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# *Quintessential Harry McElroy*

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY CRAIG GOLDEN

*A biography of a living legend in falconry*

**T**his is a story about a living falconry legend in our time. Harry McElroy is a model falconer, hunting his birds as often as he can. Retirement and moving to live close to excellent hawking terrain helped foster this innate quality. His falconry is guided by independence of thought, imagination, keen powers of observation, and a critical analysis of the job at hand. He doesn't reinvent the wheel when something works well, but he's not afraid to diverge from deep-rooted falconry traditions. He is a longtime member of several falconry clubs, helped write falconry legislation, and helped start and has held offices in falconry clubs. He shares his wealth of knowledge in articles and classic falconry books. In person, he is as friendly and courteous as a southern gentleman can be, liberal with advice and happy to explain anything.

His worldwide appeal also lies in the fact that he's an eccentric character, even among falconers. A substantial portion of his life has been devoted to an all-out war on a hidden enemy. Not terrorists, but quail. What type of quail, you say? Oh, any old type will do, as long as they provide a good chase. He is as understated as Jim Corbett (a renowned sportsman and conservationist who hunted notorious, man-eating big cats). Also like Corbett, he's modest to a fault, largely unwilling to acknowledge the breadth of his contributions to the sport. Harry's a bit of a conundrum—a pioneer on the one hand but also keeping up with technology and devising modern innovations. One of the qualities I like most about Harry, one that makes him so engaging, is his dry wit. It is so sneaky that it is likely to slip past if you are not listening closely. Part of the humor in these subtle "Harryisms" is the surprise in you thinking, "Did he actually say that?" And his eyes are twinkling. This is my justification for interjecting as many direct quotes as possible, so as not to deprive the reader.

Harry Conrad McElroy was born in Houston, Texas, on August 16, 1930. His father, Jeffery H. McElroy, was from Bishop, Texas, and his mother, Clair M. Chandler McElroy was from Brazoria, Texas. Harry received a Bachelor of Science from the University of Houston and a Master's degree in counseling and psychology from the University of Arizona. He married Beth (Margaret Bethany Lotz, born in Berkeley, California) in 1971. His five children are: Chandler, Jenny, Molly, Lilly, and Gregory.

During most of his career, Harry worked as a school psychologist. He was also a reading specialist, writing prescriptions for students with learning difficulties. On this he commented, "Most learning difficulties center on problems with reading. The public schools haven't learned this yet." He welcomed retirement in 1984, because it meant he would have more time for quail hawking.

Several factors predisposed Harry toward becoming a falconer. As a small boy he recalls being fascinated by raptors, dreaming about them often, and wishing to learn more. Like so many falconers, his early wildlife experiences involved collecting snakes, often a stepping-stone to raptors.



*The passage tiercel Harris's hawk is one of the species Harry prefers for quail hunting in the high desert, and is the most effective hawk for both open desert and heavy brush.*

Falconry often flies under the radar in this country, so it is interesting to learn how falconers discover their sport. His first introduction to falconry came at age 18: "I was rummaging through the reserve library in Houston and found a book on falconry [*Falconry: A Handbook for Hunters*, by William F. Russell, Jr.]. That book was it! I knew I wanted to become involved in flying hawks." (We can all take a lesson from Harry's younger days and give people an introduction by donating falconry books to libraries.)

Harry became a falconer in 1948, when he bought an eyas Cooper's hawk from the Trail's

End Zoo, but it did not survive long. He obtained his second Cooper's while attending the University of Houston (circa 1954) and caught sparrows with it. His primary reference and the book that influenced him most was *Observations on Modern Falconry*, by famed British falconer Ronald Stevens.

I asked Harry what appealed to him about falconry, and he replied: "There is something about flying hawks that combines being able to control them and yet release them to fly free." Then he added, "I have always been fascinated by the interaction between prey and predator."

I talked about some of Harry's qualities earlier, but there is an essential characteristic I waited until now to discuss—his passion. We all know people who were born without it: lackluster, aimless, and misdirected. Then there are people like Harry who have more than their fair share. Here follows a little investigation into the root of his passion for hunting quail with hawks.

I asked Harry why the enemy is so hated, and he replied, "I've tried so much of my life to exterminate them and without success. There is little doubt that I will go to my reward without any feeling of accomplishment, and the whole fault lies with the quail. In fact one was able to make fools of my Aplomado falcon, pointer, feist, Peruvian horse, and me only yesterday."

