

# Cooperative Quail Hunting with the Aplomado

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*Aplomado falcon. Photo by Rob Palmer.*

I have read only passing mention about hawking the aplomado in a brace. This hawk is noted for being a social species, along with a list of other falcons. This article is my effort to write a few details about the behavior of our pair. Jamaica Smith (whose six-year-old daughter, Deborah, rides with her on a Peruvian paso) and I are flying her third year tiercel and my first year falcon in the Kingman, Arizona area. She is knowledgeable of the quail and has an especially keen understand-

ing of the interaction between hawk and prey.

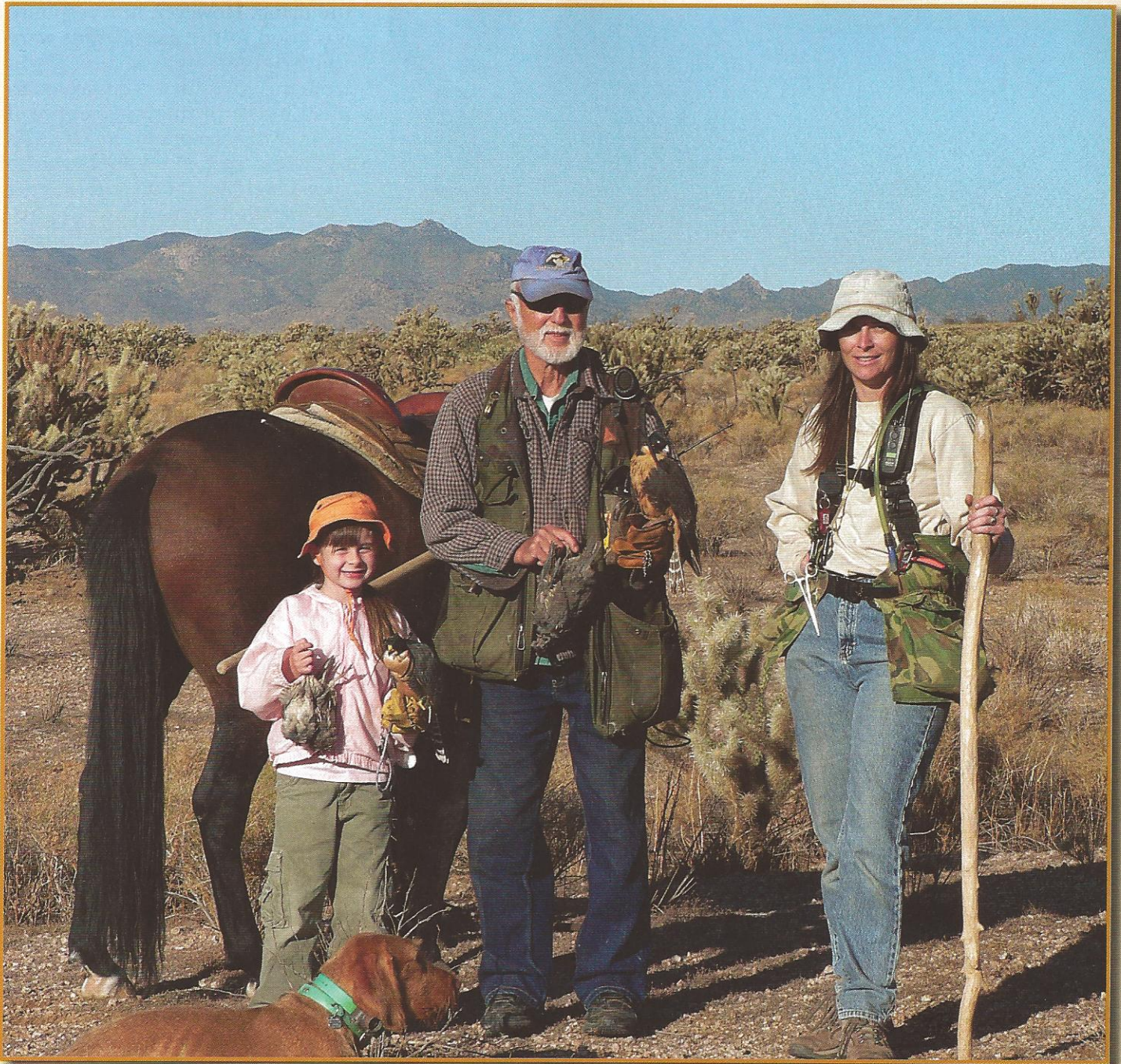
It is interesting to note that several Mexican falconers are hawking passage aplomados together in the Tabasco and Vera Cruz provinces this year. We are corresponding on the NAFEX site.

