

The Making of a Jack Hawk

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The historical use of the word “make” in falconry refers to arranging a trained hawk’s first kill – when the hawk chases her first quarry she is “entered,” and if she catches it she is “made.” But in modern falconry parlance, the propagator of captive-bred hawks is said to “make” the offspring, in the sense that the breeder has arranged the mating, incubation of the eggs, and rearing of the progeny.



VICI, Queen of Jacks

In both of these senses of the word “make,” in 2008 I made the greatest jackrabbit hawk of the 31 captive-bred Harris’s hawks I have flown over the past 30 years. Her name is Vici, taken from the last word of a phrase made famous by Julius Caesar after his swift military defeat of the Bosporan Kingdom – “*Veni, Vidi, Vici.*” (“I came, I saw, I conquered.”)

Vici’s greatness is expressed in her flying, a combination of flamboyant style, recklessness, persistence, and lethality that gives me the same feeling as riding a roller coaster – a stomach-churning swing from exhilaration to fear. Many a time while watching Vici in pursuit I have laughed out loud at her incredible pace and spectacular vertical moves, only to grimace in panic when I see her crash into the sagebrush in a maximum velocity, followed by the crunching sound of her body absorbing the impact and the

frantic, powerful blows of the jackrabbit’s hind feet against her chest. Vici’s uninhibited enthusiasm for the hunt could easily lead to her injury or death, but the joy of her flying makes the risk worth taking – for both of us, I think.

The competition. Vici had some serious competition for the title of “greatest.” Of the 1600 jackrabbits my hawks have caught, Killer (Vici’s great-aunt) was responsible for 184. Killer, a daughter of Lola and granddaughter of White Wing, was the pick of the litter when I visited Tom and Jenn Coulson in 1999. Killer was my first truly amazing jackrabbit hawk, and still stands out in my mind as the friendliest and most sociable Harris’s hawk I’ve ever flown. Like all really great gamehawks Killer has an insatiable desire to chase

and kill. Her appetite is legendary. She caught jackrabbits in every imaginable way, from simple tailchases to long vertical stoops from a slope soar. She was nearly killed in 2003 when a Nevada black-tail dragged her through a small hole in the sagebrush, snapping her neck backwards and leaving her unconscious. She couldn't stand for more than a week, and several times I considered putting her down to end her suffering. But a month after her near-death experience Killer recovered sufficiently to go back outside to her chamber. Still, her coordination and mobility were so severely impaired that she was never flown on game again.



Killer feeding Apache



Q in her first season

Killer's younger sister, Q, flew – and still acts – very much like Killer. Q was hatched in 2003, the same year Killer was injured. Q learned her trade as Killer's castmate, and the jackrabbits fell in droves to this deadly duo. Between 2003 and 2005 Q racked up 125 jack kills, and surely would have many more under her name in the quarry book had I continued to fly her. But Hurricane Katrina wiped out Tom and Jenn's Harris's hawk breeding program in August 2005, so I sent Killer (and her mate, Milo) to the Coulsons, and retired Q from the jackrabbit fields to my breeding chamber (paired with Neon), her genes being far too valuable to risk now that her mother, Lola, was dead.

In 2003 I had Killer and Milo molting together when Killer unexpectedly began to lay eggs. Milo (not yet two years old) had been doing his part, since all three eggs were fertile. But Milo's youth and inexperience as a breeder led him to spend more time playing with the eggs than incubating them, and after



Apache

he broke two of them I artificially incubated the remaining egg. That egg hatched into Apache, to this day the only female offspring ever produced by Killer. Apache was trained and flown by Mark Harrington in Colorado from 2003-2005. Mark returned her to me about the time I began to devote my full attention to summer jackrabbit hawking in the Great Basin, and I flew Apache for three short (6-7 week) seasons in 2006-2008. Apache is not what I would call a gifted flyer in terms of speed or style, nor is she better than an average footer. But she has two qualities that I love in a Harris's hawk. Apache instantly rebounds and pursues after every missed stoop, and she is a flawless cast partner, always eager to set up a kill for the other hawk, or assist after the initial catch is made. She is never territorial or crabby. Partly because of her placid nature and simple, businesslike flying style I never thought of Apache as one of my top guns, yet she ranks #2 in jackrabbit kills with 215. Apache is back with Mark again, and now I understand why he enjoys her so much. It's satisfying to know that Killer's genes live on in Apache.

