

A Yankee in Oregon's High Desert

GUEST ARTICLE BY JIM WEBBER - ON THE FARM



ALL-SEASON TIRES AND 4 WD WERE NO MATCH FOR THE SLICK OREGON MUD.

Black smoke belched from the Case front-end loader as Hank Minor eased it into gear. Hank's Tundra was mired in the mud next to an irrigation pivot and he'd gotten the farmer's permission to use the front-end loader. Despite its massive size, the Case's tires began to spin ineffectively as the tow chain to the Tundra tightened. During the whatta-we-gonna-do-now pause, I reflected on how I ended up hawking Oregon's high desert rather than upstate New York.

Move from New York to Oregon

Gail, my wife, had spent decades skiing the hardpack that is the prevailing surface of the slopes of New York and Vermont. She wanted to retire to an area with real powder, which meant the Rockies. We settled on Bend, Oregon because of easy access to skiing on Mount Bachelor. Now, I didn't start skiing until I was 61 years old, so skiing wasn't important to me, but I liked the idea of a wider range of quarry that the mountain west had to of-

fer for a falconer. Not to mention an abundance of trout in the cold mountain rivers and lakes. And did I mention that Bend has thirty plus microbreweries for less than 100,000 residents?

The falconry experiences I describe below are characteristic of the high desert around Bend, which lies just east of the Cascade Mountains that suck up eastward-traveling atmospheric moisture. West of the Cascades, Oregon

is a temperate rain forest that provides a much different falconry experience - one that's closer to what I'd experienced in New York.

Falconry Quarry

One of the frustrating aspects of hawking in New York is the profusion of trees and brush. While these provided necessary cover and food for falconry quarry, the sheer number of trees usually prevented me from seeing a hawk's chase and capture of rabbits. A typical New York hunt would have me painfully stuck in multiflora rose, flailing about with a stick to get imagined cottontails scurrying, only to hear the jingle of bells followed by a distant squeal of a caught rabbit. In the high desert of Oregon, you get to see most, if not all, of the chase and capture.



SNEAK CULLED A JACK RABBIT FROM THE HERD AFTER THE CALIFORNIA HAWKING CLUB MEET IN JANUARY 2018.

Oregon has a year-round open season on black-tailed jackrabbits and mountain cottontails, both of which happily reside on our property on the east side of Bend. The jackrabbit is an incredible athlete, greyhound fast, capable of hitting 40 mph when hard pressed. They live in wide-open spaces, depending on their acute hearing and speed to stay a step ahead of the eagles, hawks, owls, coyotes, bobcats, and mountain lions. Around agricultural pivots, jackrabbit pellets can be so numerous

that you can't walk without stepping on them. These were extremely abundant where Hank's Tundra got stuck - maybe they added to the lubricity of the soil. The small-taloned mouser red-tails (more on this later)

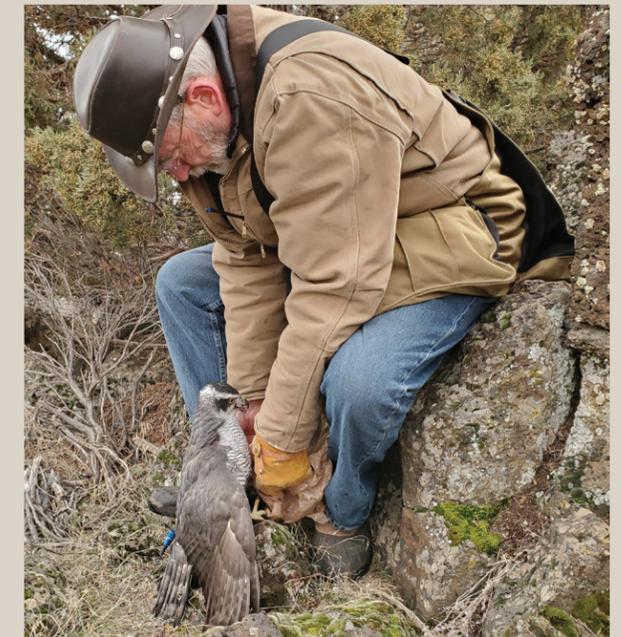


THE LARGER, SOMEWHAT FLATTENED DISK IS A JACKRABBIT PELLETT, WHILE THE SMALLER, SPHERICAL PELLETT COMES FROM A MOUNTAIN COTTONTAIL. STUDY THE DIFFERENCE AND THE NEXT TIME SOMEONE TELLS YOU DON'T KNOW JACKSH*T, YOU CAN REPLY, "AU CONTRAIRE."

