

# HAWK CHALK

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*Lou Woyce*  
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# THE APLOMADO FALCON IN THE 21ST CENTURY

BY JIM NELSON

"Here at the end of the first decade of the 21st Century it is safe to say that--thanks to Harry McElroy of Arizona; Jose Antonio Otero Corbeto of San Isidro, Peru; Doug Alton of California; the author in Washington; and a small host of "aletarios" (aficionados of the alette) throughout Latin America and in parts of Europe - the aplomado falcon is available once more for the sport of falconry after about four and a half centuries of hibernation."

It can no longer be doubted that the aplomado was the alethe (aleto) of classic Renaissance European falconry. Not only is the aplomado a dead ringer for all the physical description of l'alethe, but much-witnessed field falconry in North America on game-birds such as desert quail (McElroy), grey "Hungarian" partridge (Nelson) and Chinese ring-

neck pheasant (Ingram, Stovall and Stovall) provide the evidence that William Ruttledge required when he stated that the aplomado met all the necessary physical descriptions of the alethe, but was "slack mettled" and hunted only the smallest of bird species. In fact, all of the above listed falconers have stated unequivocally that given the proper conditioning and an appropriate slip (vast areas of open, level ground with interspersed patches of cover), a female aplomado falcon can catch every quail, partridge or hen pheasant put up before her...and watch out for the east!!! The alethe was also known to capture "butors" (bitterns). In South America, falconers such as Oscar Biengoleo, Max Aranda and Raul Ramirez, of Peru, have regularly taken large waders such as the thick-knee. In Brazil, aplomados have taken southern lapwings, ibises and even small species of egrets. "L'alethe" was known to also take "pies" (maggies). During the course of pest bird abatement, in 2009, Jake Messinger captured 5 magpies in four days with D-Lyla, a female aplomado, and he described the flight as being nearly text book Cooper's hawk in style.

So just what the devil is this thing called the aplomado falcon, and why should we care?

Falco femoralis is found as a nesting species in the wide open lands (where proper vegetation and prey combine) from just north of the Rio Grand all the way south to Tierra del Fuego. There are three subspecies: F. f. septentrionalis (USA and Mexico), F. f. femoralis (Central

and South America, to the east of the crest of the Andes), and F. f. pichinchae (South America, to the west of the crest of the Andes). The differences between them are analogous to the differences between the Scottish peregrine, the Anatum peregrine, and the Peale's peregrine. Suffice to say, they are more alike than different. However, with careful



*Alpha awaiting the reflush*  
*Photo: Brian Sullivan*

scrutiny, subtle differences (which this article will not attempt to define) become apparent. Because of current wildlife laws, the Northern aplomado (septentrionalis) is not available, and probably won't be in the foreseeable future. Because of the combined efforts of Doug Alton, Jose Antonio Otero Corbeto, Harry McElroy, and this author; it is the Peruvian (pichinchae) aplomado that we are now blessed with for use in modern American falconry.

Someday one of us may take the time to pen the details of this effort, but the broad strokes are that for different personal reasons, all of the above mentioned persons came together in a cooperative effort to bring the "Peruvian" aplomado to America. All Peruvian aplomados in this country today were produced by Jose Antonio at his El Huayco raptor breeding facility in Peru. The first group arrived in this country, personally escorted by Doug Alton, in 1999. Subsequently, one more importation was secured by Alton and then two more by

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the author. There are now enough breeding pichinchae aplomado pairs, with enough genetic diversity, to reasonably sustain an ongoing North American population for some time. Some falconers have expressed surprise at a recent “sudden appearance” of aplomados on the falconry scene. However, to those of us plodding along since the first permit application was submitted in 1995, it has been a slow burn, not an explosion.

At the time of writing, other aficionados that have “stepped up to the plate” and are contributing serious efforts to breed Peruvian aplomados are Jim Lott (Washington), Jim Ingram (Nebraska), Justin and Sherric Stovall (Florida), Troy Morris (California), Bill Murphy

(California), Dennis Grisco (California), Bill Mecker (Texas), Tim Hickock (Missouri), Zach Fossum (Utah), and Matt Mitchell (New Mexico).