But Vici's stiffest competition for highest honors is her own mother, Shadow.

Shadow was born in 2004, a daughter of Jenn Coulson's Ten, granddaughter of Lola, great-granddaughter of White Wing.

Shadow has flown jacks head-to-head with her aunt Q and cousin Apache, and at the end of the season the quarry book confirms what my eyes have told me. Apache is a very good jack hawk. Q is a great jack hawk like her sister, Killer. But Shadow is better than either of them – a jackrabbit hawk with the kind of phenomenal talent that any falconer would be lucky to get once in a lifetime.

Shadow's greatness flows from her intensity on quarry. Every jack is chased hard, every turn is pulled at maximum g-force, every stoop is made with power, every missed stoop triggers a renewed pursuit. Her grip strength is tremendous. If she can get even one foot on a jack, its fate is sealed.

Shadow burns through huge quantities of food to fuel her

Shadow on a Christmas Valley jackrabbit



Chaco (foreground) and Shadow (background) filling the gene pool

high-energy flying style. She is my all-time #1 in total kills (570) and jackrabbits (433). In just one of my short hunting seasons (6-7 weeks) Shadow has made as many as 139 kills, including 102 jackrabbits.

With a pedigree and hunting credentials like that, I had high hopes in 2007 when I first paired Shadow with Chaco, a male I made in 2002 by linebreeding WD-40 (a White Wing daughter) and her nephew Jupiter (a son of Lola). The offspring of Shadow and Chaco have an inbreeding coefficient of 9% – a little more closely related than first cousins. By 31 March 2008 I held in my hands Shadow's first clutch of the year – four pale blue tributes to 26 years and 5 generations of selective breeding for the traits that make a truly outstanding Harris's hawk, and 2 generations of White Wing linebreeding to intensify the qualities that have endeared White Wing's many descendants to hundreds of falconers around the world. Since 1998 every Harris's hawk I have flown has White Wing in its ancestry, and all the hawks I've bred since 2006 have White Wing on both sides of their pedigree.



Vici's first season. Each egg holds a world of promise in a small package – the distillation of decades of effort in breeding and flying Harris's hawks. Once laid, the eggs receive meticulous care in my artificial incubators, with detailed records kept on every aspect of the process. I personally attend every hatching event, giving assistance when needed. It never ceases to amaze me that the wet, helpless, newly-hatched chick curled up in the palm of my hand will be racing across the high desert to hammer jackrabbits just four months hence.

The egg that would become Vici was "made" on 31 March, the last egg in Shadow's clutch. [But in a very real sense it took nearly 30 years to make that egg!] Vici hatched on 3 May and was placed in the brooder. I extracted her DNA from blood vessels left behind in the eggshell membranes, and after a couple of hours of work in my lab I knew that she was a female. Five days later I moved her outside to be reared by her foster parents, Q and Neon, Vici's great-aunt and great-uncle. On her 11th day I banded her, barely able to squeeze the RW band over her rapidly growing foot. Vici grew up with her siblings, learning the rules of Harris's hawk etiquette from her foster parents. The open chain-link breeding chambers exposed her to the constant activity of people, dogs, and vehicles. After she fledged, she routinely came back to the nest to visit whenever I stood beside it.



Minutes after hatching, with RW band

I had plans to fly two new Harris's hawks in 2008, and after careful observation of the eight eyasses I bred that year, I chose two sisters on 12 July: Una and Vici, 11 and 10 weeks old. A week out of the chamber both hawks were jumping to the glove. Two days later we made the annual pilgrimage to Christmas Valley for 6 weeks of summer jack hawking. Una and Vici learned the fundamentals of their craft by flying as castmates with their cousin Apache.