### **The Area**

Kingman is located in northwestern Arizona and is a relatively dry desert with 9-11 inches rain per year. Temperature normally ranges from the 40's to 60's during winter

afternoons and we enjoy more than a touch of wind. Elevation is about 3,600 feet.

We hawk in three distinct areas: open level valley with concentrations of cholla cactus; quite open valley with little cover or cactus; and along the foothills with concentrations of lava rock, steep-sided arroyos, etc. The latter presents considerable danger to the hawks because keeping up with flights is not possible and often the hawks are lost from view in the uneven terrain. The risk is compounded when the wind



*The Happy Nimrods. Photo by Kyle Runyan.*

is sweeping in from the bottom of the hills: our hawks may slope soar the ridges and speck out far above presenting an enormous umbrella for slips. Kingman provides wintering grounds for raptors of many types including goldens, redtails, ferruginous, prairies, ravens, etc., all of which are a danger to our small falcons. There are hundreds of raven in the Kingman area and they chase our hawks on the majority of hunts. By January the falcon began to fly high to avoid raven and she also began to make passes at them.

In the better years Kingman has a generous quail population. For the most part they are found in association with stands of cholla cactus. A water source is required during dry periods. After precipitation the coveys work away from the water source and rely on grasses and forbs for their moisture needs.

### **The Hawks**

Jamaica's third year tiercel is dual imprinted, an accomplished quail hawk even after losing three primaries in its first year to a bone

infection. They regrew this year. His acceleration and speed compares with the better hawks. I rate his overall effectiveness among the top 10% of the aplomados I've flown in the past 20 plus years. He sits the T perch for extended periods and is always ready for the long slip. His forte, like other tiercel aplomados, is the low altitude stoop and we very nearly count the quail as "in the bag" once he reaches a position above. (In the stoop Shaq hits quail in the open as well as inside cover, at times knocking them to the ground



*Jamaica and daughter Deborah at Hatband.*

or binding to others.) On one stoop he struck a quail head-on. When flying together we see him, time and again, knock quail out of the air with the falcon promptly scooping them up as they run along the ground. He takes slips from remarkable distances and we watch carefully on these long flights for an attack pattern that would indicate quail. For my part he responds to prey farther out than the falcon.

**M**y falcon, also dual imprinted, is the least aplomado I have flown with a body weight of 300 or so grams. "Sombra" (Spanish for "shadow") has been slow to mature. She was manageable when flown around our home but the first month in the field she seemed to live in perpetual fear. She all but refused to come to the fist and departed quickly after a bite or two of

the tiring. However, lure response was good so the early flights were not telemetry exercises. Right from the start she was dedicated to quail and surprisingly perceptive of their evasive tactics in the bush. As the weeks rushed by she began to spend increasing time on the wing in extended prospecting flights. To my surprise, she spends over one-third of the hunt on the wing. In these flights she often ranges beyond vision. In the beginning these flights followed a slow circling flight pattern, but as the weeks passed she began to fly with some determination. On the return she often sweeps past me tipping my face with wing tips. On others she may stoop in, tipping the horse's nose and very nearly causing me to become unhorsed. On one hunt we rode into a 20 mph wind for over a mile and she flew in front of us the whole way at her normal height of 20 to 50 feet. In the more dangerous areas she is offered frequent tidbits to rein her in otherwise she may fly in and tip the glove or T and sail back out. Sombra demonstrates other strange behaviors, a few of which will be covered in the text.

### **Daily Management**

Both hawks are handled in the same general manner. They are free-lofted in the mew and flown free in the field. Marshall PowerMax radios are attached to the backpack and they are flown with anklets only. Jess straps are sure to become entangled in the cactus. They are hooded at the end of the hunt. Jamaica's was hood trained using Steve Layman's operant conditioning techniques and the falcon using Jim Nelson's system. They are carried to the field in a hawk box for safety and sanitation. We ride Peruvian horses and the hawks are flown off the T perch. The tiercel sits the perch almost by the mile while the falcon spends little time sitting. The lure is used to call them in from afar, when lost from view or when predators move in. We run one vizsla one English pointer and one wire-haired vizsla. For some reason the falcon distrusts our vizsla which is the dog she has



*The pair closing on a quail.*

been trained and hunted with mostly. After the second month the English pointer was introduced and she fell in love with this bitch immediately. She shadows this big white dog in the search and can often be seen flying only a foot or two above her. After watching this habit for some time I thought of the moniker "Sombra."