Now to the fun stuff. What can these birds do? Or, better yet, what can't they do?

To get the very best picture of the aplomado in falconry, and especially on quail from horseback, buy a copy of Harry McElroy's instant classic, *Desert Hawking IV: Quail* and intensively study the second half. Here, Harry comprehensibly lays the foundation for understanding this species. He is the undisputed Father of Aplomados in Modern Falconry. He and Beth ventured to South America in the mid-to-late eighties and flew aplomados

in Peru and later in Mexico. His articles “written home” on their abilities inspired others (myself included) to look in their direction. Harry was the first to understand that this was a “hawk in falcon's clothing” and to see the aplomado's potential as a quail hawk sine qua non. The degree to which Harry McElroy has influenced the course of modern falconry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has yet to be determined, but it promises to prove mind boggling in scope.

As Harry has postulated, the aplomado (like the alethe of old) is a hawk in falcon's clothing. Though unquestionably a member of genus *Falco*, the build and behavior of the aplomado is as much accipitrine as it is falconine. They are light for their size. Most Peruvian males fly around 225 grams, and females fly around 335 grams. But the males (tercelettos) are easily the “size” of a small male Cooper's hawk, and the females (alettes) are the “size” of a small female Cooper's hawks. They even wear the same hood sizes as the corresponding Cooper's hawk sexes. In fact, the wing load of the aplomado is quite consistent with that of the Cooper's hawk, and so are the tarsi and to some degree the toes. Yet, while they are accipitrine in build, and rather “soft” in feather, the speed that they display in acceleration and then pursuit is often equivalent to a merlin or



*Two young Alettes*  
Photo: Jim Nelson

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even a gyr. Perhaps not in actual top end speed, but the aplomado's ability to climb "on its tail" for a sustained duration and at great distances cannot be ignored.

Here is a bird that can blast off the fist like a goshawk, speed across vast acreage of land to catch up to far distant fleeing quarry like a merlin, or stand on its tail and "sky out" like a gyr when the mood takes them, then crash into cover and wrestle about with quarry on the ground like a red-tail. They are courageous beyond belief, and have been known to catch rabbit, pheasant and large waders many times their size. They are as entertaining to see in pursuit of a grasshopper as they are an egret. They are beautiful, agile, explosive, swift, versatile, intelligent, agreeable, and just all around pleasing to behold. To many (or even most) that have spent significant time in their company, they are the perfect hawk.

Add to this a Harris' hawk-like sociability and the aplomado becomes even more intriguing. Here is a falcon we have flown in foursomes! To see a cast or small group of aplomados in action is a genuine treat. The alethe was describes by Charles D'Arcussia as "sprightly" and one cannot help agreeing with this view while observing a trio of these little sprites dashing and popping about. There is constant action everywhere, and throughout the scene is an ever present sense of bouncy, almost puppy-like abandon. They are simply having the time of their lives out there, and you are invited to join the action.

Aplomados are falcons of the fist. That is to say, waiting on is not the primary mode of hawking with them. I have preferred flights from the fist out of the hood over a setter's point at partridge. Others loose the aplomado and begin moving to provide action from other quarry. Others encourage a loose form waiting on (really, more like waiting around) to keep the little hawk elevated and ready. Because of their impetuousness, abilities to accelerate, and determination once in motion, the way in which the flight is initiated seems very flexible. Conditioning is the key to success, and there is really nothing that can beat kite and balloon training to bring an aplomado into peak condition in a compressed period of time. Once they have been trained and entered and know the basic game of falconry, taking a few weeks out to muscle your alette up on the kite pays huge dividends throughout the rest of the season.