From my hawking journal:

27 July 2008 Apache 901g Una 892g Vici 785g

Despite this being just her third day in the field, Vici behaved amazingly well, keying off Apache's pursuits like an old pro. Apache went after a jack, missed, and Vici launched at attack from the T-perch. After a 50+ yard chase Vici angled down and made her maiden jack catch! She stepped off immediately when Apache came in to grab the jack's head – excellent manners.

After 3 weeks of jack hawking experience, Vici began to show a glimmer of her potential as her weight and muscle development increased.

16 August 2008 Apache 885g Una 910g Vici 815g

Vici was at her all-time high weight, but it didn't handicap her performance. She doesn't hit down on every jack, but she smoked one before Apache could get there. It was a 100+ yard flight, to boot.

... Apache had quite a crop by now, but still put in a good effort on the next jack, which she caught on the rebound. I would have been happy to stop here, with 6 jacks and all hawks catching, but Vici was just hitting her stride. She caught her second jack of the day no more than 30 yards from the truck – a sage-crunching hit.

20 August 2008 Apache 897g Una 914g Vici 865g

By now the south wind was really howling, but Apache and Vici came out anyway. Vici's weight now includes ~14g of backpack and transmitter. The girls were not 50 yards from the truck when they got a small jack going. They took turns trying to catch it. Finally, Apache was grounded, with Vici able to take one more shot. She missed, but turned the little jack right back into Apache, who caught the jack in self defense as it tried to run over her.

We continued in a big loop, getting some tough flights. On the final approach to the truck a good-sized jack broke downwind 50 yards out. Vici was off. The jack tried to turn around to run upwind, but Vici cut the corner crosswind and hit the jack at full throttle – fantastic!

By the end of her first season Vici has become an accomplished game hawk.

3 September 2008 Apache 920g Una 990g Vici 889g

As long as the hawks stay healthy and the weather stays good we are having 4-5 hours of great hawking every day. Today's flights were long and complex. Fortunately, Apache and Vici are in terrific physical condition. Apache made her first kill of the day from the top of the tallest juniper on the hill – very pretty. Vici caught her jack in an amazing rebounding pursuit. The catch was made 308 paces from the T-perch – quality stuff! The jack was stone dead when I (finally) arrived.

Vici's first-season total of 30 jacks put her slightly ahead of her sister Una, who had 26 jack kills. But my end-of-season notes reflect a slight preference for Una. Una made some impressively long pursuits, and has a somewhat calmer disposition than Vici. Still, I never make up my mind on the true merits of a Harris's hawk until I have flown her for at least one season as an adult, because there is usually quite an improvement in performance after the first season. A Harris's hawk's first season is characterized by reckless pursuits and boundless enthusiasm – tremendous fun to watch but not necessarily the most productive flying style. And although most Harris's hawks become less intense in their second (and subsequent) seasons, the number of kills often increases dramatically as the hawk substitutes experience and cunning for the impetuousness of youth. My very favorite Harris's hawks retain their youthful intensity for their whole careers, and when combined with experience this is not only a highly lethal combination, but produces a flying style that is very, very exciting to watch. Vici is one of these rare gems.

Vici goes head-to-head with her mother, Shadow. In 2009 I got a brief opportunity to fly Una and Vici with their mother, Shadow. My eyebrows went up on several occasions when Vici outshone Shadow – an outcome that I would have deemed practically impossible given Shadow's impressive record of accomplishment in the field since 2004.

18 August 2009 Shadow 1010g Una 952g Vici 909g

Vici really showed her stuff this morning, catching 4 jacks before Shadow could catch a single one. Vici caught them in every possible way – pinning them and catching them on the reflesh, pulling them down from behind, and hammerheading from a high pitch-up. She pursued them at any distance and rebounded instantly after every miss.

