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The Indefatigable Accipiter and Southern Quail

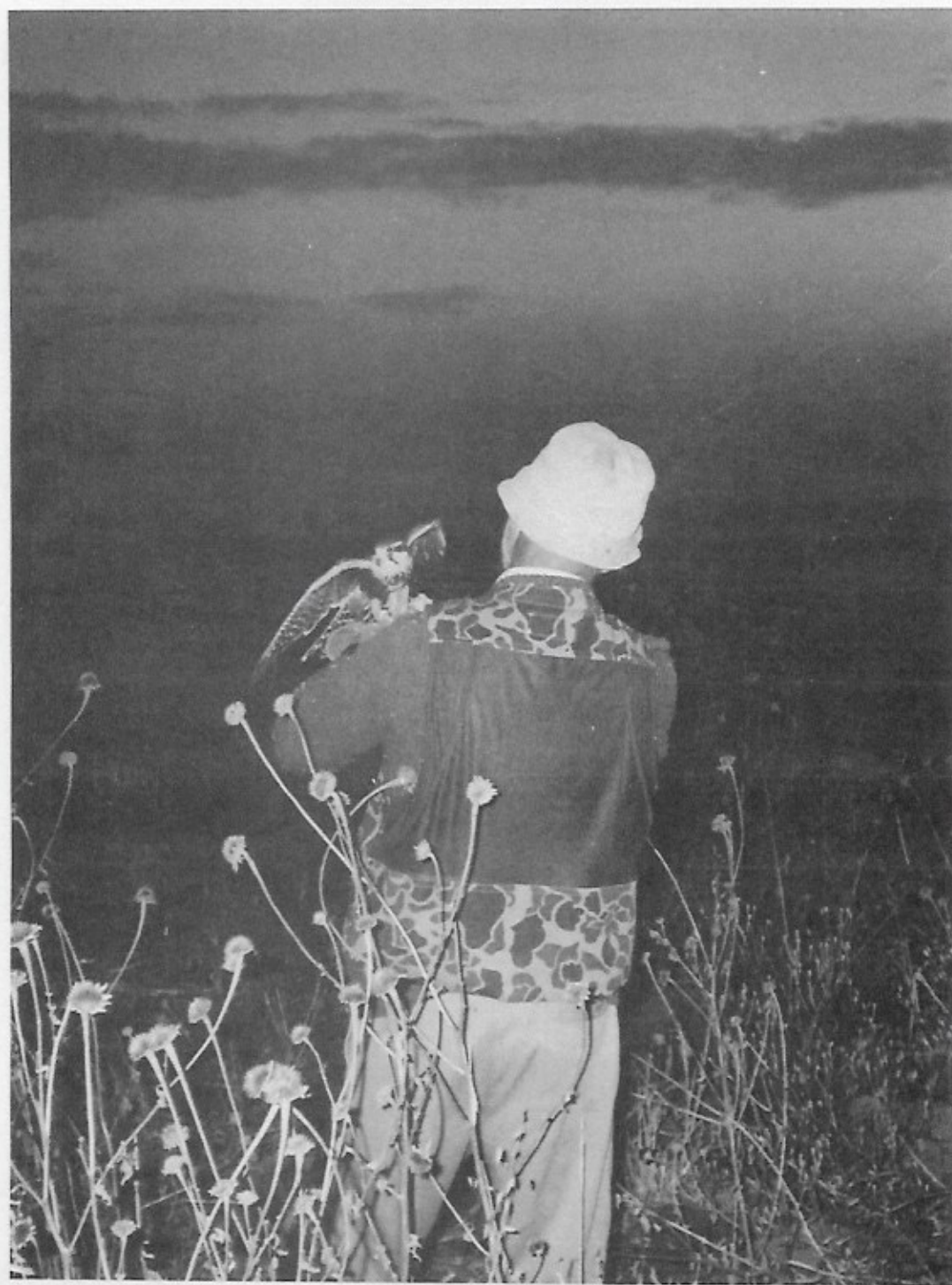


Photo by Rene Othon

Late evening flying of the aplomado.

By Harry McElroy

Perhaps there exists a handful of skeptics who don't believe that the Indefatigable Accipiter really exists but how else can one justify a hawk that: 1) Tailchases, along with impressive acceleration as a primary capture technique, enters a trance-like state similar to an accipiter in the pursuit frenzy. 2) Drives itself into trees, bushes, cactus, wedges itself down holes after birds. 3) Waits on only briefly, as if it had a short attention span. 4) Runs about on the ground with the dogs after flying a bird to cover. 5) Commonly spots sitting birds and dashes off in pursuit. There are some who would call this hawk the female aplomado (*Falco femoralis*), but those chaps just don't know a misnomer when they see one. In fact, it's almost a malapropism, but to each his own I suppose. When I first flew this hawk five seasons back, in Peru, I immediately knew that it must have been designed for quail.

