

THE TALE OF A HAWK BANDER

By W. RAY SALT

I AM a tall man. I was always tall for my age—one of the big boys—and it was a decided achievement for a smaller fellow to whip me or to hold his own against me. Many a fight not of my own choosing did I fight when a lad, merely to further the ambitions of some stocky individual whose pugnacity was out of proportion to his frame. And much criticism did I receive from the neighbors and many a second whipping from my parents for 'picking on' these smaller fellows. Thus came my sympathy for the big fellow.

There exists a numerous class of people who consider it an achievement to persecute any large creature. It matters not if that creature is doing its best to avoid them or is fighting to protect its own. It is of no consequence to them that the creature is beautiful, harmless, more noble than its human persecutors. It is large of stature; hence it is potentially harmful; therefore it should be destroyed. To this class the hawk, the owl and the eagle are the choicest of prey.

The existence of such people is fostered by a number of agencies which flatter their ego, condone their offense, or arouse their cupidity. They are encouraged by the newspapers with their stories of the Tarzan who, armed merely with a gun, has successfully warded off the attacks of a soaring eagle or a foraging owl; by the lurid paintings of artists who must depict a bird of prey attacking a pheasant or a duck instead of its more natural but less colorful prey, a rodent; and, by certain local Game Associations which offer cash bounties or other rewards for the death of any creature which might purloin an occasional game-bird from their guns. It is to one or more of these sources that the ultimate satisfaction of the hawk-shooter can be traced. Without their encouragement the sight of the bloody bedraggled mass of feathers would soon bring a realization of the uselessness of the slaughter.

Out of my desire to protect the much-maligned "big fellow" arose our banding station for the banding of birds of prey at Rosebud, Alberta. It is not a station in the true sense of the word since the birds do not come to us. Instead we go to them. Our paraphernalia would surprise the orthodox bander. Buckets with long cords attached to the handles, long coils of strong rope and clothes-line, wire, climbing irons, leather gloves, and of course, the camera, for there is always an interesting "shot".

We keep a record of occupied nests each year within a radius of fifteen miles. It takes several days to cover this territory even with a car, and the work must be carefully planned in order to secure the young after they are fledged but before they are awing. Since cannibalism is common among the young of hawks and owls a family may be seriously reduced during the two weeks after hatch-

ing. So we rarely band young under two or three weeks of age unless it is impossible to return to the nest at a later date. On the other hand we sometimes arrive a little late and find the young ready to try out their newly fledged wings. Then we must follow the first wobbly flight, take up the young one, and return it to its nest after banding. Often, after carrying a couple of Ferruginous Rough-legged Hawks under our arms for a quarter of a mile or so, we have found it necessary to resort to Keating's. Hence the buckets which facilitate transportation and are immune to bird-lice. Bird-lice do not stay upon a human being long but can cause some discomfort in their brief stay.