I've managed to capture in Oregon haven't been that keen on catching jackrabbits. The sole exception was in central California where a couple of dirt-hawkers took pity on me and gave me directions to a grassy 50-acre area brimming with jacks in the midst of suburbia and highways. I threw a rock into a cluster of brush and a herd of about

50 jacks started loping away. Even Sneak, my 900-gram Oregon red-tail, could not resist the temptation and grabbed one.

The mountain cottontails of the high desert are smaller, (about 600-800 grams) than their eastern cousins and are much more flexible. This flexibility probably helps



HOS PROVIDES ADVICE ON DISPATCHING A DESERT COTTONTAIL. PHOTO CREDIT: HANK MINOR.

them fit into the tight and rigid crevices of basalt rimrock that provides bunker-like shelter during the day.

Unlike the eastern cottontails that can be forced out by beaters wearing double-tin armor and who are willing to brave facial lacerations in the briars, mountain cottontails are unmovable once they get into the rocks. Unless you have dynamite. Or a front-end loader that's not being used to pull Hank's truck out of the mud. This means you need to be out at dusk or dawn to find them with any consistency.

Hos, a small (650-gram) male Finnish goshawk I got from Bob Welle of Portland Oregon, was successfully flown on ducks on the west side of the Cascades for several years before I got him. After almost two seasons, I'm learning enough about these cottontails to put some slips in front of Hos and he's starting to reel them in. He also quickly catches up to the more abundant jack rabbits, but his pursuit is a game of touch football, not tackle. It's always exciting to see the chase, but I'm relieved when he doesn't latch on because of his small size.

Finding good rabbit spots has been challenging. The desert is so dry that rabbit pellets remain for years - they may have been dropped yesterday or ten years ago, so you never know what the current year's crop of rabbits will be like or what spots are productive. Although we are only 30 miles (as the hawk flies) from Mt. Bachelor where the annual snowfall is consistently several hundred inches, Bend averages about two feet of snow. When we are lucky enough to get a few inches, I have to get up much earlier than my usual "Retirement O'Clock" to look for bunny tracks before the snow melts in the afternoon. As I've done this over the past three years, I've been able to add a few hawking areas and eliminate many more.

For the serious long-winger (which I am not), there's an abundance of natural quarry, from ducks on stock ponds, to Chukars in the valleys, to pheasants in agricultural areas, to Sage Grouse, whose western-most lek is located less than a half hour east of our house. Ruffed Grouse, Blue Grouse, Gray Partridge, California Quail, Mountain Quail, and Mourning Dove round out the species available for the long-winger. Hos has come close to catching California Quail that are often strutting through the sage, but a pointer will be needed for consistent slips.

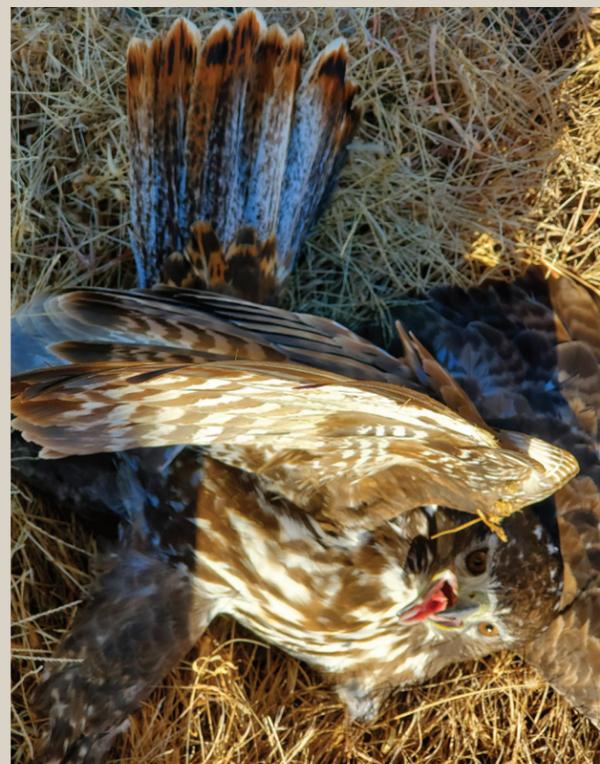
I've heard zero Oregon falconers talk about squirrel hawking. Here in Bend, that makes sense because squirrels are limited to the city and suburbs where a few hardwoods have been transplanted. But the ever-present junipers and ponderosa pines provide dense year-round needles that hide the squirrels. Ground squirrels are ubiquitous

