

LURING TECHNIQUES TO TRAIN AND CONDITION BUTEOS AND PARABUTEOS

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For hundreds of years, longwingers and some shortwingers have valued the lure as a training and conditioning tool. The muscle tone and foot/eye coordination that the hawks develop through the pursuit of an object moving in three-dimensional space is of obvious benefit, yet the use of the lure as a training aid is not stressed to or by broadwingers.

Some falconers believe that training a buteo or parabuteo to the lure is unnecessary; a few would consider the practice silly. That position is not based on any practical experience. Most of those who do incorporate the lure into their overall technique simply employ it as a means to retrieve a hawk that is, for one reason or another, reluctant to come to the fist. When the need arises, the lure is pulled out of the bag, swung around a couple of times to get the hawk's attention, and then plopped on the ground where it will lie like a roadkill until the hawk glides over and lands on it.

A good trainer is open to any technique that can enhance his results and lead to greater success. Lure-flying your buteo or parabuteo is such a technique. In addition to the obvious benefits noted earlier, lure-flying creates an opportunity for the falconer to interact intensely, both physically and mentally, with the hawk, as well as a chance to observe your hawk in action, and up close. All these benefits aside, it is also a lot of fun!

There are a few misconceptions regarding the lure and its use as it applies to buteos and parabuteos. One of these is that too much exposure to the lure will cause the hawk to lose interest in the lure. My experience has been that if you indoctrinate your hawk to lure-flying as described in this article and you observe what appears to be an indifference to the lure, it's due to another cause than too much lure-flying. Rather than indifference to the lure, a nearby animal that she's not been conditioned to accept may be overpowering her drive; a noisy tractor can unnerve her. It could be that you've cropped her up, or that you are flying her too far above her optimum flight weight. None of these situations are in any way an indication that the hawk has lost interest in the lure. They are the result of a more powerful survival instinct. To think overexposure induces indifference would mean that the hawk would soon refuse to come to the fist; after all, it is offered that tiny morsel on the glove much more often than the lure.

Hawks are, by nature, greedy and opportunistic. They are incapable of refusing a good opportunity for no good reason. If you can see the world through their eyes you can understand their actions. They are continually reacting primarily to what they see, but also to what they hear. They do not sit around and dream up behavior. They are also creatures of habit. If they are excited about their luring experience today, they will always be excited by it under similar conditions.

It is not necessary that the lure be a good imitation of the desired game animal. Though there's no harm in building a lure to resemble the general size, shape and weight of an animal, the bird is not fooled unless you have gone to great extremes to create the illusion by covering the lure with fur or feathers. But in this case, each time she is served the lure, she will have to be taken up off of it in much the same way that she would have to be taken off a kill, or else she will develop resentment that could manifest itself as aggression. Meanwhile, she will pluck the lure with each serve, and it will soon resemble a roadkill on a string. A good-quality, well-made basic lure,

presented in an exciting way, will draw no less of a response than the more elaborate one, and should last at least a couple of seasons.

Finally, I've heard it said that once you show the lure, you must give it to her. I would agree to that in an emergency, but it would be counter-productive to lure-flying. The lure used for lure-flying is designed and used to be catchable. The purpose of lure-flying is to draw out the hawk's best effort. In lure-flying, the hawk is rewarded according to its effort.

Plopping the lure on the ground will move a hawk, but it will not draw that burst of adrenaline that seems to be so good for it. The hawk quickly learns that the lure is catchable, but only in fair flight. As you both get better at lure-flying, she will always respond with good effort.

The Lures: Two lures are needed to complete the hawk's indoctrination to lure-flying. Though both lures should look the same, the difference is in weight. The introductory lure should weigh in at 30-40% of the hawk's weight. The lure itself is weighted. No weight is attached to the lure line as this could be hazardous to the hawk in lure-flying. The weight that brings her to the ground should be in her feet, not over her wing or around her neck.

The lure line should be 5-6 feet in length, and a hand-hold loop tied at the end is handy. It should be made of a strong, yet soft, flexible and light-weight material such as parachute cord, or braided cotton clothes-line cord. Do not use stiff nylon cords or small-diameter strings as they can cause feather damage. Cords between 3/16" and 1/4" are best. Lure-flying is not dangerous and injury or damage to feathers is unlikely, but we have a responsibility to minimize any known risks.