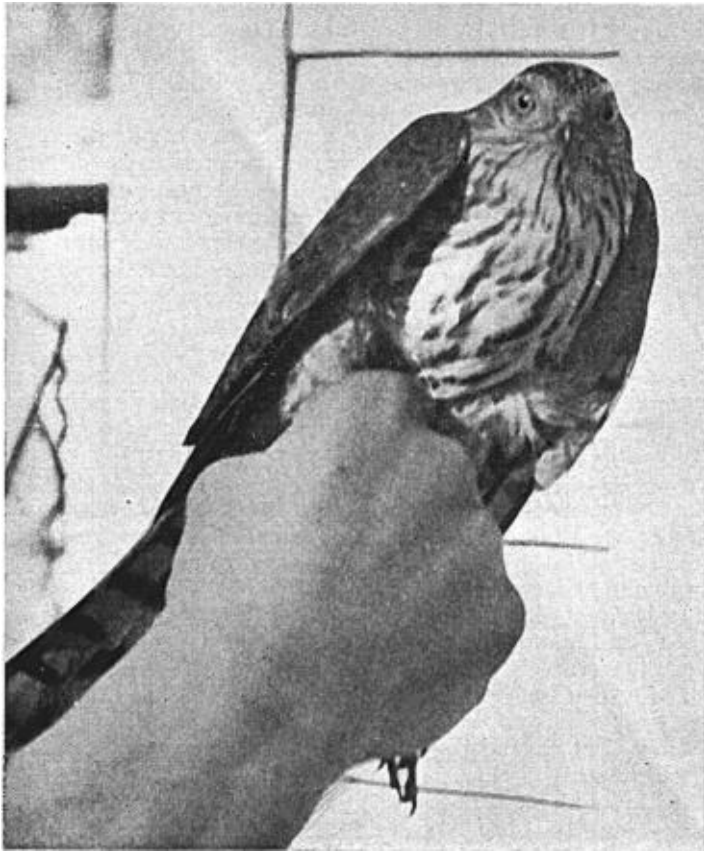
Young hawks and owls are not difficult to band if a few simple precautions are taken. A pair of leather gloves will give confidence at first but after a few successful attempts at securing a bird you will probably discard them. The beak is not to be feared. Nine times out of ten the hawk will not use it; when it does, the result is a mere pinch. I fear the beak of a magpie more than that of a hawk. Keep your eye upon the bird, which will be facing you, and gradually reach toward it with your hand, palm down, until your fingers touch its breast. Slip your spread fingers down its breast until the big finger is between its legs and the others are on each side just above the 'knees'. Close your fingers tightly and you have a harmless bird. Make no rapid movements. If the bird moves suddenly try to avoid starting. Even if it seizes you in its strong grasp it will pay you to make no sudden movement. Attain the hold indicated above and pry its toes apart. You cannot pull out of its grasp with impunity. Have a look at its closed fist when you have secured it and you will find the reason.

Place the bird, belly up, under your left arm with its head behind you and release your right-hand grasp after securing a similar one with the left hand. The band can now be adjusted with a minimum of struggling since the bird cannot see your movements. Never relax your hold upon either leg for even a moment. If possible the bird may be banded upon the ground in which case a cloth covering the head will keep the bird quiet. A hawk which cannot see is perfectly docile.

When replacing the bird in the nest, place it on its back and release the legs quickly. Put it on the opposite side of the nest from the unbanded birds to avoid confusion and further attacks.

A keen observer will make a lot of mental notes while banding a hawk. Color and texture of tarsus and cere; color of eyes; presence of maggots in nostrils, ears, or mouth. He will note the color phase of the young and of each parent; the nature of any food in the nest. From the size of the young he can determine its sex, a female being decidedly larger than a male. These notes, written down after the actual operation of banding is performed, will accumulate to provide valuable scientific information.

Occasionally an unusual situation occurs. On approaching a cliff



Method of Holding Hawk

nest of a Ferruginous Rough-legged Hawk which had been previously recorded as containing three young, we found it to contain but one. And this poor creature was tied by the leg with a short piece of twine to a metal stake driven into the cliff. We banded it and released it. But how were we to prevent a repetition of this cruelty? We attached to the stake a notice: "This bird is protected by law. Anyone molesting it will be prosecuted." Needless to say we watched our banding record with interest. In September came a report. The bird had been shot in Colorado. We had, at least, granted it a three months stay of execution.

Perched precariously near a nest in a tree it is difficult to band aggressive young hawks and owls. We have adopted the method of

lowering them to the ground in a bucket or a collapsible wire basket where they are banded by an assistant. They may then be returned to the nest *via* the bucket route.

Our only casualty occurred at the nest of a Prairie Falcon. Standing on a narrow shelf I could just touch the nest. Below me the sandstone cliff fell away in a sheer drop of two hundred feet. The falcons stooped at me; their raucous "cacking" echoed from the cliffs. Gingerly I tip-toed to reach into the nest cavity. Talons fastened upon my gloved hand and out came an outraged young falcon, her shrill rattle combining with that of her parents and her nest mates above me to produce a pandemonium. She was a little smaller than I had anticipated but I could not revisit this eyrie. So I banded her and returned her to the nest. Apparently she resented the indignity. As I released her legs she made a lunge at my hand, slipped, and fell. The thud which came from the rocks below unnerved me and I called for a rope. With its assurance of safety the remainder of the nestlings were banded without mishap. Today we use a safety rope in any situation offering the slightest danger.

