

# The little *Falcon* Who Could

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*Author, tiercel ¾ peregrine Zhel and Gobi closing the gap on a 12 pound whitetail jackrabbit.  
Gobi is a cross between a collie x greyhound and a central Asian tazi. Photo by Robbie Whytock.*

**A**ny falconer worth their salt learns that all hawks are individuals. A good falconer will also learn that perseverance and commitment brings results that seemed unlikely when their relationship with a particular hawk began.

Too often hawks that don't make the grade in the first season are considered worthless. How many of us have been offered a hawk and turned it down because of its history? No one wants a hawk with baggage, yet with hard work many of these can become successful gamehawks. This is a story of a falcon that overcame the odds.





**Z**hel, Mongolian for “wind,” seemed a likely failure from the moment he was born. His mother was a peregrine, the father was supposed to be a gyr, but the gyrkin hadn’t started producing semen yet. Moroni, a gyr x peregrine tiercel was the back-up donor. Zhel ended up a one-quarter gyr hybrid and a tiercel to boot. Not the huge hybrid female the Arab market desired. Lars and Dave Sego, Zhel’s breeders, were stuck with a bird their clients had no interest in. They put the word out in the New Mexico falconry community that a free tiercel was available.

Recently divorced, I had no income to spare for buying birds so I offered to take him on. Later that day I found myself in possession of a 650-gram hybrid that looked like a peregrine. He was, to my mind, an ideal bird for hunting ducks, which is to say not what I really wanted. Here in arid New Mexico duck hawking requires lots of driving. One hundred and fifty miles per duck just doesn’t strike me as very efficient. I wanted to try something different. One quarry we have in abundance is jackrabbits, not a quarry most western falconers would choose for a falcon, but one Arab falconers have hunted for centuries, usually in conjunction with Salukis.



**M**y concern as I looked at Zhel sitting on my fist was that he was just too small for the job. My decision to take Zhel seemed a little precipitous. To add to my doubts, Steve Bodio had a young gyr x prairie tiercel that looked much more suitable for hares than my almost-peregrine. I talked about my concerns with Steve and he agreed that Zhel looked an unlikely hare falcon. Then he offered a solution to my dilemma. Steve lives about 70 miles south of me and his local hare population had crashed. I had plenty of hares around Albuquerque. We would switch birds; Steve would take Zhel and start him on the plentiful ducks in his area and I would hunt hares with his bird, Tuuli.

The exchange was made, and over the next few months Tuuli and I learned to hunt hares. By December I was catching hares consistently with Tuuli and my Australian shepherd x greyhound cross. Over the Christmas holiday I began to feel guilty over having all the fun with Steve’s bird. Steve got stuck with writing deadlines and hadn’t done much with Zhel. He finally had time to hunt so I resolved to take Zhel back after the holidays and leave Tuuli with Steve.



I picked up Zhel in January and decided, I would try him on hares. I knew I had a challenge ahead of me. I had a falcon with 75% of his genes telling him that chasing ground game was just plain wrong. He was also only one-fifth the size of his intended quarry. To add to this, the most memorable experience Zhel had of his stay at Steve's was not a positive one. During an early training session one of Steve's sight-hound pups had pounced playfully on Zhel as he sat on the lure. Panicked, Zhel had bolted over the horizon and was not recovered for three days. An integral part of the hare hunting team is the sight-hound and Zhel had developed a deep distrust of dogs.

The first couple of weeks of free flight were eventful. Zhel showed great enthusiasm for the hare lure and no enthusiasm for my dog, Percy. If the dog came too close he took off in a straight line and telemetry was required to find him.

Despite this, I took him out to the field so he could see the dog catch a hare and maybe understand the purpose of the dog. It worked... kind of; Zhel had had a small-bagged rabbit a few days before and caught it without hesitation. I was hopeful he might chase a hare. Our first attempt did not go as I hoped, but left me with some optimism. We had been in the field for about ten minutes when Percy flushed a hare and took off at high speed after it. I cast Zhel off the fist and he flew vaguely in the direction of the chase. He showed no desire to close and I walked forward and began to pull the lure out.

