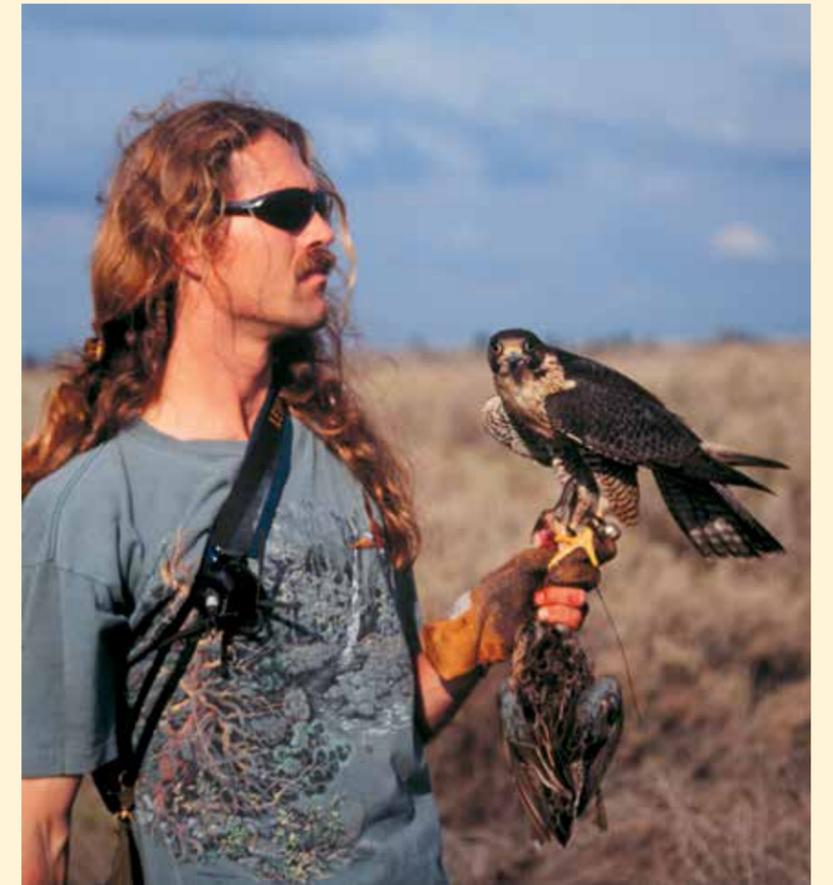


Wild Things



Tiercel Harris hawk and a black-tailed jackrabbit. Photo by Joe Roy III.



Joe Roy and Omen hawking teal in the desert. Photo by Cassi Roy.

Joe Roy III Grass Valley, CA

Classic, with a statuesque beauty, rivaling the handiwork of Michelangelo, the pointer poses motionless like some frozen stone monument in a snow-covered California high desert landscape. Muscles tense, tail high, nose directed into the slight breeze. The atmosphere is charged and I am electrified.



Pigeon work, photo by Joe Roy III.

It felt a little strange to be hawking amongst sage and snow in my fiancé, Sydney's, 280Z. But my 4Runner was in the shop (again!), and grouse season was coming to a close. So I crammed my falcons, Harris' hawk and pointer, Latham, in the hatch compartment, while Sydney and I rode up front in style. Since I couldn't very well cruise the Z off road, I knew from the get-go that I was in for a lot of hiking. After the three-hour drive, I pulled

off the road and let the dog out to do his business, while I did mine. Imagine my surprise when Latham wandered off to my left, and a minute or two later locked rock solid, barely 40 yards from the car. Needless to say, I slapped a transmitter on one of the falcons and launched. Shaman, the older of the two gyr x peregrine hybrids, motored into the cold wintry sky while I collected my hawking bag and binos. Sydney, who had never been grouse hawking with me before, stood by the car

and watched. I turned to her and said, "Watch this."

