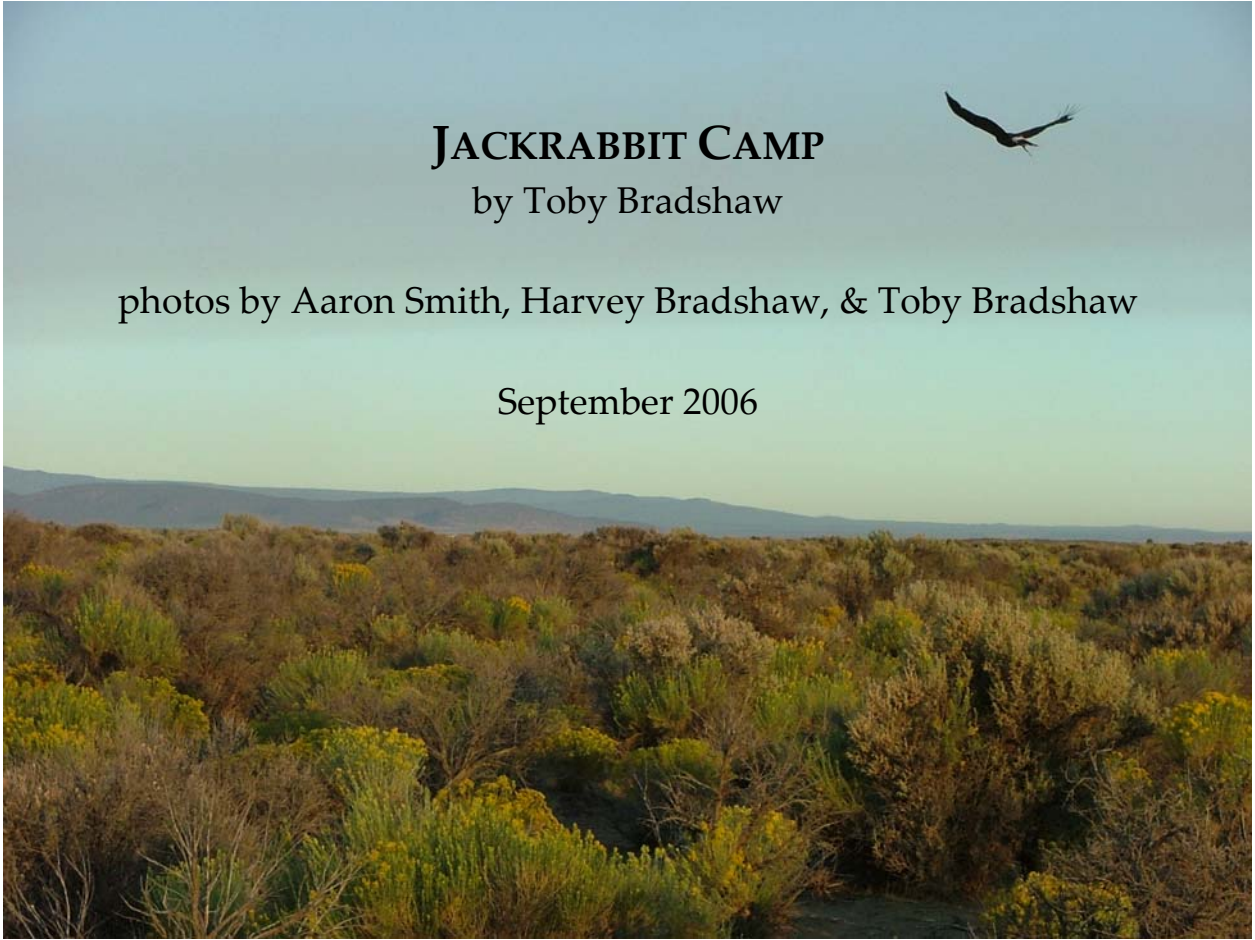


# JACKRABBIT CAMP

by Toby Bradshaw

photos by Aaron Smith, Harvey Bradshaw, & Toby Bradshaw

September 2006



## Into the Outback

After almost 400 miles of driving, I finally left the cities behind and turned onto Oregon Highway 31 and into the Oregon Outback. I pressed a little harder on the gas pedal, anxious to trade the claustrophobia of concrete and tree trunks for the horizon-to-horizon vistas of the Great Basin. Twenty-nine miles later, with the park-like stands of ponderosa and lodgepole pine in my rearview mirror, I relaxed as I dropped down the last few switchbacks into the pungent, sea-foam green of the sagebrush ocean. My summer home.



I turned east towards Fort Rock, a spectacular volcanic tuff ring that dominates the



Fort Rock

surrounding valley floor. The feathery yellow flowers of rabbitbrush say “jackrabbit country” to anyone familiar with this part of the Great Basin. Fort Rock Valley was once filled by a lake, and the lapping of its waves against the base of the extinct volcano carved a groove around the circumference of Fort Rock that is still visible, though the lake has long since been transformed into a high desert as the climate warmed and dried over the past several thousand years.

## The Jack Shack

For the third year in a row I’ve made the pilgrimage to Christmas Valley, Fort Rock’s next-door neighbor, for summer hawking of the abundant jackrabbits and quail. This year Dan Pike and I chipped in to rent a house in Christmas Valley for the whole month of August and the first half of September.





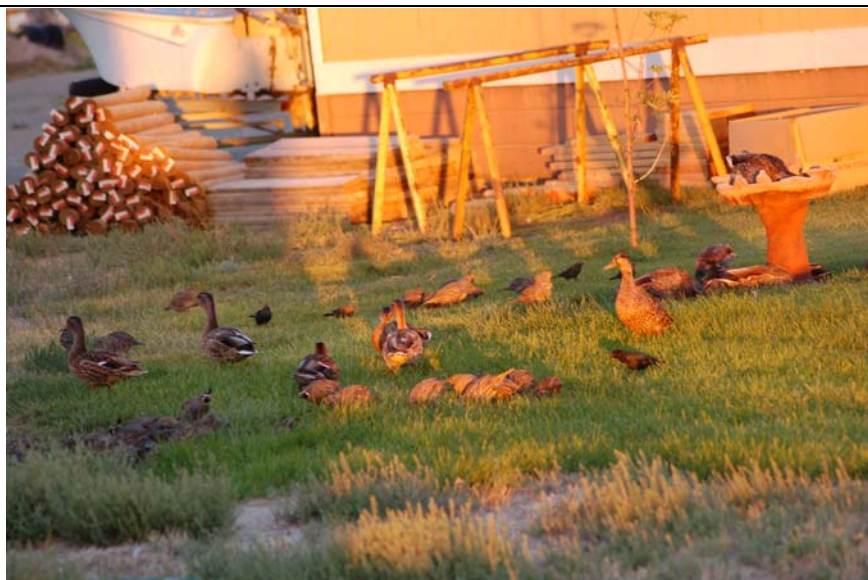
The “Jack Shack” sits alongside the Christmas Valley golf course, with our impromptu weathering area right next to the gentlemen’s tee box for the 8<sup>th</sup> hole. Visiting golfers generally spend a few minutes satisfying their curiosity about the hawks, and always leave us with words of encouragement to catch those fairway-desecrating jacks! The golf course is overrun with game. We’ve seen as many as 17 jacks at one time from our front porch. Every morning and evening more than 100 quail promenade through the grounds, and a dozen mallards visit the bird feeder at dawn, making it too distracting to leave our gamehawks on their perches when the sun is low on the horizon. We literally can hunt right outside our sliding screen door, and have taken advantage of that on a few memorable occasions.



*View of the Jack Shack*



*Views from the Jack Shack*



Christmas Valley's burgeoning reputation as a premier summer hawking destination led Dan and me to expect a lot of visitors, and we weren't disappointed. Nine people, including six other falconers from four different states, dropped in at one time or another – some for a day or two and others for weeks at a stretch. By my count we hosted 9 Harris's hawks, 4 goshawks, a black-banded peregrine, and a ¾ GxP. Dan's brace of pointers and Aaron Smith's Jack Russell terrier provided ground support for the quail hawking, and disposed of leftover scraps of jackrabbit that were a wee bit past their prime as tidbits for the hawks. One of Dan's pointers, Dolly, apparently acquired quite a taste for jackrabbit this way, spending a pleasant interlude in the back of Aaron's pickup thoroughly cleaning the fingers of Aaron's favorite hawking glove.

If there is a finer location than Christmas Valley for summer hawking with shortwings and broadwings, I haven't been there. While the western U.S. experienced a record-setting heat wave in late July (making Aaron's remodeled hawking glove comfortably cool, though leaving his fingers rather vulnerable to his goshawks), daybreak in Christmas Valley always registered 50°F or below on the Jack Shack's thermometer – ideal for Harris's hawks and apparently fine for the goshawks, too. By the end of July we had our first frost, and by the end of August we were in the 20s at sunrise with the hawks's bath pans frozen over. Every morning, on the way out to the hawking fields, a check of the "wind gauge" at the Ag & Auto showed the flags hanging straight down. By afternoon it was usually warm and windy, but by then all the hawks were on their perches decorating the golf course with white stripes, while the Dan took advantage of the breeze to get the kite up for his peregrine.



