

REDTAIL, WORKHORSE OF MODERN FALCONRY

By Gary L. Brewer, author of *Buteos and Bushytails*

This sounds like a tall order, but such a hawk does exist. Sadly, relatively few have truly appreciated her or given her the respect and recognition she has earned. In our country, no other hawk has introduced more people to falconry than she has. I speak of the Red-tailed hawk. This article is written as a tribute to this special bird.

The range of the various species and subspecies of Redtail is similar to the range of human beings. Virtually anywhere you may be [law permitting] with a loaded bal-chatri in your lap is a good place to trap a Redtail, and their conspicuous habit of sitting atop the highest perch makes it possible for even the inexperienced trapper to spot them. They are not difficult to trap. A properly baited trap well served will most likely draw a quick and powerful response.

As for the passager, I've never had a freshly trapped Redtail that I could not get to take food on the fist within 48 hours of trapping. Once that ice is broken and provided sensible weight management is practiced, she will soon be looking forward to your time together. She does not require a lot of carrying time to man her down, although it certainly would not impede her progress. The old saying, "...it is not the quantity of time, but rather the quality of that time that matters" applies in training these hawks. A couple of sessions on the creance, and you will suspect that someone has had this hawk before and released it.

If you were going to list the qualities that any falconer would desire in a game hawk, the list would certainly include the following:

It would be available to most anyone, no matter where they lived.

It would respond quickly to manning and training.

It would be aggressive toward game.

It would have feathers that would seem to be made of rubber.

It would fly well in the forest as well as the open country.

It would be easy to house and transport.

It would tolerate extremes in temperature with a minimal of consideration.

It would be easy to maintain in good health and feather.

It would last for years, improving with age and experience.

It would respond well in the field, and not embarrass you in front of friends and falconers.

With the novice falconer, it is usually the trainer that holds up progress in the training process. Using sound falconry techniques, 2 to 3 weeks is about average to progress from the trap to flying free, assuming weather is favorable.

Competently flown, she is steady in the field and responds to the fist and lure better than most, making it easier to manage her under most any situation you may encounter in the field without any undue loss of training time. If properly introduced she will fly with a crowd, and/or a dog.

Redtails are selfish and greedy. This may be an undesirable quality in humans, but it is the basic ingredient for a good gamehawk. The more selfish and greedy they are, the more aggressive they will be toward game. If you put up enough game under them, even an inexperienced Redtail will kill with some consistency, and that consistency will improve with experience. If I had to come up with a disadvantage to flying a Redtail, it would be that they are not able to take feathered quarry in fair flight with any regularity. There are a lot of true stories out there, and I am sure that on rare occasions a perfect slip is achieved on feathered game but, as a rule, this quarry is not within the effective abilities of this bird, and getting those perfect slips is not within the abilities of most falconers. Mammals such as rabbits, squirrels and hares are within their ability, and fortunately one or more of these game species is available to most any falconer.

Redtails in pursuit of game are reckless. They slam into briars, crash into stationary objects, and bounce off the ground harder than you would think they could survive. They roll and tumble with, and are dragged by, the sometimes-large game they bind to. They do this with no apparent concern or respect for their feathers.

Fortunately, Redtail feathers are so resilient that, unless you fly another species, you will have only rare opportunities to practice your imping skills. In all my years of falconry, I have never actually seen a feather damaged in the course of a hunt. That is not to say that their feathers do not wear. The feathers of a hawk that is fairly flown will wear, but they wear evenly and still give the appearance of being in perfect feather. When feather damage or excessive wear does occur, the cause can almost always be connected to the way they are housed, perched or transported.

Redtails naturally tend to hunt the more open areas for obvious reasons but, being opportunistic, they will also hunt the forest if there is sufficient game to draw them into that habitat. If flown at forest game regularly, they will, in time, develop remarkable muscularity and agility. Forest game, such as squirrels, will utilize every obstruction available to save their hide. These twisting, braking and turning flights will work every muscle your hawk has, and she will become graceful beyond belief. I am ever amazed at what an experienced Redtail can do.

Frankly, I have seen very few hawks become as graceful as these hawks can be if flown regularly at this three-dimensional forest quarry.

If your facilities and giant hood are constructed thoughtfully, Redtails are kept and transported safely. The main chamber should be spacious and airy. The Redtail will prefer to spend the largest amount of her time during the day in the weathering chamber, therefore it is best to spend the majority of your time and money in the construction of this part of your facility. Your hawk spends most of her time in this facility, and it is my opinion that it can be the most dangerous time she spends if the facility is not constructed with consideration. Believe it or not, it can actually be less expensive to build a safe facility than one that is not. The key is to keep it simple, and with adequate space for her to move about. [For more information on this type of mews -please see the section on Basics of Freelofting].

The transport box or giant hood should also be simple. My preference for any sized Redtail is a 24 inch X 24 inch X 12 inch box with a padded perch placed 7 inches from the door and 7 inches from the floor. The perch should be mounted such that the bird is facing toward the door. The door should be large enough that she can enter and exit easily.

