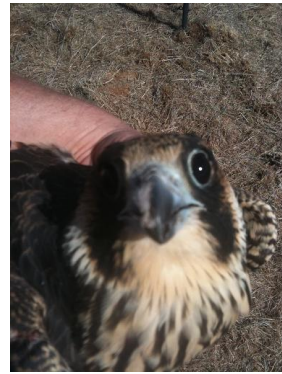




Jet

The first season



My name is Mark Runnels and I am a Master Falconer from Bartlesville OK. In September 2011, I was fortunate to trap the first legally taken passage Tundra Peregrine falcon in Oklahoma since the 1970's. Due to the historic nature of this bird, I feel that she belongs, in a Zen sorta way, to all of the falconers in Oklahoma. So I thought I would take a few minutes to relay the highlights (and low lights), of our first season together.

Trapping

Although Oklahoma has had a legal take on Peregrines in both the 2009 and 2010 season, no birds were captured. Ryan Van Zant, the 2011 Oklahoma Falconer's Association President, put out a general appeal to the Oklahoma falconers to fill the two bird allotment in 2011 as there was a risk of losing the allotments if we did not use them.

I love passage birds. I had just finished a miserable season with an imprint hybrid. Never again! I understand passage birds, but imprints are a mystery to me. Even chamber raised birds have been less than average successes for me. I like passage birds and the idea of a passage peregrine appealed to me, so I decided to give it a try.

The 2011 summer had been a record dry year. The ponds were very low, and the shallow lakes that attract the migrating shore birds that, in turn, attract the peregrines were either dry, or very low. There are two locations that are considered the best potentials for attracting shore birds and, therefore, attracting peregrines in Oklahoma. These are Hackberry Flats in Southwest Oklahoma, and Great Salt Plains in North Central Oklahoma.

Two weeks before the season opened, Steve Olnier and I made a trip with our families to Hackberry Flats. There had already been reports of one peregrine seen there, but what we found was very disappointing. There is a lake on the refuge that is supposed to hold a large quantity of water to be pumped out onto huge man-made flats to flood them to attract migrating ducks. The flooded plains also attract migrating flocks of shore birds which, in turn, attract migrating peregrines. The lake was very, very low. There were a few small flocks of shorebirds, a few teal around the lake, and one Merlin, but it was obvious that there simply wasn't enough water to flood the plains and we decided that this would be a low probability of success for peregrines.

The following weekend, the weekend before the season opened, my son, who is an apprentice falconer, and I went to Great Salt Plains to look around. Again the water was very low, but there were good numbers of shore birds working the exposed mud flats and it looked more promising. A few questions asked of the old timers drinking coffee at the local café resulted in the names of a couple of landowners who owned property with a view of the lake. Both of the landowners were intrigued with our explanation of what we were doing, and both gave us permission to go look around. Both properties were within view of the mudflats, but one had a high cliff overlooking the lake (actually overlooking a trailer park which was overlooking the lake). The landowner stated that he leased his land for goose and deer hunting, but neither would be in season during the 30 day peregrine trapping season. He was a huge fan of the local hawks and eagles and we agreed to a reasonable lease rate, which he discounted from his normal rates provided that we let him see every bird we trapped.



View from the blind

The season opened the following Thursday and I made arrangements to take two days off work that week, and all of the following week. I had food and provisions to trap for 11 days and expected to spend all or most of that time trapping in the thin hopes of trapping a passage peregrine.

I arrived at about 10:00 AM on Thursday. As I drove across the pasture to the blind site, I stopped to watch a falcon soaring overhead. I assumed that it was a prairie, but I had never seen one soar with its tail fanned out like this one. I have since learned that I was looking at a soaring peregrine. One could hardly ask for a better sign to start a week long trapping trip!