The aplomado flies well under a wide range of temperatures. In Eastern Washington (arid shrub steppe) I have flown my own alettes at partridge in the snow during some pretty severe winter weather. However, hawking when the temperature dips below 25 degrees F. is usually not productive. Flying in no- to low-winds during the midday is a good strategy in cold weather. During mid-summer, under abatement circumstances, the aplomados

seem to perform consistently well in the mornings and late-afternoon/evenings even on days where the high is 100 degrees or more. Ready access to shade and freshened bath pans along with abundant spray bottle hydration during meals and throughout the day is critical.

The hand-reared aplomados (whether true social imprints, or dual imprinted) are sweet natured and cuddly on the fist, but ferocious on the wing. The authentically chamber-reared aplomados can be skittish and balky and lack the unbridled headlong brashness of the hand-reared birds, but they are more refined in nature and less inclined to the vices of the imprint. Some of the chamber birds are as quiet and reserved as if passagers, and their behaviors bespeak a different side to aplomado nature. Anyone aspiring to truly know aplomados should try several of each before drawing final conclusions. Though I may stand somewhat alone in my view, for me, the chamber reared (or at least chamber tempered) female flown at grey partridge is the ultimate aplomado experience. I look forward to the many future articles bound to be written by others who prefer the hand-reared alette.

Males are lightly built and more naturally aerial than females. Some will fly about the sky in an almost hobby-like manner, though it is really not waiting-on in the sense that most large longwings perform. From this height they may tuck in their wings and descend at a fast clip, but it is not stooping (to clobber) in the way most large longwings perform. Yet the good males are so proficient they rarely are flown without ending the flight without something in their talons. Though when they do you are well advised to give them time and space to cache it, for males are especially prone to carrying small birds about and this is perhaps the most aggravating trait of the aplomado.

Females are more stockily built and straightforward in their flight style. They are somewhat humorless, and are brutish on the kill. To see one tackle down a hen pheasant three times her size gives a moment of pause. Will she be injured? Have no fear. By the time you arrive on the scene she will have dispatched the bigger bird with a series of hard gnawing bites at the base of the skull, and she will be pluming and eating in a most relaxed manner when you get there.

All have their own unique personalities, and one quickly comes to understand that these charming little hawks are more than "just birds." In this way, they are much like gyrfalcons, though the aplomado personality is distinctly different from that of the gyr. Aplomados are curious and friendly, and want to be near. But they can be skittish at times, and though wish to be at your side, do not necessarily want to be on your fist, preferring to