However, training longwings in Christmas Valley proved to be an exercise in frustration. The huge populations of sage rats, pocket gophers, jackrabbits, and quail (fed and watered by the center pivot alfalfa fields) support an extraordinarily high raptor density. Nearly every power pole and pivot irrigator is occupied by a red-tailed, ferruginous, or Swainson's hawk. Prairie falcons, kestrels, and northern harriers patrol the skies. Great horned and barn owls stake out the hay sheds, and short-eared owls roost in the sagebrush. Along with the ubiquitous ravens, the local hawks and falcons gave much unwanted attention to a longwing's lure attached to a kite string. The first time Dan put the kite up for his peregrine a wild red-tail was on the lure before his tiercel could even be unhooded!



## The Quarry



Aaron Smith, Mozart the JRT, Gremlin the goshawk, and a summer pygmy rabbit

**Summer hawking.** Game numbers peak in late summer, before the bitter Great Basin winter culls the weak, careless, and unlucky. In August and September, when I am hawking in Christmas Valley, most quarry are young of the year, smaller than adults and inexperienced at escaping predators. Even though my hawks arrive in Christmas Valley out of shape, molting, and, for the first-year eyasses, just as inexperienced as the young game animals, there is no doubt that summer quarry are easier to catch than at any other time of year. In exactly the same

way that a molting summer skylark is much easier for a merlin to catch than a full-flighted winter lark, a December jackrabbit is an entirely different critter than an August jack with the white blaze of youth still stamped on its forehead. A buzzer quail in September doesn't have the stamina or guile of the covey's watchful cock bird. Keep that in mind when reading what follows, especially when considering the number of quarry brought to bag. Summer hawking for jacks and quail is fun in the same way that molting larks are a sporting proposition, but shouldn't be confused with late-season hunting of those tough animals that have proven their mettle by defeating death for many difficult months.



**Jackrabbits.** For me, black-tailed jackrabbits are *the* reason to hawk Christmas Valley. Jacks are a large, formidable quarry that challenge the strength and courage of any hawk. A full-grown jackrabbit is three times the size of a female Harris's hawk or goshawk, and can dish out severe punishment. I've seen many of hundreds of jackrabbits caught by hawks, and I still

wonder how in the world the lightweight bones, feathers, and muscles of the hawk can withstand repeated blows from the jackrabbit's powerful kick. The sight of a Harris's hawk's legs stretched to the breaking point, talons buried in the jack's head while the jack's hind feet pummel the hawk's breast, always makes me wince no matter how many times I have seen it.



In contrast to jacks hunted in light cover (typical of the Great Plains or low deserts), in the relatively heavy sage and rabbitbrush of Christmas Valley the jacks are difficult for the hawks to catch, requiring a lot of starting, stopping, and high-g turns that test the hawk's physical condition and determination. The hawk is not just racing, it is doing wind sprints for hours at a time. High desert jackrabbits are masters of evasion, rarely using their full speed to escape. Instead, they sneak, duck, dodge, and circle to force the hawk to miss its initial stoop, then to lose airspeed and stall trying to match turns with the jack. An NFL scout would love to recruit any prospect with half the moves of a Christmas Valley jack! Once caught, though, the heavy cover does make it possible for the hawk to hold the jack with less risk, since the jack will usually jam itself and the hawk into the brush, instead of dragging the hawk around as often happens when the catch is made in light cover.



A tall T-perch (aka "cheater pole") enables the hawks to spot jacks creeping hundreds of yards ahead of the falconer, and gives the hawks some initial height that can be converted to speed. The hawks home to the cheater pole much better than to the glove, recognizing the advantage of the elevated perch, so the hawks are more often in good position for flushes and reflashes. I must admit that the cheater pole can be a nuisance – my hat brim is a slice magnet, my arms get tired of hauling two Harris's hawks for 10 miles of walking, the aluminum pole is damn cold on my hands in the mornings, and crossing fences (thankfully rare in the wide open spaces) requires some extra gymnastics. Nevertheless, the cheater pole has become so indispensable to me that I carry a spare in my truck, since I seem to break a T-perch once in awhile.

Troy Nicolls, a Redding (CA) falconer who is building a second home in Christmas Valley, suggested to me that this year's jackrabbit population was down from last year's phenomenal number. I have to agree with Troy. While there are plenty of jacks this year, we don't see last year's *herds* of jacks crossing the dirt roads in a cloud of dust. The winter of 2005-2006 was fairly harsh, with below-zero temperatures for weeks on end, and occasional waist-deep snow. The surviving jackrabbits seem to have had a successful reproductive season, with lots of young jacks running around. This year I heard coyotes almost every morning in the field, unlike last season's near absence of coyotes (reportedly due to canine parvovirus), and no doubt predation plays a strong role in reducing jackrabbit populations from the peak of their cycle. In any event, the official Christmas Valley jack hawking forecast is down to "great" from "unbelievable."

The upside to smaller jack populations is a much lower incidence of tapeworm cysts – the golfball-sized (or larger) fluid-filled bags of tapeworm larvae that have a nasty habit of exploding in your face when butchering infected jackrabbits. Last season, every full-grown jack was chock full of tapeworm cysts, embedded in all of the major muscles. This year, the incidence of tapeworm cysts was less than 10%.

No discussion of parasites would be complete without mentioning botflies, which lay their eggs under the skin of their host. The botfly larva (maggot, to be precise) lives and grows by eating the tissue between the jackrabbit's skin and the muscle. Rabbit/hare botfly maggots achieve impressive dimensions, as shown in the accompanying photo. They



abandon ship when their host dies, and every summer rabbit hawk in western North America has had the pleasure of reaching into his/her game vest to find a squirming pinky-sized botfly maggot searching in vain for a new home. In the field, usually I see botfly maggots as a moving lump under the skin near the jack's hindquarters or shoulders. I wasn't prepared when this season I saw a maggot wriggle out from behind the eyeball, leaving a bloody trail through the tear duct, of a jack already in grim shape from the eight Harris's hawk talons buried in its head. When I stretched that jack's neck I think I was doing it a favor.



The flesh of jackrabbits, like that of any hare, is dark red from the high concentration of myoglobin, and is much more nutritious than cottontail. Further evidence of the jack's status as an endurance athlete is the huge heart, which I usually offer as a reward to a hawk that has expended extraordinary effort to make the catch and endure the jack's violent defense. By early September the jackrabbits are laying down fat reserves that will sustain them, and my Harris's hawks, through the coming winter.

**Cottontails.** Oddly enough, my hawks rarely catch a Nuttall's cottontail in Christmas Valley – they catch ten times as many jackrabbits and three times as many pygmy rabbits as cottontails. In the open sage, where I almost always hunt, cottontails are scarce before dark. As any rabbit hawk knows, cottontails prefer impenetrable cover, such as that provided by farm equipment, junkyards, pallets, landscape shrubs, and irrigation pipes. In



other words, cottontails live near people. One of the pleasures of hawking the Great Basin is that I can avoid people completely, which explains why my hawks don't see many cottontails in Christmas Valley.

There is nothing I enjoy more than hawking cottontails in good country, such as the basalt cliffs along the Columbia River in Washington. Harris's hawks pull out all the stops when chasing and slamming cottontails. Cottontails have more escape tricks than Houdini and more jinks than a snipe. That makes for exciting falconry. Both sexes of Harris's hawks are well equipped to snag cottontails. Harris's hawks and cottontails are a perfect match of hawk and quarry.

The dearth of cottontails in Christmas Valley can make it difficult to enter a young Harris's hawk, especially a tiercel, for which jackrabbits can be intimidating. I have a half dozen cottontail spots that I use for this phase of training, but the hawks I've entered in Christmas Valley have more often caught a pygmy rabbit, chipmunk, deer mouse, or sagebrush lizard before they've even had a chance to see the bobbing white flag of a bunny.

Sometime in the future, when the Christmas Valley jack cycle bottoms out, I'll safari in search of canyonland cottontails. Drop me a line if you know of a great summer cottontail spot somewhere in the western U.S.!



**Pygmy rabbits.** Pygmy rabbits are sagebrush specialists. They eat sagebrush leaves, live in burrows that they dig under sagebrush roots, and seek shade and cover under sagebrush branches. Because they must burrow, pygmy rabbits can only be found where soils are deep. Deep soils are also desirable for irrigated agriculture, so humans and pygmy rabbits have come into conflict. One casualty of this conflict is the Columbia Basin pygmy rabbit, which is extinct (or nearly so) in Washington. Fortunately, the Great Basin pygmy is going strong where suitable habitat remains. Christmas Valley is one such stronghold for the pygmy rabbit.

Even by rabbit standards, pygmies are cute. Their round heads, stubby brown tails, and short, fuzzy ears make them look like little teddy bears. A full-grown pygmy rabbit weighs about a pound. After looking at a bunch of donkey-sized jacks, when a Harris's hawk sees a pygmy rabbit darting through the sagebrush the hawk's head shoots



straight up and her wingbeat finds a new gear. I don't need to see the rabbit to know what the hawks are chasing.

Pygmies have short legs, and none of the dazzling zigzags of a cottontail. Except for the fact that they live in tall, thick sage and are never very far from their burrows, the hawks find pygmies easier to put a foot on than any other rabbit I've hawked – and it only takes one foot to stop a pygmy. Until this season I had never even heard a pygmy rabbit squeal, since I had only flown female Harris's hawks in Christmas Valley, and females hit pygmies so hard that the little scooters are killed on impact. To tell the truth, I still feel a little guilty every time I put a pygmy in the bag, but my Harris's hawks (especially the tiercels) seem to have no conscience at all.