For two seasons I flew one of these hawks at the bobwhite quail in the highlands of Central Mexico in Queretaro. Here at about 6,000 feet elevation the weather is mild and cool year around with frequent wind. Gerardo del Llano and I fly daily in two general locations. One is the lower agricultural valleys irrigated and intensely farmed, fences are uncommon and the farmers are either friendly or indifferent to hawking. However, raptors are considered vermin and caution is always in order. Our second and most favored area is the high, dry, cool plateau just above my home. This large domain is a step back in time with the oxen more common than the tractor, cobblestone and dirt roads, limited electrical power, scattered lakes and ponds; yet dryland farming with barbed wire fencing common as hen's teeth. Patches of native desert still exist with scatterings of Indian artifacts. Birds are thinly spread on the plateau where its enchantingly peaceful setting rewards the extra step.

THE EARLY PASSAGE

This small female, called E. Zapata, was loaned to me and kept through a Mexican friend's permit. At 290 grams, she was smaller than the South American aplomado (flight weight 320 grams) and also more high strung. Incidentally, Mexico has a strain of this bird that has a flight weight well below this. I have flown two females of around 250 grams. These smaller numbers also have lighter colored or near-white upper breast feathers. Unfortunately, this nervous disposition of Zapata's was combined with a reckless abandon in pursuit that equated to self-destruction. She was always in the process of recovering from at least one injury. Trapped in August she was decidedly withdrawn and I well recall doubts about taming, yet as it turned out she trained quickly and was flown free within the usual thirty days for a passage of the species.

Taming was an extended process and it was near the end of the first season before this lean and mean "fist falcon" was even minimally acceptable. Although tameness became imprint-like in the second season she was always ready to have a small nervous break-down over the least transgression. Many nights were spent out the first season. The only reason this hawk was not lost after one of these nights out is the propensity of the females to stay in the area. If the transmitter is not used for some reason it is of little consequence because the females will normally return where last seen and can usually be found within 200 yards of that spot.

CACHING AND THE PICK-UP

The newly trained passage aplomado, after taking a medium-sized bird can be an unreal problem. Most of them will not tolerate the falconer within ten feet and some will eat and refuse to return. I don't know a good answer for this chronic problem, but I have learned a compromise or two. Unlike the merlin, they cannot be conditioned for the approach and pick-up within a reasonable length of time. However, after about two months of flying several things begin to fall into place; small birds are cached under certain conditions and the falcon is reluctant to carry quail. Small to medium-sized birds are consistently cached in early afternoon if the hawk is flown frequently and if flight weight is within normal range. To encourage caching the falconer and dogs must stand back because to approach encourages carrying and eating. An aplomado about to cache its prey after eating head and neck will appear agitated. She will move about carrying the prey short distances among weeds, rocks, bushes, and repeatedly extend the head to the end of its neck as if fearful or searching. This behavior has been observed by trained female aplomado falcons in Peru and Mexico.

There may be a parallel between the aplomado's caching and the intriguing observations of merlins by Tom Gleason, et al, *The 1989 N.A.F.A. Journal*. The things I see with the aplomado are: 1. Diet of one whole bird daily with pigeon as filler and careful weight control. 2. Time of day influences caching. 3. Flights at least every other day. 4. The falconer and dogs must stand back, no attempt to pick-up the falcon on small birds. 5. Quail will be eaten by the falcon so I pick her up to control weight or to fly another that day. So far I have been unable to pick up any passage aplomado by using a tiring on the glove, the lure, or the bare hand. Only a tiring lowered on a leash has been effective.

After a few small birds are caught by a new passage and no attempt has been made to rob her the falcon can be approached while on a quail. She can easily "migrate" with a quail but if confident of the falconer will only move it about three feet at a time at his approach. After she eats head and neck and begins to deplume the body a tiring can be lowered on a leash. I have been unsuccessful in offering tidbits. With God's will, she can be enticed to step off the quail for the tiring. This system will, after some conditioning, work on small birds but only if she is fed on each bird and each quail. Once robbed of quail to hunt a second bird she will revert to old habits and begin to carry small birds again. Yet strangely enough, this system will still work on quail and the falcon can be picked-up using a tiring on a leash. My preference is to encourage caching with small birds and to pick her up on quail.

