

# Post-Release Hawking

by Eric Edwards, Winter Haven, FL

*"The whole art of training a hawk is to reduce restrictions to the minimum and to disguise the necessary ones."*

*Ronald Stevens,  
Observations on Modern Falconry*

"See you in the morning okay?"

It was Tim Breen calling from Ocala. I had offered to watch his bird for him while he traveled on business. We talked about his kestrel and set a time to meet at my house.

"By the way," he asked, "any chance we'll see your merlin fly?"



"I released her three weeks ago," I answered. "But I've been to the field and hawked with her since. Last time was six days ago. I don't know if she's still around, but we can go check."

Tim, my wife Diana and I pulled into the field at eight AM. I got out and swung the lure. Lilly didn't come, so we drove down the road to the other end of the four thousand acre ranch. I swung the lure again and much to Tim's amazement, Lilly zipped in and landed on the glove.

She looked feather perfect and as friendly as ever. Lilly had been an exceptional hunting partner for two seasons. She was always powerful on the wing but after three weeks of liberation she looked especially strong. I gave her a small tid-bit and we began walking the field. She left the glove and fell right back into the routine, flying lazy circles overhead.

Nearly one hundred yards from the truck we flushed a dozen sparrows. Lilly was out of position but saw her fleeing breakfast. She gave just enough of a chase to put all the birds into a small palmetto bush, the only refuge for a hundred yards. She immediately began pumping into the wind and looking over her shoulder, waiting for my arrival. I kicked the bush and she rolled a sparrow across the ground. It was only a glancing blow and the sparrow made it back into the bush, minus a few feathers. The next sparrow to flush wasn't as lucky; she flew it down with ease and carried it to a low branch by the lake, a great spot for breakfast.

Lilly ate the sparrow and flew back to the glove. I topped her off, thanked her for the entertainment and said goodbye for the last time.

The last three seasons, I've had some of the best flights of the year after I let my merlins go

back into the wild. It was never my plan to continue hawking after release; it's something I happened across by chance. I'm certainly not the first. Ronald Stevens wrote about Kestrels, Peregrines, Luggars and others that were left at liberty around his home and would meet him in the field. He would even leave birds in the hawking field after a hunt and race them many miles back to the house. I don't live on my own moor like Mr. Stevens, but I fly my merlins in the same handful of fields all season. My birds tend to view them as their territory.

I first discovered this at the end of the 2001-2002 falconry season. I was flying Mallory, an intermewed passage female merlin, and Daisy, a young female peregrine. In February I decided to finish up the season hawking only ducks, so I released Mallory. I typically flew her in one of several five hundred acre fields that border each other, separated by small patches of woods or roads. For weeks before release she was flying well over her trapped weight and catching birds almost daily.

I took her to one of "her" fields, cut off her jesses and went for one last hunt. She quickly caught a sparrow and cached it. When she returned I called her to the glove for a quail leg and stepped her onto a post in the middle of the field for some farewell photos while she finished her meal.

The next day I returned to the field to check on her, not really expecting her to be around. I was only ten feet into the field when she flew overhead and took perch in a nearby tree. I had a few minutes so I walked the field looking for game. We found a few birds and enjoyed good chases but didn't connect. Again, I left her on the post with a quail leg and went in search of ducks.

To my surprise she was there the next day as well. I quartered the field and within minutes marked a sparrow and called her in for the flush. She caught the sparrow within twenty feet, cached it in a nearby tree and returned to the glove for a quail leg.

For a week I returned to the field daily, and she showed up roughly every other time. She only caught two birds during her post-release hunting but after three days there was a noticeable difference in her speed and endurance. After a week she was a different bird. Her lack of success during this period was likely my fault: I was more interested in hunting with my peregrine and didn't give her much time. I was mainly checking on her to make sure she was doing okay. But, I knew one day I would give more effort to some post season merlin hawking.

During the 2002-2003 hawking season I flew a deadly cast of passage female merlins, Lilly and Rose. By the end of the season both of these birds were flying as well as any merlins I've seen fly. Since I planned to fly a tiercel peregrine the following season I decided to release Rose.



At the end of March I returned from a hawking trip in TX, I put Lilly up to molt and released Rose on the four thousand acre ranch we hawked the

majority of the season. Unfortunately, I was having knee surgery in two weeks so it would be a short post season. For two weeks I returned to the field daily and Rose showed up ready to hunt. At her release, Rose was incredibly fit but there was a noticeable increase in her speed thereafter, and her footing ability seemed to improve.

While I walked the field looking for a slip she constantly flew around catching dragonflies. Sparrows were few and far between, but without exception, she caught every sparrow I flushed and all were quickly cached.

During the two weeks Rose caught ten sparrows and dozens of dragonflies. Her response to the lure remained instant. On several occasions she had blood on her tarsus and chest from birds she caught on her own.

Rose was trapped at 190g - by the end of the season I flew her at 190g. I took a scale out to the field twice after her release; five days after release she was 190g, and ten days after release she was 191g.

This past season I made the difficult decision to release Lilly, the best merlin I've had. The routine was the same: I showed up almost daily for several weeks and she was there every day, ready to hunt. Her weight remained right around trap weight.

An interesting fact about all three of these birds is that their caching frequency increased, caching almost every bird they caught. They also cached quicker and closer. For two seasons Lilly typically cached in the same row of pine trees on the edge of the field. She would fly a mile to cache there. However, after release she would cache in the nearest bush and come right back, ready for more. This leads me to believe that caching is as much a result of fitness as increased weight. If a merlin catches early in the hunt and is still energetic, she is more likely to cache and come back ready for more. If she's tired, regardless of weight, she'll usually eat.

I try to achieve the highest level of fitness with my merlins, often flying them for hours a day and near or at their trap weights. Not even the most fit falconry merlin can match the speed and endurance of its wild counterpart, but after a week of liberation you're essentially flying a wild merlin.

I don't know if it would be possible to do this with any other species of passage raptor, but I know it's possible with merlins. Eventually I would like to carry this experiment further and release a merlin earlier in the season and see just how long this type of hawking scenario can last. I see no reason why you could not release a steady, game catching, merlin in January and continue hawking with it for several months.