The hawks are putting a lot into their flying now. If they can avoid injury they are going to run up a score. They've caught 42 jacks in the past week!

Unfortunately, my father died the following day, so falconry had to take a back seat to more pressing matters for the next several months. But in this short season (just 24 days), Vici ended up with 35 jacks, while Shadow caught 24 and Una caught 23. I had never seen a hawk catch more jacks than Shadow, but Vici did it. I considered the possibility that

Shadow was not at her best, having been used as a breeder, and not flown, for the previous two years. It also occurred to me that I might have bred a jack hawk – Vici – even better than Shadow. I could scarcely wait for the 2010 season to see how the competition between two great jack hawks would play out!



A season to remember in 2010. Over the previous 10 seasons (2000-2009) my Harris's hawks had made well over 2000 kills, so I had every reason to expect that the 2010 season would yield plenty of top-notch flying. But the quality of hawking exceeded even my high expectations, and I had (by a considerable margin) the best hawking season of my life. Honestly, how could it be otherwise? I was flying my two finest jack hawks, the products of 30 years of selective breeding, in an area abounding with jackrabbits, with week after week of daily hard flying that put the hawks at the absolute pinnacle of their physical and mental capabilities. The results were awe-inspiring.

31 July 2010 Shadow 1021g Una 946g Vici 894g

After almost 2 weeks of flying, the hawks are really hitting their marks now. Shadow and Vici continue to rain death on the jacks. They are a great team, with Shadow generally leading the flights. Vici takes advantage of any misses. Both hawks caught 2 jacks, all big ones (including one of the biggest black-tails I've ever seen).

1 August 2010 Shadow 1025g Una 946g Vici 913g

Cold (34°F) and calm this morning. Shadow and Vici were really flying well today, taking some incredibly long slips and putting pincer moves on the jacks. Vici caught the first one in a vertical stoop. Shadow caught the next 2 in full power tailchases. On the way back to the truck Vici speared a big jack and held it with one foot until the cavalry arrived.

3 August 2010 Shadow 1019g Una 944g Vici 908g

The first flight today was the best of the summer so far. I parked the truck, dropped the tailgate, and got Shadow and Vici on the T-perch. I climbed the berm about 20 feet from the truck, but before I got to the top Vici spun around on the T-perch and launched to the north across the short rabbitbrush. She pumped hard and fast all the way across the flat, but I never saw the jack ahead of her. She disappeared into the sagebrush on the hill. Then Shadow (finally) followed. I never heard an impact or a jack squealing. But 262 running paces later I found Vici jammed in the sage holding the jack's back end. Shadow was on the head of a very dead, donkey-sized black-tail. The sun had not even cleared the horizon yet!

4 August 2010 Shadow 1038g Una 959g Vici 919g

Shadow and Vici have "gone weasel" on me. They are so strong and so confident that every jack in sight is in mortal danger. Within an hour they caught 6 jacks. Vici accounted for 4 of them, and Shadow collected a brace. I am lucky to have these two hawks.

5 August 2010 Shadow 1036g Una 964g Vici 932g

I hadn't even closed the tailgate before Shadow took off and caught the first rabbit. Not 50 yards from the truck she caught number 2. Shadow hardly missed anything today, which didn't leave much for Una to work with. Shadow had 4 jacks in less than an hour.

I continued to fly Una, but swapped Shadow for Vici. You would never know that Vici was heavy. She worked every jack like her life depended on it. She caught 4 again today, including a lactating doe. Una tried hard but was outgunned.

We were back at the truck and headed for home at 0822 – 8 jacks in 2.5 hours. These hawks are in the zone!

8 August 2010 Shadow 1025g Una 972g Vici 926g

Vici is without a doubt the best hawk I've ever bred. Her most exciting flight today ended without a kill, but it was a testament to her perseverance. She flew out 100 yards but missed. Una's followup stoop also missed. Vici rebounded and chased the jack – HARD – another 100-150 yards. Incredible crash at the end. She continued to fly like this on every flush, and ended up with 3 jacks.

