

Hawking the Big Sky

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY KATE DAVIS

Life with a hat-stealing peregrine

We all know the mantra for this sport. To quote John J. Craighead, it is “patience, perseverance, and hard work.” And hopefully progress. For me, the progress has at times been glacially slow, with some setbacks along the way. I fly an imprinted anatum peregrine from Springhill Falcons in Bozeman. Raised in a baby playpen in my living room, Sibley is as bonded to me as I am to her. In the field, her behavior around the occasional stranger had been fine, until late March of her first hunting season. That day, the landowner got out of her car to walk up for a greeting. Down came Sibley, and off went the woman’s baseball cap. “Very funny trick. Now bring it back.” Well, that wasn’t in Sibley’s game plan, and I had to retrieve the cap after an hour of searching, right where she had dropped it in a grove of trees. I decided it was intermewing time for Sibley the peregrine. Sib duplicated this trick several more times when I forgot to warn onlookers—a stunt that I have since learned is widespread in imprints. A reporter who once fell victim to this behavior even included it as the opening anecdote in a magazine article. Sib lifted her grandma’s hand-knitted, heirloom cap right off her head. Thankfully, I found it weeks later and returned it.

Until recently, hat-swiping only took place while the falcon was on the exercise grounds, not while hunting. But that changed on the opening week of upland game season last year. We were in an area we had never before hunted, one with thick cover, where the pheasants never showed





themselves, despite the frantic pointing of the English setter. After 20 minutes of such frustration, Sib noticed something she had missed up until then—a stranger wearing a huge white cowboy hat. Attack time. After about 30 passes from the screaming falcon, the targeted man crouched trembling beneath an irrigation pipe, hat pulled down tight with both hands, and, I swear, he let out a whimper or two. I kept shouting for him to take off his hat, but he refused. With Sib back on the glove and hooded, the man sheepishly admitted that he didn't want me to know that he was bald on top. Come to think of it, I never have seen him without a hat on his head.

I had a different sort of experience another day while out in the field with a shotgun-hunting new friend. Sibley was showing off her flight skills, and I tossed up a homing pigeon as a finale. The pigeon raced uphill to an old log

house with an enormous stone chimney and Sib on his tail. To my horror, down the chimney both birds flew! Not knowing what to do, I circled the house calling and blowing the whistle. A voice from the door urged me to come inside, where I found the homeowners leaning into the fireplace, listening to falcon bells ringing inside the dark chimney. I didn't think that this was in any way humorous, contrary to my friends who reminded me that this is "the sport of kings!" I climbed a ladder to the roof, and five minutes later, Sib hopped out of the chimney, with the dead pigeon in one foot. She looked none the worse for wear. I was so relieved that, without thinking, I reached down to pick her up, and off she sailed with her prize. No signal and the transmitter was broken (two—one on each leg—from then on). After an hour and a half of me searching the forest, with the occasional expletive, my

hunter friend and I found her perched next to the car as if she was impatient to get home. Indeed the sport of kings (and queens).

Our hunting grounds are right down the road, a quick Subaru ride to over 1,000 acres of wetlands and fields loaded with ducks and pheasants. My hunting partner is Jay Summer, director of the Montana Peregrine Institute. We just have to call ahead to make sure no one is gun hunting, and then we have the place to ourselves. It is a falconer's paradise, with no power lines, fences, or highways, and the towering Bitterroot Mountains bordering us to the west. Sibley scored her first duck here, a hen mallard in an impressive 300-foot stoop that ended with a collision 50-feet above us. The two speeding birds came together for a split second then separated, and both fell to the ground with a thump. I ran over to find Sib convulsing, covered in blood and with one eye swollen shut. Jay collected the duck, dashed back to get the car, and we sped off to the veterinarian.

Sibley could still use her feet, so my worst fears that she had broken her neck or back were dismissed. Luckily, we found our vet wrapping Christmas presents at the time, so Sibley was examined immediately. With all of her pieces and parts intact, the vet concluded that she had only suffered a concussion and

that the splattered blood was from the duck. So off came the hood. Even with one eye, she quickly scanned around her feet, looking for the duck. Jay pulled the decapitated carcass from his vest and confessed that he had searched all over and couldn't find the duck's head! Sib had knocked it off on impact, and my anxious concern turned to pride, thankful that our hunter was going to be fine. She ate the entire duck during the next week, while recuperating in the back bedroom.