**D**iet is composed of quail, from the hunt, with a filler of pigeon, sparrows and small ground squirrel. The 22-hour weight control technique keeps them at flight weight. The aplomado is known for being

difficult to pick up on prey and yet Jamaica's tiercel can be picked up with a minimum of fanfare. My favorite technique failed miserably with this falcon and she is not so pleased to see the approach after she has eaten the head and had time to recover from the pursuit frenzy. (The pursuit frenzy is that peculiar state raptors enter as they are chasing and subduing prey where they are tolerant of any number of things that would normally alarm.) As a result, I have had to resort to Plan B, in some cases Plan C, and on those dark days, plan D. When she has taken a bird some distance

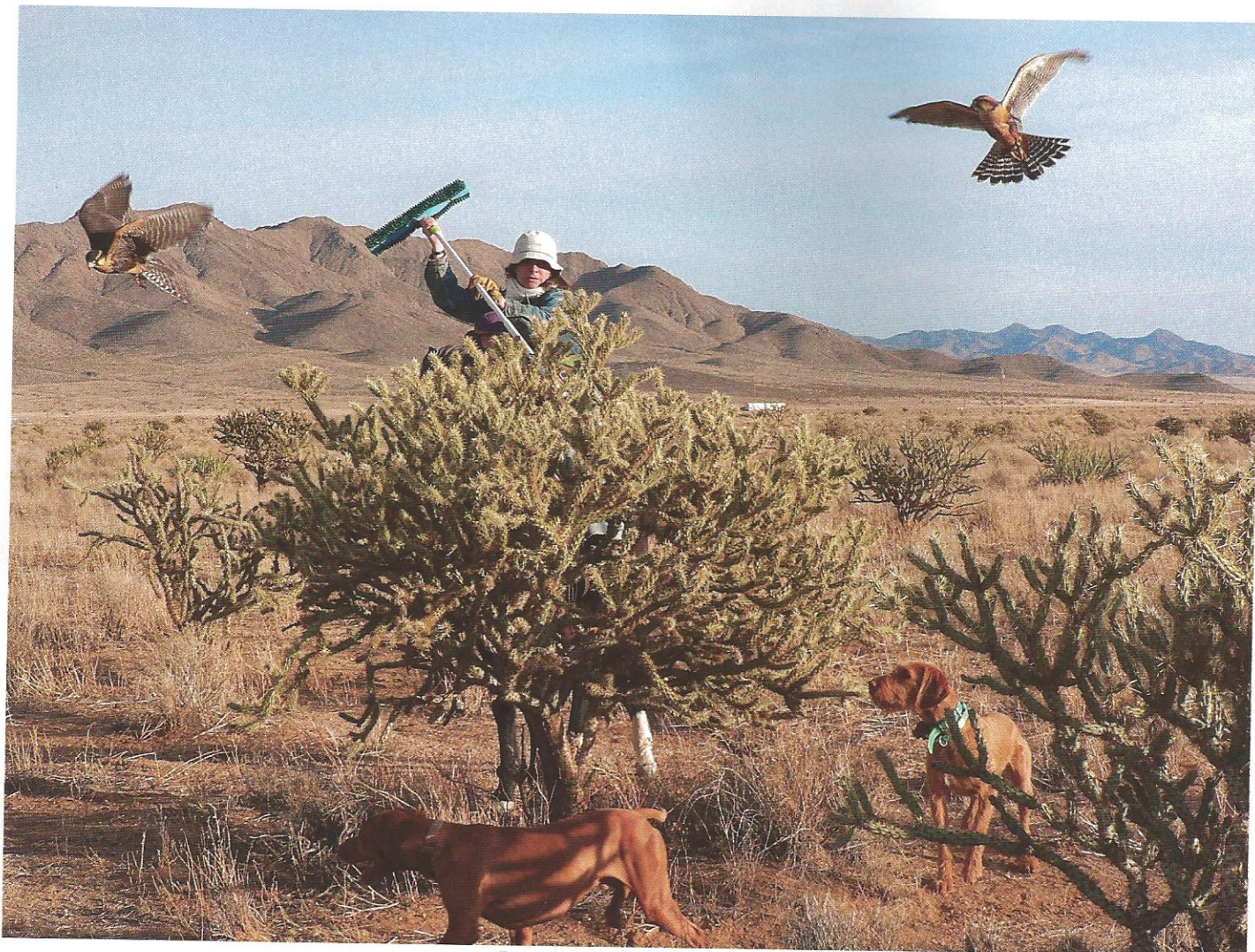
from us, or when we have difficulty finding her on prey, by the time we approach she has eaten the head and entered into a defensive mode, protective of her kill. In these situations that small window where she is easily picked up has passed. Unlike the average aplomado, she will carry a quail for well over 100 yards. To take her in I normally use one of the two systems listed above and the evil third when necessary: Plan B involves the pick-up pole, which is an extending fishing rod with a straightened fish hook attached to the end. Mine extends to eight feet. If the pole fails, Plan C involves

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*Note the falcon on the ground waiting for the flush.*





*Jamaica flushing a quail.*

attaching a quail carcass to a leash and it is dropped to the ground and tossed about until she can't resist the temptation and drops her prey for the carcass. When all else fails, or when danger lurks and we are in need of haste, Plan D involves releasing the tiercel to storm forward to claim the prey. Like so much of modern falconry, none of these systems are new. They have been recorded by the Arabs and East Indians for centuries. (See Dr. Ken Tuttle's use of the pole for picking up merlins in recent literature and a book soon to be released.)