I have never been struck by an adult hawk or owl. The 'zoom' of a Ferruginous Roughleg as it rises vertically over my head after a half-mile stoop still sends a shiver down my spine but, whether wisely or not, I have learned to disregard it. There may be something in the fact that I usually have assistants with me who watch the bird for I have noticed that they only strike when they can take you unawares. An assistant was once grazed by the wing-tips of a horned owl which attacked from behind and another was similarly struck by a Ferruginous Rough-legged Hawk. It is my firm belief that neither bird would have struck if a bander had been watching it.

From the old Dutch falconers comes a method of catching adult hawks. The trap consists of two four foot semicircles of round iron hinged together at their extremities, to which is attached a piece of fish net to form a conical trap. One semicircle is firmly attached to the ground; the other is placed over it, and the loose netting carefully disposed between them. Any loose litter will assist in camouflaging. The bait is securely pegged out in the centre of the semicircle. A stout cord is attached to the movable half of the trap and led through an eye-loop pegged in the ground to some place of concealment for the operator.

For the buzzards a dead gopher, rabbit, or fowl, makes excellent bait. The short-winged hawks and the falcons, in fact all hawks, are more likely to be interested in moving game. A second light cord attached to a leg or wing of the bait can be used to produce the desired movement.

This set-up attracted one day a Sharp-shinned Hawk which attacked the bait and attempted to make off with it. Finding it secured the hawk settled upon the bait and proceeded to tear at it.

While its attention was thus engaged a strong pull upon the cord pulled the mesh over it. The more it struggled the more securely it became entangled. We photographed it after banding it and it behaved very well. If a large hawk struggles much a cloth over its head will quiet it.

Another adaptation of a falcon trap follows: Between two trees or posts about eight feet apart stretch an eight foot square of gill-net of about two-inch mesh. The method of attachment is important since the net must drop if struck a strong blow from either side. Notches cut on the insides of the posts every foot or so on which the net is loosely hung are satisfactory, but if the trap is to be permanent, metal clips should be used. The bait is a stuffed owl placed close on one side of the net. A hawk swooping at it sees the net too late, strikes it, and pulls the net about itself. The more it struggles the more it enmeshes itself and it rarely escapes without human assistance. This trap does not require the constant attention of the operator but should be examined from a distance at intervals of fifteen or twenty minutes.

I have received from Capt. R.L. Meredith, of Boonton, New Jersey, the plans of a hawk trap which has been successfully used in Florida to capture falcons. It is similar in principle to the Government Sparrow Trap but, of course, is much larger being about six feet long, two feet wide, and eighteen inches high. Over a frame of metal rods is stretched wire or strong twine netting. There is a funnel entrance at each end large enough to accommodate a hawk and in the centre a wire enclosure to protect the live bait, a pigeon. I understand that this trap was developed after Duck Hawks had several times entered dove traps of similar construction.

We have been unable to use these last two traps at our station but would recommend a trial by any bander who is situated in a rural area over which hawks migrate.

I always hesitate to mention the nest trap. It can easily be misused by a too enthusiastic worker. We have used it often but have never caused the desertion of a nest, possibly through close adherence to the rule: Never disturb a nest until the young are several days old. The nest trap can be used with slight modifications at nearly all hawk and owl nests whether on the ground, on a cliff, or in a tree. It is a wire basket with a semi-flexible rim similar to, but wider than, a waste-paper basket. The edge is attached at one point to the back of the nest. It is tilted by an eight inch twig at one side. The cord is tied to the rim, then to the twig, and led under a nearby branch so that when pulled, the twig is removed first and the trap is held firmly over the nest. The bird invariably rises in the trap and does not harm the young. The flexible rim may be closed under the struggling bird, which is pinned lightly as the wire sides close upon it, and the whole removed to the ground for the work of banding.

The first hawk we ever caught in a nest trap was a female Swain-

son's Hawk. She was outraged at the capture and sat on the grass at our feet glaring at us for several minutes after she had been released. That was in 1930. In the summer of 1937 while driving about a mile from this spot I came upon the decaying bodies of three hawks. There were two young Swainson's Hawks and our banded female. Apparently she had been returning to this locality each year for at least eight years to raise her brood. This is the longevity record for Swainson's Hawk in North America as far as banding records show but one wonders to what ripe old age they might live if permitted to complete their life span.

