

Harry the Hazzard

Harris Hawk (*Parabuteo unicinctus*)

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Common Buzzard hybrid (*Buteo buteo*)

Those of you who read issue No.19 of the World of Falconry (July 2014) may have read the article starting on page 11 entitled **Plymouth “Hazzard” or Not?** In summary that article told the story of an escaped male Harris hawk that has paired up naturally in the wild a female Common Buzzard, the pair have been breeding and producing young since 2010. (“*Hazzards*” as the residents have named them)

I have never been a fan of hybridised Buzzards or Hawks, I have looked after three Ferutails over the years, two hens and one male, the male was fine but the hens awful in temperament, I have always felt that whatever you wanted to hunt in the UK that there was a true bred hawk just sat there waiting for you, fully evolved over the years by nature to take what prey species you wanted to fly it against. Having watched the “Hazzards” over several years and talked to the locals who live around the park that homes them my views slowly changed, seeing one of these hybrids at close hand you cannot come to any other conclusion that you are looking at a simply stunning looking bird, but how would they behave in the world of falconry?



The fact that these wild Hazzards are semi tame, allowing you to observe them from close quarters gives a bit of a clue as do the stories told by the residents whose homes overlook the park. In 2013 I rehomed a five year old female Buzzard and a number of Harris Hawks one of which was a mature male, neither bird had ever been bred from previously. So having given the matter a great deal of thought and consideration I began to slowly

introduce the Buzzard to the male Harris hawks, bowing them out in each other's company, keeping them in the same mews area within sight of each other, at no time was there ever an issue, so in February 2014, having kept them very well fed in I placed a male Harris into one of my larger aviaries and once he had settled in I introduced the Buzzard hen.

Having bred a number of Harris hawks over recent years I was familiar with the breeding behaviour and habits of Harris hawks and with this pairing I saw nothing absolutely nothing, no obvious bonding, no interaction, all that could be said was that they seemed to be content in sharing the same aviary.

A nest platform was set up in one corner into which I placed a goodly layer of twigs and nesting material, the Harris would frequently perch on it but nothing more. Then at the end of March I saw both birds on the nest platform the hen was fiddling with twigs, as we moved into April the Buzzard hen began to spend an increasing amount of time on the nest platform with the Harris in close attendance, the first egg was laid on the 28th April, three eggs were laid the third being on the 3rd May, but that same day I found one egg broken on the aviary floor, from what I observed the male Harris took no part in the incubation, and I had no confidence that the eggs were fertile, I tried to candle the eggs on a couple of occasions but the thickness of the shells frustrated and defeated my efforts, on the 29th May I saw two DOC's stashed in the nest and that was the first time hint that all may have been going to plan.

35 days of incubation came and went, both Harris and Buzzard had been very tolerant of my periodic visits into the aviary, the Harris simply stayed at the other end and the Buzzard would simply stand up and let me check her eggs a far cry from the behaviour of my breeding Harris hawks. No sign of the eggs hatching and I must admit that it was a very empty and disappointing feeling, "Give them another day or so" kept going through my mind, but despite that extra couple of days and constantly going over my breeding notes and dates nothing changed. On the 3rd June I laid my hands over the eggs to find that both had pipped, both chicks could be heard tapping away and cheeping.

On the morning of the 4th June both eggs were well on the way to hatching and by the afternoon I had two very tired but fully hatched “Hazzards”, the hen brooded the chicks almost constantly but I never saw her feeding them or any interaction from the male Harris, where they feeding the chicks?



There was no evidence that they were and being new parents I started to have concerns. On the third day I took down some food and a pair of tweezers the hen simply stood up and watched while both chicks held their heads up, beaks gaping open to be fed, so I gave both chicks a feed and they both fed readily, the following day I gave them another feed, both looked well but I still had concerns, should I pull the chicks

and hand rear them? Imprint Buzzards? The falconry world seems to be united in saying “don’t, they scream” “You can’t trust them” all sorts of rumours and stories, but the risk of losing what to my knowledge were the first ever Harris Buzzard hybrids to have been produced in falconry them was a massive ever building amount of pressure. Then the next day the parental birds both started to get a little more defensive and I found DOC’s and other food items stashed all around the aviary, it seemed that their parenting skills were at last kicking in and that my worries had been groundless.