After the first month of touch and go with the falcon she has become bonded to me and seeks my company. This falcon is strongly attracted to the tiercel and often aborts quail pursuits after they have been flown in to race to him from hundreds of yards away, which

creates all sorts of complexities. It is interesting to see the falcon's reaction to the alarm call of the tiercel. Even when hooded she attempts to go to him when he calls out in alarm or anger which is usually from some imagined danger. We are convinced, as reported in research, that these falcons use communication systems that reach beyond visual stimulus.

### Cooperative Pursuit

**T**he first three weeks our little experiment did not go as planned. The tiercel was aggressive toward the falcon and took her to the ground just about anywhere he could reach her. She returned his affection in kind. Both were taking quail during this period and when one caught a quail the other would blast into the hawk full bore. One would

expect them to fight over the quail body, I suppose, so we were a bit surprised to see them go for each other. The result was a concern to us both; as it played out there was no lasting problem and only a few quail were able to escape during their debates. We were relieved to see the tiercel begin to accept her company at the end of the third week. She attempted to bond and sit with Shaq, but he was not receptive of a close relationship and she was footed and nipped. By the end of the month they were eating the prey together with minor disagreements over ownership. We also noted that they did not attempt to rob one another when one was being fed on the fist. Our attempts at overcoming aggression were to feed them close to one another (as well as daily hunting) but other than hawking, we question whether our

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*The falcon launched off author's hat to join the chase.*

efforts were productive and suspect that the aplomado's nature of being a social hawk exerted the true influence.

**A**t the point when the cooperative hunting began it was an absolute delight. We quickly discovered a parallel between our pair and hawks in the wild. Researchers (see Dean Keddy-Hector) have reported

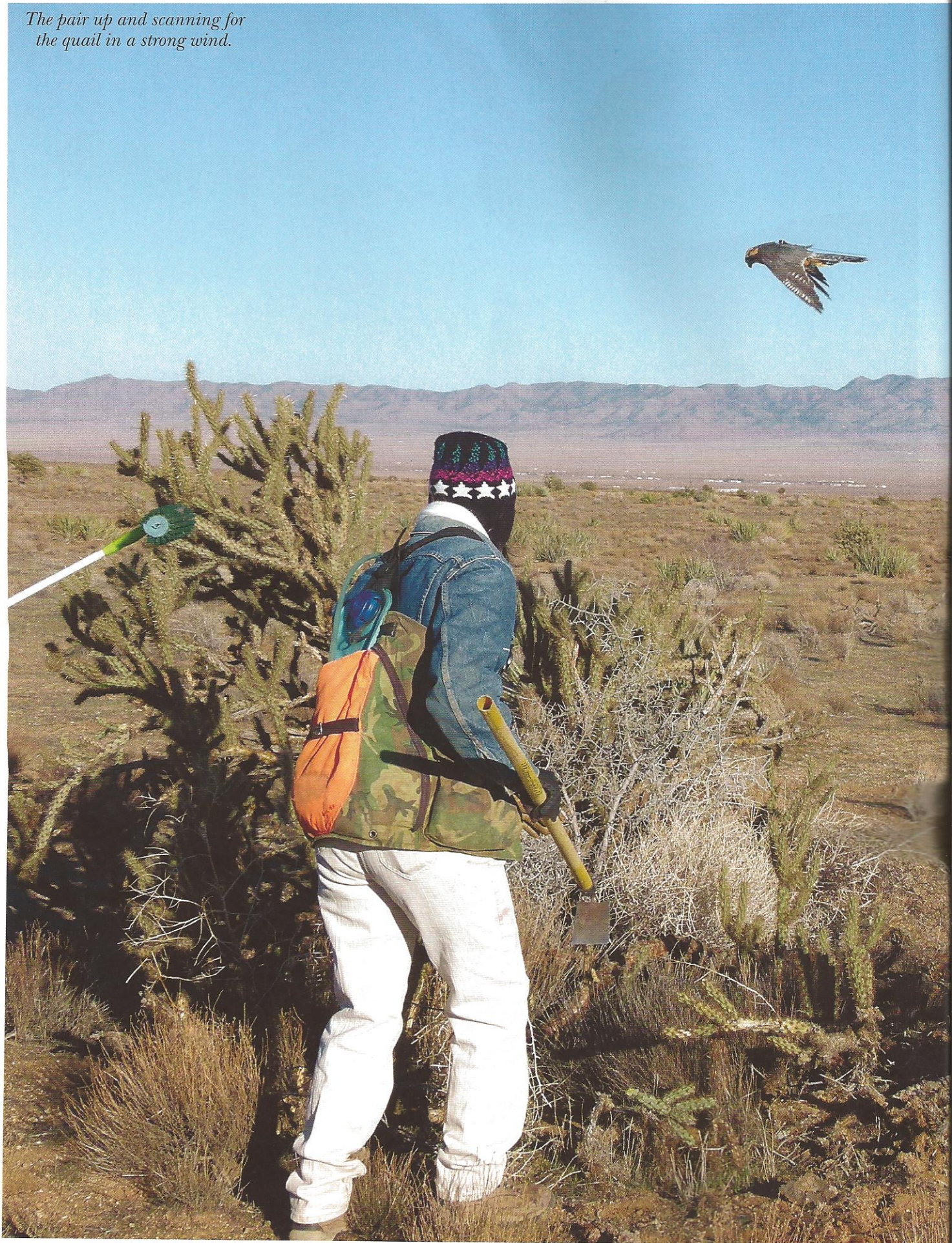
pairs and even groups hunting together and I have seen the same in South America and Mexico. In the hunt the tiercel tends to stay high when prey is flown in. He either circles just above the cover in an erratic manner or perches on any high place available. In this desert there are few trees so the tiercel usually perches on dead cactus or the T perch. Neither of these hawks