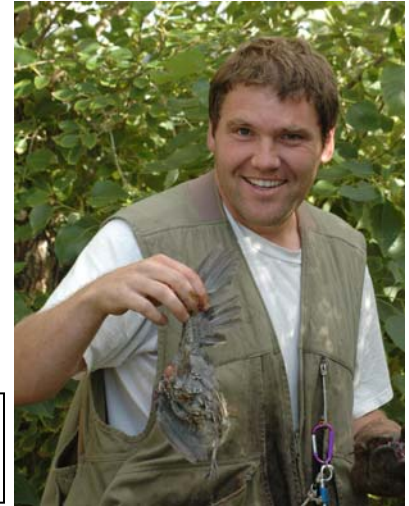
After spending enough time in Christmas Valley it is possible to recognize (and avoid, if you wish to focus on jackrabbits) pygmy rabbit habitat. Though Christmas Valley is an old lake bed, it is not perfectly flat. There are narrow ridges, or berms, that rise 3-5 feet above the valley floor and snake over the flats for hundreds of yards. These ridges, perhaps because the soil is deeper, or because the sage is taller, or because greasewood tends to grow on them, are where the pygmies are most likely to be found. Their unique burrows and tiny droppings will confirm their presence.



**Quail.** After spending last summer in Christmas Valley I seriously considered taking an eyas Cooper's hawk to fly the seething masses of quail. Every house has a covey or two. They run back and forth across every road, tempting me on the way to the jack fields. In the evening the branches of the few trees in the valley bend under the weight of roosting quail.

Quail are the simplest game to find, because the cock bird always perches prominently on a fencepost or hay bale. While this behavior has adaptive value in nature, since the cock can serve as a sentinel for the whole covey, it advertises "Eat at the Topknot Café" to falconers and their hawks.

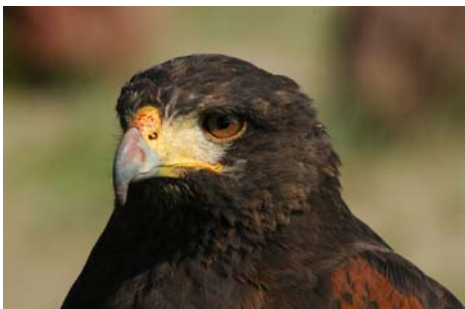
I came to my senses, remembered from 20 years ago what it was like to fly Cooper's hawks, and decided to stick with my Harris's hawks. But Aaron Smith and Dan Pike brought tiercel goshawks (bred by Dan in spring 2006), and Dan even brought his pointers, to give the quail something to really worry about!



Dan Pike, Pepper the pointer, Bigboy the goshawk, and quail

## The Hawks

I brought four Harris's hawks to Christmas Valley. They are the product of more than 20 years of selective breeding for tameness, sociability, and hunting desire. All four of them are grandkids of Lola, the absolute best of Tom and Jenn Coulson's hunting hawks. Lola was killed when Hurricane Katrina tore through the Coulsons's back yard last summer, but Lola's genes live on in Shadow (female, bred by Tom and Jenn in 2004, out of Lola's daughter, Ten), Apache (female, bred by me in 2003, out of Lola's daughter, Killer), Chaco (tiercel, bred by me in 2002, out of Lola's sister, WD-40, and sired by Lola's son, Jupiter), and Itsy (tiercel, bred by me in 2006, out of Lola's daughter, Q). Itsy belongs to Cory Rhea, who gave me his 1999 tiercel, Neon, to pair with Q this spring. I volunteered to train Itsy for Cory, curious to see whether Itsy would live up to the promise of his pedigree.



**Shadow.** Shadow is in her third season, and the only returning veteran of my group of three females from last year. She was trained in Christmas Valley in 2004, catching her first game (a chipmunk, better known as a "timber tiger") in Jim Walker's wood

pile, then quickly graduating to jacks in cast flights with her aunt, my ace jack hawk, Q.

Last year, in her second season, Shadow caught 94 jacks in 44 days of hunting in Christmas Valley, so it is fair to say that she came into the summer of '06 with a good deal of jack hawking experience. Shadow is not the most gifted, and certainly not the flashiest, jack hawk that I've ever flown. Nothing about her attack style is subtle or artistic — she just pours on the coals and hammers jacks. She almost never loses one if she touches it. This season she learned to pitch up very high when the jack stops under a sagebrush. She can hit with the earthshaking thud of an artillery shell when she teardrops onto the jack from a pitch.

I have never had a Harris's hawk more excited than Shadow to go hunting all day, every day. "Frantic" might be the most appropriate adjective. Shadow kaks with anticipation every morning, and pounds on the door of her transport box when the truck's tailgate is dropped. The first jack Shadow sees in the morning often spends the rest of the day curled up in a Ziploc bag. She comes off a kill instantly for even the smallest tidbit, far more interested in resuming the hunt than in eating the jack already in her feet.

Shadow has caught jacks over a wide range of flying weights, from 815-1032 grams. She is one of those Harris's hawks whose hunting behavior doesn't change much with flying weight. At higher weights she is a bit more independent, and may pick and choose her jacks somewhat, but even with a baseball crop she remains a threat to jackrabbits. Shadow is probably the easiest-to-manage and most "honest" hawk that I have ever flown. She is like your favorite hunting dog, always quivering to jump into the truck and head for the field.



**Apache.** Apache is the result of an "unplanned pregnancy" in the spring of 2003. She is, for the time being, the only offspring of my greatest jack hawk, Killer. At the end of the 2002-2003 hawking season I molted Killer with her cast partner, Milo, a two-year-old tiercel, in one of my chain link chambers. To my (pleasant) surprise, Milo became a precocious father when Killer laid her first egg on

April Fool's Day. It seems that Milo didn't take his parenting role too seriously, though, since rather than accepting his turn at incubation he preferred to play toss-and-catch with the eggs. Milo broke two of Killer's clutch of three eggs before I gave up on him, put him on a bow perch, gave Killer three plastic Easter eggs to keep warm, and placed Killer's third egg in my trusty Turn-X incubator.



In order to have Killer ready for the 2003-2004 summer hawking season, I couldn't wait the five weeks for her own egg to hatch, and another 12-20 weeks for her to rear the eyas. I allowed Killer to incubate the ersatz eggs for about 10 days before giving her a week-old Harris's hawk chick (from another breeding pair) to rear. When Killer's real daughter, Apache, hatched on 12 May she was foster-parented until mid-September by Lee Mann's pair of Harris's hawks, Tweety and Sylvester.

I promised Apache to Mark Harrington in Colorado, who had been flying a tiercel (Chaco) I sent him the previous year. I felt terrible when I contacted Mark in September to give him the bad news that Killer had been very seriously injured when a jackrabbit snatched her through a tunnel in the Nevada sagebrush. If Killer died from her injuries, I planned to keep Apache for myself. To his great credit, Mark understood the unexpected change of circumstances perfectly.

Fortunately for all concerned, Killer recovered from her injuries sufficiently to breed, though she will never fly game again. Mark trained and flew Apache (with Chaco) for the next three seasons, while I shipped Killer and Milo to Tom and Jenn Coulson in late 2005 to help them rebuild their Harris's hawk breeding program post-Katrina.

Apache is a small-ish female, flying at 840-915g. Mark flew Apache primarily on cottontails, with a few jacks caught incidentally. His description of her canyonland stoops on cottontails, and her easygoing personality, told me that she had found a good home in Colorado.

When Mark's job as a commercial fisherman made it impossible for him to fly Apache and Chaco in 2006, he asked me if I knew of anyone who might want to hunt with them. Mark's email could not have come at a better time for me, since I had just retired Q, Killer's sister and my best current jack hawk, for breeding. I was really looking forward to acquainting Apache with the hordes of jackrabbits in Christmas Valley.

Once Apache realized that on most days it was "catch a jack or go hungry," she warmed to the game. Just like her mother, Killer, she prefers a climbing attack on jackrabbits, gaining height as she overhauls the jack, then winging over to stoop when the jack stops or turns. Also like her mother, she is remarkably persistent. If she misses a stoop she will rebound instantly to resume the pursuit. This chase/stoop/rebound



sequence may be repeated two or three times and cover a quarter mile before the jack is caught or Apache is grounded, gasping for breath.

One of Apache's most endearing qualities is her excellence as a cast partner. She is gregarious, flying beautifully with any combination of sexes and ages of Harris's hawks. She never lags behind the hunting party; usually, she leads by staying 50 yards ahead where the jacks are most likely to be spotted. She homes to the cheater pole (or the truck, or her transport box) like a champ, setting a good example for her castmates.



**Chaco.** Chaco is the product of the first White Wing linebreeding. For several years I paired Dan Pike's 1988 female WD-40 (a White Wing daughter) with her nephew, Jupiter, Lola's son (and White Wing's grandson). My intention with this linebreeding was to concentrate the very desirable traits of the White Wing lineage. Chaco is a great example of the merits of such linebreeding. He is wonderfully easygoing, and tremendously intense on game. Mark told me that Chaco is an enthusiastic quail hawk. This turned out to be something of an understatement. Chaco is on hair trigger when he hears quail, and is moving at maximum warp before the quail clears cover on the rise. He will chase quail as hard and as long as necessary to put them in. Woe to the quail that reflushes. Chaco catches these in the air in great style. He's the first Harris's hawk I've had that really makes quail panic. With the thousands of quail in

Christmas Valley, Chaco has added a new and exhilarating dimension to my September hawking.

