



Revered as a nature writer, Stephen Bodio is also a self-taught expert on the ancient sport of falconry. Here he handles a Harris' hawk.

# THE GREAT UNKNOWN

Based in tiny Magdalena, the sportsman and naturalist Stephen Bodio might just be the finest writer New Mexico doesn't even know it's got.

BY JOHN MULLER PHOTOS BY STEFAN WACHS

*"[The mountains] stand on the western horizon, above the peppered desert, ice-white and Pleistocene in the morning, a flat blue against the sky's dull red in the dusk. A high plateau lies at their base, hidden by foothills that mark the edge of the Río's rift valley. I had a life up there on that plateau, twenty-six miles away, two thousand feet above, in another world. I could see the mountains there, too. We said that was why we stayed."*

—Stephen Bodio, *Querencia*

FOR SEVEN YEARS, the only way for the outside world to reach New Mexico's best-kept literary secret was to dial into the Golden Spur Saloon, the lone beer joint in Magdalena (pop. 926), and leave a message with Millie behind the bar. In the late afternoon, when the heat broke, Stephen Bodio would set aside his day's writing and wander down the street, and Millie would pour him a chilled vodka double and let him know whether his publisher had called that morning. He used to bring flowers to the saloon on Secretaries' Day.

There are a lot of reasons people might want to call Steve Bodio. For just about any question on the world's wild places, the living things you'll encounter there, and in particular how one might go about catching or eating them, he's as knowledgeable as they come. If a hawk's been snacking on your chickens and you need to find it a good home, his might be the only adobe in the state with a raptor roost in the dining room. If you're a gun gal, he'll talk your ear off about the craftsmanship of English antiques.

He's written volumes on pigeons and coursing dogs, both of which have a place in his rambling menagerie. More than anything, though, the man can talk about books.

Bodio is what can only be called a writer's writer's writer. Callers to his far-flung office include a roster of authors that could rival any nature-writing prize committee's Rolodex. He and Annie Proulx go back to *Gray's Sporting Journal* in the seventies, where she made her name publishing short stories and he wrote a book review column that's still talked about in reverent tones among the cognoscenti. He keeps letters from people like Jim Harrison, who died last year, and Thomas McGuane, one of his heroes, who checks in occasionally from Montana. Helen Macdonald, the author of *H Is for Hawk*, summed up her admiration in an introduction to one of his books: "You might have come across Bodio's elegant book reviews. ... You might have read *Querencia*, his great and moving meditation on love and loss and home. But if Bodio is new to you, then know that the book you are holding is by one of the great modern sportsman-naturalist-writers." »

Stephen Joseph Bodio was born in Boston on March 4, 1950, the oldest of nine children. His father was a quick-tempered Italian engineer who loved hunting and surf fishing and wore an evil-eye charm all his life in spite of his scientific bent. Bodio's mother, a Scotch-Irish Catholic, taught him to read at the age of three from Kipling's *Jungle Book*—an influence he's never shaken. In their old neighborhood of Dorchester, "the only animals were mice that drowned in your bedside water glass and dead pigeons," he says, but the family soon moved outside the city to Easton, in those days a child naturalist's paradise. Because their house was built on a marsh, he could go down to the basement and find five different species of frog, which he cataloged with loving care.

When Bodio was 13, his gang of friends checked out some falconry books from the library and got it in their heads to try the ancient sport for themselves. Armed with nothing but yardsticks and badminton netting, they trekked out to Plymouth and managed to capture a pair of kestrels. Within a week, Bodio had started to train his bird. "I thought that the only thing better than pulling down a hawk from the sky by trickery was to return him there and have him come back to your call because he wanted to," he later wrote in his first book, *A Rage for Falcons*—in his own estimation "the first literary falconry book since T.H. White," whose *The Goshawk* appeared in 1951.

At 17, he went to Boston College to study evolutionary biology, but he lasted less than a year before dropping out to write for local weeklies and hunting magazines. He got married—to a childhood friend who'd been part of that first falconry outing—and then divorced. In 1976, as a bored freelancer with little more to his name than "five hundred books, a master falconer's license, and a captive-bred lanner falcon," he met a woman at a Boston party who could talk Eliot and Austen, smoked unfiltered Camels with abandon, and had a passion for breeding Central American margay cats. Her name was Betsy.

The word "love" seems altogether inadequate to describe what followed between them. *Querencia* tells the story of the next seven years, as Steve and Betsy drove out to visit the writer and hunting dog aficionado M.H. "Dutch" Salmon at his home near Quemado and wound up renting a house along the highway. What was supposed to be a summer in Magdalena turned to winter and then summer again. The house filled up with dogs, birds, and books as the couple settled into a writing routine that was too peaceful to leave.