So time to step away and let nature take its course, an early morning check at five days of age showed that the chicks were looking good I had no



concerns all appeared to be going well, but late that same afternoon one chick was dead and the other looking very weak to the point that I had no confidence in it surviving the night. The hen oddly enough

was not going to give up her chicks without some resistance; this was the first time she had in any way objected to me checking either her eggs or chicks, she was clearly aware that something was wrong, I removed the dead chick to prevent it from being eaten, an examination showed it to be very thin with no evidence of food in its crop.



The surviving chick was given some hydration fluids and a small amount of food before being placed into a preheated brooder, I was kicking myself if I had followed my instincts and pulled the chicks a few days earlier chances were that I would have two healthy growing Hazzard chicks, now the possibility of losing everything was a very real possibility. The following morning revealed that I had one very sorry looking chick, but it was still alive, worry and TLC in equal amounts went hand in hand over the next few days, the chick slowly began to pick up and grow, I was gaining some

confidence that he would survive, by the middle of the month he was growing as young birds of prey do, at one point his fitted closed rings seemed huge and the next his legs were filling them at an alarming rate was Harry actually a Harriet? I had no reference one way or the other, but in time that growth spurt dropped off as his plumage developed and “Harry the Hazzard” was on his way into the world of falconry.

As he grew I often sat him outside in the warm sunshine while I cleaned his quarters, he thrived in it, to the point of being ridiculous, I have never known a hawk to sun worship as Harry does, each time I moved him into the shade or placed shading around him he was off to find the warmest spot he could find in direct sunshine. He also quickly developed the Harris liking for water and bathing habits even as a relatively young bird he would hop into a shallow bath, take a drink and then dip up and down putting his “butt” into the water as he held his stubby wings up.



The only set back which was to trouble him for some time was down to those long legs, due to being hand reared he was up and about earlier than nature had intended, despite carpet being fitted in the various containers he was reared in he strained his left leg which resulted in a twist to his foot that

was a bigger problem later once he was out in an aviary and being flown, the twist to his foot made him clumsy on the fist and on some types of post where he struggled to get a firm footing and grip. That said as he began to move around in his aviary and when being flown his grip improved and the twist became less pronounced, by the end of August there was a marked improvement which will hopefully continue to improve.

So “Harry the Hazzard” was a reality, stupid silly tame and friendly and far from vocal, not the screaming imprint that you hear stories about, he was placed out into an aviary and his twisted foot soon began to improve once he was moving about and using it, each fed time he would come straight to the front of the aviary and hang off of the netting or some other fixture calling to be fed, not a habit I wanted to encourage so it was a simple matter of opening the aviary door and laying on the ground a few feet away and letting him come out to be fed, due to the demands of the summer show season I had not really intended to do any real training with him, being happy to let him come out of his aviary to be fed and have him bowed out overlooking and getting familiar with the area in which he would in time be flown over.

That all changed at the beginning of the second week in August when Kristian my step son saw me feeding him and asked to take over the feeding, (*my step children and my grandchildren have always made a fuss of him, often sitting down and feeding him so he has always been sociable around people even strangers*) I left Kristian to entertain Harry and set up two high perches about 10' apart and simply called him to the respective perches with Kristian feeding him on arrival and that was it he was flying from perch to perch, no creance, no short hops to the fist, a repeat performance in the evening had him ranging out further to a distance of some 30' and he has never looked back, he is as responsive if not more so than any Harris that I have ever flown, he is also just as friendly and confiding as any Harris, which does on occasion prove to be an issue dependant on if you consider having a hawk use you as a perch to be a problem, “Harry” when being flown is quiet happy to land on my arm or shoulders if there is no other suitable perch available.

I frequently flew him two or three times per day and as he progressed I started to fly him even in poor weather conditions when the wind strength grounded some of my other birds, he proved to be remarkably buoyant displaying a very long deep wing. I flew him on for the 31st time on the 26th August to a dragged lure which was actually the front quarter of a squirrel; there was no hesitation he was after it like a shot, the fact that his food was moving obviously made him wonder what on earth was going on, as his “food” moved off he was more than happy to take up the chase on foot and then back to winged pursuit as it began to get away a very determined and promising first time after a lure gives me a great deal of confidence in respect of his future abilities.