I set up my nets and settled into my blind. I noticed that, by coincidence, it was almost exactly 12:00 noon when I pulled the pigeon for the first time. After what seemed like a long time of inactivity, something came in unexpectedly from behind me. I heard the wind in her wings long before I saw her. She hit the pigeon and took it directly to the center of the net. I pulled the net and she was caught mere seconds after I first knew she was there. The first bird of the trip and I didn't have a clue what it was! In my haste, I left my towel in the blind. When I saw that it was a peregrine, I didn't want to risk going back to the blind to recover my towel, so I decided to remove her from the net with my bare hands. I remember thinking "How bad could she be?" The answer was "Very bad!" I typically throw a towel over a trapped bird and gently work her out of the net. In this case, I reached under the net, gently grabbed her lower body and feet and worked her out of the net....and she promptly sank her talons into me to the hilt! The speed of her footing was incredible. To make a long story short, I had over 60 punctures and tears in my hands and forearms. I was never so glad to get a bird in the giant hood! I won't forget my towel again! When it was all over, I looked at my watch. It was 1:12 PM! Just a little over an hour into a week long trip and I had my dream bird!



On a side note: I heard second hand that there were some people speculating that I had really trapped the bird in Texas (I guess they mean on the beach) and only pretended to catch it at Great Salt Plains. All I can say to that is that I would have made up a better story than this! It's hard to believe that the very first bird to hit the net was a passage female Peregrine and it happened in less than an hour and fifteen minutes. The truth is stranger than fiction!

I named the bird "Jet" after the town of Jet, Oklahoma near where she was trapped. I took her back to the campsite and opened the giant hood inside the camper. I was able to fit her with temporary jesses and one of the hoods I had seemed to fit pretty well. Her first mutes were kelley green and she was very thin. The vet later gave her a perfect bill of health with no parasites, so I suppose she simply hadn't eaten on this first leg of her migration. Once she had eaten a full crop, her mutes returned to normal. I am just glad my pigeon was the first thing she found when she got there.

Within 10 minutes, she was hooded and sitting calmly on the fist. I unhooded her, and she bated a few times, but very quickly settled down. She never fought the hood, and was tolerating being hooded and unhooded within a half hour. I put a large piece of pigeon breast in my fist and unhooded her. I picked up a small piece of pigeon in a pair of hemostats and, when she hissed as my hand approached, I popped the tidbit of pigeon in her mouth. By the third piece she was taking it from the hemostats and within the first hour of being in captivity, she was very hesitantly reaching down and pulling pieces of pigeon. I have tamed dozens of wild caught birds, including several passage prairie falcons, but I have never had one eat off the fist this quickly. She must have been very hungry.

After eating a full crop of pigeon and being re-hooded. I placed her on the portable block and sat with her for an hour or so in the air conditioned camper. Once I was convinced that she would be OK, I went back to the trapping blind. I caught and released several Cooper's hawks, an immature red-shoulder, and a passage red-tail. Just before sunset, I had another passage peregrine come in from the lake and take the pigeon. I didn't want two birds, but I also didn't want to make this bird trap shy as I had heard rumors that there were other falconers trapping not far away, so I just let her enjoy the pigeon. After she had killed it, broken into it and had a visible crop, a THIRD peregrine came in and bumped her from the pigeon. This one ate most of the rest of the pigeon before a red-tail came in and bumped her off of it and ate the rest.

I had a friend come up from the Oklahoma City area Friday night and trap with me over the weekend, and my wife and daughter came up for the weekend. We caught approximately 30 birds over the three days, mostly Cooper's hawks. I couldn't see wasting a week of vacation since I already had my bird, so I pulled up stakes and went home with my family on Sunday night. I took home my beautiful peregrine, and my friend from Oklahoma City took home a passage female Cooper's hawk. All other birds were either not trapped, or were trapped and released unharmed.



Training

It has been said that telemetry has made falconers reckless, and I am perhaps one of the worst. I try to have a passage red-tail back on the wing on the fourth day after it first jumps to the fist, and a passage prairie within a week. Not so with this bird. She was so tame, and so well mannered that she seemed almost too good to be true. She was bathing in the weathering yard on the second day home, and jumping to the fist on the third. She was coming the full length of the creance within a week.

Two things made me hesitant to release her. The first was the historic nature of this bird, and the fact that she could not be replaced if I lost her. The second was that I had heard horror stories of the highly migratory nature of Tundra Peregrines. Conventional wisdom was that it was risky to fly the bird free before December, never to fly them with a north wind, and only fly them late in the evening. I am not sure how much truth there is to these conditions, but I wasn't taking any chances.