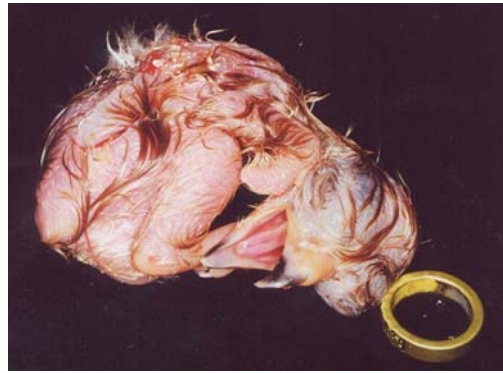
Although Chaco is a good-sized tiercel, flying at 670-715g and with some impressive meat hooks on his long yellow toes, he is spotty on jackrabbits. When a jack piques his interest he slams it with the best of them, but more often he uses his quickness and ability to do "tiercel turns" to catch smaller game – quail, pygmy rabbits, cottontails, and timber tigers. Around the Jack Shack he came to be known as "Mr. Clean" because he didn't get dirty, bloody, or battered like the jack hawks. Chaco is very skilled at catching things that can be eaten completely, and that don't even require me to gut them. At the end of the hawking season my jack hawks look like they've received a good thrashing (because they have!). Chaco looks like he's wearing a new tuxedo, right down to the immaculate white tail tips that seem to have been dipped in wet paint.



**Itsy.** I was on my knees attending to a jack kill in Christmas Valley last summer when I got a call from Kenny Jennings informing me that Tom and Jenn Coulson had (barely) survived Hurricane Katrina, but that all but one of their more than 40 hunting and breeding Harris's hawks had been drowned in the flooding that followed.

All three of the female Harris's hawks I flew last season – Shadow, Q, and Delta – were bred by Tom and Jenn. Now my hawks's parents were dead. The first thing that crossed my mind was to do what I could to preserve the Coulsons's legacy of selective breeding in Harris's hawks. In addition to sending Killer and Milo to Tom and Jenn, I decided that it would be prudent to retire Q (Killer's sister, Lola's daughter, White Wing's granddaughter) as a hunting bird and breed her.

Although Q was only three years old in the spring of 2006, and might not be expected to lay for another year or so, I had paired her with her first cousin, Neon (a White Wing grandson), since I finished hawking in mid-September 2005. I chose Neon as a sire because he is simply the most incredible jack hawking tiercel I have ever seen, though he had no experience as a breeder. In early April 2006 Q and Neon built perhaps the poorest excuse for a nest on the planet (even a dove would be embarrassed to claim it), then on 14 April Q laid her very first pale blue egg – on a pile of sticks I had thrown on the ground for nest material! I hastily built a marginally better nest for her, and in due course she laid three more eggs there. Itsy was the third of three brothers that hatched from Q's and Neon's inaugural clutch.



Since Cory Rhea provided Neon's stud service, the least I could do was to train "son of Neon" for Cory. I pulled Itsy from the chamber at the tender age of eight weeks, just hard penning and still producing a blizzard of down from his underwing coverts. The next day Itsy was on a bow perch in Christmas Valley, weathering with Shadow, Apache, and Chaco. Usually I

recommend against taking a Harris's hawk so young, because an eyas Harris's hawk needs to learn proper social skills from adults, and some maturity is required before a Harris's hawk is really ready to be a regular breadwinner. But if I waited until Itsy was



12 weeks old (a better developmental stage to start a tiercel Harris's hawk), he would miss a month of hawking experience. Plus, I was going to be able to fly him every day with Shadow and Apache, who would be more than happy to keep him in line and teach him the rules of Harris's hawk etiquette.

Itsy is the 26<sup>th</sup> Harris's hawk I've flown, and I hoped that within a few weeks he would be the 21<sup>st</sup> whose first kill I've arranged. Most of all I hoped that he would show me that Q and Neon will produce the caliber of Harris's hawks that my friends and I will want to fly for the next couple of decades.



**Sunset behind Table Rock**

## The Routine

The best thing about the Christmas Valley hawking routine is that it doesn't involve alarm clocks (or *any* clocks, for that matter), driving in traffic, email, or meetings. Instead, for six or seven weeks in summer I see the sun rise and set every day. I watch the moon pass through its phases. Mornings get colder, quail grow from tiger-striped hatchlings to top-knotted adolescents, the southward migration of shorebirds, waterfowl, songbirds, and raptors begins. The only traffic hazards are jackrabbits and the occasional piece of farm equipment. Most of the time I am by myself. On any given day the only important decision that needs to be made is where



to hunt, and with the abundance of game in Christmas Valley it is just about impossible to make a bad choice. Activities are dictated only by the needs of the hawks, and the rhythm of the daily and seasonal cycles. I am unplugged from the worst aspects of 21<sup>st</sup> Century life.

I roll out of bed about the time the eastern sky is pinking up, pull on my tattered, bloodstained Carhartt coveralls, walk through the laundry room to turn on and check the L&L XLF-3 transmitters that are lying in an orderly row on top of the dryer, then find my well-worn Danner Pronghorns and lace them up.

The hawks are in their Coroplast boxes on the front porch to keep them as cold as possible so they metabolize more food. Shadow can hear me putting on my boots, and begins to kak with excitement. I open the sliding screen door and take a look at the thermometer on the porch. The news is always good. I glance down the fairway at the flag for the 7<sup>th</sup> hole. It is always limp. I move the hawk boxes into the laundry room. I open the boxes one at a time to be sure that each hawk has cast. The hawks are then weighed (this news is *not* always good!), and their transmitters are clipped to their tail mounts. I load the boxes in the truck.



Before we leave for the field I grab my hat and hawking vest off the hooks in the laundry room and head to the kitchen to cut four tidbits from one of yesterday's jackrabbit front legs. I like to put a tidbit in each hawk's box as a treat at the end of the hunt. The four tidbits are plunked into a small plastic bag, moistened with a few drops

of water to prevent them from becoming jackrabbit jerky in the dry Great Basin air, and I'm finally ready to kick the tires and light the fire on my red Ranger.

I rarely hunt more than five miles from the Jack Shack, so by sunrise the Ranger is parked somewhere in the sagebrush, as far as possible from houses, fences, and power poles. I drop the tailgate and fish out the cheater pole. Shadow taps on the door of her box with her beak, anxious to get underway. Sometimes I partner her with Chaco, but more often I fly her with Itsy so that he learns to spot and pursue jackrabbits far in the distance. I make my choice of who flies with Shadow, open the two boxes, and both birds jump straight to the cheater pole.



As often as not the hawks are in pursuit of a jackrabbit before a minute has gone by. On days when everything clicks the hawks will be cropped up, exhausted, or both after just an hour of flying. On an average day each of my two casts (usually Shadow/Itsy and Apache/Chaco) will get two hours of constant flying, and I will cover about ten miles cleaning up after the hawks – killing the jacks they catch, kneeling on the jacks's back feet to keep them from kicking the hawk any more, and giving the hawk a jack shoulder



blade by way of reward. The cast partner almost never comes in on the other hawk's kill, since adult Harris's hawks seem to hunt more for fun than for food. I generally gut and bag the jack while it is fresh, because big jacks are hard to fit into a 1-gallon Ziploc once *rigor mortis* has set in. I "wash" the jack blood off my hands with a dust bath. It's the only circumstance in which the talcum powder dust in Christmas Valley is more a help than a hindrance. With the hawk and the jack attended to, we're off again. On a tough day, when the hawks have missed more than usual but still are trying hard, I may be out for seven or eight hours. Days like that put a lot of miles under my Danners. "Too much walking and not enough kneeling" is the way I describe it.



After the day's hunt I swing past Jim Walker's house to drop the jacks in the freezer. Back at the Jack Shack the hawks are put out on their bow perches, hosed off to remove the worst of the caked jackrabbit blood and gore from their face, feet, and feathers, then offered a bath in case they want to get *really* clean, while converting their clear bath water into





something that resembles chocolate milk. The newspaper in the hawk boxes is changed and the boxes are put in the shade on the front porch.

Now that the hawks's needs are satisfied the needs of the human contingent may be addressed. An inspection of the fridge determines what's available for breakfast (if the hawks worked fast) or lunch (if the jacks had the upper hand). Everything in the Jack Shack is "man-food" – easy to prepare, filling, and guaranteed to clog major arteries. Pancakes, eggs, red beans and rice, chili cheese dogs, barbecued chicken and mashed potatoes, fajitas made with leftover steak, and spaghetti are typical fare. A couple of Costco cases of candy bars and a pallet of Oreos put the point on the man-food pyramid.

Footsore and now satiated, I plop down in a chair to make a journal entry of the day's events while they are still fresh in my mind. My current 500-page journal, dating back to 1999 (Killer's first year) will be full at the end of this season. The black-and-white scribblings in my journal bring back Technicolor memories of those eight seasons every time I read them.

Now the time has come to enjoy civilization's greatest accomplishment: the hot shower. This is followed by the obligatory siesta, a tradition that should be an institution in any truly advanced culture.



