


# *Lapwings, Owls and a Loss*

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Following the Ulu Dag episode it was resolved that there would be no more loose flying, only tightly controlled flights to the lure or quarry, of short duration. Shaheen flew three times after Ulu Dag behaving like the best-trained hawk in the world. It almost seemed as though he really didn't enjoy spending time away from us.

Three days after the Bursa trip, Mavis and I flew him at lapwings on the Golbasi wetlands, which were flat and safe. There wasn't much wind half an hour before sunset. Shaheen saw a pair of lapwings rise. He jumped from my glove and skimmed low over the frozen grass, all his focus on the quarry. There was a chase, a climb and the start of a ringing flight. Suddenly, Shaheen was in the lead and the lapwings were chasing him. He ducked as one dived at him. Just before they went out of sight I brought out the lure. Immediately, flying fast and diving, he came back to it. He made



three circuits round me and then, as he came in fast with the wind behind him, I let him take it. That was Wednesday. Shaheen had flown perfectly, held close to us by an invisible string.

On Sunday a gale was blowing with, now and then, a few flakes of snow. They were like poplar fluff. But, it was too early for that. A party of us went out to the little earth and stone dam on the west ridge of Beynam Forest. As the car nosed over the dam, six mallard rose off the water at the far end of the reservoir. With warmer weather, the northward migration had begun. The mallards towered high into the wind and went over us, going west toward Golbasi Village.

As I parked the car a small owl jumped up from the rocks of the dam and flew into a low cliff on the north hill. It looked like a good flight. Climbing upwind of the owl, and with Shaheen on my fist, I unhooded the tiercel at the top of the rise. As I turned, the wind almost blew him inside out. He screamed to get loose. Hearing his cry the owl jumped up again and I let Shaheen go. The owl reached the rocks on the far side of the water and the falcon went streaking past it, lifting up downwind of John and Ruth who had been watching to see where the flight might go.

“See if you can get the owl in the air again,” I called to John and Ruth.

John raised his arm to signal that he had heard me. He spread out with Ruth toward the rocks. Suddenly the owl went up again and Shaheen, waiting high and upwind, as the books said he should, came down straight and fast at sixty degrees. Using the wind, he streaked past in a brown line, but he didn’t strike. Perhaps the owl flicked to one side, or turned over, it happened so quickly one could not be sure. Whatever the reason, the falcon went past and the owl ducked into a ground-squirrel hole in the flat, bare field, ten feet from Ruth. We left it there and called Shaheen, first with the lure and then with food in my glove. Close in he saw the piece of red beef. But first he wanted a game. With wings half closed, then open, to match the gusts of wind, he clutched at the food with one



foot, trying to make off with it. He went straight up by spreading his wings, up fifty feet with his face in the wind, and then dropped like a stone by letting the wind from his sails. He came down slowly from five feet, hovering, one inch at a time, until he was on my glove. Then he fed, tearing out great wedges of meat, exhilarated by the evening's sport and the wind.

On another outing soon afterward, halfway up Elma Dag, Shaheen in a gale force wind went even higher than he had been the day we flew the multicolored kite for his encouragement. We beat the sides of a grassy slope for game, near an orchard where the buds were already waiting to bloom. Shaheen, like a professional skater, came back after diving into bare trees 200 yards away, skimming a foot above the ground without moving a feather, and landed neatly on a pruned apple stub at my elbow.

So confident was I after these outings that Shaheen had lost his wandering urge that I took him out to the fenced area above Golbasi Village for a fly at noon. The March wind was still roaring across Anatolia, and Shaheen, not having fed the day before, nor that morning, simply let the wind take him away. A shepherd standing on the opposite ridge outside the fence with his flock and dogs saw me waving the lure and heard my whistle above the wind and wondered what the signals meant.

“Strange people, these foreigners,” he must have thought to himself.

Later, we came face to face with a grizzled shepherd, unexpectedly and without appointment. He was a kindly man, tough and weathered, with a decorated head-to-ankle sheepskin coat, its shoulders broad and pointed to keep the winter out. Perhaps he knew the bird was gone, although he never said so. He was ever watchful, anxious for wolves, in his slow, enduring earthbound way. His sheep were always there with him, with his dogs. In his world, I was a transient who may be here or gone the next moment across the valley, or perhaps a hundred miles away looking at the sky.



It was a change to look for Shaheen on his own home ground, south of the big city. The first day offered no opportunity to search because a powerful delegation of forestry people came to Ankara from Rome, Washington and British Columbia to talk about setting up a forest industry complex on Turkey's southern coast. On the second day near sunset I disturbed a pair of rough-legged buzzards above Emir Gol. Surely Shaheen must have seen them, I thought and, without wishing to engage in a free-for-all with both of them he had moved on out of range of their predatory eyes. There was the possibility too, of course, that he had been blown clear out of the country that first day, all the way back to the cliff where he had come from. Then on Saturday, which was the third day he had been away, we traversed the perimeter of the fenced off area and came back with eyestrain from staring up into the bright, empty sky. Anatolia was thrusting winter away. Out of the high sky, larks spilled their liquid song over their new spring territories; new lush blades of wheat were already five inches up in the fields, and pairs of shelducks fed in the damp spots, which went down to the lake. But we saw nothing of Shaheen. My concern began to mount. The old arguments went round and round in my head. Had Shaheen tired of the lure? Had I been hiding it too long? Had he wearied of chasing it now he was so very fit and able to fend for himself? Had I been mistaken in his training from the start? Did his kind migrate northward in spring, or had he perhaps, although he wouldn't breed this year, already found another saker?

