

# A Red Letter Aplomado Hawking Day



Photo by Rob Palmer.

## Oscar Beingolea Lima, Peru

**T**en is a parent-reared female aplomado falcon (*sp. pichinchaë*). It was captive produced by Mr. Jose Antonio Otero at his breeding facility, "El Huayco." Mr. Otero specializes in breeding a large variety of neotropical raptor species for their use in falconry. The current available aplomados in the USA are descendants from his captive produced birds in Peru.

Ten is owned and flown by my friend, Marco Chavez. Her flying weight ranges from 318gr to 327gr. She is quite within the range of the average female's size. She is close to eight months old now and

beginning to mature. So far, she has never been served a baggy in the field. She started hunting some young doves and has been taken out hawking some 20 times. We started flying her on wild prey in early February and have put 14 preys belonging to seven different prey species in the bag. Among the prey species she has taken are: the eared dove (*Zenaida auriculata*), pacific dove (*Zenaida meloda*), croaking ground-dove (*Eupelia cruziana*), and thick-knee (*Burhinus superciliosus*), and two small miscellaneous species.. After the summer (December-March), winds in Central Peru did not help us exercising her to the

kite; her stamina during the past month has been kept and improved with vertical flights. But, be aware that there is no formula or straight path for producing standardized individuals of this great falcon species. Their reaction is variable and our individual approach to overcome them is as well. However, always keep in mind that the tenacity regularly found in the tame aplomado to refuse some things easily accepted by other falcon species, such as the hood and our approach on the kill, is expressing part of one outstanding trait, its indefatigability—not to mentioning its unequalled courage, footing



*Female aplomado falcon, Ten, after just five days of handling. Photo by Marco Chavez.*



The hunting field, aplomado coastal habitat. Photo by Marco Carpio.

skill and accurate lethal bite. Use that former trait in your favor to make it work close to exhaustion, between the spaced outings, but well fed. After having repeatedly flown far over the fields for grabbing the little reward found in the insect, the young aplomado falcon, proud of its independence, has already found that the better food never comes easy. To our amazement, it enjoys getting it. Work it out hard, but be patient. Its nature will respond you with unexpected flights and chases.

#### PREVIOUS OUTING

Last Sunday, May 3rd, she flew after the first Peruvian meadowlark (*Sturnella bellicosa*) she had ever seen. It was a 70m away flying flock consisting of five individuals in their way to their roosting place. With a surprising determination we had not witnessed in her before, she flew, putting all the meadowlarks down into cover. After singling out a meadowlark, the second flush ended

with her just one hand away from succeeding. When attempting to flush the bird for a third time, she flew away, chasing another distant flying flock of meadowlarks, releasing the pressure we had upon the former one which sneaked away. During that outing, she had also flown one pacific dove down into cover, amid one meadow, and we could not flush it for her. Later, she chased another pacific dove more than 150m, until one pair of wild aplomados intercepted the dove, forcing it to dive into one heavy cover located amid two neighbor meadows. Despite of my efforts for flushing that dove underneath the wild aplomado pair, I could not do it. We had arrived to the field late that afternoon and Ten finished the day empty handed. Despite the fact that she had not gone to the field but once during the past ten days, the changes we had noted on her hunting behavior made of that day one to be remembered in her hunting carrier. What would she show us during our next outing?

In the following lines I will narrate how she performed on that next outing and some surprising events, turning that 45-minute outing into a very peculiar afternoon.

#### THE AMAZING DAY

Last Friday, May 8th, we took her to the same field where I used to fly with Harry McElroy in the late eighties. The field in question is a narrow dry valley some 600m wide with a handful of thin dry river beds running along it. Soon after leaving the car, I saw some distant flying bird whose shining light under-wing recalled me a mockingbird (*Mimus longicaudatus*). I would later admit I need to wear glasses, at least for the field. As we got closer to it we found out it was an aplomado falcon perched on top of one small tree. At first glance I thought it was one of the members of the aplomado pair we had been occasionally sighting, either when hawking closer to the sea, or at the same valley, up to four kilometers



*Ten on a ground dove. Photo by Marco Chavez.*

apart. The female had behaved very territorial beaten the hell out of Ten in three occasions. I would even recall some strange passes she had made at her male during her territorial displays, wondering myself about their meaning; no doubt she was really pissed off. At our approach, however, we could hear that the bird we were watching

screamed like a young, rather than protesting or “barking” to us. Such an unusual behavior could only be the call from a lost falconry bird. When we were less than a dozen of meters away of it, Marco pulled his lure from his lure bag and called it down. Soon we noted it wore jesses. The aplomado landed near to the lure, realizing it had not been gar-

nished. After looking at it for some seconds, it flew downwind. For a moment I thought it would be the last we saw of it, but fortunately it wasn't. It turned around, perching on top of the same tree. Against my complaining, suggesting prudence, Marco called it to a piece of meat on the glove. The aplomado accepted the offering by flying to the fist and



*Author and recovered aplomado falcon, Marco Shavez with Ten and recovered red-backed hawk, and pointer Sacha. Photo by Daniel de la Torre-Bueno.*

Marco grabbed its jesses. It had no transmitter. We fed her right there, tying her later to the base of one tree inside one protected area right next to one paisano and friend's house before continuing with our hawking afternoon.