10 August 2010 Shadow 1031g Una 990g Vici 934g

This is the fun part of the season. The hawks are flying great and are a joy to watch. We hadn't gotten far before Shadow caught the first jack of the day, number 500 lifetime kills for her. She's my first hawk to reach that milestone.

Una and Vici were particularly intense today, especially Vici. I watch her fly with a feeling of amazement and fear – amazed at her speed and style, but afraid that she'll be hurt. She caught the first 2 jacks in phenomenal fashion. Una must have been inspired, and caught 2 jacks for herself. Each hawk added another on the way back to the truck.

18 August 2010 Shadow 1032g Una 1020g Vici 940g

All of the hawks are getting heavier, but have never flown better. Una creamed the first jack we saw this morning, but wouldn't eat her tradeoff tidbit until she had a chance to produce a 20g casting!

Vici led most of the flights, catching a big jack by the hindquarters. Una spared Vici a beating by securing the head. The head-and-heel roping continued when Una tackled a monster jack. She was buried under the kicking jack, but Vici had an eye-popping grip on the head. Both hawks were covered with dust, but were determined to hold the jack.

21 August 2010 Shadow 1053g Una 1013g Vici 953g

Una and Vici are perhaps the best cast I've ever flown, though Q and Shadow would give them a run for their money. They really team up, with Vici almost always getting the first stoop, but Una trailing in case Vici misses. Vici kept her 29-day killing streak alive, ending up with 3 jacks. Una made 2 amazing catches herself.

24 August 2010 Shadow 1038g Una 1002g Vici 959g

Vici put on a show of speed, agility, and desire that makes her one of the top jack hawks I've ever flown. She spots them at incredible distances, powers over to the jack, climbing all the way, and puts in the most devastating and stylish stoops I've ever seen. She turned another hat trick today.

26 August 2010 Shadow 1040g Una 1033g Vici 994g

I was expecting Vici to be a little off, since she's about 100g over what I used to think was her flying weight. Apparently, there is no upper limit for her. She was gasping in the gathering heat after every flight and crash. She didn't stop until she had caught 4 jacks, including 2 monsters. Una did her best, but it's hard to keep up with Vici. Una saved the day when Vici was buried under a kicking jack. I couldn't reach in far enough to help, but Una roared in to get the job done.

27 August 2010 Shadow 1048g Una 1023g Vici 978g

Well, every dog has its day, and today was Una's. Even though Vici initiated most of the flights, and got in most of the first stoops, Una batted cleanup to perfection. She caught the first jack, and

then 3 more for her first “quad.” Vici doubled, and had the most exciting kill of the day (for me). She turned a jack back towards me. Vici was making knots to catch it, but when the jack saw me it froze. Vici pitched up, I threw my T-perch at the jack, and it bolted back the way it came. Vici sucked it up from behind and Una stapled the head.

1 September 2010 Shadow 1061g Una 1058g Vici 1024g

The wind came up for Una and Vici. Vici produced two castings of ~30g total, but still gained 26g on yesterday’s crop – 150g of warm jackrabbit. The awesome flying continues. Una absolutely destroyed the first jack to flush. However, Vici had the flight of the day. A jack flushed downwind. Vici climbed into the wind about 25 feet, then banked downwind in pursuit. I knew from the sound of the high-speed impact that there would be damage. The jack was skinned from tail to ribs.

Vici wasn’t done. She caught 2 more jacks in difficult flights – kills number 100 and 101 for her this season.

2 September 2010 Shadow 1060g Una 1041g Vici 1009g

It was a good day to be Vici’s wing(wo)man. Una hammered 4 jacks, every one of them set up by Vici. Still, hats off to Una for always being in the right place, and for putting out a maximum effort smash every time.

