



Hawk Chalk

The Newsletter of the North American Falconers Association

August 2015

ON CHOOSING AN APLOMADO: PART TWO

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. See part one in the April 2015 issue.

Another aspect of choosing a hand-reared aplomado falcon concerns whether the hawk will be a social imprint (raised by hand in isolation from other aplomados and thinks it's human, so to speak) or dual socialized (raised by hand with a group of siblings and is very tame toward humans while still knowing it is a bird). Which to choose? Well, both are very tame and can become incredible field companions. The difference will be most noticeable if you wish to fly in a cast, or when you go to breed them, if you eventually choose to. The social imprint may not fly well with, or copulate with, another aplomado. The dual-socialized is significantly more likely to tolerate a cast-mate in the field and be successful in the breeding chamber for natural pairing.

If you have made the choice (or if circumstances have made the choice for you) to get a hand-reared youngster, find a copy of Harry McElroy's *Desert Hawking IV: Quail*. The entire second half of Harry's comprehensive masterpiece is devoted to this type of hawk. Additionally his book should be required reading for those flying any sort of aplomado, including the wildest ramage bird, because he devotes a great deal of attention to detail where topics common to all

aplomados are concerned; such as nutrition, mews design, hawking equipment, radio telemetry, behavioral observations, weight control, and overall training and hawking strategies which would be redundant if repeated here.

Then, what of the ramage? Unmarred ramage hawks will be the result of a) initial hand-rearing, then shifting into a chamber at around penning with a group of youngsters, be they siblings or unrelated, to be left to their own devices; or, b) parent-reared youngsters hatched by parents or fostered back to parents if hatched artificially. To be considered ramage, these will have been raised by a parent or parents but not visited by humans at all. If they are reared by a parent that is very tame and are frequently visited by the breeder, they are likely to behave more like a dual-socialized hawk than a true ramage hawk. So *ramage* means the young hawk will predictably react like a wild bird when finally taken to hand, but does not have any particular preprogrammed phobias toward humans developed by poor or rough handling earlier on.

The pro of taking on a ramage hawk is that it comes to you without any great affinity for humankind, and therefore, with careful handling, is less likely to develop eyass-like vices. This is particularly true of the genuine parent-reared youngster that is hatched by its parents and reared by them until penning. They have no background to associate with humankind as providers. This will be the nearest thing most modern falconers will experience to a passerger. Sibling-group-raised chamber birds will eventually tame down again after initial manning, and then may remember their earliest days of being hand-reared, thus sparking eyass-like behaviors.

SELECTING AN INDIVIDUAL APLOMADO

In most cases, you will not have the luxury of selection. But if you do, and assuming all the candidates are in good basic health and feather, the first and foremost selection criteria in a ramage hawk will be its natural appetite. This



PHOTO COURTESY OF SCOTT CARTER

Taco's prize.

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is something the old falconers knew about and spoke of, but whose significance seems to have been largely forgotten over time. The reason for its importance is simple: with a ramage hawk, your key to rapid and successful training will be its response to food. If the hawk has a natural appetite and quickly gets down to the business of eating, even if its weight is in the higher ranges, you will catch its attention and reach agreement early on, and from there you will both experience an ever upward spiraling series of successes, each brick built upon the hawk's keen desire to eat even when he or she is not particularly hungry. For those who know him, the 2008 ramage terceleto, Alpha, came from the chamber ready to chow down a meal whenever he could. Consequently, his training went like clockwork and he instantly became the outstanding performer from a cohort of a dozen candidates.

Contrasting Alpha was Butterscotch, the finicky one. With special attention, finicky Butterscotch became a superb performer over time, but his disinclination to eat when under stress caused him to lag far behind Alpha and all the rest in his cohort. In time, he did emerge an excellent hawk, but it took the focused handling, experience and understanding of a genuine aplomado master, Raul Ramirez, to bring this out of him. Alpha would have no doubt emerged a brilliant performer for even a moderately experienced falconer. The most visible difference between the two, again, was simply their basic natural appetites.

The next criteria is what might be called predatory impetuosity; that is to say, an almost unthinking reaction to prey, much like the reaction of a typical accipiter. The two specimens that come to mind were the 2006 alethe, Cuvee, and the 2008 terceleto, X-ray. The very first live bird offered to Cuvee during her tempering was immediately pounced upon and dispatched. She had never before seen a living bird other than her siblings in her crèche. A sister of the exact same age and rearing ignored or played with live birds for weeks until her predatory instincts were finally sparked. X-ray, in the same training cohort as Alpha, was accipitrine in his response to the lure in



PHOTO COURTESY OF STEVE DUECKER

Ziggy, Steve Duecker's downy aplomado tiercel.

early training. Later he showed the same hair-trigger reaction to live prey, and his rapid response to moving objects made his training and entering easy and entertaining.

The attractiveness of an individual should not be a primary criterion for selection. All healthy aplomados in good feather are fine looking animals. Some are perhaps more eye-catching or handsome than others, but that becomes irrelevant in the field where the behavior of the hawk is paramount. A striking looking but screaming, hard-mantling, lazy, or overly fearful hawk loses its charm rapidly. No one wants to watch them, so to what advantage are their good looks? Whereas a plain-looking hawk that is calm-natured, steady on the fist, follows appropriately, instantly pursues quarry with vigor, and returns when called is a prize beyond accounting.

Having mentioned all of the above, it is my firm belief, based on a depth of experience over fifteen years with dozens of aplomados, that all aplomados are capable of becoming outstanding performers when given proper handling, hard conditioning, and quality hunting opportunities. If you are not fortunate to be able to select or come into possession of a naturally ravenous or electrically impetuous specimen, there is still much you can do to ensure that, like Butterscotch, your potential laggard turns out to be a Tony-the-Tiger instead.