At that moment, a hare burst out of a grass tussock at my feet and headed towards Zhel. He immediately turned towards it and began pumping hard toward the oblivious hare. His stoop was shallow; he was only about thirty feet up but even so he was traveling at a

reasonable speed when he reached the hare. He passed over the hare with a foot of air between them and threw up over it. Rolling over, he turned and stooped again. For the next minute he repeatedly stooped the hare without connecting before losing it in a patch of heavy sagebrush. Then he wandered off to the western horizon; I called Percy back and pulled out the telemetry once again. After recovering Zhel,



*Zhel, tiercel ¾ peregrine ¼ gyr. Photo by Robbie Whytock.*

I returned to the truck and fed him up. As I drove home my mind went over my options trying to find a solution to his fear of the dog. I decided that bringing his weight down would not hurt.

gradually lowered his flying weight from 650 to 610 grams. Several things happened as a result. First and foremost, he decided it was okay to turn around and come back, rather than head over the horizon, thus making my life easier. His tolerance of the dog also improved, although he still had little enthusiasm for joining in the chase with Percy. His attitude to hares certainly intensified; now besides stooping and hitting hares he also bound to them.

The scenario played out much the same each outing. Zhel would refuse hares the dog was chasing and attack every hare the dog didn't see. Zhel would bind to hares and be dragged for hundreds of feet and or get stomped into the bargain. Concerned for his safety, I raised his weight up again, hoping he would take to stooping rather than binding with his prey. Zhel might have been three-quarters peregrine, but evidently he thought he was a gyrkin. I think this enthusiasm for hares is typical of any young falcon with gyr blood in them, as gyrs hunt arctic hares as part their natural prey base.

Despite his bloodlust for hares, by March we still had not caught a hare. If he would just tolerate the dog he would have an eager helper to finish the hares he repeatedly pulled to the ground. Then one day in mid-March something different happened. Percy put up a hare and began to course it and Zhel launched off the fist. This time he didn't hesitate; he joined the chase. For the next minute and half I watched as Zhel and Percy pursued the hare across the desert. The hare turned, repeatedly trying to shake them off. Zhel and Percy remained glued to the hare through every twist and jink.

At roundabout a mile into the chase I saw Zhel throw up, then flutter down into the sagebrush. Percy also had stopped running, but I couldn't see them—too much cover was in the way. Could they have finally done it? Had my little tiercel caught his first hare? I began to run. As I jogged across the desert I saw a redtail coming in from a line of poles close to Zhel and begin to circle over Zhel's position. My jog became a sprint. Finally I arrived breathless in the vicinity of Zhel and Percy and the redtail drifted away. After an anxious minute of search-



*Author with his jack-killing team. Photo by Juliet Smith*



ing, I heard a bell ring and spotted them. Zhel was sitting, plucking the hare and Percy stood over him. We had done it.

Needless to say, Zhel got a full gorge and we didn't fly for two days. My hopes were up on my next outing and I was eager to see if the lesson had sunk into his little bird brain. We began to walk the field searching for hares. After ten minutes the first hare got up and what I was beginning to think of as the team took off in pursuit. This hare was not impressed with the experience and shot down the first badger hole it could find and the chase was over. We kept on walking and after thirty minutes we had still not found another hare. Zhel bated and I let him go. He began to fly in circles around me, I really hoped a hare would get up right then.

At this point I became aware of a loud chirping behind me and turned around. Heading toward me was a very lost and confused cockatiel. Zhel saw it and decided it was food. He had never killed a bird before; even so, the poor cockatiel had no chance. I decided to call it quits at this point and made the mistake of letting Zhel feed up on this rather exotic meal.