The lure itself is designed to give maximum footing, and also to absorb the impact of the hawk without causing the bird discomfort. I prefer an oblong 2-sided shape rounded at the ends, resembling the shape of a hot dog. The lure material is a strong but soft split leather. If the leather has a finished side, use the unfinished side to make up the lure's exterior to give the hawk a better gripping surface. Both lures are stuffed with scrap leather or similar material, but small weights are mixed in with the stuffing of the starter lure. I use steel air rifle BB's because they are small and do not change the overall flexibility of the lure. Slamming into a bag of rocks with both feet is not a good way to encourage a best effort.

Ties or other means of attaching garnishments are built into each of the bilaterally-symmetrical lure halves. Two garnishments are involved with each serve of the lure. When presenting the lure to the broadwing in the traditional way (plop), it is common to place one garnishment in a neutral location. It might be argued that I am recommending too much reward, and that a couple of serves will take the edge off the hawk. However, I recommend the size of each garnishment be small, about the size of two joints of your little finger for the female, and a little smaller for the tiercel. For me, the lure is a training and conditioning tool that has the side benefit of being a good "reserve parachute". It is designed to excite, condition, teach and reinforce lessons already learned with every serve. In addition, I use the lure to bring an unsuccessful hunt to a somewhat satisfying conclusion. The two-sided lure requires that you reach in under the bird to roll the lure over. The reward that always follows conditions her patience and tolerance of your moving in swiftly and handling the catch, and your hawk's kill ratio will improve if she anticipates your diving in and assisting. This routine also reinforces her attraction to the lure. I believe the difference in two garnishments is not due just to a difference in quantity but more to the length of excitement involved. Each serve is two series of familiar events and each series ends in some gratification. The hawk's attachment to the lure should be second only to the kill itself.

Introducing the Lure: Early in training, the hawk is introduced to the lure. With eyes-taken or captive-bred birds, this introduction may take place even before the hawk can fly. The passage-taken hawk is introduced to the lure when she is coming 20' to 30' to the fist on the creance without hesitation.

Step 1. In either case, blow the call and plop the weighted, garnished lure on the ground from about 10-20 feet away. After the hawk has taken the garnishment from the up-facing side, put a small tidbit on the back of the glove. Step or kneel on the lure line about 12" from the lure. Reach down in front towards her feet with the tidbit up where she can see it coming. Do not blow the call. Let her take the tidbit with her beak. At that point, you will be in position to grasp the lure and roll it over. She is likely to be bound to it with both feet so you may not be able to roll it all the way, but you only need to roll it over enough for her to see and take the second garnishment. After she has cleaned the lure of garnishments, draw back and watch her until she has decided for herself that she has gotten all the good off the lure and becomes less possessive of it. With the lure line still anchored, place another tidbit on the glove in the normal way. Hold the glove in front of, and above her, and blow the call. You may have to tease her up to the fist the first couple of times, but she will catch on quickly. She may also try to bring the lure up with her, but if you are standing on the line, she will give up after a try or two. If you have a bird that seems to be lure-bound, toss a tidbit onto the ground 3 or 4 feet to the side of the lure where she can see it, stand firmly on the line and be patient. She will leave the lure for the tidbit.

As soon as the bird is off the lure, step over it, squat and pick the lure up, (keeping it hidden from her sight), and slip it into the bag. You can roll up the line later.

Repeat the same serve at 30-40 feet. If all goes reasonably well, you are ready to move to 50-60 feet. Make sure the lure is garnished. If she starts toward you before you are ready, and you did not blow the call, it is fair not to reward her. You may catch her on the fist without a tidbit. Restore her to a perch and restart. Repeat as necessary until she waits for the lure to appear. Wasting time is not in their nature, so they must be taught to wait. At this close distance, you will not have time after she starts to fly to give her a proper serve. You will set the training back a bit if you try because you will certainly foul up the serve, so don't try.

Step 2. The object of the next step is to get the hawk to take the lure as it hangs above the ground. When you are set, drop the lure on the ground and blow the call with force. As soon as she is underway, pull it up off the ground and dangle it as still as possible about 12" to 18" off the ground. If she hits it, let your arm go with her momentum while simultaneously releasing the line. If possible, try to flip it out of the way as you release it.

If she brakes and lands on the ground without making an effort to take it in flight, continue dangling it before her. Tease her into jumping for it, and if she does, let her have it. Proceed with taking her up as already described. Repeat this step with the lure hanging two feet off the ground until she will consistently take the hanging lure in flight.

Step 3. The next step is to add movement to the hanging lure. Give yourself a little more room. The difference in this serve will be that you will add movement by gently allowing the hanging lure to swing side to side a little or swing in a circular motion about a foot in diameter. If she checks off without giving effort, do not reward her. You rushed the last step; she hasn't built her confidence to the proper level. Repeat step 2 until she seems comfortable with it, and try adding the movement again. But do not dwell overlong on any step; once she has achieved a degree of mastery, move on to the next step.