during warm months, but it's the wrong season and they just pop back into their holes when threatened. Our irrigated field has ground squirrels that I harvest with a pellet rifle from my office window - helps stock the hawk-food freezer.

One of the dangers for falconers in the wide-open desert is the glut of large predators. If you are flying long-wings after far-flying quarry such as Sage Grouse, long tail chases are almost certainly going to attract the attention of a Golden Eagle or a Ferruginous Hawk. The same goes for dirt-hawkers pursuing jack rabbits, where a chase of even a quarter mile will get the same attention. More than one falconer I've talked to has lost a raptor to eagles. Coyotes are also a problem, especially with jack rabbits, whose squeals attract coyotes to the captured quarry like pickup trucks to a Waffle House. And I've seen mountain lion paw prints in the snow more than once, though I've never seen one. I finally bought a 9-mm handgun that I carry when venturing out in the desert by myself.

Capturing a Wild Raptor

Going out to capture a falconry bird in Oregon is a real treat for a New Yorker. Even on a slow day, the open space of the high desert lets you spot Red-Tailed Hawks, Ferruginous Hawks, Rough-Legged Hawks, Northern



A CAPTURED HAGGARD HARLANS HAWK THAT WAS IMMEDIATELY RELEASED.



NO AMOUNT OF HANK'S HANDIWORK COULD DISGUISE THE EVIDENCE OF THREE MIRED VEHICLES.

Harriers, Golden Eagles, Bald Eagles, American Kestrels, Merlins, Prairie Falcons, and Peregrine Falcons. All three accipiter species can be found around Bend, but usually not in the open habitat where I look for red-tails. It turns out that red-tails are pretty easy to capture in Oregon. Like upstate New York, you can drive for hours and not see a passage red-tail. But in the Oregon desert, boom, you unexpectedly hit the jackpot: an irrigated field with a dozen passage birds chasing voles. Most of these hawks don't bump as easily as New York red-tails, making it easier to get a good BC set. Some fields are so ripe with passage red-tails that, with the landowner's permission, I just walk out into the field and set the trap down within sight of the most poles or irrigation wheels on which hawks tend to perch. But I have to be vigilant because of the eagles (both species) that habituate the surrounding air space. What a nightmare it would be if one of them flew off with a BC stuck to its talons.

There's the complete diversity of red-tail colorations in Oregon, from Kriders to Harlans to solid dark western morphs - you'll usually see at least three colorations when you hit a jackpot field. The big drawback is that most of these red-tails are not the robust types we have in New York. Western wing cords are impressively long but their flying weights, and most importantly talon size, are much smaller. From my decades-old trapping records

in New York, I could pretty much predict from a fresh-trapped New York red-tail's wing cord what its flying weight would be. Western red-tails, however, typically have flying weights 100 to 200 grams lower than I would predict based on wing cords. In fact, it was recommended to me when we moved to Oregon in 2016 that I trap and bring an eastern red-tail with me. This was from Paul Hutcheson, a Master Falconer who got his falconry start around Millbrook, New York back in the 1970's and was living in Bend.

For the long-wingers, American Kestrels, Merlins, Prairie Falcons and Peregrine Falcons can be taken from the wild. Only the peregrine has a statewide annual quota: no more than 10 from eyries. Again, trapping can be easier than in New York. It took only an hour for an apprentice and me to capture a kestrel on a BC.

Meanwhile, Back at the Farm

Hank called the property owner to explain how the front-end loader was now stuck as well. The owner chuckled, "Gonna need a bigger tractor" and directed Hank to a tractor with four aggressively treaded tires. This beast managed to pull both the Case and Hank's Tundra out of the mud. As I relaxed and regarded the wide-open fields and surrounding mountains, it was obvious I was not in New York anymore.