elect to perch on green cholla. The falcon normally stays low in more direct pursuit and will enter holes, pack rat dens, canopy of the cactus, etc. She occasionally perches on my head and commonly takes a stand on the ground. She rarely perches on the fist after a bird has been flown to cover and normally refuses the fist if it is offered. If either of the hawks spots the quail moving



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*The pair up and scanning for the quail in a strong wind.*





about it will take to wing and the other follows. In these brief flights which we call “scanning” (see Martin Hollingshead) they may hover in a kestrel-like manner or circle around at about 30 feet or lower often faced into the wind in an effort to hold position directly above.

### Taking Position

**T**raining the aplomado to take wing during the flush presents a challenge with some individuals more responsive than others. We have had luck in training this pair to go up at the call through repetition because we reflush quail from cactus almost daily. By the end of the fourth month both hawks took to the wing consistently when they saw the quail moving in the bush or in response to the call. From only a few feet up they make repeated stoops swinging back and forth like a yo-yo on a string. The tiercel makes several stoops through and beside the bush while the falcon stays up waiting for a clear shot. With hawks, the quail running, dogs, and perhaps a curious horse moving in to investigate, the scene is bedlam. We try to assist in pushing the quail out into the open but care is in order to avoid stepping on or striking a hawk or one of the dogs. Max Aranda of Lima, Peru trains his hawks to go up by calling out and tossing tidbits high above while other falconers have used various techniques including the kite to encourage the practice. Results have varied. Some falconers call this flight “waiting-on,” but my perspective sees it as too low and too brief for that label. To repeat, our flights above prey have lasted only moments and normally range from directly above the cover to about 30 feet. For the most part the pair takes a stand if the prey isn’t flushed within moments.

Both hawks take slips from almost any distance, but when it is close in or off the point they charge with acceleration near that of the accipiters. We estimate that they fly the same bird about 30% of the time. In these flights they are constantly changing position.



*A female Gambel's quail. Photo by Loren Erman.*

In one instant they fly side by side one another, the next above and then another below. It is like watching objects in a tumbler but it is a thrill to see them building speed and racing hundreds of yards in the tail chase. At times they drop back in the race, hold position or gain in an all out effort to overtake before cover is reached. Often we lose contact with them hundreds of yards out but re-sight as they toss high at the end of the flight. The horses hear the call "Ho! Ho! Ho!" and leap into action obviously taking joy in following the chase at speed. Our dogs are encouraged to follow the flight to offer protection and arrive at the scene long before the horses. Very often the prey is reflused before we arrive and we see the hawks making short flights and repeated stoops. During the work to refluse, the tiercel sits the

T or takes to the air in an effort to position himself for the short stoop. During the refluse effort the falcon shifts position endlessly and usually makes circles around and around the site, all too often taking stand on the ground. Even though the pair will not perch on green cholla, if the canopy of the cactus is not too dense she will enter it to chase on foot.

Oftentimes when she catches inside the canopy she drops to the ground below and becomes impaled by the carpet of cactus segments shed by the plant. Both she and the quail are quickly covered by spines and she instantly kills and abandons the prey to work on the spines. The hemostats are a tool of the trade in this game and our hands, arms and legs suffer from many a tiny spine part not easily removed. All

too often we can be heard shouting colorful terms as the spines find their mark.