I thought Vici’s string of 40 days with a kill might come to an end. But this gem has no quit in her. She kept her streak alive with a highlight-reel tubed-out downwind stoop to catch a monster jack in the wide open. The jack was delivering all the punishment it could dish out. Vici had it by the head, legs stretched to the breaking point, with the jack’s body between her feet and chest. Gasping, dirty, but in control. And I’ll be damned if she didn’t catch another on the way back to the truck – kill number 200 lifetime for her.

10 September 2010 Shadow 1089g Una 1068g Vici 1027g

Una continues to provide thunder to Vici’s lightning. Vici worked every flush, doing all the spotting, but with Una making some bone-crunching followup smashes. Una caught 3 this way – fine catches, all. Vici managed to pound 1 jack for herself.

Christmas Valley 2010

	Shadow	Una	Vici	TOTAL
black-tailed jackrabbit	105	87	114	306
cottontail	4	1	0	5
California quail	2	2	0	4
misc	9	23	11	43
TOTAL	120	113	125	358

In 50 days of summer hawking Shadow and her two daughters, Una and Vici, each made more than 100 kills. That's the first time I've had three hawks reach that mark in the same season. Shadow set her own single-season jackrabbit kill record with 105. But, even when setting a personal best, Shadow's remarkable performance was eclipsed by Vici's brilliance as a jack hawk. And the raw numbers don't tell the whole story. Many (if not most) of Una's jackrabbit kills were set up by Vici or Shadow. Their ability to spot jacks in the distance, and their vicious initial stoops, often put Una in the ideal position to make the catch.

With three seasons in Christmas Valley, Vici has established herself at the apex of a pyramid of elite jackrabbit hawks. With any luck she will rule the skies of the Great Basin for many years to come.

Epilogue. In late September I took Una and Vici to Wyoming for our annual group hawking trip with Tom and Jenn Coulson and Bob and Mary Armbruster. This event gives my battered jack hawks a chance to chase some mountain cottontails, and to take a crack at white-tailed jacks in short sage and bunchgrass. Again this year both Una and Vici took full advantage of their opportunity to add these species to their season's quarry list, while the hawkers enjoyed sweeping vistas, spectacular scenery, terrific sport, and camaraderie.

Normally my hawking season ends in September. But this year we had a very special hawking opportunity in December. My UW faculty colleague, Jeff Riffell, mentioned that during his spring field work near Saguaro National Park he had noticed an exceptionally large number of antelope jackrabbits (*Lepus alleni*). Now that really caught my attention! Back in 1998 I went to the Sonoran Desert with the Coulsongs and Dan Pike to hawk antelope jackrabbits, but never even saw one. Then in 2009 Tom Coulson's Harris's hawk, Thelma, caught an antelope jack near Tucson. Tom saved the jack's head for me, and the colossal skull from that kill now rests on the shelf above my desk, dwarfing the adjacent skulls of white-tailed and black-tailed jacks. So I couldn't pass up this new opportunity to try once again for the elusive and spectacular antelope jackrabbit.

I planned to meet Tom and Jenn, and Bob and Mary, in Tucson just before Christmas. Since Una and Vici had been on vacation since September, I needed to get them in some kind of decent physical condition before making the trek to the Sonoran Desert. So I spent a week in Christmas Valley on the way to Tucson, giving Una and Vici some much-needed exercise.

When I arrived in Christmas Valley there were four inches of slushy snow on the ground. It was warm enough for me to hawk in a T-shirt – fairly unusual for a December hunt in the high desert! I parked the truck and opened the tailgate. Una and Vici hopped from their boxes onto the T-perch just like old times. They had never hunted in snow before, but it didn't seem to bother them. I hadn't gone ten steps when Vici launched, stroking low and fast over the snow. Within 100 yards she had wrapped up her first December black-tailed jackrabbit, staining the snow with fresh blood.

By the end of that week in Christmas Valley, Una and Vici were reasonably fit, and flying exceptionally well. The weather returned to normal, with overnight lows in the single digits and afternoon highs in the mid-30s. The hard flying on winter jacks, and the cold days and nights, had the hawks's metabolism (and enthusiasm) running in high gear.