The next outing my mistake became very clear. Zhels neglected peregrine genes were awake; all he wanted were birds. He chased sparrows, quail and doves and wouldn't look at hares at all. For the rest of the season he refused hares and once he started molting I laid him off.

The next season I picked up Zhel from the molt and began to bring his weight down. That season was going to be a little bit more complicated; in addition to Zhel, I had a second-hand gyr x prairie tiercel and a passage anatum. The peregrine

was a young female that had been badly injured by a wild prairie and needed extensive rehabilitation and training before she could be released. The gyr x prairie had been flown at ducks, but I felt he could be persuaded to hunt hares. He was to prove a difficult bird to enter; it quickly became apparent that he was frightened of two things: hares and my dog.

The first time in the field with Zhel, I was not overly confident of

kite was the greatest thing since sliced bread, although it took a while for him to develop his flying skills. In his first season he had rarely flown over fifty feet and at a year old was a rather naive flyer.

I remember his first flight to the kite at 500 feet. He simply took off into a stiff wind and at a 75-degree angle flew at the kite. No circling, no outruns, just a steep climb inching toward the kite in a straight line. Within a week he had figured to use a little more sky to climb but has always flown very tight ever since. This does mean that he is rarely out of position, which is a nice trait to have in a waiting-on falcon. Both he and the peregrine progressed rapidly to pigeons and the kite was dispensed with. By December he and the peregrine were waiting-on very nicely and taking game. The peregrine was released to the wild and Zhel was flown at ducks.

Although Zhel was flying beautifully, I was in a quandary. I really wanted to hunt hares, not ducks. I also had the gyr x prairie that I was struggling to enter on hares. I needed to devote time to my new falcon and I had turned Zhel into the kind of longwing someone else would want. Once again I called Steve Bodio to see if he wanted

a duck hawk. He liked Zhel and we agreed to meet up in the Rio Grande valley the next weekend. We put Zhel up over a ditch and he climbed to an 800-foot pitch. Once in position over us we flushed. To our chagrin, the gadwalls which had already lost one of their number to a friend's barbary had sneaked off down the ditch. Instead, a kingfisher flushed. Zhel folded and came hissing down and the kingfisher bailed into the ditch.

I called Zhel back and he reluctantly left his pursuit of the kingfisher. Once on the fist I noticed

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success. The end of his first season had not gone well. I was amazed when the first hare we flushed was brought down by Zhel and Percy after a couple of hundred feet. They looked like old pros and my optimism soared through the roof.

My optimism proved premature. After taking that one hare he resolutely refused every other and started chasing birds again. By this time I was training the peregrine to the kite and decided to fly Zhel to the kite as well. Zhel thought the



*Cottontails are actually harder to catch than hares with a falcon. Photo by Robbie Whytock.*

that he had come so close to the kingfisher that he had been soaked when it splashed down in the water. The water had frozen and a film of ice covered his feathers. As I was trying to figure out what to do about the ice, my friend Matt spotted the missing gadwalls further down the ditch. Without thinking I cast Zhel off and an icy tiercel staggered into the air. As he mounted the ice and moisture seemed to leave him and wingbeat speeded up and his pitch increased rapidly. Once in position again we ran in and flushed. The gadwalls, flushed once already, flew along the ditch below the banks.

Zhel came straight down and through the duck, which tried to roll away and allowed him to hit the duck across the breast rather than the back, closely followed by Zhel hitting the water. When I got there the duck was upside-down and Zhel was floating next to it looking very surprised. I jumped in and lifted them

both out. Zhel happily grabbed his duck and began to eat. Suitably impressed by Zhel's gung-ho attitude and style, Steve took Zhel and I returned home to concentrate on my gyr x prairie.