If the hawk is being flown daily, she can be kept in the giant hood for an extended time. While traveling, I have kept my hawks in the giant hood for two weeks without any problems (of course they should be cleaned regularly). I will also put my hawks in the giant hood during very cold nights. Her body heat will keep the interior of the box about 10 to 15 degrees warmer than the outside.

Redtails are biologically tough. They have a temperature tolerance range of zero degrees (out of the wind) to 110 degrees F. making them a good choice regardless of geographical location. They are resistant to maladies, which plague other species of hawks, making them a good choice regardless of experience level. Their immune system is so effective I would only medicate as a last resort for fear of interfering with it. I have never had a Redtail die of illness, disease or parasite.

Availability, responsiveness, determination in pursuit, variety in quarry, durability, adaptability, disease resistance, hardiness and longevity are all qualities inherent in Redtails. Few other species have this many qualities built into them. They are the qualities that make up an ideal game hawk for today's fast lane falconer who has to work falconry into a busy schedule.

Another factor that has prevented the Redtail from receiving her just recognition in American is that she is one of the hawks that the apprentice is permitted to fly. This has resulted in her being dubbed a "beginner's hawk". Because of this stigma most apprentices can't wait to disguise their experience level by flying something other than the Redtail, Kestrel or Redshoulder. A lot of master and general class falconers would not care to fly them out of fear that they might be mistaken for an apprentice.

Again, a true falconer does not judge another based on what he is flying, but rather on what he has been able to accomplish with what he is flying. Falconry is the taking of wild game by using a trained raptor. If game is not being taken, then you are only attempting to practice falconry.

The key to successful falconry is to determine what game is most available and select a hawk that can consistently handle that job. Any species of hawk that can handle that job should be held in high esteem, and the falconer who handles her should be respected for his observation and making choices that are obviously based on his commitment to quality falconry.

Regulations limit the apprentice to a choice between the Redtail, Kestrel and Redshoulder, and in most cases the Redtail is chosen. Without the close supervision of a competent falconer who understands Redtails and their quarry, this first experience will likely not be very productive for

either hawk or hawker. The new apprentice, regardless of how much he has read on the subject, will be clumsy in handling of the hawk, disorganized and unsure of himself in the early training process, and he may possibly lack the discipline, determination and commitment to put his hawk in the field as often as he should. Furthermore, he may lack the knowledge and experience to fly his hawk in situations where she has at least a fair chance to succeed. As a result, the apprentice does not usually set the world of falconry on fire.

During this period of learning, he is constantly reminded to hang in there because, once he moves to the general level, he can fly something else. At the general level, he abandons the Redtail and moves on to something else that he may or may not begin having more success with... Often, it's because he now has more experience and is beginning to become a falconer, and does not necessarily have anything to do with the change in species. Nevertheless, the memory of his Redtail experience is what he will carry on with him into the future. In his mind, he will blame the results of his inexperience and clumsiness on the Redtail he learned on. He will observe other apprentices having similar experiences for the same reasons and this confirms what he already thought. His apprentice picks up on his lack of confidence and looks forward to the day he can get himself a good bird, and the cycle goes on and on.

You cannot pass judgment on value based on species alone. What is a good game hawk? She is an individual hawk of any species that is consistently successful. There are a number of ingredients that must come together simultaneously before a good game hawk can emerge. The raw material you start with is an individual hawk, of any species, but, to succeed, she needs certain desirable mental and physical attributes. Those are the desire to hunt and take prey, some sense of prey behavior (or the intelligence to learn it), suitable physical characteristics such as body size, flying ability and foot size, and the coordination to utilize all qualities. She needs to be flown at quarry that is plentiful and which is within her capability and to be flown often.

I realize that all birds are not created equal and that goes for any species. I have encountered a few birds that, no matter how well flown, did not show promise of being good game hawks. If she has been properly entered and well flown, it should only take a couple of months to determine if an individual has promise or not. If she doesn't show promise and there is trapping time left, get rid of her and start with a new prospect. Being a falconer does not require you to be a foster parent.

A good Redtail, properly handled and well flown, is as impressive as any hawk. If I had to depend on a hawk to put meat on my table, I would look to the Redtail to fulfill that need.

As a man with a demanding career, as well as with a family who does not understand but is tolerant of my passion for falconry, the Redtail gives me the satisfaction I need and is the least demanding of any species I have flown. In my 20 years of falconry, I have flown Redtails, Harris', Coopers, hybrid falcons and Redshoulder, and have close friends who have flown the rest. I can fly anything I want and I do. I wouldn't mind having something a little more exotic as a second hawk to experiment with, but I will keep a good Redtail as a mainstay. She truly is the workhorse of modern falconry.

Remember, the fact that they are so "common" is a testimony to their versatility and ability; I find that very attractive.

God bless and good hawking!

Gary

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