### **Danger, Danger**

When a covey is flushed and the hawks select different birds to pursue we have no choice but to follow the flight of our individual hawk because of the constant danger of predators. For the tiercel this practice is effective because he stays with his intended prey faithfully, but for the falcon it can lead to "a lean horse." (In our area with predators in most fields it is obvious that cooperative flights require a falconer for each hawk.) This falcon may follow a bird for several hundred yards and with the tiercel pursuing prey in the opposite direction, the hawks are separated by considerable distance. Once she discovers that the tiercel is not with her she may leave the site to search for him. When she begins the flight back to the male she cannot be dissuaded with lure or whistle and she often speeds right past me in her drive to reunite. Or if Jamaica shouts out the falcon hears and responds. Often enough the falcon sees the quail reflused by the other party and off she goes. If the dogs flush singles from the covey she will depart, leaving the bird she may have flown to a lone bush where the refluse is certain. On several hunts the falcon has switched from one quail to another up to five times and has cheerfully flown each to cover. On one hunt the falcon took a quail in an open area and, before killing, she dropped it to fly another. Even when the pair has flown a quail to cover, the falcon will depart for birds flushed in the distance. If the tiercel is not being flown, she shifts her attention to the English pointer and follows Sousa about. She follows this bitch mostly and, typical of the pointer, Sousa follows the falcon on many flights. Her drive to fly quail cannot easily be overstated. If eating on the fist, she will instantly drop the meal to push off after birds spotted in the distance. On one occasion she was eating a quail head on the ground

when she saw a bird in flight and popped the head into her beak and burst into the air. These flights give one an inkling of the endurance of the aplomado. Needless to say, our horses are in top condition and cover miles in the fast gait with hardly an extra breath.

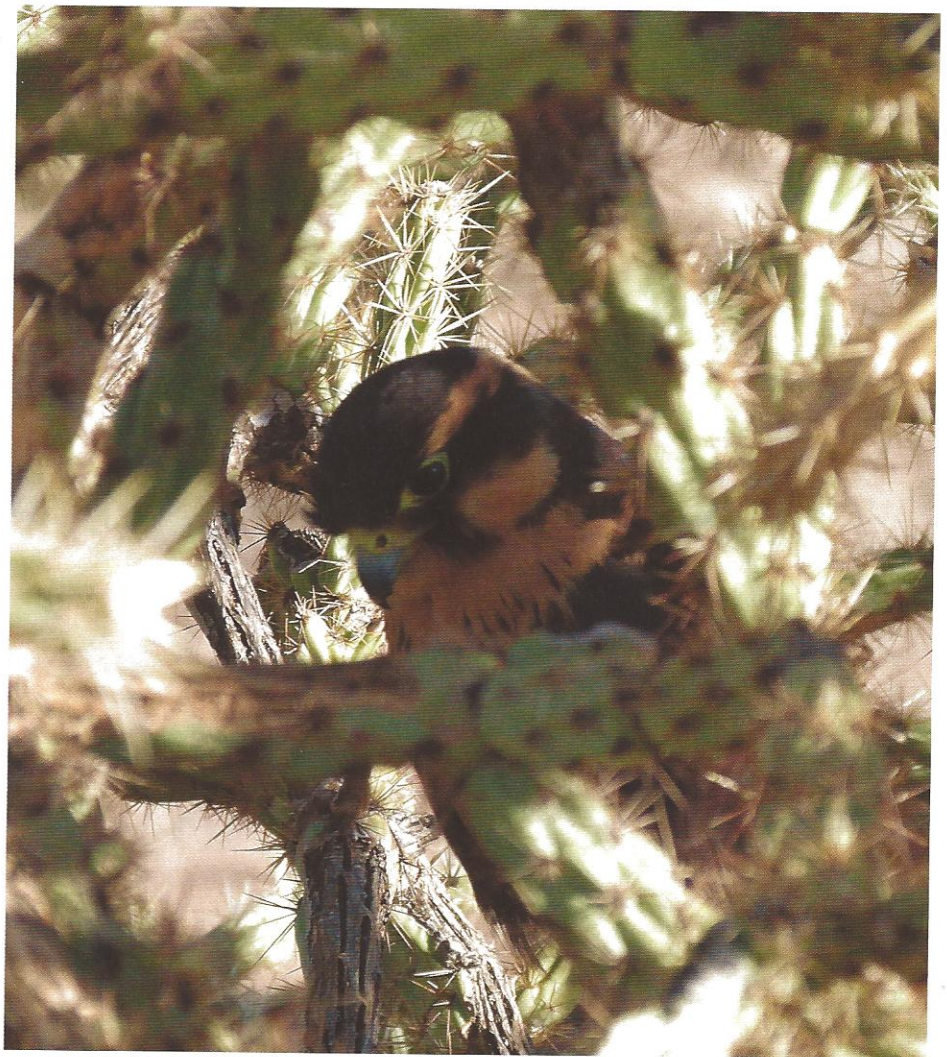
**W**e take several precautions to avoid predators: hawking in strong winds is avoided because downwind flights can easily go beyond 500 yards; flying in or near foothills is usually avoided because predators are on the soar and can easily reach the hawk on a kill; and hawking near hills is also dangerous because of slope soaring. This species may be unpredictable, but we are thankful that neither of our hawks often pursue various other birds. It is obvious that our interest in flying the brace at quail has not revealed much in new behaviors. However, these hunts have provided a small step into the unknown along with grand entertainment.