Three days later Steve called with bad news. Zhel was losing weight and appetite and he suspected aspergillosis. As I had better access to veterinary care in Albuquerque than Steve's remote location, I drove down and picked Zhel up. He looked a very different bird than when I left him with Steve. His eyes were slitted, his wings hung to the ground and his voice was wheezy. Steve had already begun treatment with oral asper meds. I took Zhel down to my local raptor vets. Ray Hudgell and Michael Melloy are both falconers and veterinarians and we are lucky to have them here in New Mexico to care for our raptors. They agreed that it looked like aspergillosis and sent off a titer test straight away.

Most of my falconer friends had heard the bad news and my hawking buddy Warren Spencer had a suggestion for treating Zhel. Warren is into pigeons and poultry besides falconry. He is also one of those people who constantly reads up new ideas and products and definitely leans to the nerdy side of aviculture. He had just got hold of a new product called Oxine AH, a poultry disinfectant that was also being used as a nebulized medication on exotic pheasants to treat aspergillosis. He suggested I use it on Zhel and I decided to give it a shot. I headed off to the shops and obtained a ten-dollar humidifier and fifty-gallon plastic trash can.

We mixed the Oxine AH solution and poured it into the humidifier. Zhel was then hooded and placed on a block next to the humidifier and covered with the upside down trash-can. The humidifier was turned on and ran for an hour. We repeated this twice daily in combination with





*They went from a ratio of one kill in every thirty chases, to two hares a day. Photo by Karen Wetherill*

his oral meds. By the next morning Zhel's appetite had increased. Within three days he was gaining weight and his voice was improving. I continued this treatment for two weeks during which his condition rapidly improved. By the end of the treatment he seemed back to normal except for some damage to his vocal chords.

Playing it safe, I placed Zhel in a chamber and left him to moult. He went through his molt and by the fall was feather perfect and appeared healthy. Despite his improvement, the general opinion

among my fellow falconers was that Zhel would not fly again. I was told that very few raptors ever recovered enough from asper to fly and catch game.

I still had my gyr x prairie who after many weeks of perseverance had turned into an excellent hare falcon. I eagerly started the season with my gyr x prairie tiercel, Cog, and initially everything went well. In his first week of hunting he caught two cottontails, a hare and a burrowing owl that I was able to release unharmed.

Then disaster struck. He was killed by a redtail and his promising career was over. My plans for hunting hares with falcons were in shambles. All I had left to work with was a too small three-quarters peregrine tiercel that refused hares and was probably too damaged to fly again. I decided that there was no point in Zhel sitting in a chamber doing nothing; I would fly him. I felt that, despite the risk, it was better that I should at least try to fly him than leave him to molder away in a cage for the rest of his life.

I began by lowering Zhel down to his flying weight very gradually. Soon enough he was at flying weight and the real test began. Would he fly with any strength? I was pleasantly surprised to find that he did want to fly and his physical condition improved rapidly. I started throwing common pigeons for him and he waited-on readily. His pitch was improving steadily. It was not as high as before his illness, but it was still early in the season.

During one of these training sessions Zhel managed to get

himself in an odd predicament. I was flying him in the back parking lot of the local basketball stadium. It has a nice slope below it and you can get effective ridgeline there to encourage a bird to go up.

Zhel had been cast off, climbed to about three hundred feet and I tossed a pigeon. Zhel stooped down hard and the pigeon dodged him and a tail chase began. It quickly became apparent that the pigeon was not very confident. Rather than outrunning Zhel, it headed for a storage shed on the edge of the parking lot. The shed was supported on a series of joists with a six-inch gap between them. The pigeon squeezed into one of these gaps and disappeared; Zhel quickly followed it.

I ran over to the shed. Fluttering and the jingling of bells came from beneath it. Looking into the gap, I could see Zhel wedged in, grimly holding the pigeon. I could see no way to get in there and spent the next twenty minutes trying to lure him out.

