killed, or even grabbed, by one. I've been witness to a number of close encounters, and it seems both birds are very curious about the other. It appears to me that the Cooper's hawks are mystified by the aplomado's accipitrine appearance. I have seen Cooper's hawks fly in close, land nearby and stare at the aplomado, then leave. Raul Ramirez has witnessed some aerial skirmishes that started with the Cooper's chasing the aplomado, only to have the aplomado turn the tables on the Cooper's hawk and then chase it away. If other falconers have had less fortunate experiences with Cooper's hawks, I would be very curious to hear about that.

Your second tier of choosing will be gender. That will relate to your intended quarry. When hunting birds in the size range from English sparrow to doves or quail species, the male is suitable and his snappy style and aerial nature makes him highly entertaining. Add to this that male aplomados, like all male raptors, are sole providers during the nesting season, and you have a hawk motivated to fly yearround, quicker to cache his quarry and resume the hunt. Females, while capable of catching very small birds, are

better suited for species quail-sized and larger. They are more powerful and brutish than their delicate stature indicates, and trained female aplomados have regularly taken barn pigeons, partridges, pheasants, magpies, and shorebirds including (in Latin America) the thick-knee, southern lapwings, ibis, and even small egrets. Small ducks have been reported, largely as incidental aplomado quarry. Good slips on smaller "diver" species such as the hooded merganser (as opposed to smaller "dabblers" such as teal) could lead to successful duck hawking with female aplomados. These statements may seem like outrageous boasts concerning a raptor weighing in under 400 grams, but those who have seen well-trained and well-conditioned female aplomados in action know the assertions here to be realistic, reliable and repeatable. Females seem to be harder to get motivated to perform at peak levels once they reach breeding age and especially during the nesting season. This may be related to the fact that females are programmed by nature to slow down and eventually stop hunting during courtship and incubation.

Of course both male and females are capable of catching what Harry McElroy terms "medium-sized birds," those in the weight range of starlings. For both sexes, targeting medium-sized birds must be accompanied with the caution that unless one is very careful with the pick-up, this size of quarry might be problematic. In brief, an English sparrow-sized bird will often be cached or totally eaten without consequence to weight control in the field; a female pheasant will hold the aplomado to the ground by the sheer force of gravity; but a starling is easy to carry and makes a tempting, filling meal that may lead to the hawk satiating itself at a distance and then staying out for the night.

Another consideration is whether to fly a cast. A cast is a significant handful for all but the most experienced falconers or those who practice abatement professionally. However,

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if you live near another falconer, or are part of a falconry family, a cast can be shared fun in the field. Since aplomados are a social creature in the wild, they seem to be very tolerant of one another in the field and there are many examples of successful casts being flown at quarry in many countries. Casts of two have been successful in sport falconry. For abatement, I've flown up to five birds (all males) at one time, and Raul Ramirez has flown up to seven. In these situations, the flying is more on the lines of a controlled tame hack, where all the birds are loose in the field together, but little happens in terms of coordinated pursuits.

If you have decided on an aplomado for your mew and, based on your intended quarry, have chosen the sex, the third tier of choice will be whether to obtain a hand-reared youngster (either a social imprint or a dual-socialized imprint) or a "ramage" bird.

I use the open-ended term "ramager" to describe any aplomado not hand reared from its earliest days and maintained by human handling until in your hands. This can include youngsters hand-reared initially and then turned loose with a group of siblings in a large chamber where they will most probably withdraw and become quite spooky, or parent-reared by adult aplomados, or that (in countries where it is legal) are wild-trapped as passagers. What all of these have in common are that they start out their relationship with you in a state of high anxiety. They are not at all tame and have little or no experience being handled by human beings. Wild and untamed, they are ramage.

Returning to a description of the hand-reared youngster: what are the pros and cons of this choice? The pros can be summed up in three words: tameness and sociability. A hand-reared aplomado can be downright kitten-like. Anyone who has worked with them extensively can attest to such amazing examples of tameness as flying across the room multiple times without being called, to land and then lay down on a human's lap; flying out of a car window at quarry and then, after missing, flying back into the car window to perch at the falconer's shoulder while the car is in motion; hopping off the scale while hooded and tramping across the linoleum toward the sound of the falconer's voice, then scrambling blindly up his pant leg to the gloved fist; flying off at quarry to become a nearly out-of-sight speck, only to return like a boomerang and land at the falconer's feet, on his shoulder or hat without any luring or

temptation of food.

So why would anyone want anything else? The primary con with the hand-reared's is screaming. It is not impossible to train a silent hand-reared aplomado, but the odds are against you. For some falconers, screaming isn't a big deal and the screaming around the house is tolerated because aplomados are generally silent in the field. However, if screaming is an issue with family members or neighbors, this could be a risky choice. Another con is general eyass vices including mantling, puffing of feathers and other babyish behaviors that are annoying and can lead to feather damage from the jamming of wings and tail against the glove or perch surfaces. The final con can be availability. Aplomados seem at first blush to be easy to breed, but in truth can be tricky. It may be that you desire to possess a hand-reared youngster but cannot find one available during the best window for you to take it. Just as there is a best age for taking up a puppy (seven weeks old is often cited as ideal for a pup), the best window to take on a young hand-reared aplomado will be from hatch until about penning at fifty-two days. That assumes constant handling throughout by a knowledgeable person that isn't messing it up before coming into your hands. If a hard-penned, hand-reared aplomado is placed by itself or with siblings in a chamber and not consistently handled by a knowledgeable falconer on a daily basis, it might emerge as either a ramager (best case) or a mar hawk (worse case) in as little as a week's time. That is all it takes for some hand-reared hard-penned youngsters, especially males, to withdraw to a spooky or even downright wild state.

So, actually getting your hands on an unmarred individual at the right age will be the trick. If you are ordering one from a distance, beware that there may be a long protracted wait before you receive it if the summer weather is extremely hot and the airline refuses to deliver in the heat. What started out as a hand-reared darling at the outset may arrive in a very different and less-tamed state.

"On Choosing an Aplomado" will conclude in the August issue.