I am still trying to identify which parts of him are Harris or Buzzard like and which bits are “new” so as it stands at the moment while he is still just under three months old, (*a month younger than most Harris hawks are taken from the parental aviary*) some more serious descriptive notes and comparisons.



Description: Harry is a notably broad bodied looking hawk and is larger than his parental male Harris Hawk flying at around 1lb 13oz, being on a par in size visually with his Buzzard mother although she clearly a much heavier bird. His talon and leg size and structure stand out, being of a similar size to that of a male Red Tailed Buzzard. The yellow coloured legs are bare, the feathering beginning at the thigh

as in the parental birds.

The wing, body and tail feathers are noticeably broad in structure; this feature is very noticeable when you compare the tail with that of a Harris hawk.

His wing is broad and deep, the inner wing formed by the secondary primaries appears to be deeper than that of the parental birds, the shafts of the six outer primaries pronounced and very finger like, the wing length



body to the longest tip with a tail length of 27cm (10 5/8")

The colouring of the Supercilium (eyebrow) is a light brown/gold colour, yet in the wild Hazzards that I have observed and photographed the supercilium has always been pure white and I would speculate that the birds I have seen are in their adult or at least second year plumage, images taken by photographers of young birds still with the parents show the brown coloured superciliun.



appears longer than the wings of either parent bird, giving the bird a marked agility, despite being very early days my initial thoughts are that "Harry" is more agile and manoeuvrable than a Harris hawk, and has a more buoyant flight than a Buzzard.

When fully extended his wing measures 52cm (20 ½") from the side of his

"Harry" and the other hybrids that I have seen have the white vent and under tail coverts and rump of the Harris hawk, the notably barred tail feathers have fine white tips. The white stripped red thighs of the Harris hawk are evident in the hybrid, which has also inherited those long Harris legs.



From above “Harry” has the plumage coloration of a Buzzard but the underparts more closely resemble a juvenile Harris hawk with the barred markings on both primary and secondary flight feathers with the red underwing coverts and similar tail markings. The hybrid has a very obvious white throat and chin.



(Hybrid top & Juvenile hen Harris above)

The head of some of the hybrids I have photographed appears to have a flat aspect while “Harry” has a rounder shaped head and this may be a characteristic between males and females. (*I have noted a similarity with Ferutails*).

If my observations of the wild Hazzards are correct then there will be little change in “Harry’s” appearance when he moults to his second year plumage other than this supercilium turning white.

I cannot claim to be the first person to produce the Hazzard hybrid, in the very early days I made contact with Bob Dalton my thinking being that with all his contacts if anyone will have heard of the existence of a Hazzard somewhere else chances are that Bob would know, but Bob’s response I think fair to say could be summed up as “Gob smacked” I think the words were “Good God keep me informed” and asked me to keep him updated with Harry’s progress.

So other than the wild birds in Plymouth was “Harry the Hazzard” unique? Well the answer to that as I found out is not quite, my next contacts were Keith and Babs at the IBR, did they know of the existence of another “Hazzard” the answer from Babs was “Sorry Steve but I am going to burst your bubble” cutting a long story short there is a guy in the north of the country who had a hen Buzzard and a pair of Harris hawks, he is not a falconer as such and simply as I understand it kept those birds, exercising them by simply opening the door to where he keeps them, the hen Harris died at some point and “*as they were getting lonely*” he put the male Harris and hen Buzzard together for company, last year (2013) they bred and produced the first ever captive bred chick that we presently know of, however that bird was subsequently lost when being flown with the parents and despite being IBR rung has never turned up. The same guy has produced two further chicks this year that hatched as Harry did in the beginning of June, as I understand it they are not A10’d and when I last made contact no decision had been made as to what would become of these birds.

So all I can claim (for what it is worth) is that “Harry” is the first planned and deliberately produced Harris hawk cross Common Buzzard hybrid intended for falconry, what his future holds is yet to be discovered, but as it stands I will be keeping the parental birds together with a view to letting them breed again in the coming 2015 season.