Heart thumping, I scan the sky once more before maneuvering past the dog. In a flurry of wings, three sage grouse erupt from the desert floor, larger than life. I hear a hiss, glance over my shoulder and locate the source—Shaman, diving towards the grouse at breakneck speed. Within moments, predator and prey connect at sharp angles with an audible impact of exploding feathers and a single grouse is



Immature gyr x peregrine teircel, photo by Joe Roy III.

smashed from the sky. The once-composed pointer rushes wildly towards the fallen grouse, as the falcon circles overhead. The grouse springs back into the air, but the falcon stoops again, knocking its quarry back into the snow. Once again the grouse is forced into the air by the now-berserk canine, and for a third time, the falcon draws a bead and strikes the grouse, a bird twice its size, pummeling it back to earth. Amazingly, the grouse leaps from the ground and strokes into

the sky, a fourth time. The falcon, having lost its momentum, tries desperately to close the gap between itself and his intended prey. Two birds, one the hunter, one the hunted, sweep across the desert landscape in a struggle as old as time. One hundred and fifty yards out it becomes clear that the grouse is extending its lead and gaining altitude. Mere seconds after it all began, both birds are out of binocular range, and I am left standing in a vast sea of snow and sagebrush.

There is an uncanny silence and an indescribable sense of emptiness.

Minutes later, Shaman returns, landing on the car. As the tension in my body fades and the adrenaline subsides, I step Shaman onto my gloved fist with a certain sense of pride. I am likewise overwhelmed with awe and respect for the grouse, having made good its escape from a highly-skilled and experienced predator, obviously intact. Utilizing speed, strength, stamina and intelli-



Tiercel gyr x peregrine, Omen, lining up on a mallard, photo by Joe Roy III.

gence the hunted survives, perhaps eventually passing its genes along to the next generation. Natural selection at its best.

This is falconry, the art that has ruled most of my life. Raptors seem to embody some of the qualities we humans most admire; beauty, strength, pride and freedom. Countless cultures, religions and governments have been influenced by these masters of the sky. There are some who find these aerial predators fascinating. There are others, falconers, who take this

fascination to the next level, obsession. Falconry has been practiced since its inception, some 4,000 years ago. While its popularity may have peaked throughout Europe during the Renaissance era, falconry still flourishes nearly world wide, albeit on a small scale. Modern falconry is practiced with a degree of expertise rivaling, perhaps surpassing, that of any previous era. Falconry has always been a hunting art to be sure, and still is. However, the emphasis of American falconry leans towards the quality of the experience, not

the kill. Indeed, many falconers currently utilize catch and release techniques. To the industrialized man, contemporary falconry is about experiencing life at primitive core levels. Hunting cooperatively with raptors reignites primeval fires, which smolder in the hearts of modern men...

After loading Shaman back into the pointer, I pick up Omen, a young falcon bubbling with enthusiasm. The pointer is given the command, "find birds" and is off and run-



Head shot, photo by Joe Roy III.

ning, devouring ground, the way bird dogs were meant to in wide, open spaces. Meanwhile, I trudge through the snow on foot, with Omen riding hooded on my fist. Tension builds as I await the opportunity to unleash this feathered bundle of energy.

Falconry's glory days may have come and gone with the Renaissance era, but I feel its zenith is looming on the horizon. Recent innovations in captive breeding and radio telemetry technology have taken falconry to new heights.

Weighing in at a little under two pounds, the gyr x peregrine tiercel hybrid is a predator second to none, combining an awesome physique, incredible aerodynamics, intelligence, and the heart of a lion. Talk about hybrid vigor! These falcons are at their finest when conditioned to attack their quarry from lofty pitches. Their precision and agility in and around the stoop is nothing short of phenomenal. These vertical attacks are heart stopping to watch and have a certain addictive quality about them. Fortunately,

these hybrids enjoy an enhanced resistance to the ails which commonly afflict gyrs.