During February John Arent hawked his pair of aplomados with us, also from a horse, for a week and it was interesting to watch his falcon flying with Jamaica's tiercel. She displayed many of the same pursuit styles of my falcon by entering the cholla to chase on foot, etc.

## **Hunts**

### **Social Influence**

The falcon caught a quail in the open area to the southeast of Long Mountain right out of the truck, so we continued on. Within minutes she took an especially long slip to the base of the mountain and before I could ride in she reflashed the quail and followed it around the corner to the east side in another flight of several hundred yards. As I rode to the east side I noticed the tiercel on his way to the fence along the face of the mountain, obviously out of view of the falcon. The falcon flew the bird to a series of boulders and neither of the dogs followed, so I briefly poked about with the flushing stick and got back in the saddle. Within a step or two I began to call the falcon, but she ignored



*Sombra in the cholla chasing on foot.*

me and swept past flying back to the original area around the corner of the mountain. She was obviously searching for the tiercel.

### **Hawking Hatband**

**T**his area includes many square miles of hills, mountains, level valley both open and enclosed with weed, grass, and cactus, slopes with endless arroyos, in places covered with lava rocks. So much of it is either up or down and the going can be torturous for man and beast. The quail population ranges from zero to coveys above fifty. At times they are scattered in singles and kicked up by the horse every few steps while at others not a single is to be found. There is an active mine to the west (which is posted) and a scattering of homes within a fence on a hill to the north where the

quail often seek refuge, but with a foreboding atmosphere where we dare not ask permission. Both eagles and redtails patrol the area and are especially frightening in turbulent weather.

Today Kyle Runyan joined us and Jamaica's daughter, Deborah, rode with her on *Dancer*. We found a good sized covey on a hill below the mine and had just started riding when the falcon launched off. She locked in on one that flew downhill toward the open. As we rode in the dogs reflashed and the tiercel took to the air with the falcon staying low, flying through and around the cover. The flight first went south but suddenly we spotted them flying back up hill with the falcon closing in rapidly. The last we saw of the flight the tiercel stooped in from about 30 feet, but the end of the stoop was blocked from view by the



*A Gambel's quail flushed from the cholla.*

cover. After we climbed over and through the rocks, we found both hawks on the ground clamped to the bird.

**W**e decided that the main part of the covey had flown up toward the mine, but we started in the opposite direction to avoid the rough terrain and the posted area. After a sweep of several miles through

the lower valley, we relented and returned to the same area. We paused a few moments to collect our thoughts when the falcon took off for something far to the south, and the tiercel flew north, each in a long flight. I called our vizsla to follow and had trouble locating the hawk, but the radio led me to her in a huge bush with packrat den. I had not been able to locate the dog

but he was with her. As I worked the bush with the flushing stick, the dog pointed the bird repeatedly in different parts of it; the falcon bounced about on top, at times flying up and around the area. Kyle arrived and immediately spotted the bird moving about in the cover. Eventually the dog indicated the bird was in the den, so we dug it for a while before Kyle found and



*The pair dining together.*

flushed the bird. At that instant the falcon flashed off, climbing steeply up the nearby hill pursuing a quail that appeared from nowhere, while the bird we had worked so long to flush departed for parts unknown.

I jumped in the saddle wondering which bird to follow and spotted Jamaica and Deborah half way up the hill, frantically waving to me, indicating the hawk had flown over the ridge of the hill. I debated riding up the hill or around the corner, but as I charged Juanito along, the hawk appeared flying over the ridge only inches behind the quail. It put into a small bush, but in a split second the hawk had reflashed and both disappeared back over the ridge. I rode around the lower part of the ridge to find the hawk far below

making shallow stoops and dashes in and around the cover beside a small drainage. We all scrambled down and sent a dog in, but it could not find the bird and neither Jamaica nor I could locate the hawk. In a moment, we both saw movement and Jamaica shouted out, "Pick up your hawk. She will not see the quail if it runs out!" I leaped out of the saddle but still could not locate the hawk in the small bush. I circled around and Jamaica yelled again, "Never mind she has it!" At that moment I looked down a hole and found the white tip of her tail. I then became aware of quail feathers scattered all around the hole. The falcon was tightly wedged deep in the small hole and we spent some time carefully digging her out, but found that the quail had slipped

out of her grasp and had continued on down. Jamaica reached into the hole through the carpet of feathers with her bare hand, but for some reason paused to ask if she could pull the bird out. I declined her kind offer with a brief mention of what else might be found.