"The dawns were lush and sweet, the early skies scrubbed and cloudless before the afternoon's gather-

ing thunder," Bodio writes. "We'd sleep well, morning and night, and make love in shaded rooms. Meadowlarks whistled atop the cholla, and blue quail cackled their repetitions from our fence posts. ... I would stand outside for hours, looking, not really goofing off, knowing I should go in soon and do whatever was necessary for my work."

He was happy to find that his hobbies gave him the entrée to a New Mexican culture where old aristocratic ways of hunting may not have carried the same cachet as in New England, but nevertheless earned nods of recognition for their outdoorsman's ethos. One of his first friends in Magdalena was a man named John Davila, who showed up on his doorstep one day with a goshawk on his fist. "You a falconer?" Bodio inquired.

"No," Davila replied, with a rancher's matter-of-factness.

"How'd you catch the hawk?"

"Common sense."

"Why'd you catch it?"

"It was killing my fighting chickens. They're fifty dollars a neck."

"Why didn't you shoot it?"

"It's cooler," Davila growled, "than any old chicken."

Telling a story he's been repeating for 30 years, Bodio laughs. "I knew I'd found a friend," he says. The men remain close, although getting ahold of Davila is always a "random proposition"—you just have to wait for him to finish up at the ranch and pass through town, an arrangement that suits them both.

As much as it's a love letter to a woman and a patch of earth, *Querencia* is also an act of mourning. In 1986, Betsy, who was 20 years Bodio's senior, died of lung cancer. "Heartbroken" doesn't seem to cover it. "I think people go a little crazy when they lose someone they love," he says. He uprooted for a time to Boston and Maine. He pursued relationships that nearly got him shot. Finally, for reasons both simple and opaque, he decided to return to Magdalena and resume writing. He's fond of quoting a cowboy saying he once read: "It's hard to see what a man would like about this part of the country. It is hot, dry, and dusty in the summer, cold, dry, and dustier in the winter. I left it twice, but both places I went were worse."

According to a legend recounted by David Wallace Adams in *Three Roads to Magdalena*, the town takes its name from an incident in one of the early Spanish *entradas* into New Mexico. A small band of soldiers was exploring the surrounding plateau when an Apache raid drove them up into the



**Facing page:** Bodio has carved a niche in Magdalena that suits his life as a writer, sportsman, and naturalist, surrounded by pigeons and pelts.

mountains. As they turned to establish a defense, the Spaniards were astonished to see the Apaches retreating, and came to attribute their good fortune to a feminine shape on the mountainside that reminded their priest of a folktale about Mary Magdalene.

Whether due to divine intervention or plain old isolation, the various groups who've come together here have traditionally gotten along. "The virtue of Magdalena," Bodio says, "is that it's a truly odd town. I think it's because it was a railroad town and a cow town and a mining town. It had all kinds of people, and they had to learn to at least live in the same place."

His friends in town range from ranchers and Navajo workers to a world-class cellist whose overflowing shelves hold worn copies of Bodio's books. But he's come to accept that his profession will always seem peculiar to many of his neighbors, just another eccentricity, like his falcons and his Australian Akubra hats, that they tolerate with magnanimity. "I get the question 'Are you going to write another book?' That book being *Querencia*," he says. "They don't realize that I've written ten and edited five."

Magdalena's not alone in that regard. Because most of his work is organized by interest, Bodio's readers tend to sort themselves into niches. Only *Querencia* speaks to a general audience interested in seeing New Mexico's otherworldly ecosystem sketched out in startling prose. But that risks giving short shrift to the rest of his books, which work the same spell on a variety of arcane subjects, rendering them chatty and erudite and lyrical and always inimitably his. There's plenty of home in these books, too. In *Eagle Dreams*, for instance, he comes to understand the fantastical world of eagle hunting in modern Mongolia ("AD 1200 with TV antennae") by way of analogy: The brown hills behind a mounted Kazakh hunter resemble the Bear Mountains, north of Magdalena; wood-pole barriers on the outskirts of Ulaanbaatar become coyote fences.