**Lee Mann (left) and Itsy (right) working on their tans during siesta time**

Between naptime and goshawk o'clock there are many possible activities: scouting for new hunting spots, training hawks that aren't yet ready for hunting, falconry equipment maintenance, searching for obsidian artifacts, visiting Crack-in-the-Ground (a tension fissure about 70 feet deep a few miles north of Christmas Valley), shooting jackrabbits for hawk food, or collecting rabbit fecal pellets for the DNA-based



population genetic study being funded by the Washington Falconers Association and NAFA. Wildlife watching can be done without going beyond the Jack Shack's front porch.

Eagles, hawks, and falcons usually are spotted first by the weathering hawks. Human observers will also notice white-faced ibis, Canada geese,



nighthawks, yellow-headed blackbirds, several species of shorebirds, the omnipresent sage rats that make Swiss cheese

out the golf course with their burrows, and, my personal favorite, the impossibly azure mountain bluebirds.

Before the evening rush hour of quail and jackrabbits the hawks must be put in their boxes for the night. When Dan and Aaron are in town, we have a sunset hunt. The tiercel goshawks (Dan's "Bigboy" and Aaron's "Focus") are flown at quail, but once on the wing they are quite likely to add a cottontail or pygmy rabbit to the bag of quail. Aaron's female gos, Gremlin, works the jackrabbit fields. I'm always impressed with a goshawk's ability to fly in strong wind. Gremlin flies down jacks in a flag-snapping wind that would push a Harris's hawk backwards. Any falconer can appreciate the intensity that goshawks bring to the hunt.



Dan, Aaron, and Gremlin into the wind

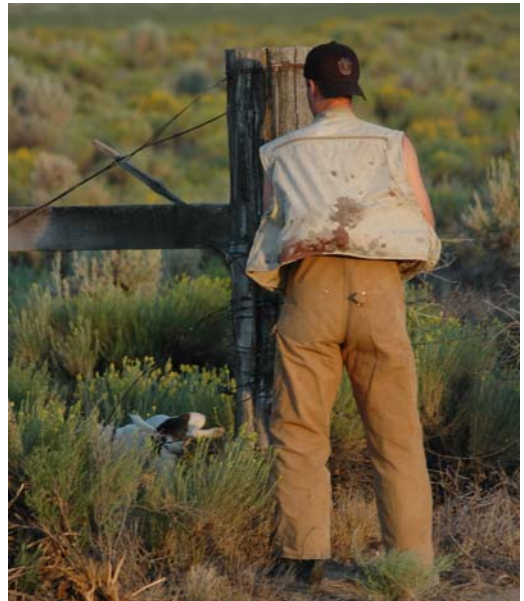


Goshawks and goshawkers being what they are, the sunset hunt often goes well past dark. Several times we stumbled back to the truck lighted only by the shimmer of the Milky Way. By the time we arrive at the Jack Shack, appetites are raging. Nothing in the pantry is safe. Everything tastes great if you're hungry enough, even the food we cook for ourselves.

At my age the end of a busy day like this doesn't leave sufficient energy for anything but sleep. The good news is that a night's sleep permits the whole day's routine to be repeated as often as needed! For me, there were 46 wonderfully "routine" days in Christmas Valley this year.



Aaron and Mozart share their daily routines



## Excerpts From My Hawking Journal

**22 July 2006 Shadow 930g Apache 807g Chaco 621g Itsy 614g**

No wind, no sun, and no heat (contrary to forecast) for our first hunt of the season in Christmas Valley. I started with Shadow and Chaco on Hill between Candy and Wagon Wheel. We didn't get into a ton of jacks right off the bat, but locals Jim Walker and Kerry Cardwell say it's another good year for them here in CV.

Shadow picked up where she left off last season, taking long slips, hitting down hard, and rebounding (to the extent possible, considering that she's out of shape). Chaco behaved perfectly, though his following tailed off at the end. Chaco did knock down the first jack and had it squealing, but lost it. Shadow put the next one in the bag from a

good perch on a Quonset hut. Chaco's manners around the kill are exemplary. Shadow left her kill to catch a mouse.

From the unoccupied house next to the Quonset hut, Chaco launched an attack and hit down with authority. A medium-sized jack flushed when I got close, so I assumed that Chaco had missed it. However, he had possession of a baby jack, so young that it was still nursing.

Shadow caught a second mouse in a surprisingly long flight with a good grab. Just to prove she hadn't lowered her sights, she next caught a full-grown jackrabbit by crunching into the sage where it put in.

I moved to the outhouse north of Jim's place, hoping for some smaller game for Chaco and Apache. Apache rides the glove beautifully in the field, and comes readily when called. Weird, given her bating at home. We never did come across any bunnies, but Apache caught an easy mouse (or some other small rodent) and a timber tiger in a good rat hunt. She put in a spirited pursuit on a young jack, rebounding three times. On jacks in the distance she didn't know what to do. I'll try flying her with Shadow.

Itsy is starting to scream a bit (but not at me – he just misses mom, dad, and his brothers), and he is very tame. He still hasn't bated when going between his box and the bow perch. This evening he showed some enthusiasm for dropped tidbits. He picked a tidbit off the glove, then jumped for the next one but couldn't quite bear to stay put. After that, though, he jumped (and stuck) twice, then down to the ground for another tidbit. Not bad for 36 hours out of the chamber – we're on our way!



**24 July 2006 Shadow 941g Apache 839g Chaco 630g Itsy 604g**

When I was scouting yesterday evening I noticed a lot of jackrabbit tracks at the church field. I started with Shadow and Chaco. Chaco was following quite a bit better today. He led the assault on pygmy rabbits with an energetic chase and grab. The pygmy made an odd scream, a sound I've never heard since I've flown female Harris's hawks almost exclusively in CV, and a female knocks the scream out of any pygmy.

Shadow took a crack at a cottontail from the top of the church. A thrill-seeking western kingbird rode Shadow's back for the whole stoop, like Slim Pickens in *Dr. Strangelove!* Shadow also caught the only jack of the day in a fairly short but intense twisting tailchase.

Without the cloud cover we've had the past couple of days, and with the tail of the heat wave still here, I put Chaco away and took Shadow and Apache farther up Crack-in-the-Ground Rd (CITG). We got into a pile of pygmies. Every flush produced a wing-whipping pursuit. Shadow caught two and Apache caught the last one. I'm surprised the hawks didn't hurt themselves from whanging into the brush.

Itsy only needed one reminder (tidbit on the glove) to get in the groove, jumping six more times to the ungarnished glove. He's getting a lot of good socialization/manning from a local six-year-old girl named Samantha, who sits in a chair by Itsy's bow perch much of the day.

**25 July 2006 Shadow 957g Apache 844g Chaco 632g Itsy 594g**

Hawked the NW quadrant of CITG/Hill, where I saw a lot of jacks crossing the road. I used the T-perch for the first time this season, hoping to give the hawks more visual coverage in the heavy sage. Shadow is flying well, though she doesn't (or can't) always pull her hardest in the turns. She caught a big jack in her usual style. Chaco just followed jacks. He took to the T-perch immediately, though. When I saw him make a hard flight, I knew it wasn't a jack. I found him on a pygmy.

I swapped Chaco for Apache and continued, trying some short cover where jacks were pouring across the road from the thin cover to the thick stuff. Shadow spotted a jack in



the short cover and nailed it where it sat, making her 200<sup>th</sup> career kill. Apache helped on the big jack. Apache is hard to trade off (unlike Shadow). Apache didn't like the T-perch, but followed well on the sage.

Knocked off at 0730 (after two hours of hawking) to help Aaron Smith navigate to CV with his two imprint Euro goshawks, Gremlin and Focus.

Itsy made >10 jumps to the ungarnished glove. Still not super quick, though, and not bating towards me in anticipation of being called.

**26 July 2006 Shadow 958g Apache 840g Chaco 624g Itsy 600g**

Aaron and I flew Shadow and Chaco at the NW quadrant of Candy/Hill. Despite not seeing any jacks cross the road on the way in (perhaps because the alfalfa hasn't been cut), there were plenty of jacks in the sage. Chaco ambushed a small-ish one in its form at my feet. Shadow was working beautifully, and eventually caught a big jack in her



signature fashion. Heading back to the truck Chaco made a hard pursuit. I was sure it would turn out to be a bunny (at best), but when we arrived he had possession of another blaze-headed small jack! Chaco lost a deck (almost down, still in the blood) tussling with the jack.

After swapping Chaco for Apache we continued. Apache is really putting out a great effort, and is an exceptionally good cast partner. Though Shadow was too tired and/or fat to do her part (beyond spotting jacks), Apache worked every slip and soon caught a whopper jack in a hard-turning attack. I gave her a good crop. Shadow picked up a mouse for vitamins.

Itsy's first day on the creance, five days out of the chamber. He behaves perfectly.

### 27 July 2006

After just two evenings of flying, Aaron's female European goshawk (Gremlin) puts all the pieces together and makes her first kill – a long fast flight on a whopper jack racing across the thinnest cover in the church field. The evenings are warm and breezy, but Gremlin maintained her focus and knifed through the wind as only a goshawk can. Aaron and I wished that Dan Pike (who bred Gremlin) could have been there to see the hunt unfold. I feel like Gremlin's godfather, since Aaron reared Gremlin as an imprint in my lab at the UW. We're still finding "dust bunnies" of her snow-white down in the corners of the building!



