

Chukar Hawking

Afshin Mofid DC.



photo by Ken Miracle

There are three imported partridges in North America, the Hungarian partridge, the Chukar partridge and the largest one of all, the Himalayan snow cock. I have never heard of a snow cock falling prey to either an austringer or a falconer's bird, but many falconers in the US and Canada have, and do take Hungarian partridges every season. Most of these birds are taken over a pointer and using a falcon waiting on overhead and it is a spectacular sight to see a prairie falcon swoop down and hit a bird out of a covey in midair. But what about that other partridge with the funny name of Chukar?

My first encounter with a Chukar partridge occurred decades ago at my grandfather's house. Grandpa was a hunter and he loved to keep birds. European goldfinches were permanent members of his collection along with canaries, and an occasional starling or cockatoo. But one day I noticed three new birds in his back yard. They were a gift from a friend. Much larger than any bird I had seen there, they were beautiful, very alert with their necks extended and their legs moving fast, much like Irish clog dancers, running around his back yard. He explained to me that this is the partridge he loved to hunt when he was young and

how physically difficult it was to chase them in rocky and steep terrain, where they live most of their lives. Being the oldest grandchild, I was responsible for any mishap in grandpa's back yard. If a rose bush branch was broken by one of my younger cousins, I would be responsible. If someone picked and ate the mulberries from the mulberry tree before harvest time I would get in trouble. Essentially, I was grandpa's back yard supervisor and my job was to keep an eye on my many younger cousins whom often visited his house or, like myself, lived there. "You should have kept an eye on them" grandpa would say to

me every time a cousin caused damage to his plants or terrified his birds. The chukars I mentioned had their wing feathers trimmed so they could not fly off the ground more than a couple of feet. Since grandpa's yard was enclosed by 7 foot walls, there was no chance of them escaping. One hot summer day while grandpa was taking his afternoon nap, my younger cousin and I went out to check on the newly arrived birds. As

we approached them, they began running and soon they reached the end of the yard. My little cousin rushed towards the largest bird causing the bird to use all his leg power to propel himself upwards and managed to reach the top of the wall and flew out into the street. Panicked at the thought of grandpa waking up and finding out that he was missing a Chukar and its consequences, I ran out just in time to see it crossing the street. Luckily, the street was not terribly

cousin to keep the whole thing a secret in case anyone asked. Since then, I have gun hunted chukars on two continents and in many states. I find the sport addictive, especially when using passage North American goshawks.

When flushed, Chukars typically do not travel long distances. They seek cover on steep rocky hill sides covered with brush, usually at a lower elevation from where they were flushed. This short flight distance generally makes a falcon less desirable to hunt Chukars with since a falcon disables prey by stooping and striking it in midair. By the time a falcon has completed its stoop halfway, the covey of Chukars have already landed and hidden in the brush. On occasion a single old partridge may make the mistake of flying across a canyon in which case a falcon can easily do the job but chukars rarely make that mistake. That leaves the goshawk as the ideal bird when hawking for the chukar partridge.

Falconry, particularly hawking for Chukars with a goshawk has a long history in Central Asia and mountainous regions of the Middle East dating back thousands of years. Here in North America, however, both Chukars as well as the sport of falconry are relatively new. Ironically in the twenty first century, in many



photo provided by Afshin Mofid

Central Asian countries and the Middle East, possession of birds of prey is illegal and falconry is practiced only by a handful of dedicated individuals who are at risk of being fined or arrested. The Chukars however still roam the mountains in those places, often in staggering numbers. This then makes North America one of the best possible places to be a falconer, particularly for hawk-ing Chukars. The inland Northwest has the ideal habitat for chukars, and falconry is alive and well regulated in all states in this region. Best of all, a variety of game, including Chukars is available to the falconer, on millions of easily accessed acres of public lands.

