

# THE GOSHAWKS AND ULTIMATE SHARPTAIL GROUSE QUARRY

*BY GARY SELINGER*

When I was flying a redtail, I used to drive by all these ducks in the puddles and think, "boy, it would be great to have a bird to chase them -- that would have to be the ultimate in falconry." It always seemed, even when chasing cottontails or snowshoe hare from either the glove or a perch high above, that the timing was just a half second off. It was the difference between putting something in the bag or having it escape. So I thought about what species of raptor I could use to accomplish my goal. A lot was being written about the Harris hawk and its fast flying and good training attributes. It seemed like it was a toss up between that or the dreaded goshawk, with its lightning speed but maniacal temperament. I went for the Harris but as I looked into it, the first wall I met was that of the cold temperatures experienced in the north. Minus 20 centigrade is about the average daytime temperature for January and February, which meant the Harris was definitely not the bird for me. So it was to be a goshawk. Deep inside, that was really the bird I wanted to fly, but I was afraid of all I had heard about training and hunting with one.

My first goshawk was mainly a fur bird, catching lots of snowshoe hares but little else. Those ducks I so fondly remembered all seemed to be gone by Thanksgiving

**There will always be a discussion on what is the ultimate quarry for each species of raptor flown. It really depends on the quarry base you have around you and the experience of the bird you are flying. For this discussion, I will be dealing with Goshawks. I have flown them for a few years now and am in no way an expert on them, but I will relate to you a few of the experiences I have had with my birds.**

weekend so that gave me only a three-week season. Well, as time had progressed I have flown my goshawk at these ducks, and it has provided some great times in the field. Sometimes, when flying for these ducks, it turns into a rat hunt which in turn can be a very humbling experience, but at other times it almost seems too easy. You really have to see a goshawk, turn on the boosters, when he wants to

catch something to truly appreciate his speed. I am not sure how many times I have witnessed this, but I still stand in awe each time I do. I have seen him miss a cottontail twice, get back up and catch it on his third attempt, and at no time did this rabbit miss a beat in running like hell all the way.

I live in northern Ontario, and by that I mean 100 miles north of the northern shore of Lake Superior. About 15 years ago we started to get sharptail grouse migrating into our area from the Hudson Bay lowlands. They came in flocks of 50 to 100 birds and were able to survive our winters by eating birch catkins. You could drive along the bush roads and see 40-foot high birch trees with 30 birds in them. They really did look like miniature turkeys sitting there all puffed out in the cold. As the years passed, some of the birds started to nest and

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make this part of Ontario their home. They were actually expanding their home range. They seemed to prefer the wide open areas of cutover that were 2 to 6 years old, which provided them with habitat similar to what they were used to farther north. In the fall, you could drive by them on the bush roads and watch them eating wild rose hips.

Now, does this sound like the sharptails you hear about in the west, where they blast from cover at break neck speeds? No, these birds seemed very docile and could be approached very closely. In the last 6 years or so it has been possible to view leks in the spring with as many as 20 birds. There is one lek in particular that has become established on a logging road for the last five years. Each spring the sharptails are on the road doing their little dance, and as we drive our trucks around them to get to work some of the males try and attack the tires. Mostly they just move off to the side of the road and resume their courtship ritual after we have passed. I have used a video recorder several times to tape their ritual by just stopping the truck in the middle of their lek and video taping out the truck window. What I am trying to show here is that these birds are not at all skittish or nervous, unlike their counterparts in the western provinces. I have attended two falconry meets out West, and for sure the birds around here do not come from the same gene pool! Several times over the years I have been able to approach flocks of sharptails while archery hunting for moose, and be as close as ten yards. It got me thinking of trying this quarry out with a gos.

It had to be a sure thing, as they were so close; even when flushed out of the way, they only flew off 50 to 100 yards. So my quest began. I was able to acquire a male goshawk from

Steve Shute, and raised it as an imprint using "The Imprint Accipiter" recipe. My heart was really set on getting a female bird, as they are supposed to be easier to handle and not as high-strung as the males. But I was only able to get a male bird, and the decision to raise a male as opposed to a female was almost the end of my sane days on this earth! If not for the expertise of several falconers whose brains I was constantly picking, I believe I would have given up my quest. With mentors like Steve Shute and Don Hunley, it would have been hard to give up. So the bird's training -- or should I say my training -- progressed throughout the summer months, and we were almost ready by the time hunting season started. For those apprentices who would like to start out with a goshawk as their first bird, I can only say good luck! It is possible, and has been done, but it probably takes several years off a falconer's life span. I trained and flew redtails for a lot of years, but nothing prepared me for that little tiercel and all his tricks. To say he pushed me to the wall several times would be an understatement. The only words I still remember Don saying: "I warned you it would get worse," and each time I emailed him he would reiterate the same words and I would wonder how it could get any worse, but in the end it was all worthwhile. Just to witness one of the goshawk's flights as he tail chases a duck or grouse is worth all the pain and misery, at least until I train the next one. It is so easy to forget all the bad experiences I encountered and only think of the good ones.

Opening morning for grouse-hunting saw the team, as I now called us, driving old logging roads and looking for the first sharptail of the day. Finally, there it was, about 30 yards away walking down a grass-infested bush road. I parked the truck



This is what its all about. Author Gary Selinger with a content gos.

and got the bird ready. The grouse went right on eating, paying no attention to us. Some imprints have a tendency to be noisy until they get their head into the game. So as I brought mine out of the truck, the tiercel thought he might even up the odds by squawking and letting the quarry know we had arrived; apparently the mere appearance of the truck wouldn't do it. As we got out, the grouse started to slowly walk away. As soon as the gos saw the movement, he was off my fist before I knew what was happening. The next sequence of events happened so fast I still have a hard time believing what unfolded, but witness it I did. It was a true Kodak moment. The gos was off, and at the same instant, so was the sharptail. I still do not remember the bird leaving the glove. The sharptail had a 20-yard head start and it seemed as if it had been shot out of a cannon.