Now as many falconers know, our antics can often draw the attention of officers of the law. A passing patrol car spotted me and assumed I was trying to break into the shed, which was true, but only for the most innocent of reasons, I just wanted my idiot bird back. Once explanations were made the officers were eager to help. It must have been a slow day as within half an hour I had the assistance of the Albuquerque police department, the university police and a passing state trooper. Zhel seemed indifferent to the voice of authority at first, then finally released his hostage. A very battered pigeon escaped from under the shed and was swiftly recovered by a police officer. Zhel still refused to come out, even when I waved the pigeon at the opening.

Then the reason he would not come out became clear; he was hung up on some nails stuck through the floor of the shed. I had to get to him out, but how? Then help arrived in the form of a maintenance supervisor who came over to see what was going on. Once the situation was

explained he offered a solution. He left and returned in a few minutes with a forklift. Positioning the tines carefully, he lifted up the corner of the shed. After a moment's struggle, Zhel got loose from the nails and ran out into the open air. I thanked everyone and rushed off to the vets to have the lacerations in Zhel's back looked at.

Dr. Mike Melloy looked at his injuries and decided they weren't severe, but needed stitches. Mike put him under and began stitching. It was a nerve-racking half-hour as Zhel's heart stopped twice under the anesthetic. But in the end he pulled through just fine. Training was put on hold as I watched carefully for any signs that the stress would bring the asper back. Zhel seemed completely unfazed and once his stitches were out we began flying again.

Not wishing to have a repeat of that situation, I moved the training to another location. By this time, in addition to Percy, I had another sighthound named Gobi. She was bred by Steve Bodio and I hoped she would be a good hare courser.

On my first day of training in the new field I just brought Percy along, as the pup was too unpredictable. I cast Zhel off and he began to climb nicely. At about 400 feet he was still climbing when I got a big surprise. Percy flushed a hare and took off across the field right under Zhel.

Zhel immediately folded his wings and stooped down hard at the hare. He leveled out and struck the hare hard. It collapsed instantly and Percy ran right past it, taken by surprise as the hare dropped. The hare was trying to get back to its feet but was clearly not up to the task. Zhel came round and slammed into the hare and bound to it. Percy, having finally figured out what had happened, arrived and helped Zhel finish off the hare. Zhel showed his gratitude for the assistance by binding to Percy's head, Percy reluctantly withdrew and Zhel claimed sole ownership of his hare.





The team takes a break between whitetail chases in Alamosa, Colorado. Photo by Robbie Whytock.

It seemed that Zhel had taken his experiences on ducks and transferred this to hares. Perhaps I had a hare hawk after all. Freshly motivated, we returned to the field repeatedly over the next two weeks. That time it was not a one-off event. Zhel repeatedly stooped at hares and seemed fine with both dogs. We caught another hare, which trying to avoid Zhel's stoop, was snapped up by Percy. Once again Zhel drove off the dogs and claimed the hare. It seemed his previous fear of dogs had been replaced by a desire to dominate them. For their part, the dogs were

very submissive to him and showed no aggression at all.

Then despite the team's best efforts, we ran into a dry spell; we just couldn't put another hare in the bag. Zhel began to get discouraged and the weather became very windy, making things harder. All I could do was keep on persevering and hope we made some more kills.

On one particularly windy day Zhel ended up on the ground after a failed attempt at a hare. He was sitting on an earth bank and Percy flushed a cottontail. Somehow Zhel got up, swung round, and grabbed

the rabbit. It was so quick I couldn't tell exactly what happened. This seemed to remotivate Zhel and he hunted with newfound aggression.

The next hare Zhel chased took off into a thirty mile-per-hour wind. Zhel flew it down. After two quick stoops he pulled it down and Gobi finished it. On examining the hare the reason for its easy capture became clear; it only had three legs! Still, it was just what the team needed and it was one of those breaks that never seem to come to me when I am getting a bird going. Normally I am the guy who can

never find that half-grown hare. Every bird I have ever entered on hares has had to start on adults.