### 29 July 2006 Shadow 972g Apache 860g Chaco 641g Itsy 571g

Local teenager Tyler Meyer joined Aaron and me for this morning's hunt. We had a good number of slips at jacks. Shadow takes the lead on every jack slip. Apache backs on kills but usually refuses to be the first to grab a jack. Apache is better about coming off kills now, but nothing like Shadow, who looks expectantly waiting for me to produce a trade. I've never had a hawk that comes off a kill better than Shadow. Shadow made two nice catches on big jacks, with a tag team timber tiger for lagniappe.



We took Chaco to Blaine Nofziger's place, looking for bunnies. Unfortunately, the sage south of his house has been mowed flat. We did find a cottontail in a pipe, though. Aaron flushed it, but Chaco could only get one foot on it, and it pulled free after making considerable noise.



After his first free flight yesterday (a week out of the chamber), Itsy did very well at Jim's. He came instantly to the glove from the top of Jim's shop, for instance. He followed well, though he didn't pounce aggressively on the "hunted" tidbits I had surreptitiously sprinkled around. He also didn't attack the several perfect cottontails we stalked. He got to "chase" a dragged timber tiger on a string, which he took a little quicker than yesterday's dragged cottontail. Itsy just needs experience and flight time, not much (if any) weight reduction. He screams a good bit on his bow perch, but not in the field or box.

**30 July 2006 Shadow 973g Apache 850g Chaco 647g Itsy 572g**

The weather has finally cooled off to normal. We had frost on the truck windshields this morning. Shadow has been kakking every morning, ready to go no matter what her weight. We paired her with Chaco at the outhouse. Shadow had a small blaze-headed jack within 50 yards of the truck. Then she went on a killing spree, catching three more jacks in an hour. She was chasing everything, but picked her shots. Chaco didn't help much. He probably should be lighter for jacks. He mostly got rabbit feet for breakfast.

I took Apache and Itsy to an abandoned (domestic) rabbit ranch north of Jim's. Aaron and I saw some cottontails and sage rats there a couple of days ago. I figured that Apache would be a good role model for Itsy. We hadn't been there five minutes when a 1/3-grown cottontail flushed at my feet. Itsy almost left my glove to chase it. Apache didn't hesitate. She creamed the little bunny. I traded her off and tossed the whole rabbit to Itsy, who pounced on it tentatively. After the eating was done, Apache took stand on the trailer, where Itsy joined her. He thought about begging food from her, but she discouraged him with a neck arch. The first bunny's brother made the mistake of flushing near the trailer, with predictable results. Itsy squirmed into Apache's second kill, cautiously, to share. He was easily persuaded to eat a jack shoulder instead. He followed me back to the truck, but wasn't too quick about it. Apache needs to lose some weight to get back on track with jackrabbits.

**1 August 2006 Shadow 969g Apache 844g Chaco 627g Itsy 564g**

A cookie-cutter morning in CV – calm, clear, cool. Dan Pike arrived yesterday. I decided to fly Shadow solo, since Apache and Chaco tend to mooch off her. Shadow did fine by herself; well-motivated. She chased a jack out of sight over a low ridge. After 10 minutes of searching for her I gave up and jogged the half mile back to the truck for the telemetry receiver. Antenna out the truck window, I drove as close as I could. I found Shadow on a very dead jack, surrounded by expectant magpies. Fortunately, Shadow must have been waiting for me, because 20 minutes after catching the 2-quart jack (no squeal!) she had barely broken in. We hawked a bit more, with Shadow up to full strength in the turns, and using the vertical dimension more. She made a nice catch on jack #2, a 3-quart size.

I moved a few sections east to fly Apache and Chaco. Neither showed much interest in jacks, though Apache did chase some. On the way back to the truck we got a rare close jack slip, and Apache plowed it under.

I went back to the Jack Shack to get Itsy. I took him to the rabbit ranch again. He was very attentive and responsive. I started flipping the pieces of plywood and tin roofing that were scattered on the ground, looking for a cottontail. Itsy was very interested! A sagebrush swift popped out from under a board, and Itsy had his first kill – humble, to be sure, but valuable experience at just 11 days out of the chamber. The lessons continued as Itsy took stand on a fence post while I flipped and flushed. He bagged lizard #2 from this vantage point. From yet another perch he slammed a deer mouse,



then dropped it to catch a second mouse! The first one had already been squeezed to death, so he got to eat both of them. He's ready for the big time now – timber tigers, sage rats, and (maybe!) cottontails.

I didn't get much chance to enjoy the morning's good fortune, though. I returned to the Jack Shack to find that Dan's white  $\frac{3}{4}$  GxP had been lost on its first flight. Dan, Aaron, and I split up to cover Christmas Valley, telemetry antennas poking out of the truck windows. Dan got a brief signal from the water tower southwest of town, but Aaron and I got nothing. Dan and I joined forces and headed west for the highest point – Ft. Rock – to try to re-acquire the signal. We climbed to the top of Ft. Rock and scanned in all directions with line-of-sight views for 20 or 30 miles, but no joy.



**4 August 2006 Shadow 985g Apache 864g Chaco 637g Itsy 564g**

I gave Apache the day off. I only fed her ~15g today, so she should be sharp tomorrow. I flew Shadow solo. Lots of jacks, and she was flying energetically, but it took her almost an hour to catch her first jack. I let Itsy join her. He was duly circumspect around her, perching lower but otherwise following well. Shadow ignored his more-or-less constant screaming. She caught a monster jack and held it, jammed in the sage. Itsy tiptoed in to the kill.

Went prospecting for rabbits with Chaco. We found a few and got good flights on every one of them, but Chaco came up empty. We headed out to the hay bales at the obsidian ridge to look for more. Chaco caught a pygmy rabbit in a hard slam.

**5 August 2006 Shadow 971g Apache 833g Chaco 648g Itsy 568g**



Lee Mann showed up yesterday. We all went out to watch Dan fly his black-banded peregrine tiercel free for the first time, just at sunrise. Then we split up, with Lee and I hitting the NW quadrant of Candy/Hill. I flew Shadow with Lee's Sylvester. Shadow is really in the groove now. She initiated almost every flight and caught three jacks in less than an hour. One of the jacks had a botfly maggot crawl out from the corner of its eye ... nice.



We flew Apache with Tweety. Apache gave a good effort most of the time. She caught a vole, but finally redeemed herself with an ambushed giant jack. I gorged her on it. She needs to get enthusiastic about catching jacks. She has the ability.



I flew Itsy with Tweety at the outhouse. He behaved well – following, taking lower perches than Tweety, and not food begging from her. She let him share her jack kill. He only screams when there is an adult Harris's hawk in sight.

Chaco got the day off, though he gained surprisingly little weight on his big crop from yesterday.

**9 August 2006 Shadow 955g Apache 841g Chaco 648g Itsy 561g**

Everything is fresh-smelling, and the usually omnipresent dust is nonexistent, thanks to a hard rain night before last. Chaco must have stolen some of Shadow's food yesterday, based on their relative weight changes. At any rate, Shadow was her usual self, and

caught three jacks (all large) in fine style. I got a close-up view of the third catch when the jack ran towards me, stopped under a sagebrush, and took a stiff wingover shot to the head.

It was a red letter day for Itsy, who caught his first rabbit – a rat-sized cottontail – at the rabbit ranch. He's 20 days out the chamber and has been hunting for 10 days (not counting the days we were back in Seattle). He was lackadaisical on good bunny slips at the Chevy spot, but the spark ignited at the rabbit ranch where he put in good pursuits on chipmunks and caught a lizard. I flushed a rabbit from under a piece of tin, Itsy put it into cover under some plywood, and caught it cleanly on the reflush.

**10 August 2006 Shadow 978g Apache 839g Chaco 640g Itsy 568g**

Last night's full moon still hadn't set when Shadow came out of her box for the morning hunt. Shadow can find jacks anywhere now, and has nearly endless endurance. Her flying is getting more stylish – more height, more flash wingovers. It still took almost an hour for her to catch her first jack, then she caught #2 on the very next slip. The first was a 3-quart; the second was a monster Ziploc-busting 4+-quart.

I flew Apache and Itsy as a cast. Itsy learned to use the T-perch, but deferred to Apache when she was on it. Apache took stand on a double-wide overlooking the sagebrush. I flushed a jack, and Apache made a beautiful curving pursuit to bulldog it in the wide open. Itsy arrived to help. All went very smoothly. Itsy is screaming less now, even around adult Harris's hawks, as he matures and becomes more independent.



I waited until evening to fly Chaco. We went to the hay shed just north of CV highway. A thundershower earlier in the afternoon had settled the dust. From the top of the hay shed Chaco spotted a timber tiger in the greasewood. He made a firing run but I lost sight of him. When I couldn't find him, I went back to the truck for the telemetry. Before I could locate him he appeared on a fence post, sporting a healthy crop of chipmunk. That makes kill #100 for the team in 18 days of hawking so far this season.

**12 August 2006 Shadow 964g Apache 845g Chaco 657g Itsy 575g**

The Glorious 12<sup>th</sup>, opening day of grouse season in Scotland, but I'm more than happy to be here in CV. Lee and I started with Tweety and Shadow. Tweety drew first blood with a jack. Shadow disregarded the flayed jackrabbit under Tweety and continued to hunt, catching a cottontail. Shadow had lost a surprising amount of weight (34g) since yesterday, no doubt because of the large amount of flying she did. Shadow proceeded to pound four jacks, two of which were set up by Tweety in true teamwork fashion. Shadow hit down so hard on one jack that she knocked a sage limb 10 feet into the air, twirling like a drum major's baton! She got quite a crop today.