My first attempt at chukar hawking was with a young Finnish tercel goshawk I acquired from a breeder. Many hours of training and hiking up and down hillsides and multiple slips at Chukars did not seem to excite him. I continued patiently by having friends and family hide under rocks and throw baggies for him, but he still did not seem interested in wild Chukars. He did, however, catch many ducks, quail, and even a dove. When it came to

Chukars, he would chase them hard but would not stay focused and give up halfway. I researched the literature for anything specific to Chukar hawking and found an old book by a fellow Persian falconer Taymour Mirza. Written in the mid nineteenth century, Baznameh, as the book is called, is a treatise on falconry. There I found a few references



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to partridge hunting but nothing specific. However, there was a few amusing instructions in this book, one having to do with a lost hawk. Not having the luxury of telemetry in the 1800s, Taymour Mirza writes “If you lose your hawk and have lost all hope of finding it, face Mecca and say a prayer and your hawk will soon be found, guaranteed!” Frustrated, I consulted with experienced falconers in my

home state of Idaho and got some useful suggestions but I realized only a few had taken Chukars with hawks or falcons and none flew hawks at Chukars regularly and consistently to be able to help. Determined, I contacted some falconers in India and Pakistan, and they told me they mostly fly their hawks at gray francolin on flat terrain, but

one falconer suggested asking a man in a mountainous village in Pakistan who flew his goshawk regularly at chukars. The problem was that there was no internet service in his small village.

My contact suggested I email my questions and send them to him and he would call this man, get the answers and then relay them to me. After many back and forth sessions and waiting a week at a



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time for a response, the village falconer's verdict was, GET A PASSAGE HAWK! The mountain falconer was convinced that the reason my hawk could not keep up with a wild chukar was because he had been raised in captivity and did not have the speed, the muscles and aggressiveness to get the job done. Some experienced falconers may

not agree with that opinion, but I was on a quest to get a Chukar with a goshawk so the next season I acquired a passage female. This was the bird! She had hunted and survived in the cold and was big and strong, a beautiful specimen.

I began working with her with flights at either bagged or wild Chukars and no other birds, to keep her focused. I was between dogs since my old, experienced dog was now too old for the joint punishing Chukar country and the new pup too young to have along yet. I searched for Chukars without a dog. Early

in the season, Chukars are not too far from water and an experienced hunter can eventually locate a covey or two, but it can take some time and a few miles of hiking steep terrain. Eventually, after a few hours, I finally flushed a covey on a steep and shady side of a hill. The covey was a mix of adults and young birds, all headed down the hill into a row of willows. As they flushed, my hawk was instantly off the glove and on their tail. About 30 feet into the chase she abruptly stooped into a bush. Thinking she had given up too soon I walked over and saw that she had a young chukar in her talons! I was overly excited to say the least. The next time out I flushed a covey of chukars at a distance that almost seemed too far for a young bird to give chase successfully, but she was eager to go and

I let her fly after a single bird. I had approached the covey from above and the birds, as mentioned earlier, will always head down into canyons below. I saw the chukar head down to the creek below, disappearing behind a car-size boulder on his way down with the hawk at his tail and closing in and finally stooping almost like a falcon as she cleared the boulder and disappeared. After hiking down and listening for her bell I found her in the row of willows, plucking the Chukar. She continued to be successful at catching wild Chukars in the next several outings. She was beginning to understand the game and really excel at it when an unusually hard winter ended the season sooner than expected. This bird had survived two coyote attacks and was nearly killed by an eagle, but West Nile virus took her life the following summer.



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My latest attempt at Chukar hawking is with a passage tercel goshawk I trapped last season. At this writing, no wild chukars in the bag yet but I am hopeful and determined and, most of all, obsessed with Chukars and Chukar hawking. I have learned that getting a hawk ready to chase wild Chukars is much like being the hawk's athletic coach. His diet, exercise and mental state must be closely monitored for success. This is also

true for the falconer. Hiking in Chukar country is not easy. The falconer must be relatively fit with good coordination for navigating rocky and slanted ground, using only one hand for balance and grabbing rocks if needed, and also have some knowledge of Chukar habitat; how to approach them as well as having the determination not to give up after a few unsuc-