Clearly the enemy is a valiant foe, one not to be underestimated. I imagine quail must be the source of much hardship, clenched fists, cussing, sweat, and tooth-grinding. I also asked him when he had first engaged the enemy, "My quest against this demon of a creature began in its most serious form in 1961," he said. "Since that time I have not been in complete control of my behavior."

I am reminded of the writings of Sir Richard Francis Burton, Victorian explorer and falconer. Why was he going to risk life and limb to explore the lower Congo? So it is with men of passion. Harry even moved his family twice to live near good quail hunting, including his most recent move 14 years ago to Willcox, Arizona.

In his quest for the ultimate quail killer, Harry has tested a variety of weaponry, and a few species and individuals stand out in the crowd. Harry has taken game with Cooper's hawks, American goshawks, European goshawks, sharp-shinned hawks, peregrine falcons, prairie falcons, merlins, red-headed falcons, lanners, Aplomado falcons, bicolored hawks, Harris's



hawks, and the following hybrids: gyr x merlin, gyr x prairie, peregrine x merlin, peregrine x prairie, and one "Hooper's hawk" (Harris's x Cooper's). His favorites are the female Aplomado, passage male Harris's hawk, and female Cooper's hawk.

Here's how Harry described his favorite individuals: "In the past 14 years here in the high desert, I've had three hawks that stand out as performers with quail. First was a female passage Cooper's. I flew her for several years, and even fanatical falconers who knew this species well thought that she was an imprint. She was that tame. In the field, when the hood was removed, she often dropped to the ground to run about with the dogs at our feet. Like the others, she took long slips from out of sight on quail and was most persistent, easy to manage, and totally cooperative, but she was not more than average in speed.

"The second was a passage male Harris's hawk named Refugio. He was slightly sensitive, or one could say withdrawn, but totally cooperative. I would rate his speed as just above average, but his ability to catch quail in cover was remarkable. His tactics demonstrated a broad range of pursuit styles that, like the Cooper's, developed over the years. His most surprising habit was to fly high behind Gambel's quail on many flights, and this tactic just blew my

pals away. Many falconers claimed that he went up over 250 feet. Both he and the Cooper's took hundreds of quail at the rate of one per outing. The enemy suffered.

"The third was an imprinted female Aplomado falcon named Favorita. This hawk was relatively aloof the first season and well into the second when she one day decided that I was her best friend. From that day forward she would not perch more than a few moments with either me or the horse out of sight. If she had flown birds to cover she would stay at the site, but otherwise she returned immediately, even after long dove flights. I labeled this 'intense bonding' for the want of a better word. This was a fast and tireless falcon, and when we found many dove around watering holes she would begin to 'test first one and then another. Her system was to fly them for some distance, and if they turned sharply she would lock on and never stop. At times she tested up to four or five, one after another, with almost no rest between the flights, and then she would suddenly lock in behind one and not stop for flights lasting well over two miles. Needless to say, I met some ranchers at their homes because mourning doves like to take refuge at homes or buildings. A few seemed not appreciative of visits by the dogs, horses, hawk, or me. Others treated us as their

*Harry McElory and his excellent male Harris's hawk, Refugio, once more conquer the enemy. Taken as a passage bird, Refugio is one of Harry's all-time favorite hawks. He has taken hundreds of quail over the years.*



*The team works in concert with dogs on point and a falcon awaiting the flush. The Aplomado falcon excels on quail when hunting in open desert terrain.*

long lost brothers.”

Harry has given a lot of thought to the raptor species that work well in his hunting environment and that are best for quail. Although some of the chosen species are quite contrasting, all share certain desirable features.

“For some strange reason, the fastest hawks I have flown have been imprinted, excluding the Harris’s hawk. I’m most fond of dual imprints and feel that they are the best performers right from the beginning. Unlike the common knowledge, I feel that the passager plays catch up and establishes its abilities as the season or perhaps two seasons pass. They become increasingly cooperative and conditioned to the things they are exposed to daily. I’m quite fond of the older passage hawk, but I admire the hawk that is the better hunter no matter when it was taken.

“The social hawks are the most fascinating to me because not only do they bond to the falconer but they tend to learn from their environment. I’ve flown several species but mainly the Harris’s hawk and the Aplomado. A whole new world of training and reactions is open with the social hawk because of the learning pattern and the intense bonding. With these complex raptors one never stops making behavioral observations, and, to prove the point, I just saw something new in the Aplomado’s behavior a few days ago.”

