



**From the Steppes of Mongolia
to the Plains of West Texas
by Way of the Alleghenies**

**"LITTLE BROTHER'S"
10,000 YEAR HIGHWIRE ACT**

Written by **Titos Menchaca**
Photography by **Lance C. Bell**

Scurrying along the grassy floor of a picturesque meadow, an industrious field mouse goes about his busy work. Foraging for food among the bushes, nooks and crannies, he busies himself today just as he has all his life... ensconced in a world completely comprised only of the few inches in front of his nose. This is his life, and the only existence to which he can be true.

Looking around, he makes out the rough outline of a brightly-colored berry a few feet away; little more than a blur through his notoriously poor vision. As he begins to edge his way toward it, he's suddenly frozen in primal fear as an ominous shadow swoops across the ground in front of him. He knows instinctively there is a predator in the air above him and that his only chance for survival is to run for shelter as if his life depended on it, for it surely does.

Heart pounding and mind focused only on finding sanctuary, there's almost a split-second of relief when the shadow passes again, for he senses the enemy is too far in the sky to be of immediate danger to him. Perhaps he'll be able to make it home unnoticed. Perhaps it will be one of his slower, less fortunate cousins who doesn't return to the...

Whooooosh!! Screech!!

Silence.

Now there are no more thoughts. No more running. No more worry. The Harris' have come for dinner. And what our unlucky friend will never know is that he was merely a player in a perfectly executed display of cooperative hunting. You see, the shadow in the air was indeed an enemy... a hunter extraordinaire with a taste for his kind. He was, however, a decoy. His role was merely to flush the prey out into the open. To make them dash madly in abject, unconscious fear – their already weak bladders leaving behind a glowing roadmap for Little Brother to follow.

- There are three main types of them: accipiters, falcons; and buteos.
- To some Native American tribes, they are known as Little Brother.
- Their domain reaches a thousand feet in the air.
- There are over 250 species of them, ranging in size from less than a foot long with a wingspan of 24 inches to about two feet long with a wingspan of almost five feet.
- They are raptors... day hunters... birds of prey.
- Their name comes from the Middle English word *hafoc* – to grasp or seize.

They are hawks and they are magnificent.

These spectacular creatures have been endowed by nature with an amazing array of attributes, allowing them to be some of the most perfect hunters in all of the animal kingdom. For our purposes, we will focus on the buteos,

or soaring hawks, as these are the kind most commonly seen by humans. And it is the red-tailed hawk that is the most common buteo. High-soaring hawks often seen hovering overhead, coasting on air currents, searching for their favorite prey – rodents, their chunky bodies and banded tails easily identify this variety of hawk. Buteos have large, broad wings and short, rounded tails, allowing them excellent maneuverability in the air. Other family members include Rough-legged hawks, Broad-winged hawks, Red-shouldered hawks and the previously-alluded-to Harris hawks.

“They’re popular in falconry because they’re very adaptive and extremely intelligent. In fact, I think the only raptor smarter is the Gold Eagle,” says local falconer and Harris hawk aficionado Floyd Presley. “They also work very well with humans,” he adds. He should know. Mr. Presley, along with various family members, has been hawking since the mid-1960’s.

Although native to the deserts of the American southwest, it is a testament to the Harris hawk’s adaptability – as well as Presley’s care and training – that they can thrive in such a different clime as the Allegheny Mountains. Their large feet make it easier for them to catch and hold their quarry and the notched ligaments in their talons afford them the same bone crushing pounds per square inch as a shark’s bite. They are the only hawk that will hunt in a family unit, often dining cooperatively over a kill instead of fighting for dominance.

“They’re also amazingly loyal,” says Presley. “The offspring will sometimes stay around for a year or two to help feed the young and teach them not to catch poisonous snakes.”

A SPORT FOR KINGS AND COMMONERS ALIKE

Presley’s passion for falconry is palpable, but his fascination with these birds of prey is not unique in the world or in history. Although poorly-kept records make its exact history unknown, there is early documentation of falconry as a sport and hunting method dating back to the days when the Khans marauded across the steppes of Mongolia about 3000 years ago. Written records in China go back to about 700 B.C. but it was already a highly refined sport by then, suggesting it had been around for quite some time. Its significance to the Imperial Family has been well-documented in poems, literature, paintings and porcelain extant from that time. But this was a sport for the common people as well. It was widely practiced throughout all Chinese society until it fell out of patronage by the royal family in the early 1900’s. The previous centuries, however, had seen it spreading throughout Asia, finally landing in Japan in about 355 A.D. Mounted on horseback and carrying traditional long bows, arrows, katanas and banners, it was always quite the show when a Japanese hawking party departed. This public

demonstration of the importance of Japanese falconry created a tradition of beautiful costumes and elaborate equipment which still exists today.

Yet, as impressive as the Asian angle to falconry's history may be, there are some who say it goes back even further, to Persia. Evidence presented at a 2005 symposium in Abu Dhabi called "Falconry: A World Heritage" suggests there is documented Iranian history stating birds of prey were first used by Tahmooreth, a king of the Pishdadid dynasty, 2000 years before Zoroaster who himself lived around 6000 B.C. This could mean hunting with falcons has a background of 8,000 to 10,000 years. Early records indicate falconry was already popular in the Middle East and Arabian Gulf region several millennia B.C. In fact, falconry is considered a symbol of this region's civilization more than any other region in the world. As Arab influence spread, falconry became a means of cultural communication because its symbolic system was shared between most cultures of the known world and falcons made ideal diplomatic gifts.

The art and sport of falconry was probably first introduced to the Americas in the 1500's by the Spanish, as there is an allusion to the hawk trained by one of Cortez' captains early in their stay in the Valley of Mexico. Finally, the emergence of modern U.S. falconry is commonly credited to Colonel R. L. "Luff" Meredith, who formed, along with others, The Falconers' Association of North America in the 1940's. It only lasted a few years because of WWII. Then, in 1960, the North American Falconers Association (NAFA) was formed and falconry exploded across the U.S.

The second part of this series (Fall/Winter 2008 issue) will look at the intensely emotional, almost spiritual connection between falconers and their birds as well as the Native American perspective of "Little Brother" and his place in the circle of creation.



Floyd Presely, falconer, and Elvis. Elvis is a well trained Harris hawk and is shown on a take off (below). Elvis is a beautiful hawk and well taken care of. Floyd puts on many demonstrations for schools and various church and special interest groups — his talks evolve around the biblical history of falconry. If your group would be interested in a demonstration, Floyd can be contacted through the *Mountain Discoveries* web site.