By the fourth week on the creance, she was flying circles above my head at the end of the creance like a kite and I decided it was time to fly her free, even though it wasn't quite December yet.

Her ideal flying weight was 830 grams or 19.3 oz.

I love to lure fly falcons, and have trained several very successful lure birds, but either she or I one couldn't get the timing down. In the end, I gave up on trying to teach her to fly the lure, and just used it as a call back device. The nice thing was that she would come any distance, and down from any height, at the sight of the lure.

Pigeons

Our experience together with pigeons was short and sweet. I have a loft of pedigreed racing homers that are very strong flyers. In the past, I have had peregrines that would stoop the homers, and even a few that would tail chase the homers for a ways, but it was very rare that they ever got close to one, let alone caught one. This made them great exercise with a minimal loss of pigeons. Not so with Jet! She was so strong, and her instincts so keen, that almost every homing pigeon that I released under her was eventually caught. They could usually evade her in the first stoop, but she has a deadly tactic that they were less capable of evading. After blowing by them in the first stoop she would pull into a horizontal loop that brought her back to the pigeon's path, usually head on. Most didn't survive the horizontal "stoop", but if they did, she would pull in behind them and fly them down. I found her as much as three miles away in heavy brush, eating a pigeon. From then on, they were an emergency call back option only. I was running out of homers!

Ducks

In Early December, she was waiting on well, and there were plenty of ducks in the area. I decided to try her on ducks. I wanted each flight to be successful to encourage her, so I took a flight conditioned, game farm pheasant into the field with me every time. She would climb up to 350-400 feet (according to the altimeter) and wait on over the ducks. When they flushed, she would fly through them almost as though she was playing with them. She pulled a few feathers, but didn't really hit one. After each miss, she would come back over me and pitch up to 500-600 feet. I would then release the pheasant which she would pound with gusto. She loves killing pheasants more than anything. After two weeks of repeating the same performance, I realized..... the little brat was training me! She wasn't trying for the ducks; she was just doing what she had to do to get me to serve her the pheasant!

My cure for this behavior worked well, but at a great cost. I put her up over a duck pond and let her fly through the flock. When she pitched up and back over me expecting a pheasant, I pulled her down with the lure and gave her a quail leg. I put her back up over another duck pond and repeated the same performance, again pulling her down to a lightly garnished lure. I put her up over the third pond, she seemed to realize that she wasn't going to get a pheasant and she killed a drake Mallard with her deadly horizontal stoop. After that she was serious about killing ducks, but she also never came down off a high pitch to the dead lure again. If I wanted her back, it had to be on a kill, even if it was a live lure.

Jet loves big ducks. Her first kill was a drake Mallard as were her next 9. If there was a drake mallard on the pond, she would single it out and ignore everything else. She killed one hen Mallard that was the only duck on the pond, and a couple of drake Widgeons, but perhaps the most interesting kills she made were when she would fly through a flock of divers as though she was looking for a big duck. She flew through one flock three times before taking a small duck, both times taking a drake Ringneck. There were several times when she flew through or along side of divers or mergansers and just refused to take one, although she could have easily done so.



I have mentioned Jet's "horizontal stoop", but it is hard to convey the actual power that she displayed with this tactic. She used it once on a drake Widgeon. She missed the vertical stoop, but without losing speed, she pulled into a horizontal loop that put her head on with the on-coming duck. They connected hard and it tumbled to the ground dead, but fell in the middle of a gravel road. A few moments later, when I picked her up to move her to a better location, I noticed that the duck had no head! We never did find that duck's head, but it gives you a sense of the power of her secondary kill mechanism when the initial stoop fails to connect.

She ended the season with 15 duck kills in three months. I suspect that this year will be even better if the ducks are here.

Pheasants

Jet is a pheasant-aholic. There is something about that wing beat that drives her crazy. She will come from any height and any distance to try to hammer one, and she hits them harder than any other game. Fortunately, I have access to flight conditioned pheasants that fly like the wild ones, and she cuts them down. Most are killed in the stoop with very little tail chasing, or struggling on the ground.

Unfortunately, I didn't have a good pointing dog to work with her. We made a few trips to hunt wild pheasants, but she only had one legitimate set-up. Although she knocked a full grown, late season cock down into the tall grass, she came back up before we got to her. Not sure what happened once they were in the grass, but she lost him regardless. This year I have a very capable English Setter that should tip the odds in our favor.