Harry’s horses have ranged from the Peruvian Paso, Kentucky Mountain, and Foxtrotter to the mule. On this subject Harry has the following advice, “For my money, and they do cost more, the Peruvian is the best. A good mule is completely different from the horse and superior in many ways, especially if one wishes to enjoy a long life, because the horse is an accident ready to happen.” And, “horses will walk on when the hawk comes to the fist and break into a fast gait or canter when you call out the escape signal.”

I did not at first take Harry to be a serious master of the hounds. Granted I don’t know much about dogs. They were friendly enough but didn’t seem to mind particularly well. In the field they ran willy-nilly, maybe even without purpose. But then something happened. The hyperactive White Dog (an English pointer) that continually raced by us in a blur suddenly disappeared. I asked Harry where he was, and he replied, “That’s a good point. Let’s see what the White Dog is up to.” Harry tracked him to his position on point. Every inch of his white flesh trembled. The White Dog had been like this for a long time, and I wondered if he wasn’t on the verge of a heart attack. I expected the quail to be close, but Harry explained that this type of dog points from a distance, and the quail run. The other dogs, including Beethoven, moved in to flush.

The Harris's hawk, Refugio, wise to this game, took an advantageous perch over the digging dogs. A bobwhite busted and Refugio climbed out of sight, straight into the sunset. We found him plucking the quail 350 yards away. Utterly amazing! There was method to the madness after all. The dogs were an integral part of a proven, highly successful method.

When asked about the dogs he has used in falconry and his favorites, Harry replied, "I have run German shorthairs, Drahtaar (Wire-haired pointer), Brittany, and the one English pointer. The English pointer is a bit more difficult to control, is never released without a radio collar, and, because of its wide-ranging style, cannot be run near roads. But this breed and the English setter are obviously the trial winners. They specialize in pointing, and the bloom falls off the rose when working birds in cover. The Continental breeds are great for quail and for the down-and-dirty part of working birds in cover. So if you could have only one pointer for quail, the choice would be the Continental. In 2006, I began to run a feist with our English pointer, and she has worked birds in the bush quite nicely. But of course this is only the beginning of the experiment and the end result remains to be seen."

Harry described the team (hawk, horse, and dogs) and their interaction: "My favorite method for hunting quail is from our gaited horses. We like the Peruvian Pasos for their behavior, or "personality" as the Peruvians say, and their smooth four-beat gait. One of our horses is totally cooperative and fast when speed is needed. From a horse a person can cover five times the amount of ground compared with the walker, and hawks are attracted to horses for some reason. These trail-grade horses love to hawk and exhibit some spirit daily. Much of our terrain is rough, and there is no doubt that the mule is superior to the horse when the going gets rough. They are both safer and more durable, but I love the speed and spirit of the smooth-riding Peruvian. My system is to release the hawk and follow the pointing dogs. We use two breeds—the English pointer to locate quail and the Continental breed to work the birds once they have been flown to cover. Our free-flown hawks tend to locate about 70 to 80 percent of the quail even with good dogs working. Many falconers seem to fear that hawk, dog, and horse are too much to train and handle, but these animals all see the value in one another and work together in the hunt. They all seem to follow one another, so the horse must be controlled to keep him from following the dogs and bolting

into a gallop when a hawk flies past at speed. My preference is to hawk in relatively open desert terrain, and my favorite species is the scaled quail because of their complex escape tactics. So far the Harris's has been the most effective quail hawk for both the more open desert and the heavy bush. In the open, the Aplomado falcon would be hard to beat, and one must consider the cooperation from both of these social hawks. However, accipiters become wedded to quail during the good years and present a most cooperative companion, both eyes and passenger."

The end result is that Harry's hawks and supporting staff have taken a wide diversity of game while in pursuit of quail. He has succeeded in killing the following varieties of enemy in fine style: Gambel's, scaled, Montezuma, and both American and Mexican bobwhite quail. Other quarry ranged from accidentals ("trash hawking" according to HM), several species of dove and duck, and various species of rabbit and hare. When asked about unusual quarry, Harry gave one example of "all those silly things that happen to us all after years of hawking." His Harris's hawk pulled down a baby javelina. Harry pulled the two apart only to have the javelina turn the tables on him! The enraged piglet attacked Harry again and again. Harry finally managed to hood the hawk and climb into the saddle, with the young javelina still attached to his boot.