I feel that the various species of falcons will react differently in efforts to encourage caching. For example Gerardo's first year *gyas tiercel* peregrine will cache small birds if flown in areas he knows well. He is flown often. Birds are not caught every day by his falcon so he is not especially influenced by numbers such as the case with Gleason's merlins. Like the aplomado he will not cache quail and unlike Dan Cover's passage peregrines of the 1970's he does not cache mourning doves. Similar to the aplomado, he is more likely to cache if we stay well back. Behavior is similar to some nervous displays; often carrying the prey from bush to bush. Certainly the aplomados I have flown were triggered to this behavior by something that I do not understand.

HUNTING STYLE

Because my aplomados have not tolerated the hood (and incidentally I have never seen one that would) I carry them to the field in a transport box. For the passage the box is another compromise. By the end of the season primary tips are frayed. In the field the bird is released for flight and hops out of the box to run about on the ground or perch on the car, etc., waiting for the tiring while the transmitter is attached.

Once the despicable creatures (known as dogs in some circles) are released she begins to fly and sail about driving them into a frenzy. She is on the wing much of the first twenty minutes burning energy and waiting for the creatures to do their job. If no birds are flushed she begins to perch on just about anything from the ground to bushes, electrical poles, and trees. As the months pass, in hunting, she seeks higher perches even if farther away from the falconer and the despicable creatures. However, in general, she is like the imprinted Harris', always following the falconer and waiting for signals. This bird could be considered the Harris' hawk's long-winged companion. A social falcon that will follow birds high into the air seeking a position above to make a stoop with flapping wings then charging up above for another stoop repeating this performance time and again until the bird is caught or tires and seeks refuge in cover. Once the prey enters the bush the falcon bursts in at top speed where she chases about on foot. If handled with care this bird can be more intense in its bonding with man than the Harris'.

By the way I hope that canine lovers will not feel offended by our referring to dogs as despicable creatures.

We do have more affectionate names. We call one Hand Biter and the other Dog Eater.

DANGERS

Here where raptors are in almost constant danger from man the passage aplomado ranges too far. The locals use sling shots, black powder muzzle loaders, and rocks to exterminate. We watch carefully but almost daily find hunters, farmers, or herders in-close below a ledge or in the bush. We have endured too many accidents: On one hunt, my hawk flew to a water hole, "caught" a bird and flew off. I ran over to inspect and found that it was a wounded dove shot by a hunter hidden in a small rock corral where he was recharging his muzzle loader. When we returned the dove the hunter assured us that he would not have shot our hawk under any condition but only moments later a marsh hawk flew by and was blasted out of the air. Shocked, Gerardo and I stumbled out of the area.

RESEARCH

Dean Hector has written several articles about the recent history, prey, and hunting style of this species. His research reports that in paired hunting the female follows the prey into cover while the tiercel stays above waiting, hovering, or perching on tree tops.

Dr. Javier L. King, of Mexico, and I have witnessed this behavior in the neo-tropics along with Rafael del Valle of Tabasco. A pair of these falcons perched on a tree spots birds passing overhead, accelerates rapidly while climbing up, overtakes and forces a bird to cover. The tiercel does indeed stay high waiting for the falcon

Photo by Alex Franco



Indefatigable Accipiter and "T" perch.

to reflush. A stunning, dramatic flight that is over quite rapidly.

Behavior of the trained aplomado also supports this research. Oddly enough the extremes to which the genders pursue their lot in life is often a pain for the falconer. The female drops into heavy cover to race about on the ground with the creatures in search of birds that have been flown in and the tiercel all but refuses a bird flown to a patch of grass in the open. Obviously we need to fly these birds in a pair.

THE ENEMY AND HIS HIDE OUT

The past two years of specializing in the native bob-white quail has not been without trade-offs. To view a greater variety of escape tactics flights at the female grackle are superior. Another is the meadow lark and we caught a few of the above along with a scattering of tohee, shrike, Inca dove, etc. Most of these were accidents over which we had no control. Probably ninety-five percent of our quail are found in agricultural areas with the remainder in those scattered small patches of desert (where I strongly prefer to hunt). Unless they are found in alfalfa they usually flush instead of holding for the pointers. An average situation results in a tailchase to cover where, hopefully, they can be found by the creatures, pointed, and perhaps even flown from a waiting-on position. A minority of them attempt long flights to cover which is not wise to do. Akin to many raptors the aplomado senses the prey's increasing fatigue and makes a closing rush toward the end of these extended flights.