After this hare there was no stopping Zhel. In two weeks we went from a ratio of one in every thirty chases ending in a kill to two hares a day! The weather remained horrible for the rest of the season. Howling gales were the norm but it made little difference...the team had found their groove.

Gobi, my young dog is a cross between a collie x greyhound and a central Asian tazi. She has proven to be an incredibly fast dog with an innate ability to grab hares. Many young dogs find it hard to grab the hare, but not Gobi. Percy, my old dog, is the workhorse of the team, using his nose to find hare after hare. He has also learned to recognize when Zhel spots a distant hare and follows Zhel to back him up. If I had to rely on Gobi I would be in trouble, despite her athletic ability she is clueless at finding hares. Instead she stands and watches Percy working cover and never considers looking herself.

By the end of the season I had caught 25 hares and five cottontails. The cottontails, despite their small size, proved hard to catch as they were always close to heavy cover or a hole. One thing did become clear; blacktailed jackrabbits have instinctive responses to attacks by falcons. They use heavy cover to try to hide from the falcon and if hard pressed they will go down holes. They seem much more frightened of falcons than they do of redtails or Harris' hawks. I think in the wild prairie falcons hunt jackrabbits regularly. I even had one wild female prairie join a chase with the dogs.

The next season I was eager to see what an experienced team could do over a full season, Zhel appeared wedded to hares and I

expected a good year. I had proven to myself that it was possible to catch hares with a small falcon. Without the assistance of the dogs he would have caught very few hares. Conversely, the dogs would have caught far fewer hares without Zhel. He had also proven that in the right circumstances he could kill a hare single-handedly.

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Zhel was ready to fly in late September and I had him in the field by the start of October. Our first hunting trip was to a new field. I was experiencing the novelty of too much cover in the desert. We had the first real monsoon in six years and in many places the grass was over knee height.

At this point neither the dogs nor Zhel were really fit so I was more concerned with giving them all plenty of exercise. I unhooded Zhel and when he was ready he took off, he immediately began to mount up. At about 100 feet Percy flushed a hare. The hare didn't seem to like running through the tall grass and broke out on to a

dirt track bisecting the field. Zhel saw his chance and stooped down at the hare. With an audible thud he struck the hare and bound to it. They both flipped over in the dirt and Percy grabbed hold of the hare a few seconds later. In less than two minutes we had our first hare of the season in the bag. It almost seemed too easy; Zhel clearly intended to pick up where the previous season ended.

Over the next month-and-a-half the hunting proved tougher than the first hunt promised. We averaged about two hares a week. Zhel would go up and wait-on at about two to three hundred feet as we walked the fields. When the dogs flushed a hare he would stoop down. Time and again he was unable to hit the hare due to the tall grass. The hunt would then become a tail chase. Most hares would get away as the dogs lost them in the tall grass. Zhel would typically chase them over the horizon before losing them in heavy sage. Most of the kills resulted from Zhel binding to the hares or hitting them when they crossed a dirt track.

The downside of this was that Zhel began to give up waiting-on due to lack of success. Zhel would wait-on for ten minutes, then drop down and land on a rock or pile of dirt. Usually a hare flushed every time he was out of position and the dogs lost it in the long grass before Zhel got there. Often he relocated the hare and chased it over the horizon; without canine assistance and no pitch he failed to catch them.

To keep Zhel close to the action I began flying him out of the hood. Once the dogs put up a hare, off came the hood and Zhel joined the hunt. This proved a successful system and we continued to put hares in the bag. The heavy cover was still



a problem. My two best fields were completely unflyable with cover from three to five feet high.

By late November we had put eighteen hares and one quail in the bag. I had joked to a friend in October that what we needed was a really heavy snowstorm to crush down the cover. That kind of snowfall does not happen very often in New Mexico so it was just wishful thinking. But sometimes the gods smile on you. In late November we got a foot of snow in one day. My first day out in the snow was a debacle. The snow was so deep that the hares could hardly run. Zhel and Percy caught a hare with no effort at all; it wasn't sporting in the least so I walked back to the car, feeding up Zhel. Halfway there I bumped a hare out of its snow hole and Zhel left his food and caught it in thirty feet. I was almost at the car when Percy pulled a hare out of the snow and killed it while on the leash. This is not my idea of hunting so we sat it out until the snow was mostly melted.