Harry's writings have contributed substantially to the sport of falconry, and they drive home a handful of important messages to falconers. Although his style of falconry is highly specialized, his approach and underlying methods have universal application. His books include *Desert Hawking*, *Desert Hawking II*, and *III (With a Little Help from My Friends)*. Harry told me that he decided to write *Desert Hawking* "because at the time in the United States, little had been written about the Cooper's, and it was being managed as if it were a small version of the goshawk." *Desert Hawking II* introduced the Harris's hawk as a potential game hawk. A fourth book in the works, *Desert Hawking IV: Quail*, is nearly complete, and the manuscript



*Favorita. Harry's female dual-imprint Aplomado falcon, is a deadly foe of the open-country quail she hunts.*



*The social nature of the Aplomado falcon can result in "intense bonding" with the falconer.*

is currently in the hands of the editor.

In addition to these books, Harry has written a staggering number of articles, which have been published in the *NAFA Journal*, *Hawk Chalk*, *American Falconry*, *International Falconer*, and the journals of the British Falconers' Club and several state falconry associations, such as the California Hawking Club. Of these Harry comments, "I want to say that the many technological inexactitudes in them have not been my fault but the result of the spirits. And now and again one appears in print without my having taken pen to hand."

Some of the main themes in Harry's writings have been religious weight control, feeding whole-bodied prey, and engaging the free-flight system. What follows is a question and answer session to reveal a little more about these topics.

I asked, "How did you develop your ideas about weight control?" Harry responded, "The spirits must have helped me with the weight-control system. After testing it for a while Beth and I spent some time trying to come up with the most pretentious name for it we could manage. After some effort we named it the

22-hour-weight-control model. I don't know if anyone saw our humor."

Then I asked about the "free-flight system" and its importance to Harry's style of falconry. "The free-flight system is the practice of free flying the hawk in the field. Normally the hawk is released when we get the horses out and before releasing the dogs. Because our game is scattered and the hawk locates about 70 to 80 percent of the game, there is a decided reward in its use here. The other advantage is the physical conditioning of the hawk."

The free-flight system leads to another important theme, a philosophy about falconry that Harry terms minimalism. And why not take this straight from the horse's mouth? "Minimalism. That is my byword, and I try to reduce the time spent handling and training in any way possible. For example, I don't weather hawks or attach them to perches. My motto is simply to train until the hawk comes to me and then attempt to hunt and do the remainder of the training in the field."

One aspect of minimalism and the free-flight system is doing away with jesses. "I started hawking jessless many years ago in Arizona, when I saw that most anything attached to a hawk

tended to get caught up in our thorn scrub. Leg or tail bells are a real problem in quail hawking, so the neck bell is a reasonable attachment. I now like to use the receiver rather than bells and like the backpack transmitter attachment produced by Marshall Radio."

Harry explores ideas to their full potential, and minimalism was no exception. I hear tell that there was a time when some Arizona falconers decided to lose the jesses. The next trip it was jesses and shirts and then the shoes. Minimalism was taken to the ultimate extreme when Harry, Shelby Noland, Roger Claude, and possibly others, went hawking in the desert in their birthday suits. Harry recollects, "We were all flying passage Harris's hawks, and I remember one taking a rabbit and the others standing around it as if on point." Yes, he said that.