cessful flights, that may mean hiking up a hill and having to hike back down to pick up your bird several times. If the slant of the hill is on the same side as the arm that is carrying the hawk, the falconer must instantly release the jesses and the hawk if he or she happens to fall, which is usually towards the slant, or he may crush or injure the hawk. And let's not forget about keeping track of your dog who maybe

on point above you on a hill, without being seen. Hawking for chukars can be very challenging, but there is nothing more satisfying than when all your planning and weeks of training, the dog, the hawk, the sun and the moon line up and come together at the moment the birds flush and your hawk disappears into an abyss a thousand yards down the canyon, and you eventually

find him under a sage brush plucking a mature old chukar. Chasing that Chukar down the street decades ago was not easy, and over the decades since that day it has not gotten any easier. I know there are easier prey for both the austringer and his or her accipiter but Chukar hawking over a pointer is one of the most rewarding experiences in falconry. Happy hawking!

ME & FINN

Ashley Neubrand

It was in September when I got my first kestrel... my sponsor Paul Hutchinson, his wife, and I were driving along the back roads between Eagle and Star to find the right one. So far we only had one female hag. All the others were not very interested in the trap. On the way back we took a detour on the side road and spotted a male. We dropped the trap and waited. Within minutes, he was on the trap but was not hitting the nooses. A car drove by and spooked him much to my dismay. But a few minutes later he was on it again, this time he caught by a toe. He was much more well behaved than the female hag, so we released her and kept the male.

Finn has been an interesting journey in how to be a falconer so far. I learned about being quick when it came to hunting. One time I was practicing with him in the Eagle foothills when I found myself flushing a mouse. Within moments Finn was on it. Before I could do anything he flew off with the mouse. I was lucky that I was in an area with no power poles, but he was flying around. After 20 minutes tracking him down with telemetry, I spotted him on a fence post looking at me if I had anymore mouse left.

I had to wait for another season before I could start really hunting with

Finn. He broke a tail feather after the 2nd day having him and by the time molting happened, he had broken up to 5 feathers. By September he was full feathered and ready to go.



photo provided by Ashley Neubrand

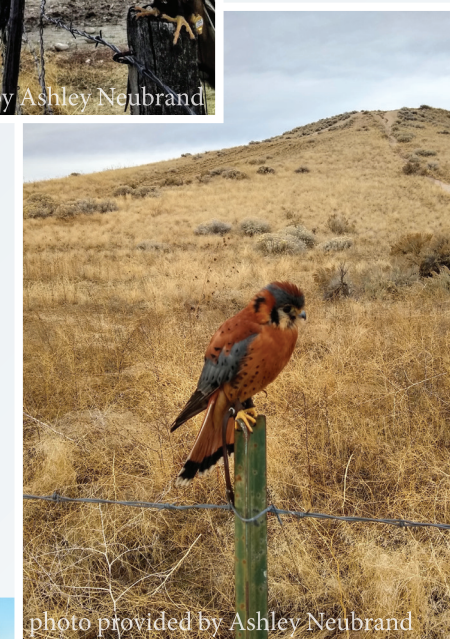


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First we started in open BLM land with bushes of sparrows out in the winter. We practice slipping out of the car sometimes he would perch on the wire and try to stoop at them. It was a good start, over time with some weight management, I became more confident to do more urban places.

Memorial Day, I took Finn out with Casey Robinson and Phil B. to find sparrows or starlings. We drove to Initial Point High School and noticed some sparrow activity in a topiary tree. I set Finn up at the tennis court fence and we beat the bush to flush some sparrows. Finn flew in and grabbed a fledged

sparrow in the tree. I tried to crawl in there to catch him but he was too fast. We spent the next hour swinging a lure trying to bring him in. he eventually cashed his prize and returned for something with a bit more meat on the bones.

As my apprenticeship comes to an end, I look back on all the exciting adventures I had with this little falcon and wonder what will come next? All I know is that it will involve wearing pants or at least longer shorts...



photo provided by Ashley Neubrand