Previous to my introduction to the bob-white in Mexico I had spent a number of seasons flying the Cooper's hawk at desert quail so I wondered what escape tactics were in store. It was not long before I learned that, at least the Mexican bob-white, was lurking in the bush with a list of tricks long enough to make Blackstone the Magician green with envy. Where the desert quails usually follow escape patterns associated with their species the bob-white can be eclectic. Their repertory of maneuvers and tactics is impressive. The most frustrating is heavy cover where there usually is a flight to a row of heavy cover where they usually run. If found in the open cultivated areas they may fly to one of the many thorn trees dotting the fields. When chased out of the tree they will often try another flight or drop to its base and circle the trunk in an effort to fatigue or discourage the falcon. Perhaps 90% of the quail that enter trees are caught by the female in its canopy. When outflown in the open they may drop to the ground and freeze. If this sounds like a sure kill just think that you have probably been running a long distance, are at least a bit excited, the falcon may be circling overhead (remember the short attention span), the birds have not built up a scent so the creatures can find them, and you are beginning to question your sanity because you can't find a feather. Some may fly great distances like the Gambel's but in general they tend to make repeated short flights with plenty of curves, dropping to the ground to reverse direction, hide in rocks, brush, etc.

This bob-white is especially prone to reflush before you are prepared after these short flights. The hay stacks are one of their favorite refuges and whereas we have caught a number of them in these piles the situation grows a bit thorny. Even in the stacks located in the open they frequently just "disappear". They make use of farm yards, holes, farming implements, ditches, drainage culverts, and straw field houses. An escape tactic that I have seen several times, and with witnesses, is the practice of flying high into the air. A friend and I saw one quail use this maneuver three times before being taken

after returning low to the ground racing for cover.

FIELD NOTES

In catching one-hundred-fifty quail in two seasons with this falcon there are numbers of varied flights to report. Even though we are able to take more than one quail on a hunt, occasionally, we average about two birds in three outings. In other words a relatively difficult quarry here.

STRAIGHT ARROW

One winter's day hawking alone was as strange as any. With one creature and hawk I entered a field in one of the lower agricultural areas. This large fallow area stretched before us almost endlessly with a scattering of low growing dried weeds in the distance. The hawk was perched on top of a small lone tree. As I passed beneath she launched off in a straight line, building speed over the bare ground, heading for a scanty patch of weeds in the distance. As she was all but out of sight I brought up the glasses to see her power into the ground; then up and around in several shallow powered stoops. Then nothing - I searched for some time and was just about to start running when I picked up blurred movement. It was the hawk flying straight back toward me at full tilt. Curious I kept the glasses on her wondering why she would return at such a furious pace? After some time I noticed a cinnamon object directly in front of her also headed straight for me. That could only be the male of a favorite table delicacy. My mind was captured by this inquiry and I knew that soon the glasses had to be pulled down to keep the birds in view. For some reason I couldn't do it. If that bird didn't change direction he was sure to smack me right on the end of my gnarled proboscis. Yet, on and on he came. Finally, I snatched the glasses down just as the quail buzzed an inch, but not more than two, over my head, crashed into the tree and tumbled to the ground as the falcon struck dust churning, forming a little black cloud. I had watched the "capture" not twelve feet away and grinning from ear to ear strutted peacock-like over a shallow ditch to pick up the prize. Imagine how elated I was at this flight, but wait there was no quail! How could this be? Hawk, creature, and I all glued to the action in the open so close? It was some time before the creature located a tiny hole in the ground just below the hawk with quail ensconced.

MORE DESPICABLE CREATURES

Another flight was on the plateau in an area where we find quail in the largest numbers, in relatively open ground yet a place where they are surprisingly difficult. Jose Antonio and friend Lalo and I parked at the lake. Several days before we had experienced problems with hunters and their dogs so I was still a bit gun shy. As we got out I reminded my friends to watch for people and their dogs. Remarks that were soon to spoil their view of the hunt. As we walked through the first field toward a line of intersecting mature eucalyptus forming a 90 degree angle the falcon soared above playing in and around the tree tops. At times she held branches with one foot, wings outstretched in a form of tethered soar in the powerful rush of air. When we were within two hundred yards of the trees a farmer approached on a burro with a small boy trudging home after a day in the fields. A large black dog accompanied them and upon spotting the hawk sailing far above began to bark and race around even jumping up against the tree trunks. After a few more steps a covey flushed at our feet and I