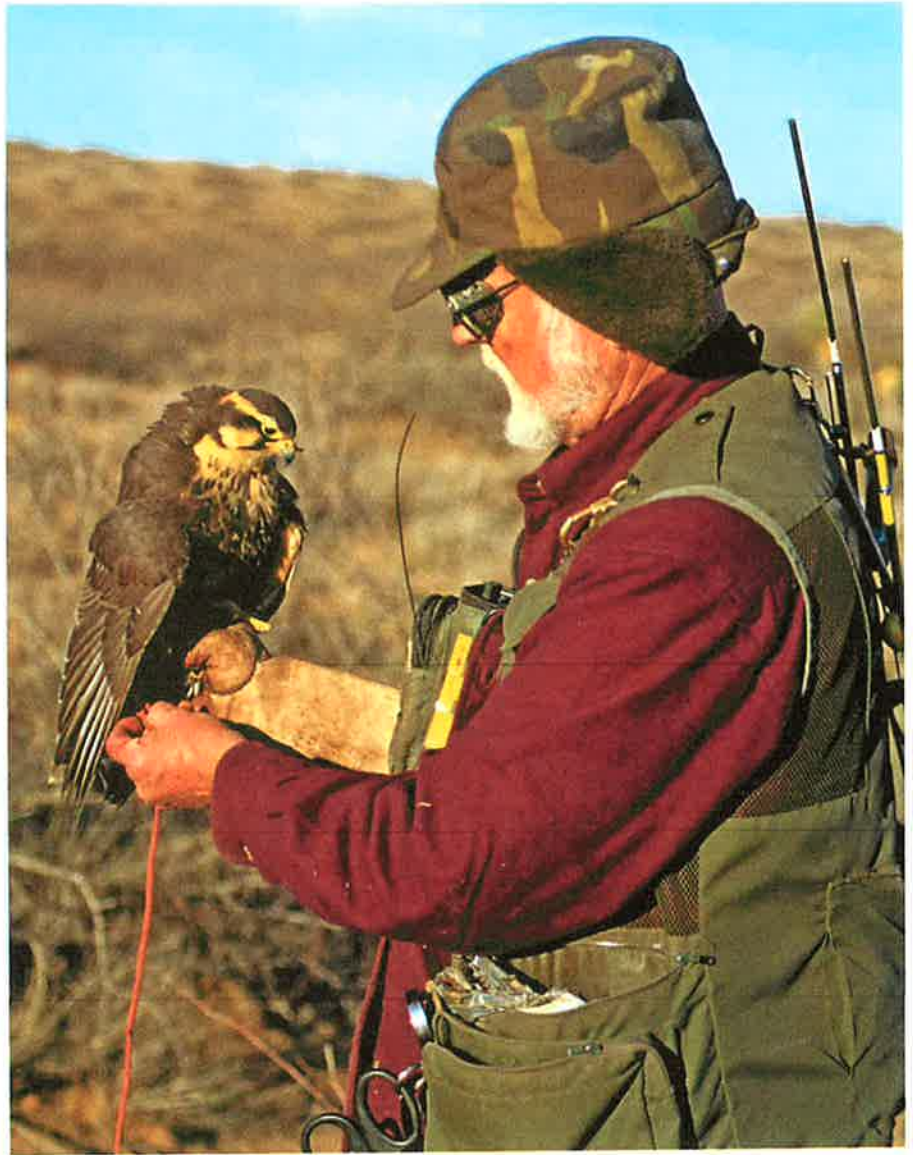
**B**ut back to the subject of his contributions to falconry, Harry has come up with many husbandry innovations that focus on practicality and keeping the hawk in shape during the moult. For example, he designed a long mew with Coroplast siding and elevated window boxes for intermewing the Cooper's hawk. The hawk could fly easily back and forth from one viewing post to another and kept in excellent feather. Since that time Coroplast has become an important building material in falconry (for example, in building giant hoods). Coroplast is lighter than wood, easier to clean, and its slickness protects feathers.

Multitudes of falconers have benefited from the McElroy family's hospitality, and it is unequalled. Their ranch-style home is inviting and has a Mexican flare. I remember a particularly sumptuous feast prepared by Chef Bethany. The entrée was hawk-caught quail and desert cottontail, ever so lightly battered, seasoned with red pepper flakes, and pan-fried. McElroy parties have an interesting mix of company, including falconers and raptor biologists from all over, and liberal doses of medicine (single-malt Scotch whisky).

Harry's service to the falconry community has included work on legalizing the sport in Arizona. He helped form the Arizona Falconers' Association and also was the club's first president, serving for 10 years from 1961 to about 1971. After that he served as an advisor to the club regarding efforts to improve the regulations.

As someone who follows current events closely, Harry is concerned about the future of falconry. He is a firm believer in NAFA and has been a member since the organization's first year. He views NAFA as a protector of the

sport, key to its survival. His service to NAFA included one term as a director and two years as editor of the *Journal* (circa 1971-72). His apprentices must join NAFA before he will talk to them. He feels that "NAFA should continue to join and cooperate with other hunting organizations. We fall under their umbrella of protection and some of these organizations who spend large amounts of money to protect the hunting industry," he said. "In America we



live in a 'Pressure Groups' society, so these organizations are the most simple and direct route to protect our interests. NAFA has done a wonderful job in protecting the sport, but with membership low, we need some changes."

So there you have it, a portrait of Harry McElroy. He's a general among the ranks of hawks, horses, and dogs, plotting his next position, constantly changing his strategy, always pushing the enemy, keeping it on the move, and striking it dead whenever possible. ■

*Harry's contributions to falconry are rich. His method of weight control, diet of whole-bodied animals, and use of the "free-flight system" produce exceptionally fit and successful quail hunters.*