Long-eared Owls are readily taken in the nest trap. Often the female watches from a nearby perch while the trap is being adjusted and returns to the nest almost immediately. As a matter of fact, in two cases the female owl remained upon the nest and allowed us to capture her by hand. By capturing for two consecutive years the seven female Long-eared Owls which nested in this district we were able to show that the females did not return to the same nest each year nor, apparently, did they remain in the district. The year after we banded her one female was removed from a nest containing four eggs about one hundred fifty miles north of here. Young long-ears are great wanderers. Birds from this district have been taken in Utah, Nebraska, and Minnesota. The percentage of recoveries is not large. Of the eighty Long-eared Owls banded only six have been recovered.

We are a little apprehensive of the steel trap but use it occasionally. Our most notable achievement with it was the capture of a Golden Eagle. The set was made near a dead horse upon which the eagle fed during the cold winter days. The trap, a weak, well-padded coyote trap, caught the bird by the foot and left not a bruise. It was a beautiful bird, probably a second year male, fierce and wild. I felt sorry for it as it awaited its fate on its haunches, its beak open, its free foot ready to strike. And I thought of all the other eagles which were captured and killed by thoughtless farmers in this region each year. It seemed shameful to deprive it of its freedom for even a moment.

While I attracted its attention from the front an assistant sent a well-aimed coat over its head and we made short work of the banding. We released the bird and removed the coat. For a moment the eagle looked about, then spread its wings and hopped toward a three-foot fence some twenty feet away. It reminded me of a coot trying to get off the water. It didn't quite clear the fence but tumbled into the snow on the other side. Then, off again with a clear runway it was soon in the air and over the hills.

It is on occasions such as this that the hawk bander feels that glow of pleasure which makes his work worth while.

We have an unusually favorable situation for hawks. Not many localities can produce the nests of four species of hawks within two hundred yards of each other. There is a spot near Rosebud in

which may be found the eyries of a Duck Hawk, a Prairie Falcon, a Swainson's Hawk and a Ferruginous Rough-legged Hawk in such close proximity. And what a commotion when we visit this place to band the young. Four dashing falcons stooping at us; four heavy-winged buzzards circling and screaming overhead; a maze of squeaking Cliff Swallows. No wonder it was here that we had our only banding casualty.

Naturally, at this place, animosity among the different species reaches its highest pitch. And usually some encounter takes place. The aerial evolutions of the falcons are a sight to gladden the heart of a falconer. Although by no means friendly toward one another, the Duck Hawks and the Prairie Falcons vent their anger chiefly upon the larger but slower hawks. Between them they certainly pester the poor buzzards. On one occasion, however, a long-suffering Roughleg lost his patience. With a long gliding stoop he caught an unsuspecting Prairie Falcon unaware and gave it a blow which sent the poor thing earthward like a stone. For a moment I thought the Falcon was dead but a few feet from the earth it pulled itself together and flew off whimpering, to a perch on the cliff.

In the last nine years we have banded 469 birds of prey of thirteen species. The Ferruginous Rough-legged Hawk tops the list with 131 juveniles banded. Then comes the Long-eared Owl with 80; the Marsh Hawk, 55; Swainson's Hawk, 44; Richardson's Pigeon Hawk, 41; Prairie Falcon, 36; Great Horned Owl, 27; Sparrow Hawk, 26; Red-tailed Hawk, 13; Short-eared Owl, 11; Duck Hawk, 3; and one each of the Sharp-shinned Hawk and the Golden Eagle. Fifty-eight, or almost 13 per cent, of these birds have been recovered. They have been killed in nearly all of the western states and as far south as the Mexican border. Redtails and Ferruginous roughlegs produce the highest percentages of returns probably because they are so large, yet peculiarly we have few recoveries of the Swainson's Hawk, another large bird.

If only for the benefit of timorous lady banders mention must be made of my chief assistants. Miss Bud Biggs, my right-hand "man" does much of the actual banding around her home at Beynon, Alberta, and handles a hawk as the average bander handles a sparrow. My wife accompanies me on all our expeditions, rendering invaluable aid in all phases of the work. The accompanying photograph is her work.

There is a thrill in hawk banding that no bander can afford to miss. Not all, of course, have the opportunity of working with these interesting birds but it is hoped that this article will fall into the hands of many banders who might, with very little trouble, band a few birds of prey. Try it. The enjoyment will be well worth the trouble.

Rosebud, Alberta.