Shaheen had been trained to be a good hunter, of this I was sure. When I got him back on Ulu Dag I knew he had found quarry even in the fog and mist. How much easier would it be for him to fend for himself here in the blazing sun, with a million starlings in the rushes at the lake-head two miles away, where there was no shortage of jackdaws and pigeon. If he saw the car or the lure, or heard my whistle after he had just killed and fed, would he return, I wondered.

We would sit on the edge of the hill, Shaheen unhooded, watch-



ing and waiting. Then Shaheen would shake himself thunderously on my fist, flip his tail sideways two or three times, jerk his head up and down, getting the distance, and slip outwards and downwards into the air. I never saw him hit anything in his first dive from the glove. He would feint at whatever had caught his eye. Once it was a black clod of earth in a field, but more often it was a loose flock of small birds. Suddenly he would swing up, and go off to make a kill out of sight. If he had been without food for two days and I showed the lure at the swing-up (the old books said “throw-up”), he would come back. If only a day had gone by since he had fed, more often than not he would spurn the lure to chase some distant item of prey. Time after time the pattern was repeated. If Shaheen took a finch or a lark, he would return to the lure an hour later with telltale feathers on his jesses. If he hit something big, like a pigeon, it was most unlikely that I would see him again that day.

However, there was one part of the pattern that varied. Every time Shaheen stayed away, he stayed away longer, because with each flight he became more adept in the art of feeding himself. Mature falcons in the wild seldom cut down prey for each other outside the breeding season. Why, then, should Shaheen bring down anything for me? I had taught him to hunt, but he knew it was much safer to hunt on his own, out of sight. Had not the buzzard, in my presence, too, taken away the first starling Shaheen had caught? Killing was to be done efficiently and secretly. There could be no sharing in this game. For the wild falcon it was a matter of survival; if he weren't good at killing he perished, and another took his place.

Rising early on Sunday, the fourth day that Shaheen had been away, I drove out to the big lip on the eastern edge of the recreation area and, leaving the car, climbed through the fence to a spot where I could see into the valley of Emir Gol. There I swung the lure, whistled and waited. I heard and saw nothing. A flock of eight magpies saw me swing the lure and rose from the stubble to a lone tree, scoffed, flapped up and sailed down the ridge like fast, front-heavy,



black and white paper darts. I went back to the car, and followed the weaving track down the eastern fence to the lake where the magpies had gone. Crossing the stream at the east end of the lake, I walked up the side valley leading to Elma Dag. Stony fields flank the dust road, which ends abruptly at a small village. Before reaching the village, I turned west, bumping through a brown, frothy stream of snow-melt water and wound up a track that took me up to a vast, open cultivated area of early wheat fields. There the track joined a broad, well-graveled truck road that went right up to the ridge, pocked with small limestone quarries. Distances are deceptive in the clear air of Anatolia and what I had thought was one mile was four. But there were no falcons in the artificial cliffs, which merely echoed my whistles. The morning was crisp and bright. There was no wind. In the stillness I could see the lip of Ankara, the recreation area and the two lakes. A huge pall of black smoke hung over the city. On Wednesday, the day Shaheen had gone missing, the wind had blown the cloud away. It had taken three windless days to collect again.

On the way down I found a new road leading straight to Golbasi Village. Just before I reached the fork, near a small spring with willows running in a row down the trickle of water in the fold of the hill, I thought I saw Shaheen. He was no more than fifty yards away, sitting on a small pile of stones at the edge of a field, sunning himself. I swung out of the car and whistled. He flew away. As he lifted with the sun on his chest I saw that he had no jesses. It was another saker. His feathers were dark. He was also a young bird like Shaheen. He flew strongly, more strongly than my bird and went away in a power climb toward Elma Dag, never missing a beat.

In the afternoon the wind came up with such force that our family changed our picnic plans, which had been to see the fossil fields near Hymana. Instead, we drove with friends to a sheltered knoll between two ridges in the recreation area above Emir Lake. New black pine seedlings had been planted out in the shallow horizontal



trenches, replacing previous plantings, but these too stood little chance of survival. Already the tips of the needles were burned by the harsh early winds, and the sun would finish them off in a month or two. Purple crocus blooms grew up through the hard, flaky soil and brown grass. We tucked ourselves below the knoll, out of the shaking wind, on the southern, sun-warmed slope, with Charlie and Heather hobbling over the uneven ground on crutches, after our accident-plagued visit to Ulu Dag.

“Didn’t you bring your lure?” asked Bev Loney as we settled down to eat.

“It’s in the car,” I said, tired and discouraged after four hours of searching that morning.

“For goodness sake, give it a whirl. He may be able to see us up here.”

I walked to the car on the knoll, spun the lure ten times, and let it go. It landed with a thud and bounced down the ridge below us. It lay there, with the pigeon wing flapping in the wind.

“There,” I said, sitting down to finish my sandwiches. The lake shone far below, and the steppe rolled, hill after greening hill, to a horizon ten miles distant. As we ate, I told the others of my morning search and the wild falcon. Bev said, jesting, “Maybe we’ll find Shaheen on a post, waiting, when we set off for home!”

“What’s that?” Charlie called suddenly. He said a hawk had skimmed low over us and disappeared over the knoll where the cars were parked. Grabbing up the lure, I ran to the ridge, swinging it as I ran.

“Goddamit you’re right, Charlie. It’s Shaheen! Look at him fly!”

The wind played tricks over the knoll. The falcon was everywhere. I was trying to handle a kite in a hurricane. Shaheen hit the lure down the ridge, away from our standing group, and this time he hit it like a thunderbolt. In his jesses, against his leg, was the breast feather of a pigeon. But his crop was empty, and it was two in the afternoon.