If one thing has kept Bodio from getting restless since his days of taking phone calls at the Spur, it's the arrival of the internet, which has brought a world's worth of research material and recondite conversation to his Magdalena living room. He started seeking out people who share his interests "as soon as it was possible, basically." He's kept an eclectic personal blog called *Stephen Bodio's Querencia* ([stephenbodio.blogspot.com](http://stephenbodio.blogspot.com)) since 2005, and takes great pleasure in a private email group populated by authors, computer scientists, lawyers, art professors, and others who share a love of hunting and literature. They call themselves the Quilt and Gun Club.

One of his best friends in the club is a biologist named Carlos Martínez del Río, the scion of an aristo-



A Harris' hawk cared for by Matt Mitchell (right) flies toward Bodio, whose wife, Libby, looks on.



cratic Mexican family who had read and fallen in love with *Querencia* long before stumbling across Bodio's name in an email thread. "I thought, My God, what a lucky person I am to interact with a person I admire this deeply," Martínez del Río says. "There's a lot of nature writing that is uninformed by hard-core biology. It becomes very irritating for a biologist to read that kind of stuff." But not so with Bodio's work, which can talk just as easily about the causes of the passenger pigeon's extinction as the poetry of Gary Snyder. "Imagine the thrill for me," he says, "to suddenly have a friend that is a bit like a naturalist from the 19th century."

For all that, it's Magdalena that keeps Bodio grounded. In the early nineties, as he began to pull out of his post-Betsy tailspin, he met and eventually married a woman named Libby, whose matronly gentleness makes it easy to overlook that she spent years trekking the Himalayas and working as a guide for Outward Bound. Friends like John Davila, wary of seeing Bodio with an outsider in his fragile state, gave the newcomer the third degree. "I was just who I am. I figure if they don't like you, oh well," Libby said with a shrug. "I thought it was sort of neat, actually, that they cared enough that they didn't want to see him do anything stupid."

One bright Sunday morning last summer, the Bodios' computer lay nearly buried under a pile of books and papers, leaving just enough room for Libby to type while Steve dictated emails. (Seven years ago he was diagnosed with Parkinson's, and though he insists he's usually fine, a keyboard can be frustrating.) The living room was strewn with printed artifacts of their life together: Sierra Club bulletins, a set of the *Britannica*, a shelf dedicated to the Himalayas. The paintings on the walls ranged from studies of pigeons and vultures to a colorful original by the songwriter Tom Russell, a friend of Bodio's. Two lithe sight hounds dozed on the floor.

A hat rack in the living room stood unavoidably in the sight line of Esmeralda, an aplomado falcon whose crippling fear of hats has made her more or less unflyable. She muttered to herself until Libby, on whom she had a crush, passed through the dining room on her way to the kitchen, causing Esmeralda

to spread her wings flirtatiously and chitter for attention. Through breezy screens, you could hear what Annie Proulx has called Bodio's "shady backyard mellifluous with his extensive pigeon collection."

When the emails were done, the couple stepped out together into the sun and shuffled side by side down the chirping side streets of Magdalena, past pickup trucks and piñon, Steve leaning on a cane. At the Magdalena Hall Hotel, friends were beginning to gather for brunch. The main topic of conversation was the upcoming Old Timers' Reunion, an annual homecoming of sorts for longtime locals. Bodio had been appointed the year's grand marshal. He enjoyed telling people about the shining black Shelby Cobra that he would ride in to wave to the crowd, as Parkinson's had left him unable to mount a horse, but kept steering the conversation back to his friend Juan, who had survived a cancer scare.

"He looked really good," he told a friend named Mary Ann. "I've been telling everybody, because he's one of my favorite of the old-timers."

"There's not many of them left. Once they get on that float for the parade, their days are numbered," she said.

"Hey, wait a minute, I'm the parade marshal!" Bodio roared, as Mary Ann giggled mischievously.

After a while, conversation turned to the Golden Spur Saloon, as might be inevitable in a town this size. Bodio launched into stories about the characters he'd met there over the years, small brushes with worldly adventure right here in Magdalena. Once he'd earned a free drink from a Ugandan on a nearby barstool for knowing his country's capital. Another time he'd switched to French to describe "some sexual peccadilloes" until an eavesdropping stranger at his elbow begged him to go on. Bodio snorted. "I can't even talk French at the bar without—"

His feigned exasperation broke down and he smiled at the surprises his sleepy corner of New Mexico still holds for him. "I love that bar," he said. "I love this town." Mary Ann nodded and replied, in that matter-of-fact rancher way, "It's the only one we've got." ■

Contributing writer **John Muller** is featured in "Storytellers," p. 8.

**Facing page, from top:** Dusk settles on Magdalena. Bodio launches into an old-timer's tale at the Golden Spur Saloon, his watering hole.