Where were those little shy grouse that had just walked off the road? What really impressed me was the speed at which the gos flew. Sure, I had seen him fly hard at some baggies before, but this time I just stood there dumbfounded. In the blink of an eye, he had covered the 20 yards, was on the grouse, and the next thing I knew, the grouse was falling right out of the air as if it had been shot by a shotgun blast of # 7 shot. What it was really doing was bailing out for the ground. They both went into the tall grass and I could see them rolling around; as I ran for the bird, or rather took a step toward it, I figured, 'Holy smokes, he caught it!' Next thing I knew, out came the grouse with the gos hot on its tail. What I saw was a grouse flying straight at me from twenty yards away. My first thought was, 'It's going to hit me!' It was concentrating so hard on making good its escape that it either never saw me, or

it was more afraid of the gos than of me. My second thought was that I could reach out and knock this bird out of the air.

Without thinking, I reached out as it shot past me, and I did make contact. The grouse rolled tumbled and landed about ten yards away, and the gos was immediately on him. I was running over as they rolled on the ground, and it broke loose again. This time it really had the afterburners on, but the gos was right on its tail. The gos overtook it 50 yards out into the cutover.

When I got there, he had his prey well in hand but was grasping for breath. I helped subdue the grouse and let him feed up a full crop. Okay, okay, you say, he didn't really catch it by himself. You had to be there to see the effort that little guy put forth, and then say that; I just couldn't. I justified it by saying I just assisted him.

Two days later we were at it again. A grouse was spotted walking on the road; the truck was parked and I got the gos out. I was about 20 yards away when the grouse walked into a bit of tall grass. The gos again saw the movement and went after it. This time he hovered over the grass; this unnerved the sharptail and it broke cover. Off they went. Within 30 yards, as the gos was about to grab it, the grouse dropped out of the air, hit the ground and came out flying at a 90 degree angle to its previous course. Somehow the gos was able to do a wingover, change direction on a dime, and catch that grouse within ten yards. This one [this catch? although I don't like using the word within ten words of the last time it was used] was legitimate, he did it all by himself. Not sure who was happier, this little tiercel goshawk or the guy standing there with a big

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smile on his face. So it could be done! This scene has replayed itself over the last few years with many ensuing great flights. Some of the flights have been tail chases that went for a good 200 yards; at other times the gos broke off after a 50 to 60 yard chase. The sharptail has two main lines of defence. The first is always a straight away flight, flying like hell to get out of the country. It is a good strategy if the birds are over 30 yards away. If the gos has not had any success or its confidence level is a bit low, the slip will break off fairly quickly. But if you



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have the gos at his knife-edge flying weight, and confidence is up, then it will be a flight like you have never seen before.

Usually the grouse will win in this event. I would like to try it at the end of the season, once the gos is in really good shape and see if the outcome is the same. But at the end of the season it is very rare to find the grouse on the ground, so I may never find out. The gos has overtaken spruce grouse very easily at the end of the season, but that species does not seem to have the initial break-away speed of a sharptail.

For the grouse's second line of defence, you have to be close enough for a good slip and be there to see what is actual transpiring. Just as gos is about to grab the quarry, they just literally fall out of the air, hit the ground, and bounce back up flying in a different direction. Believe me, they do not sacrifice any speed to pull off this maneuver either! I have seen this happen so many times that it has to be instinctive to them. It seems like they have a set of eyes in the back of their heads. It is at the precise time the gos is ready to grab them that they drop. Not when he is 5 yards away, but at that exact moment. They must be able to hear the goshawk flying, or be able to just sense the closeness of their attacker.

I have only taken 3 sharptails grouse, all with first year

birds, all males. I do not know if the sprint ability of the female goshawk is fast enough to be able to catch them in the first 30 yards or so. It is a matter of seconds before the grouse has made its escape or not, and the key lies in the gos's initial burst of speed. I do believe, however, that because these grouse are usually in a flock, an experienced goshawk could switch quarry and take one that is just rising as opposed to the one he is chasing. A lot of the time I think if only he had just moved sideways a yard or so, he would have been able to take the grouse just as it was rising.

One other aspect of sharptail grouse hunting I have noticed is that when there is a flock of 8-10 birds, and a few of the grouse are spooked and taken flight, some of them freeze right to the ground. I have been able to have three slips from the same flock by walking around, after calling back the bird to the fist, and finding these other birds that are trying to stay hidden.

Now you would think, seeing the grouse under a small 3-foot bush and walking up on them with the goshawk on your hand, that this is a gimme slip. Let me tell you this can be a very humbling experience for both the bird and his owner. They just seem to come off the ground like they are turbo-charged. A goshawk is fast, but I think the gos has to become experienced at flying these birds and learn their behavior to be able to take them with any consistency. Possibly as the bird matures this may well be the deciding factor in the hunt. Truly, what I believe to be the limiting factor is the bird's fitness level, but then I can't stop but wonder how that first tiercel of mine was able to take two of them with less than 10 head of wild game under his belt.

Well, I know where I will be next fall, the main thought on my mind being, how can I be able to get within 20 yards of a grouse in full view, and still not be able to get it with the goshawk? But I will not stop trying. I have started to use the "restrained feeding" technique described by Steve Layman in order to get my birds in the best shape possible for the start of the season. For me this is the ultimate challenge: it pits the goshawk against a quarry that is his equal or maybe even superior to his ability.



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