### **The Redtail, the Prairie and the Golden**

This large level area near town just east of a rough unpaved portion of road has only an occasional vehicle passing through. It is moderately open and includes a city pump station where run-off water creates heavy cover. High line poles run down the road where predators lurk. There are large stands of cholla and in some parts we find open expanses. For the equine,

disused fencing complicates the hunt. There are several coveys here but shooters frequent the site so the birds are often scattered and difficult to locate.

Jamaica and I rode through a large portion of the open riding to the East in a semi circle. Upon returning toward the power line area the dogs kicked up a scattering of birds along a drainage. The hawks flew them in, but the dogs were unable to relocate and we continued on to the west. Again the dogs flushed a few birds in the distance and these were flown to the heavy cover in the run-off created by the pump. This second flight put us almost under the dreaded high lines and as the falcons began a series of low level stoops the local haggard prairie came slashing through making typical low level sweeps at the quail. Our arrival discouraged her and she returned to the poles to watch as we and the dogs worked the quail through the heavy cover. At times the quail flew from bush to bush and at others it ran. Always the more deadly, the tiercel made repeated stoops while the falcon ran in amongst the dogs. This contest continued for some time before the falcon took the bird as it ran in a straight line between bushes. The hawks had their usual ownership contest before we picked them up, but during the melee the falcon pulled the head and neck off the quail and flew off down the wash. In the excitement of the chase I forgot to ground tie the horse and he drifted off, but I was worried about the prairie and followed the aplomado closely as she carried the portion of the quail several times. The prairie had obviously upset her. After she ate the portion and returned to the fist, I glanced back to see my horse far up the wash and no sign of Jamaica. As I reached for the anklets to connect the jesses, she took off for a quail flying out of the fenced area at the pump station. At the same time a redtail flew in from the west across the road to perch on a pole just above. The area to the north is open and in a short flight Sombra pushed the quail into a small bush below the pole

where the redtail was perched. The horse was too far away so I started running, calling and yelling while waving the lure. The redtail leaned over and prepared to launch down from almost directly above the falcon so I was motivated. This quail had not flown far and was obviously tired from a recent flight so it could have been taken easily. For some reason the falcon returned for the lure and I held a leg until I could snap the jesses on. A moment later I saw Jamaica approaching the pump enclosure. Her wire-haired vizsla was tracking the quail through the

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pump station and was most likely the same bird we had just flown. As it developed the redtail had made a pass at her tiercel before its flight to the pole above me. During the drive out we spotted a golden perched on a pole immediately south of the pump.

### **The Hill Climb**

In early November I hawked alone in what we call Lower Vock. Temperature was moderate with a wind in the 15mph range. We normally hunt the vast level valley here (with its forest of cholla) but today I decided to hunt the valley leading in from the south, running our vizsla and the fiest. We started by riding to the east side of the south valley through the washes and around the small hills but found no birds. Shadows were growing long while we ventured

deeper into the south valley (riding along a Jeep trail) when the falcon spotted something far to the east at the base of a steep hill with a cone-like shape sporting a sharp peak. As I watched she moved the bird about several times in short flights atypical of quail, but it was too far out to see the prey. Nevertheless, I began to suspect it was a quail. She corralled it in a bush at the base of the hill and after all, she was persistent. As I rode along, the dog reflushed the bird and, thanks to my Irish luck, it was a quail; the dog ran behind as it flew straight over the sharp peak. The falcon stood on her tail to curve around the west side some distance below. On most flights over a hill, if the hawk doesn't maintain a position well above, the bird is able to slip out of view and escape, so I suspected that this quail was long gone. This hill, like most in the area, was covered in volcanic rocks and boulders, but the falcon did not return so I had no choice but to make the steep climb. With the wind to my back I forced Juanito up and rode almost straight toward the top, with the horse picking his way along in the dangerous steep ascent. We were near the peak when something high in the air, carrying a large object, caught my eye. I nearly fell out of the saddle when I realized it was the hawk carrying the quail. She glided down the slope buoyed by the wind and, with never a flap of wing, continued far down into the valley. With some effort I turned Juanito around and we began the long ride back down, slipping and sliding through the rocks and boulders. I had marked the area where she put in along a bushy arroyo, but once in the valley I lost my way and turned on the radio. It was growing late and I was worried about predators (because of the flight over the hill) so in the search it was comforting to spot the little fiest laying flat on the ground. The ferocious 18-pound protector was not inches from the hawk tucked away in the heavy cover.

My thanks for editing by:

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