riveted my eyes on the first bird to fly. It shot high into the air far above the trees and sped downwind before curving around to the right. At that point I realized my mistake and began to search around the trees. Unable to find the hawk I asked José if he had seen it. "No, I was too busy watching the man and boy on the burro, as you instructed". When Lalo was questioned he retorted, "I haven't seen the hawk, you told us to watch for dogs ...". He pointed out the dog racing back toward the burro beneath the row of trees that led straight downwind. We guessed that it had followed the hawk and after some searching the creatures found the falcon but she was upset by the farmer's dog and carried the quail a long distance when I tried to work in. As I approached the hawk after this long distance carry three or four dogs rushed out from a patch of dried corn frightening the hawk again and started trailing behind her yapping and carrying on. She then carried back toward the field where it all started but just kept flying right out of sight. As we ran along a canal in and out of mud cursing, yelling, and in general acting like maniacs trying to chase the stray dogs away one of my creatures decided to cash-in on the confusion and have a tasty meal. I rescued the stray mutt before John Phillips Sousa could eat much of it and with that the other three scattered. Some time later we found the falcon, stuffed full of quail, on the ground in some weeds still keyed-up and ready to carry the remainder. It took a while to pick her up.

FULL VIEW FLIGHT

Many of our flights are tail chases and of course not so dramatic to watch. Our favorite area on the plateau is a large expanse of desert with a deep ravine running through its center where the prevailing wind sweeps in from a lake at its base. At the top a generous "amphitheater" is formed covering many acres of grass, low growing bush, and cactus. Soaring and waiting-on flights are assured here if the wind is following its normal path so we always feel a special twinge of excitement as we pull off the cobblestone road at the top. This day Gerardo and I approached the battered, weather beaten patch of corn at the top where we generally start the search. The creatures found a large covey on the edge and pointed for just an instant before singles began to flush flying in every direction. The Indefatigable Accipiter was just above and upwind soaring and playing the current flowing in from below. She whipped around sharply and drove a quail back into the corn perhaps one hundred yards downwind. I marked the spot carefully and started to run only to hear Gerardo yell, "She reflushed it and flew it down close to that tree". Only moments later Pisco, the hand biter, found and pointed her with the quail and I took it because we had only been out of the car about five minutes. There were two trees in this large field and after a few bites of the tiring she flew off to perch in the second. We walked to an open area outside of the corn field and were standing on bare ground. We milled there for some time to allow her to settle down while discussing the probable location of others in the covey. Pisco strolled past us about five paces snapped around and in mid-turn locked up on point, bent double like a pretzel. In searching, the quail flushed and headed straight for the hawk. She came out of the tree with the after burners turned up all the way. The quail began a swing to the left and flew around the rim of the "amphitheater" treating us to a clear view of the flight. The aplomado, left behind at first, closed the gap as her speed increased. The bird reached a low growing shrub just as the hawk overtook and we saw a flash of wings as she plunged in. The dogs were unable to relocate the quail but it flushed from behind us, flew down toward

the lake, the falcon smoked off the fist and overtook the bird just above the ground.

ONE, TWO AND MORE

Two quail in a hunt are unusual, but late on a cold damp windy afternoon in the same area we were to do better. As Gerardo and I entered the favored field we were a bit setback to find the corn harvested, cut, and the stalks hauled away, not even a hay stack remained. This was like adding insult to injury. It was late so with no time for tears we picked a course to the west leading into an agricultural area which is generally flat with the usual scattering of thorn trees. After about a mile walk the falcon flew to an open field and went to the ground hopping about making several short twisting flights. She next powered back toward our left and we spotted a quail just in front of her. The bird made it to a row of edible cactus, putting in near one of the creatures. There was some brief movement of hawk and dog then still. Strangely enough she held the quail as I picked her up not a feather was pulled. During this flight we had seen a bird or two fly toward a field of dried sparse knee high weeds to the west. As we approached a black powder shooter worked through the field with a dog. Finding no birds they moved on to stop perhaps one hundred yards out to watch us. Because of the shooter I had the falcon on the fist and just as we entered the field one of the creatures locked up like a brass statue in the park. I removed the jesses and made in just behind speaking those words he dearly longs to hear, "OK, move in!" The quail sped off with his feathered friend right on his tail building speed low to the ground. They hit the thorn tree almost together. We could see them running, hopping, skipping all over the tree but as we ran in the action stopped abruptly. After a few minutes the hawk dropped to the ground with her catch. I picked her up and because of some recent electrical burns on feet and legs, caused by a transmitter shorting out on a power pole, I did not attach the jesses. She depleted and started to eat as we headed back to the car across the little field in a spattering of rain, cold and blowing. This, of course, was the little field where the shooter could find no birds - remember? After walking only a short distance a quail flushed right at my feet and headed toward a row of huge tree-like prickly pear cactus and thorn trees several hundred yards away. This was too much for an Indefatigable Accipiter to resist, she dropped the meal and sped off for a long, long flight. A powerful quail, it flew out of sight. As we ran in watching the creatures race through the row of cactus and trees I spotted her dragging the prey into a small patch of weeds in the open field just to the right.