Next we flew Sylvester and Chaco. We got into a bunch of pygmies and small jacks. Chaco is quite responsive and strong at this weight. He had even cast from last evening's feed. He wasn't interested in jacks, but made some great flights on smaller stuff. He caught a timber tiger, a vole, and a pygmy rabbit.



We put the tiercels away and flew Apache and Itsy as a cast. Itsy is really getting into this, chasing well and even initiating a few pursuits. Apache caught a pygmy rabbit and a sagebrush swift. Itsy came close on a couple of pygmies.



By far the best flight we saw was the series of hammering stoops that a wild prairie falcon put in on a short-eared owl that we flushed from the sagebrush. The owl managed to evade each stoop at the last possible microsecond, narrowly cheating the pointy-winged Grim Reaper.

**14 August 2006 Shadow 972g Apache 856g Chaco 667g Itsy 579g**

Shadow pummeled the first jack we flushed today. No doubt the short rations yesterday had something to do with that. Shadow and Sylvester worked several more jacks. Shadow hit down so hard so many times that she accumulated enough sticks and other debris in her plumage to resemble a sniper's ghillie suit. She caught #2 in fairly short order. She hit down, missed, but Sylvester turned the jack back into her and Aaron said that Shadow ran it down on foot! Though she was nearly out of gas, I flew Shadow with Tweety for awhile. Shadow caught jack #3 in a long, hard flight going uphill. Incredible.



I drove east across CITG to fly Apache and Itsy. Itsy is behaving perfectly, though he still screams at the beginning of the hunt. He is chasing game and following Apache well. Apache is getting into good shape. She caught a pygmy and a nice big jack. Itsy was well-mannered around the kills.

I flew Chaco at Nofziger's triangle. We got a couple of cottontail flights before he snaked through the rabbitbrush to put the squeeze on a pygmy.

**18 August 2006 Shadow 965g Apache 896g Chaco 695g Itsy 584g**

Shadow was down to a more reasonable weight. I picked up local kids Tyler Meyer and Avery Overton at Avery's house, and we went to one of Avery's family's pivots to hawk. Aside from being pestered by mosquitoes, we had some good flying from Shadow and Itsy. Shadow caught two jacks going up the sage-blanketed hill and two more coming back down.

We tried the Comet Rd hay shed, flying Apache and Chaco (both at record high weights) there. We had some great flights before Chaco caught a pygmy. We continued east to the edge of a thin weedy field. A jack flushed from the sage into the weeds. Apache made a stellar open field catch. Chaco kept up his reputation as a small game specialist by nailing a vole on the way back.

**19 August 2006 Shadow 1008g Apache 880g Chaco 675g Itsy 598g**

Both Shadow and Itsy were a bit (!) heavy, but I took them to CITG/Langdon Spgs at sunrise, hoping to find a jack for Shadow and a pygmy for Itsy. Shadow was her usual intense self, and quickly caught a jack big enough to saddle. The real breakthrough came when Itsy pursued a 1-quart jack, put it into some rabbitbrush, pitched up, and speared the young jack in the head when it bolted. Perfect! His first jack kill.

Troy Nicolls joined me for Apache's and Chaco's hunt. Apache knocked down a jack right off the bat, but lost it. She proceeded to catch a pygmy rabbit and two lizards, while Chaco pitched in with two nifty catches on pygmies.

**24 August 2006 Shadow 985g Apache 895g Chaco 682g Itsy 624g**



The Bradshaw family arrived in CV – Moira, Bridget, and Dad drove down from Sun Mt. to hunt with us and feast at the Cowboy Dinner Tree in Silver Lake. We flew Shadow and Chaco first. Chaco showed off by making a nice head shot on a jack. After Shadow knocked down her obligatory jack, we headed back to the truck.

Apache and Itsy flew the field by the Comet Rd hay shed.

Despite being 30g over his target weight and not having cast, Itsy caught the first pygmy in a spectacular pitch-up/wingover after Apache missed it. Apache then caught a pygmy of her own, but Itsy stole the show by making his first double on rabbits, catching a second pygmy. He's becoming a competent gamehawk in this environment now.

**26 August 2006 Shadow 985g Apache 880g Chaco 690g Itsy 596g**

We had quite a crowd at the Jack Shack last night – Aaron, Lee, Troy, Cory, Doug Hogan (NV), and me. We ate Cowboy Dinner Tree leftovers and didn't really make much of a dent in them.

This morning we split up for the hawking to take advantage of the morning chill, with Cory and me flying Itsy and Shadow. Shadow was really slamming into cover, and caught two jacks within five minutes. She hit but lost another, then whanged a pygmy. Itsy took some good shots, but nada.

We moved south to fly Apache and Chaco. Chaco slew a couple of timber tigers. Apache pulled her weight by catching a pygmy, then a wide-bodied jack. On the way back to the truck Chaco took a poke at a jack, missed, and passed the baton to Apache. Apache stooped, the jack reversed field, and Chaco hit it head on. Excellent!

**28 August 2006 Shadow 1011g Apache 900g Chaco 691g Itsy 609g**

After 34 days of hawking in CV last season, we had 150 jacks, *vs.* 90 jacks this season after 32 days. Q's absence is the real difference between jack counts across the two years. Still, I think I'm doing the right thing by keeping Q safe in her breeding chamber.

Shadow is doing her part to fill the freezer with long-ears, catching three jacks again today despite being 4-digit heavy. She and Chaco were paired today, with Chaco pitching in a couple of pygmies (one of them caught in a lovely drag race across a dirt road) and two miscellaneous rodents. Shadow's jacks were impressive. The first two were tuskers, one of which she held for quite awhile with just one foot. She has an iron grip! The third was a 2-quart jack which she killed outright with a vertical crush.



Apache was also heavy, so I flew her and Itsy at Nofziger's triangle. Itsy spotted a bunny in the sage and set it up for Apache, who caught it in a classic wingover.

I flew Itsy solo at the Chevy spot. We got many good cottontail flights. Itsy is all over them now. He caught a lizard, but finally nailed some "big game" with a stylish pitch-



up and wingover in heavy cover. No doubt he'd catch more rabbits if I flew him alone more often, but he's growing up nicely by flying with the other Harris's hawks.

Kills #195-204 for the team this season.

**31 August 2006 Shadow 1014g Apache 873g Chaco 696g Itsy 626g**

August ended with a taste of autumn – 23°F this morning. The hawks's bath pans were frozen over and there was hoar frost on the fairway. Shadow was heavy again, but full of vinegar. She and Itsy were a little bit puffed up until the sun warmed them. I just followed Shadow around mopping up her jack kills. She's been so fat for so long that her molt has started again. She dropped a tail feather while chowing down on jack #4! With her 76<sup>th</sup> jack of this season, she has 185 jacks



lifetime, one more than Killer. Shadow is now officially my top-scoring jack hawk. She's not the most skillful nor the flashiest jack hawk I've ever flown, but her intensity, perseverance, and incredible appetite/metabolism are unmatched in my experience. With her durability I hope to be flying her for a long time to come. Christmas Valley jacks are her specialty. She's made most of her kills right here in CV.

**4 September 2006 Shadow 1013g Apache 861g Chaco 702g Itsy 622g**

By CV standards it was a tough day of hawking for Lee and me. My first mistake was choosing to fly too close to the golf course. The hawks immediately headed for all the houses, chasing quail, and generally causing me undue aggravation. Shadow did catch a jack (kill #100 for her this season), but at this weight she can be a little nonchalant after the first jack.

We changed venues to a more relaxed and remote location. Shadow came out of the box with killing on her mind, and caught the first jack to blink, 50 yards from the truck. I put Shadow away and took Apache out, expecting her to be pretty sharp at this weight. She obliged by catching a jack in a long flight (with Tweety as castmate). But as it got warmer (now partnered with Sylvester) she got picky on her jack slips, so I boxed her without feeding her much.

Given the frustration level today, it can't be a surprise that Chaco's flying at Nofziger's turned up not one but two owls – a great horned and a barn. To tempt fate further I paired Itsy with Chaco at the Chevy spot. Chaco couldn't put up with Itsy's screaming,

so I flew Itsy solo. He got in some good flying on cottontails, but made a lot of rookie mistakes and got overheated. Things became comical when I had to open the door of the '55 Chevy to rout a bunny out from under the front seat.

I took Chaco to Avery's hay shed to look for quail in the shade. They were there in spades, with more than 100 birds cooling off at the base of the hay bales. Chaco got flight after flight after flight. He put in a sterling effort on every flush. He caught a cottontail while we were trying to reflush quail from some green tumbleweed. We kept working the quail (hard!), Chaco's beak wide open in the heat, until he caught one in the air. Very satisfying after busting brush for the best part of an hour.

I gave Itsy one more chance at Jim's. He got some good shots in, but came up empty-handed. A 7-hour marathon of summer hawking ...