Geese

I have to admit that the thought of hunting geese has always intrigued me. We have tons of them here in Northeast Oklahoma and they are universally hated by the landowners. There are plenty of horror stories about falconry birds being hurt by the goose that is being targeted, or the falcon being mobbed by the other geese in the flock. These stories were enough to make me hesitate to hunt geese with her (or any bird). That being said, there were a few times that there were mixed flocks of resident Canada geese and ducks on a pond. Every time she would fly though the geese and kill the ducks.....until her next to the last flight of the season.

We put her up over a mixed flock of Canada geese and mallards. I expected that she would pick out a mallard and ignore the geese. What I hadn't counted on was that the earlier geese were large resident geese, so called Magnums, but the geese in this flock were small to medium size Canadas. Some weren't much larger than the ducks she was routinely killing. As she got up to her normal pitch, the geese panicked and took off over the field. She picked one out and hit it HARD! The goose tumbled, but recovered just off the ground. As it tried to get away, she grabbed it just behind the point where the wings attach to the body and rode it to the ground. At some point, once they were on the ground, the goose turned its head back towards her and she grabbed its head and broke its neck.



My daughter is a distance runner and was the first on the scene. She is an aspiring falconer and was prepared to help Jet control the goose, however the goose was already dead and Jet didn't require any assistance. The goose weighed 7.2 lbs partially eaten without a head. Needless to say, she went home with a full crop of warm goose that night!



Later in the week, once she was back to weight, I put her up over another flock of small geese and the same scenario played out again. Jet singled out a goose from the middle of the flock, smacked it hard in the air, and rode it to the ground. Again, in the few seconds that it took for us to get to her, the goose was dead and she was in complete control. That goose weighed 6.4 lbs plucked and dressed. What a great way to end the season!

It might have been luck that she wasn't hurt, but I had the sense that she was in complete control. There was no attempt by the goose being targeted to do anything but get away, and the other geese in the area showed no interest in their friend in distress.

I will hunt Jet again on geese, but not until she is up to full strength, and not until the smaller geese migrate down. I would love to get her over some blue or snow geese, but I am still not brave enough to let her tackle a Magnum Canada!

Loss and recovery

At no point was the difference between the captive raised birds and the passage bird more evident than when she was lost and I had to track her down with telemetry. If my captive bred birds got out of sight, they would normally be found within a mile or so. My imprint got loose from the mews one day without telemetry and she was found in the nearest tall tree, sitting and watching the world go by. Not so with Jet. This girl can cover some ground!

The first of three times that I lost her, she tail chased a small group of ducks out of sight just before dark. By the time I got the telemetry out, she was out of range, or behind a hill. I went to the top of the highest hill in the area and I got one lone beep in a generally northward direction. Four hours later, we found her roosted for the night in a pine tree in the front yard of a trailer house west of Delaware OK. She came down to a live lure in the truck headlights. She had traveled 24 miles as the crow flies, but interestingly, even though she flew over miles of open ranch land and cliffs, she sought out the only house in the area and put up to roost under a yard light. Flying to well lit areas was going to prove to be a pattern with her.

The second time I lost her is also when I first found out that she would no longer respond to the dead lure. We had left the house in a hurry and hadn't picked up any pigeons. She had been hitting nearly 100% on ducks by that point, and she had always come down to a lure in the past, so I didn't go back and get a pigeon, we just headed out to the field. She missed the duck and they flew out of sight. I brought out the lure and tried to call her down. Instead she just kept climbing higher and higher. Based on kite training and the altimeter, she is out of sight at about 3000 ft. and she was well above that this day. Realizing that she wasn't coming down without a pigeon, I headed home to get one. By the time I got back, she was well to the south. She put up for the night in a field just north of Tulsa, but as we approached her, the signal started moving indicated that we had bumped her. We next located her near a streetlight in a large fenced-in yard full of noisy dogs. It was late and we decided that the risk of being shot outweighed the possibility of getting her back and so we left with plans to return before dawn fully expecting her to still be there. That is when we learned that she has no problems flying at night!