With a third catch, howling weather, and failing light I attached the jesses despite the burns, but what's this no transmitter! Gerardo and I agreed that it had probably broken off in the thorn tree where the second bird was taken so we turned the receiver on and started back. We walked along together with voices raised above the wind and were about half way through the little field when Pisco cranked around to point almost directly at Gerardo's right foot. Remember the little field where the man ... We stood there almost perfectly still just like Pisco, then started laughing and making unkind remarks concerning the creature's nose and agreeing about the idiocy of flying under such conditions. Gerardo stepped away lifting each foot as if walking on eggs and hands that could not have been mine released the jesses. Hawk and quail blasted off into the darkness back toward that row of trees and cactus. Some time later I saw the falcon carry the bird and Gerardo heard the bell but she refused to return. After searching for an hour or so we decided

to give up and started down the cobblestone road to the car. We both were unnerved by the hawk because we could hear the bells now and again as she followed us back to the car in the cold, black night refusing our whistles and pleas. By noon the next day we had searched six hours. The area where she was lost included a road junction, bus stop with water catchment, and an intersection for farmers, hunters and walkers. Naturally, we feared the worst. After walking and driving every road and path save one, we stopped at the catchment to think it over. I started the car and wearily dropped it in first, but paused to scan one more time and there she was on top of a tree not eighty yards from where we had seen her carrying the prey.

RING AROUND THE ROSY

In the lower agricultural area several car loads of us entered a farm where we have often hunted. A number of the falconers from Mexico City were visiting on that, another cold and blowing day. I was surprised to see a few in thin garb without even T-shirts. After a short walk the falcon came off a tree top and in a short fast curving flight overtook a mourning dove. I retrieved it quickly and sure enough it was rather thin so she was given nothing from it. Some time later, across the railroad tracks in winter oats, we flushed a covey of quail and several flew down the tracks. From there a single was reflushed and the race was on. It was a strong flier and went far downwind to a large rather open tree. Several of us ran toward the tree as she chased, and flew the quail inside the canopy. Well, before we arrived the bird dropped to the base of the tree and began to race around the trunk with the hawk making like a road runner in hot pursuit. Two of us counted. We both swear that the quail rounded the trunk ten times before being caught. Long live Zapata.

SUMMARY

Because this complex raptor works in closely after flying a quail to cover it is a good contender (in semi-open areas) for the throne held by the King of the Quail Hawks - the female Cooper's. The aplomado's speed and acceleration is likely on par with the merlin. Power is impressive. I have seen both wild and trained birds fly almost straight up hundreds of feet to intercept birds.

The aplomado is in the family of hawks described in Tom Cade's "Wish Book" as the fastest in the world. Its turns are dramatic and footing is within the range of the accipiters. Endurance is its most outstanding quality. We have flown a number of small birds in extended rat hunts that have lasted over ten minutes and one that covered twenty. The bonding between the passage female and falconer progresses quite slowly and steadily over the first year. In the field its social interaction with the falconer and dog would compare with the Harris'. However, this super tame finished product that we constantly fear will be stepped on in the confusion of the search and reflush remains high strung; really high strung! There are things that you can't do with this bird like hooding, handling, etc. Would this passage female out-perform the female Cooper's on quail in the semi-open? I don't think so but she'll be a contender and searching for you after a night out instead of drifting away.

The hand raised tiercel is a better quail hawk with his inherent consistency in waiting-on, hovering, or taking stand high above for the reflush. Mine will also fly quail like a demented demon in the dark. I might fly the Indefatigable Accipiter in late afternoon, but not at night. However Geronimo, my tiercel, at 225 grams, likes nothing better. On these occasional late returns to the car in total darkness he is fond of flying quail that are

flushed by accident as we stumble along. We are amazed, but not too smitten with catching quail when we can't see the flight.



Aplomado and quail. One of these was taken in darkness.