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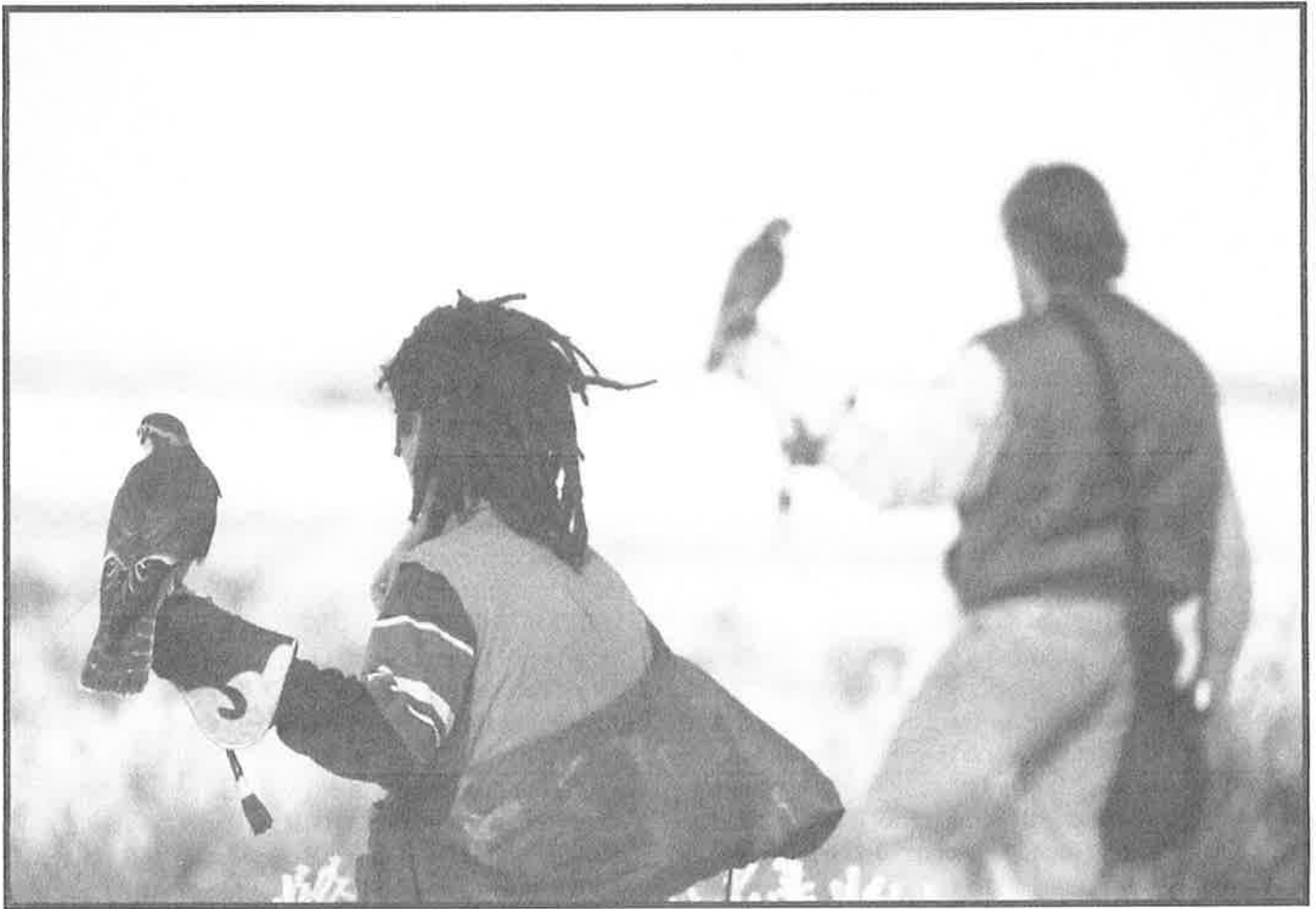
land on the ground, on your head, or some nearby natural perch. They take life on their own terms. When these terms align with your goals, all is well. But when out of sync, there may be a scene.

The good news is that aplomados are incredibly forgiving. Without exaggeration, one can forcibly cast an aplomado and perform a necessary evil one minute, and then cast them off at quarry the next. They can go from hysterical bating to focused pursuit in just a matter of seconds.

There is much more to say, but let's save some for other voices. To summarize, I will recount a story told to me by Al Ross, who was flying Hooker (originally trained by Pete Jungeman in 2005) at an abatement site during the summer of 2009. Al had loosed Hooker and he chose to take a stand on a nearby pole. Across the field the unmistakable signs of a gathering dust devil were forming.

The hot, swirling mass of air began to pick up speed, power and debris and moved across the farm toward Hooker's position. Certain that Hooker would spook away from the oncoming menace, Al prepared for the inevitable telemetry chase. Sure enough, Hooker finally bolted from his perch. But instead of fleeing, he pumped straight toward the oncoming cyclone, then whipped out to the side of it and caught its lift, popping up an almost instant 500 feet. Al dashed to his truck and fished out his binos. He watched Hooker through the glasses as the handsome little hawk "rode the elevator" skyward and finally disappeared from binocular range. After a full ten minute wait, Hooker finally reappeared, plunging vertically down from the heavens to plunk into a blueberry bush in the dead center of the field, where he ended the life of a medium-sized pest bird that had been dining there.

This is just the beginning.



*Raul Ramirez and Jim Nelson Hun hawking  
Photo: Brian Sullivan*