On the day before we were to leave for Tucson, I took the girls to a tract of sagebrush and greasewood to see if we could scare up a pygmy rabbit for Vici, who has yet to catch one. [She's a real jackrabbit specialist.] But when Vici blasted off the T-perch her sights were set somewhere in the distance – too far away to be a pygmy rabbit. Una joined the flight, trailing Vici. Both hawks were climbing hard to keep the quarry in sight. When a buck mule deer bolted from the sagebrush I assumed that he was startled by the hawks's bells, and that the hawks were in pursuit of a distant jack. However, the hawks had bigger game in mind.

When Una and Vici were directly over the racing buck they folded up and smashed the mulie's head with all the force they could deliver. The deer collapsed as if struck by a thunderbolt. I was at least as surprised as the deer.

I had a moment to wonder how I was going to dispatch a 150-pound deer with my 2½-inch pocket knife. The deer was thrashing in the sagebrush, bleating in distress from the intense pain inflicted by the impact and talon wounds. I was running towards the scene, reaching for my pipsqueak blade, when the deer rolled over the hawks, kicking both of them off its head.

In spite of the punishment meted out by the deer, Vici wasn't finished. She jumped off the ground and went after the deer in another climbing attack. Fortunately, the deer recognized that it was being hunted, and juked Vici's followup stoop.

I found Una on the ground at the site of the catch, favoring her right leg, which was badly sprained but not broken or bleeding. When Vici returned to the T-perch her right hallux talon was torn and missing the outer half of the sheath, exposing the bony core, and bleeding profusely. Despite their painful injuries, both hawks hunted all the way back to the truck, and Vici hammered a jackrabbit. Marveling at the gameness of these two hawks, I recalled a passage from William Ernest Henley's poem *Invictus*:

*In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.*

With both of my hawks injured I briefly considered skipping the 3300 mile round trip to Tucson. But the Coulsons, who had already driven from Louisiana to Tucson, had found good numbers of antelope jackrabbits in their extensive scouting. Jenn offered to try to repair Vici's rear talon with a spare talon sheath that she had on hand. So I loaded the hawks in their boxes and pointed my truck south through 500 miles of Nevada snowstorms.

Jenn has quite a talent for getting banged-up hawks back in the game. Within an hour of my arrival in Tucson she had epoxied a replacement talon sheath onto Vici's hallux. The talon would get a trial by fire the following day.

The next morning we parked in a field of head-high creosote bush and nasty cholla. The gravelly ground was littered with the giant yellow-green fecal pellets of antelope jackrabbits. Tom, Jenn, and Bob got their hawks out. Vici hopped up to my T-perch. It didn't take long to find some action.

A few minutes into the hunt Vici spotted a jack sneaking through the creosote bush, and she was off like a rocket. In her typical attack style, she pumped at full speed, climbing slightly to keep the jack in view. About 100 yards out she started her stoop, tucking her wings as she picked up speed, and turning with the jack. She hit down hard, and the sound of the jackrabbit's scream left no doubt that it was a large antelope jack. Tom's hawk, Storm, was right behind Vici and secured the head. The repaired talon on Vici's foot worked perfectly!

With that catch, Vici added a third jackrabbit species to her season list. The antelope jackrabbit is a remarkable animal with very long limbs, monumental ears with heavy veining to dissipate heat, and beautiful short fur, intensely white on the belly. For any Harris's hawker the antelope jackrabbit is a real trophy, memorable for its distinctive appearance, unique Sonoran Desert habitat, and imposing size.

Vici ended her 2010 season with 150 kills, including 124 jackrabbits of three different species. She is now my #3 in jack kills, surpassing Killer for that distinction. Long may she reign as the Queen of Jacks!



Vici and her antelope jackrabbit. Photo by Jenn Coulson.

The future. Without a doubt Vici will be the mother of my next generation of Harris's hawks. I am very much looking forward to flying Vici with her own daughters, always hoping to find the next "greatest jackrabbit hawk"!



Good hawking!

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