Advancements in the field of radio telemetry have also complimented the hybrids' longevity. By minimizing the risk of permanent loss, this technology has enabled falconers to confidently push the envelope of raptor training and hunting. Marshal Telemetry has pioneered the next generation transmitters, cutting down antennas from what had once been inherently danger-



Tiercel Harris' hawk, Arizona, on a Northern California bunny, photo by Joe Roy III.

ous lengths to what can now be considered totally safe lengths. ne and a half hours into the trek, and still no sign of sage grouse. I decide a change of pace is in order and head for my ride. Sydney and I drive to an old abandoned homestead just a few miles down the dirt road. Like a postcard from the past, the farm is typically adorned with dilapidated barn, broken-down tractor, piles of old lumber and an ancient Ford truck. Having been long since deserted by humans, this farm is just the kind of place cottontail rabbits love to call home. Abundant paw tracks in the snow indicate, though forsaken,

this place is far from unoccupied, providing shelter for dozens of bunnies and undoubtedly an array of other wildlife, including the owl that nearly parts my hair as it exits the barn. This hunt will begin and end in a space the size of an average farmyard, providing a nice break from the long hike behind the wide-ranging pointer. Pulling the Harris' hawk, Arizona, from the car I think, "Just what the doctor ordered." I remove the hood, unveiling those large dark eyes, and wonder what this creature must think of the cold, snowy scenery, having naturally evolved in a much warmer climate.

Arizona, has spent the major-

ity of his career hunting hares (jack rabbits) and the occasional pheasant in the Sacramento Basin. Handling these large hares is no easy task, even for an oversized tiercel. Catching one of these speeding mammoths isn't so hard, hanging on is the real trick. When attacked by hawks, really big jacks often rely less on speed and more on brute strength, kicking up their back legs while loping off in defiant display. These guys can kick like mules with bone crunching power. Hawks that manage to latch on are subject to being kicked, flipped and dragged through heavy cover and barbed-wire fences. Arizona is always pleasantly surprised when



Tiercel gyr x peregrine Shaman, and a Nevada sage grouse, photo by Joe Roy III.

we hunt the more amiable cottontails.

Seeking a better vantage point, Arizona flies from my fist, landing on the top of a utility pole. I head towards the old tractor, and with a stick, begin prodding at the underbelly of the rusted beast, while Arizona descends to the top of the porch for closer inspection. A couple of prods has a bunny scurrying out from under the other side, running full tilt, tail bobbing, white and cotton. Arizona is off his perch, still a bit sluggish from sitting in the car for five hours. The rabbit makes a beeline for the barn and easily arrives ahead of the hawk, disappearing down a hole in the foundation. Interest piqued, Arizona lands on top of the barn with wide eyes. As I resume poking around the tractor, Arizona flies about perching here and there on old farm relics. It doesn't take long

before another bunny squirts out from under the tractor racing hell bent for the hole in the barn, only narrowly avoiding the talons of the now-focused hawk.

Moving to the lumber pile, I rustle a few boards while Arizona takes a position on a fence post just over my shoulder, practically breathing down my neck. As if on cue, a rabbit darts out of the pile sprinting towards the barn. Arizona whips into action, wings flicking, and shortening the distance between himself and his intended next meal. Under intense pressure, the bunny dives under the remains of the old pickup, half the distance to the barn. Pitching up over the truck, Arizona lands on the barn roof, eyes afire with an expression of fierce determination. I flush the bunny out from under the decomposing wreck, and in a blur of

feathers and flashing black talons, countless years of avian evolution prove lethal, as natural selection takes its toll. The predator will dine and survive to compete another day, while I give thanks once again for the opportunity to participate in the drama we call life.

Hunting, whether with gun, bow, hawk or club, is a conduit to our primordial past, jamming us into direct contact with the natural world. This gives one a sense of balance and belonging, as well as an appreciation for all that is wild. No small gift! May there always be places where wild things flourish and the hearts of uncivilized men soar.

With just enough daylight left for one more flight, I pick up Omen, the anxious young falcon, and follow the pointer into the wilderness, searching for sage grouse, but finding myself. 