The next morning, an hour before dawn, the signal was faint and to the east. We drove to the top of the highest hill in the area and there was no signal at all. We drove to the east side of Tulsa and got the faintest beep to the east. We followed her to Claremore where she turned south towards Tahlequah. Once we caught sight of her in a tree and she panicked like a wild bird and flew off. She went into the hill country of Eastern Oklahoma and the signal was lost in the Ft. Gibson wildlife refuge area. I was very discouraged and had written her off as lost.

Later that night, 36 hours after she was lost, and after the encouragement of Dave Eslicker, my wife and I decided to make one more attempt to find her. We went to where the last signal was lost and randomly started stopping at every high spot and checking for a signal. The odds against success were phenomenal, but I had to try. Amazingly, we did pick up a signal and tracked her to a single tree in the middle of a huge field in the bright lights of the Ft. Gibson power plant. She came with little trouble to the live lure. She had three broken feathers and a bad abrasion on her leg, but otherwise she was fine. I am not sure what she had been tangling with, but she was very hungry and I got the impression that she was glad to be headed home. As the crow flies, she had traveled about 92 miles from the place that I lost her, but her complete route was well over 120 miles.

The third and final (I hope) time I lost her, I broke her routine. She loves routine and the only time she is visibly nervous is when her routine is interrupted. It was late in the season and we hadn't found any ducks. I decided that I would take her home and put her on the block to call her to the lure in an attempt to re-establish the lure training with her. But when I pulled her hood and placed her on the block, this wasn't the routine that she was expecting, and she panicked. She flew west until it was dark and then followed the lights of highway 75 south to the Tulsa area. We first found her near a well lit billboard, but bumped her. Next we located her on top of a large horse barn with 6 streetlights around it. She came right to the live lure and was picked up with no trouble. This time she had "only" gone about 30 miles before we recovered her.



The Molt

Jet was put up in early March for the molt. In classic Tundra fashion, here it is mid-April and she hasn't lost her first feather. I hope she starts soon.

I was concerned about her reverting to her fully wild state over the summer, so I opted for a tame molt. Every evening after dark, I pick her up and offer her all the food she wants, but every bite is off my fist. She normally eats the best parts and stops after only a bump of a crop. I pick up any small pieces and she will gently take them from my fingers. After eating, she feaks her beak on my glove, and sits contentedly for an hour or so before being hooded, and being placed in the indoor mews to spend the night.

Early on, she learned to drink from a plastic cup. Even though she always has a full bath in her mews, she has the annoying habit of trying to take a bath in the cup when I offer her a drink in the living room and knocking it from my hands. We both get wet!

What's next?

There are so many possibilities for the coming year when you have a bird with this type of potential.

I have acquired a partially trained English Setter and we are spending the summer finishing her training, and introducing her to the falcon. It looks like our pheasant season next year is going to be much better. Jet flies at a reasonably high pitch, but not too high, and hits pheasants like a freight train! Combine this natural talent with a good, steady bird dog and I am hoping for a winning combination.

Ducks, will of course, remain a staple. We are blessed with lots of ponds and lots of wintering ducks. This is the most reliable game to be found.

I am definitely planning to try to trap another passage peregrine this year. I am blessed with a job that allows me adequate time to fly two birds, and I found myself wanting to hunt more than Jet was ready last year. I would also like to allow Jet's weight to fluctuate more. I find myself keeping her at hunting weight for long periods of time so that I don't lose hunting days. Two birds would allow me to alternate between them allowing them to feed up on each kill and rest a day between flights.

I am still intrigued with the idea of hunting geese. Classic falconry used a cast of falcons to fly difficult quarry such as herons. Would it make sense to trap a second female peregrine and fly them as a cast at geese? I am not certain, but it is a very interesting thought.

The area where I live has a good number of shore birds to be found around the ponds. I am not sure exactly what they are, but my best identification at a distance is that they are one of the snipe family. I would like to fly them with Jet, especially when ducks are scarce, but she shows a tendency to carry full grown homing pigeons and I have hesitated to try her on smaller game like snipe. Perhaps a passage tiercel would be a better choice?

Regardless, I have already paid the lease fee for the coming fall and I plan to be in full trapping mode on the first day of the season. If you have time, come trap with us!

J. Mark Runnels, PE

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