For her first duck of the season last year, Sibley knocked it to the ice, a mallard with wildly struggling wing beats. Both birds flapped on the edge of a pond in the cattails. In my panic to "save" my falcon from injury, I started to sprint there, after the landowner assured me that a trail led to that exact spot. But I opted for a shortcut and soon found myself wading in freezing water with mud up to my waist. No matter how I struggled, I kept breaking through the thin ice. Finally, I managed to drag myself across the ice on my stomach, pulling on cattails as I went—not a pretty sight. By the time I got to Sibley, she had already plucked all of the duck's head and neck and was enjoying a nice meal. Kate to the rescue, for sure. My high-and-dry friend stood at the edge of the pond and stared at



One of Sibley's favorite tricks is to snatch caps off people who come to see her fly, but she is also an effective gamehawk. On the previous spread, a mallard flies upside down trying to evade capture. At left, Sibley on a mallard kill.



Above, Sibley cruises in low over the cat-tails.

me, sopping wet, muddy, and freezing. "I told you there was a trail," she calmly stated. Luckily, hypothermia didn't set in on the long walk back to the car.

This year, Sib was up about 30 minutes with a few stoops on single ducks, and then she came blasting down about 500 feet with a near-horizontal chase and an audible whack from a distance of 100 yards. But those 100 yards were across a slough, so I plunged in above my waist, holding my vest up high so the pigeon in the back pocket wouldn't drown. A red-tail flew in as I was running to the impact spot, and it perched there, looking in the water. I scared the hawk off and listened for bells but heard nothing. I finally waded into the creek and, lo and behold, there was Sib, wings and tail spread with just her head out of the water, floating downstream like a raft. The dead drake floated beneath her, clutched by the head. I reached underneath and threw them into the grass on the bank. I couldn't climb up out of the mud; my legs were shaking too hard!

Last week, I took Sib to the exercise grounds across the road on a blue-sky sunny day, and she went up over 1,000 feet until I lost sight of her. The signal came from right overhead,

but she was invisible to me. Telemetry receiver in hand, I chased a signal all over the Bitter-root Mountains until after dark, and I was still picking it up from my house at 9:00 P.M. Sib was up in the mountains somewhere, spending her first night out. Jay came over at dawn to help me, and my bird seemed to be flying farther and farther south, until we were opposite the town of Stevensville. We decided to try the other side of the valley, but the receiver pegged out all of the sudden on the outskirts of town.

"She's right here," Jay said, motioning to a pigeon loft, chicken coop, and a line of dog kennels. The hound dogs were going crazy, so I pounded on the door and told the man that my hawk was in with his pigeons. Jay kept pointing and saying she's in there. The man emerged from the loft and reported that there was no falcon. Then he wondered how we had tracked her to his house.

"Two transmitters."

"What frequency?"

"216." He waved over to the five baying hounds that he uses for hunting mountain lions and informed me that each one had a 216 transmitter attached to its collar! I walked over



to Jay with the bad news, just as he switched off their collars and *beep-beep-beep-hiss* . . . nothing. We had spent all morning tracking his dogs in their kennels, their signals bouncing all over the Bitterroots. The happy ending is that a call came on my cell phone two hours later reporting that Sibley was standing on top of a duck blind at the nearby bird refuge. A wild goose chase and a half!

Another highlight of this season was a trip to Boise and an afternoon of hawking with Bruce Haak. With his peregrine, Jinx, and setter in the truck, we drove to an isolated pond in the middle of what seemed a desert.

Bruce had been assured that two wood ducks were resting there that morning, a tip from a fellow falconer. Jinx went to perfect pitch, catching thermals and rising 1,000 feet. After two impressive stoops by the falcon, these ducks circled back to the refuge of the water and held tight, a frustration we all know too well. So Bruce opted for the reward of a bagged pheasant. Unplanned was the flight of the gamebird, which made a beeline for the distant horizon, with the falcon in hot pursuit.

"Better get the dog and receiver," announced Bruce, turning and heading for the truck.

I broke into a fast trot after the birds, now disappearing over a far rise, and suddenly something passed right overhead, a large raptor in a shallow stoop. I poured on whatever speed I could muster, my heart nearly bursting, not being a track star and with a camera tucked under one arm.

Over the hill, I came upon a frightening scene—the falcon grasping the pheasant with one foot and a Harlan's hawk with the other! And the black hawk had both of its feet lodged firmly into Jinx's upper legs.

Without thinking, I grabbed one in each hand and wedged them apart, too frantic to take a photograph. When Bruce finally arrived, I turned, holding the perplexed, gaping hawk in one hand, and said, "Look what your falcon caught." We had a few words about driving back to the office to get the banding equipment but instead opted for a quick release, and the hawk made a hasty exit. Only then did Jinx finally start plucking the pheasant, and we sat back and watched her eat her prize.

I will never let Bruce forget, he owes me! What great company he was to share these experiences with in this sport that is our passion and life. ■

Bruce Haak releases a Harlan's hawk that his peregrine, Jinx, caught moments earlier.