We are about to move to the most difficult, yet most enjoyable step for the hawk and man. Up to this point it has been straightforward and easy for both of you. Putting motion to the lure raises the degree of difficulty dramatically. It requires greater concentration, skill and timing of both bird and trainer. If you are to ask for her best effort every time she is served, she must be motivated. She is motivated by confidence. Confidence is learned through success. Success is achieved through effort. In the wild, a roadkill requires no effort, but instinctive knowledge tells a bird that a rat will not be taken without effort, and the reaction is almost a reflex. Before going down to the roadkill, she can perch and survey the situation until she feels everything is right; whereas, the rat requires immediate response and accurate execution. In the wild, her best effort would often, but not always, be rewarded; anything less than her best effort is usually roadkill. In lure-flying you are in control of the outcome. She is always rewarded for her best effort, but she should not be rewarded for being lazy. Her energy could be compared to lightning; it will go the shortest distance to its objective. If you make it easy, she will learn and prefer easy. If you challenge her, she will anticipate challenge.

Nature does not reward laziness -- lazy hawks have short life spans. A healthy, physically-fit, responsive game hawk is achieved, not only through working to the lure and fist and time in the field, but also through management of the hawk's instincts. Flying her at optimum weight will insure a consistent result and progress, and there is no point in going forward if you as a trainer are not committed to using good falconry management and techniques. If you are not consistent, she will not be consistent and the process will be set back by the chaos that will result.

That having been said, I use and teach two lure-flying techniques. Each of them is presented differently, allowing the bird a cue as to how to adjust her approach. You could call them the "rabbit" and the "squirrel" due to the way the lure is served. I recommend the squirrel be taught first, and after she has become good at it, then introduce her to the the rabbit. Both the rabbit and the squirrel are aimed at foot/eye coordination and muscle tone. They compliment each other in that they focus on opposing muscles and attack styles. The goal of both is to physically and mentally condition the hawk for three-dimensional pursuit.

The Squirrel Technique: Until the hawk is steady (does not try to carry or drag the lure away) you will continue to use the weighted lure. The squirrel technique attempts to simulate a mid-air strike on a squirrel that is leaping from one tree to another, or has bailed out of the tree to the ground.

Give yourself and the hawk enough room to allow for the initial clumsiness in both of you (100' to start with). At this stage of training, she is flying free. It is better to call her from an elevated (15' or so) perch. The extra drop will increase her air speed. The additional air speed provides better and quicker maneuverability.

The lure is pulled out briskly. The line is grasped about 18" to 24" from the lure by the right hand (if you are right-handed). Swing the lure around to the side, and in a clockwise motion perpendicular to the ground. In other words, the lure is going up in front and down in the rear. This is important as it permits you to serve the lure up underhanded and to gently place it. Trying to serve the lure overhand is less accurate and poses the risk of clobbering the hawk.

Continue swinging the lure as she comes in. Get a feel for the speed at which she is closing in. The first few serves should be made easy for her. As she closes in on you, bring the lure around and gently up in front of her so

that she needs only to flare out, extend her legs out in front, and take it. After she grabs it, the weight of the lure will pull her back into the glide trim. Release the line, step to the side if you are in the way, and she will glide to the ground. As she is recovering, move to her and step on the end of the line. If she tries to drag the lure, just stand on the line. Once she has settled in on the lure, make in and take her up as previously described.

If she checks off without an effort, do not plop it on the ground for her. To do so would teach her to just wait you out. She must become accustomed to taking a moving lure. Either you have rushed her to this point, her weight is not right, or you fouled up the serve.

It is not uncommon for the bird to miss the first serve, as she is not expecting it, but if you serve it up right, she will take it. After she is consistently taking it in this way, you can begin to gradually serve it farther out and higher. When she is taking it with some consistency, and becomes steady to your coming in and turning over the lure, you may try making the switch to the light lure. The light lure is a lot more forgiving as far as the placement of the serve is concerned. (A bad serve will, at the worst, stall her out, resulting in a less controlled descent and landing -- no harm done.) The light lure also allows for greater speed control in the swing and serve. However, it is a luxury and a privilege earned through the discipline and persistence of the falconer. The hawk will respond automatically to properly applied techniques.