**5 September 2006 Shadow 996g Apache 843g Chaco 715g Itsy 609g**

What a difference a day makes! Trouble-free, top-shelf hawking today. The first jack was the most spectacular. Itsy spotted it and the chase was on. Itsy's wings were a blur as he angled down to take his shot. The jack was forced to use its best move – it leaped vertically about three feet in the air, overtopping the sagebrush. Itsy raised a dust cloud when he struck where the jack had been a moment before. The jack's tactic would have worked if Shadow had not been Itsy's wingman. She ripped the jack out of the air at the apex of its jump. Phenomenal!



Shadow's third jack was almost as impressive. It flushed from a triangle between pivots and ran into the freshly mown alfalfa. Even though it had at least a 50-yard head start, Shadow's deep wingbeats left no doubt about her intentions. She overhauled it at full speed, but missed when it made a hard turn. It's a lot of work for a female Harris's hawk to rebound flat-footed, but Shadow didn't hesitate. The jack was running as fast as it could go, sending up puffs of dust from its feet as it headed back for the safety of the rabbitbrush, but within another 100 yards Shadow had it trussed like a Thanksgiving turkey. It was a big jack, and there were feathers and fur in equal proportions on the ground, evidence that the combatants were fairly matched.

For a change I got Apache and Chaco out while it was still reasonably cool. Chaco's weight wasn't a problem. He was crashing in on everything from timber tigers to jacks. He caught a timber tiger, but Apache stole the show with a cottontail, a chipmunk, and a last-minute hero catch on a gigantic jack, snagged by only one back leg. She got a pretty good crop for that.

Back at the Jack Shack a prairie tiercel made a tubed-out, smoking, low-level run down the fairway, chasing quail. Stunning!

**7 September 2006 Shadow 990g Apache 868g Chaco 694g Itsy 623g**



I saw three coyotes crossing Ivy near Langdon Spgs. Shadow, Chaco, and I were soon surrounded by three full packs of coyotes engaged in a yodeling contest. Shadow wasn't at the top of her game, but chased every jack regardless. Chaco became inspired, apparently, catching and losing one jack before making a stopping head shot on a big jack set up by Shadow. Shadow responded by catching a second jack, #300 in career kills for her (now in her third season), with 199 of those kills being jackrabbits.

Apache was all business, waxing two fat jacks in about 20 minutes. Itsy slammed into the ground hard enough to swell the ball of his left foot. He still puts weight on it, so I'm hoping he's OK.

**9 September 2006 Shadow 1015g Apache 880g Chaco 688g Itsy 625g**

Lee and I got into a swarm of jacks at Candy/Hill. The hawks didn't stop until we had 11 jacks, more than my cooler would hold. I flew Shadow with Sylvester. He caught two jacks that Shadow set up, then Shadow got busy for her own account and caught three in quick succession. Sylvester completed his hat trick on a solo shot straight down the road.

Shadow and Sylvester were exchanged for Tweety and Chaco. Tweety wasn't putting in her best effort, but she straightened out a jack for Chaco, who cracked it in the head.

I swapped Chaco for Apache. We hit the triangle between the pivots, jumping at least six or eight jacks in the light cover. Apache got the first one she saw, then Tweety caught the next two in five minutes. I thought that Apache was good for one more. I hit the fence line and, sure enough, flushed a jack at my feet. It took off at full speed, but no jack is faster than Apache. She hogtied it.

Itsy's foot is looking better, but I'm giving it more time to heal before flying him.

**10 September 2006 Shadow 1005g Apache 913g Chaco 685g Itsy 670g**

Shadow was unrelenting again today, catching two jacks while flying with Lee's Sylvester, and a third (jack #100 for her this season) flying with Tweety. Shadow nearly



added a short-eared owl to the tally, but the owl outclimbed her at the last second when both birds were about 30 feet up.

Lee took off for home, so I headed to the Comet Rd hay shed with Apache and Chaco. Chaco was bouncing around the field like popcorn, mostly trying to smoke pygmies. Apache chased them, too, but Chaco gave a textbook lesson on turning and burning, slamming three pygmies. Apache then did what she does better than Chaco, chasing a jack from the sagebrush into the open weedy field, where she wrestled it into submission with a classic head lock. She had a lizard for dessert on the way back.

Itsy's foot is almost back to normal.

**11 September 2006 Shadow 1001g Apache 889g Chaco 689g Itsy ???g**

Our last day of the season in Christmas Valley dawned clear, calm, and 36°F. I thought I'd give Apache a chance to fly early, for a change, with Shadow. Shadow got a bit territorial, and I wasn't in the mood for trouble, so I put Apache away. Chaco got the draw. Chaco has really good eyes, able to pick up the slightest movement at any distance. He made several pygmy sorties before catching one. Then he went after jacks, absolutely sucking up one that Shadow had forced to abandon any fancy footwork and simply run for its life.



Shadow took her turn, catching a jack in a 200+ yard flight. Not wanting to get mired in the Portland OR rush hour on the way home, I headed for the truck. As usual, Shadow's vision improved markedly as we got closer to the truck, and she manufactured excuses to continue hunting. Mysteriously, these "ghost jacks" always had to be chased in the direction away from the truck. But this time Shadow wasn't just pulling my chain to delay her return to the box – she lined up a jack, turned it back towards the truck, and nailed it a scant 12 paces from the tailgate! Now that is a convenient way to end her season.

It took Apache about an hour of hard flying to catch her jack. Afterwards, I had to cross a fence to get back to the truck. I put Apache on a fence post while I hopped the fence. Naturally, as soon as I was over the fence a jack flushed from the fence line back into the field. Predictably (I'm not complaining) Apache whacked the jack, causing me to make two more trips across the fence. Talk about the CV season ending on a high note!

## The Numbers

	Days hunted	Jackrabbits	Pygmy rabbits	Cottontails	Quail	Misc	Total
<b>Shadow</b>	46	102	9	2	0	7	<b>120</b>
<b>Apache</b>	44	36	13	5	3	13	<b>70</b>
<b>Chaco</b>	45	9	23	5	25	21	<b>83</b>
<b>Itsy</b>	35	1	4	3	0	17	<b>25</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>148</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>298</b>

	Kills/day	Jacks/day	% jacks	% misc
<b>Shadow</b>	2.61	2.22	85%	6%
<b>Apache</b>	1.59	0.82	51%	19%
<b>Chaco</b>	1.84	0.20	11%	25%
<b>Itsy</b>	0.71	0.03	4%	68%
<b>Aggregate over 46 days</b>	<b>6.48</b>	<b>3.22</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>19%</b>

NB: Apache caught an additional 5 jackrabbits, 1 quail, and 1 miscellaneous for Dan and Aaron, who flew her when I was away from Christmas Valley. Shadow caught an additional jackrabbit for Aaron under the same circumstances. The tables above represents only the kills made when I was flying my hawks myself.

## Epilogue



I was able to extend my hawking season by a week after leaving Christmas Valley. I met my dad in Cody WY, where he was hunting pronghorn, mule deer, and elk during the last two weeks of September. Tom and Jenn Coulson were also in Wyoming to pick up an ornate hawk-eagle, so we were able to arrange a day of hawking near Cody, joined by Kenny Jennings (IN) and Bob and Mary Armbruster (CA). Wyoming was absolutely overrun with cottontails this year, and there were a reasonable number of white-tailed jacks, as well. I was especially anxious to see Tom and Jenn

for the first time since Hurricane Katrina.

Because my hawking time would be limited, I only brought one hawk with me – Apache. I was expecting to find a lot of the canyon country cottontails with which she has the most experience. She is totally trouble-free in group hawking, and follows like a good dog. Once we found the cottontail hotspots, we were getting a great slip every minute or two, so it did not take long for Apache to put us well over the 300 kill mark for the season.



We had a fantastic day of hawking with the Coulsons, Armbrusters, and Kenny Jennings. They had found some rolling grassland near town that held a respectable white-tailed jackrabbit population. It was really fascinating for me to watch Bob's female, Isis, bred by the Tom and Jenn in 2004 from the same clutch that yielded my own Shadow. Isis and Shadow are so much alike in personality, and so incredibly deadly on game. Kenny had brought Venus, a sister to Killer and Q – the resemblance was unmistakable. What tributes to the Coulsons's selective breeding program, and to the White Wing lineage!

Apache acquitted herself well, catching a white-tailed jack and a cottontail in the midst of some pretty stiff competition (and equally stiff breeze). However, Apache's white-tail looked like a pygmy rabbit compared to the bucking bronc that Jenn caught with her female Prima (another White Wing granddaughter, bred by Dan Pike)!



The transcontinental "family reunion" continued into the dinner hour, with a prime rib buffet at The Irma (Buffalo Bill's former hotel in Cody). After a long, loud, and laughter-filled dinner, we said our good-byes and went our separate ways. Here's hoping that the next reunion is not far in the future!

Harris's hawks and jackrabbits forever!





**L to R: Harvey Bradshaw, Toby Bradshaw, Ken Jennings, Tom Coulson, Mary Armbruster, Bob Armbruster, Isis**

**(not pictured: Jennifer Coulson, who was still wrestling with that caribou-sized white-tailed jack)**

## Acknowledgments

I'm extraordinarily fortunate to have a wife and daughter who understand my pathological need for long stretches of time spent far from home on rabbit safari. Moira and Bridget made it down to Christmas Valley for a day this summer, and at least pretended to have a good time. But honestly, what could be more fun than hawking jackrabbits, finding horned lizards and cow skulls out in the sagebrush, or plinking with a .22?



Good hawking!

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