Once I felt that conditions were a little more sporting and the hares had a chance of escaping, I set out for the field. I went to one of my favorite spots that had been unflyable up until now. The dense weeds and grasses had been crushed flat. I released the dogs and began to walk the field. We quickly flushed a hare and the team took off in pursuit. With the cover crushed down, Zhel found it easy to hit the hares and we swiftly caught the hare. Curious to see if Zhel could catch more than two hares in one session, I kept hunting. In the next half-hour we caught three more hares. If I had wanted to we could have kept hunting and caught more. For the rest of the season doubles were the norm for each outing.

By January Zhel and the dogs were supremely confident. Both Percy and Gobi had breaks from hunting due to injuries. Even with only one dog in the field it made little difference, hares were caught on every outing. The team got so deadly that we caught every single hare

we flushed for six weeks! We had come a long way from those early days when Zhel caught one hare a season.

One hunt sticks in my mind as to how effective the team became. I had company in the field with me, so I felt pressured to put on a good show. Of course nothing would go right. Every slip was just exactly wrong. Uphill flushes into the wind hundreds of yards ahead were the norm. After an hour's hunting we hadn't even been able to show my guests a real chase. With light fad-

**We ended the season in mid-January for the best of reasons; I had no more freezer space! I had given away sackfulls of hares to a friend with a rehab eagle and was eating them myself.**

ing, we headed back to the vehicles feeling very frustrated. My friend Nate commented that a hare had broken cover about five hundred yards away. By the time I looked it had gone into some dead ground. I smiled and said to Nate, "Wanna bet Zhel can catch it?"

Unhooded Zhel and cast him off, knowing full well that Zhel would fly over to a tall pole overlooking the dead-ground the hare had disappeared into. Zhel flew straight for the pole and Percy took off following him. Gobi then followed Percy directly for the deadground. As I hoped, the dogs flushed the hare and Zhel launched off the pole. This time everybody was in just the right place and the hare was in big trouble.

The hare tried to lose them in a patch of sagebrush but Zhel piled in and bound to the hare. He was quickly shaken off but the dogs were able to zero in. Zhel jumped up out of the bushes and rejoined the chase and they herded the hare out into an open slope. Seeing an opportunity, Zhel poured it on and slammed into the hare, flipping it over. Before it could recover, Percy grabbed hold of the hare and it was all over. With light fading Zhel got a crop of well-deserved hot meat while the dogs begged for scraps at a safe distance.

We ended the season in mid-January for the best of reasons; I had no more freezer space! I had given away sackfulls of hares to a friend with a rehab eagle and was eating them myself. I just couldn't use them fast enough to stop my freezer filling up. I had put eighty hares, eight cottontails and one quail in the bag with a six hundred and thirty-gram tiercel falcon in one season's hunting.

Most falconers with no experience of hunting hares with falcons have two misconceptions about this branch of falconry. Firstly, that a big falcon is needed. Zhel has proven this premise to be utterly false. Not only could he do it, but he is able to do it on a daily basis with a tally a gos would be proud of. Secondly, falconers who haven't seen the chase say it is poor sport and a waste of a longwing. I can only say that Zhel has provided me with tremendous sport in a gamebird-poor state where falcons are often underutilized. I am truly lucky to have ended up with this great little bird thanks to the Sego's generosity. They later told me that Zhel's mother has a reputation for producing deadly houbara hunters. Zhel certainly inherited some aggressive genes. Despite my own preconceptions, mistakes and his near fatal illness, Zhel's "can do" attitude has come through truly making him The Little Falcon Who Could.



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