Once the hawk has progressed in lure training to the point that she is consistently catching a properly served lure, she should begin hunting. The lure training is incorporated into the normal routine. Of course, the lure is employed in an emergency, but it is also a good practice to end any unsuccessful hunt with an aerial serve or two followed by her final feeding on the glove. I've found that ending an unsuccessful hunt this way relieves the frustration of the hunt. A hawk that hasn't killed may be reluctant to go into the giant hood, even after she's had her feeding -- this is especially true of a consistently successful hawk. Chasing and catching the lure seems to provide a sense of going full circle, and allows closure to occur in a way that is familiar to her instincts and expectations. It will be these instances that will give you the opportunity to practice and advance your lure-flying technique.

If she makes a serious pass at the lure, misses, and lands on the ground, you can try to run forward, grab the line, and drag the lure on the ground. Make it as difficult as you can, but allow her to catch it. After she has caught it, continue to tug on it so as to simulate a brief struggle. She is only allowed to take it this way if she made a good effort to take it in flight. If she begins to show an inclination to wait for the ground chase, then discontinue the drag until she is again aerial.

If she shows little interest in the lure, don't beg her (unless it is an emergency). Put the lure away and identify the reason. Take the appropriate measures to get the training back on track. The lure should appeal to the predator side of her personality, not the vulture side.

The Rabbit Technique: The "squirrel" technique focused on power climbing, braking, footing, and controlled descent and landing with weight. Of course other skills were involved, including decision-making, timing, maneuvering and foot/eye coordination. It worked the major muscle groups, producing controlled brute strength.

The "rabbit" is more like a sprint. It employs minor muscles as well as major in combination with gravity and trim to gain speed. There is a brief window of opportunity during which decision, execution and commitment must all take place in rapid succession while simultaneously bringing the feet forward to

grasp the lure. The attack is at higher speed and lower altitude. She has to have enough momentum to overtake the lure that is moving away from her, then reach forward and grasp it without stalling. As she brings the legs forward and extends them, her tail is dropped and her head raised, resulting in rapid loss of air speed. If her timing is not precise, the lure will outrun her.

The rabbit requires of the falconer a higher degree of concentration, touch and timing. The position and speed of the lure when the hawk is in striking range is crucial to draw her best effort while reinforcing her attachment to the lure. I suggest some practice without the hawk in swinging and serving. This will familiarize you with the weight and speed involved.

The hawk and falconer should be steady and proficient at the squirrel serve before beginning the rabbit serve. This is why dry practice in speeding up and slowing the lure is advised. Never use the weighted lure to serve the rabbit technique. When ready to serve the rabbit, grasp the lure line about 2' from the lure. Bring it up straight over your head and swing it counter-clockwise around your head (forward to your right, backward on your left). After a few serves this will serve to cue her that it is a rabbit serve (clockwise with the left hand if you are left-handed). When she is underway, pay out another 3 or 4 feet of line, but continue the circular movement of the lure around your body. The hand operating the lure is still above your head. Swing the lure as slowly as possible, yet keeping it 1 or 2 feet off the ground and out away from your legs. Watch her as she is closing in. If she is focused on the lure, her flight path will swing back and forth slightly in unison with the lure's sweeping across the front, and back again behind you.

When she reaches the strike zone, the lure must be between a point directly in front of you and directly to your left. Anything else is not a fair serve. If the lure is too early, it will surely outrun her; if too late, a head-on collision may occur.

Assuming the serve is in fair territory, you can then rotate your body around to the left and use your right arm and hand to fly the lure just ahead of her. While you are learning, make it fairly easy for her. With experience, you will learn to better control the speed so as to pull more and more from her, but until then, concentrate on fair serving. You have to be good before you can do her any good. If she binds to it, immediately flip the line out of the way and release it. If she brushes it, but misses, let it drop to the ground and make her catch it on the ground running. If she tries, but misses altogether, continue to swing slowly in the circle so that it passes just in front of and above her each time around. She should start timing the pass, and on the second or third time around, she will jump up and snag it. Drop it, simulate a brief struggle, and proceed on as usual.

If she is not prepared to commit herself to at least a clumsy effort, another factor is involved. Determine what it is and take the appropriate measures.

Conclusion: The "squirrel" and the "rabbit" are two broadwing luring techniques I use to train and condition buteos. I believe that the ability of buteos and parabuteos has been disgracefully underestimated and that lure-flying can be a valuable tool for training these hawks. Other beneficial effects of lure-flying training -- physical, mental and emotional -- are self-evident. I can't fathom a logical reason as to why any buteo shouldn't be flown to the lure as a means of training and conditioning. As for the falconer, lure-flying provides a powerful means to interact with his hawk, and a great opportunity to observe and have an effect on the hawk's behavior. Aside from all that, it is just plain fun!