**W**e walked for two hundred meters before we got to flush the first croaking ground-dove. The dove flew upwind and over one hill before disappearing with Ten in hot pursuit. By the time we got to detour around the hill she had vanished. After some minutes searching for her into the closer bushes, we discovered her coming from a very shrubby area some 200m away. She landed close to

us. Marco picked her up and we returned to the place from which we had flushed the dove. After a few minutes we got to flush a second ground-dove and Ten flew it for some 20m before the dove put itself in heavy cover. Marco called Ten to the glove and I moved in for flushing. Just when I had begun beating the bush, Ten turned its head and flew backwards, across the wind. I could not see her performing and by the moment I got to move out of the river bed she had landed at the base of one row of bushes, some 150m away. We rushed for flushing whatever she had put in cover. When I begun beating the bushes Ten started to produce some alerting calls. Marco turned his

face to see what was alerting Ten that much. Suddenly he exclaimed, "Watch what is coming! See what is coming! Watch, watch, watch!" By the time I could focus my eyes on that unknown object scaring Ten to death, one red-backed hawk (*Buteo polyosoma*) was only a few meters away and directly coming to Marco's fist and Ten. He protected Ten by turning his back towards the hawk. The Red-backed landed a few steps away of him. He slipped his hand into the lure bag pulling out one piece of meat offering it to the hawk. The hawk jumped to his hand, grabbing all the food and Marco's hand. He held it by one of its tarsus, using his single finger he had free. I helped him by removing

the hawk's talons out of his hand. Although this bird had no jesses, it was clear it was thin (not much) and tame, very tame! We did not want it flying around and threatening Ten during the rest of the afternoon. The car was far and I put the hawk into my occasional bag pack before we continue flushing.

**B**y beating one end of the row of bushes, I finally got to flush one mockingbird. As they typically do it under similar circumstances, it flew low and parallel to the row, never more than four feet away from it, and towards the opposite end of the row. We flushed it again and Ten flew it for some 30m before putting it down into another bush. I flushed it for a third time and then flight unfolded across one cleared small field, certainly the worst conditions for the mockingbird to fly over, though exactly the ones we were after. However, when she was ready to close her talons on it the mockingbird turned towards the ground, flattening on it. Ten touched its feathers but could not grab it. Approaching Ten's low wide turn, the flattened mockingbird twisted its body in a 90° angle and took the air low and towards its left,

reaching another bush located less than 10m away, the closest one, of course. Ten couldn't go through the wide cover and the mockingbird sneaked away, appearing at its other end. Ten could not see it. The long-tail flew, looking exhausted. In retrospect, it never lost its outstanding caution; they seldom do. Keeping an eye on us, it flew long enough and low, before disappearing among some distant bushes, not far from that dove we had been formerly flying. We rushed for fruitless flushing for the tired long-tailed. After giving up with it, we moved onto the former dove, the one preceding the flight at the long-

tail bird. Less than a minute later, I got to flush the dove. Ten flew it down into another close bush. I got to flush it again by beating the bushes down in the dry river bed. Both Ten and dove disappeared, flying downwind and straight towards one small "paca" tree some 200m or more meters away. By the time we got to be there we found Ten perched on top of one 1.20m tall

I ran all the way back to pick up the jessed aplomado we had found, waiting for Marco at the car.

**R**eally, never two hawks of unknown origin had produced similar happenings during the same hawking day. While driving back to home we made a couple of phone calls, finding out who the owner of the aplomado was. Later we returned it to its owner. I brought the red-backed hawk home, feeding it some full crops before turning it loose. When writing this article, I found its owner and learned the falconer had released it due to some domestic trip. We are waiting to return his bird in a month or so.

Although partially because prey has turned relatively scarce due to some significant reduction in the poultry activities found around, it has been a while since I last enjoyed this valley running as much as we did last Friday. Twenty-three years have passed since I started hawking the same dry valley with Harry McElroy and the first aplomado falcon he ever flew, well-named as Harry the Indefatigable Accipiter. But 23 years is not an eye blink in the human life. Only months away from my fifties, I finish the days

realizing that I'm no longer as fast or indefatigable as I used to be, though when flying an aplomado the effort is more than worthwhile. Cooperating with her hopes and hunting desires will keep your fitness. Will I ever find more fun or be more moved than I am when watching and cooperating with the resuscitated althe? I doubt it!

Thanks to Marco for allowing me the freedom to write this article, and to all of you flying aplomado falcons. One falconer isn't enough to decipher it.





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cactus. I did beat the base of it, producing no bird. Then Marco called Ten to the fist and I moved to beat the "paca" tree. I could not flush anything from it either. When I was walking towards the closer cover, 20m away, I suddenly discovered the dove raising its flight from a clear opening, only eight meters in front of me. It had remained flat on the bare ground. Ten saw it and both birds flew straight for some meters before the dove twisted to the right and back. Ten closely followed the twisting dove, grabbing it just as it was trying to sneak into another small bush. She ate the dove on the ground and did not cache this time.