

24 April, 1999

Michael P. Fialkovich
805 Beulah Rd.
Pittsburgh, PA 15235-4209

Dear Mike,

Thank you for submitting documentation on the Gyr Falcon you saw at Presque Isle State Park on 8 February, 1997. The record circulated the committee for two rounds. After careful review and much discussion, we regret that we are unable to accept this record. Although the committee felt your report was a very good one, the description did not rule out the possibility of an immature Peale's Peregrine (e. g., there was no mention of underwing pattern). This does not mean of course that the bird was not a Gyr Falcon, merely that the details did not allow for a definite determination.

We hope that this does not discourage you from submitting documentation on any rare birds you find in the future. Please be encouraged to send as much detail as possible when submitting a report.

Sincerely,

For the Committee,
Roy A. Ickes, Chairperson

Record # 200-01-1997

200-01 -1997

GYRFALCON (*Falco rusticolus*)
Presque Isle State Park, Erie County, Pennsylvania
February 8, 1997

by Mike Fialkovich

While driving through Presque Isle State Park on February 8, 1997, Joyce Hoffmann, Bob Machesney and myself noticed a large, dark raptor flying over the entrance to Dead Pond Trail. At first glance we noted the large size, but unfamiliar shape of the bird. We got out of the car and observed the bird in flight for approximately 45 seconds as it circled behind the trees near the trail, then flew past us in clear view above tree top level.

We were unsure at first, thinking the bird might be an immature Northern Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*), until it cleared the trees. I was still baffled until Joyce called out "Gyrfalcon!" Suddenly, it all came together in my mind. We discussed the bird's features as we were watching it, noting size, shape and color. Bob and I have never seen this species, but Joyce has, so she took note of the shape of the bird and recognized it. It flew off to the West going over Pine Tree Trail.

We drove towards the direction it flew with the hopes of relocating it for further observation. We walked along B-Trail for approximately 20 minutes without finding the bird. We thought it might have perched on one of the many tall trees in this fairly open area.

We continued driving West along the lake shore, stopping to scan the ice on Lake Erie and the beaches and breakwaters hoping to find the bird perched. We could not locate it.

Suddenly, while we were driving, the bird flew over the car, and we got out of the car and observed it flying away from us, heading out over the frozen lake. Again, it never stopped flapping, and appeared heavily bodied, and dark. The bird flew out of sight and despite further attempts at locating it, we could not find it.

DESCRIPTION:

A large, dark brown heavily built falcon. The wings were "falcon shaped"--long and pointed, but very broad, particularly at the base.

The tail was long and proportionally thin, but very broad, and not spread at all during flight.

The bird never stopped flapping during the time we observed it.

The bird was very dark brown overall, lacking a face pattern, or other obvious marks. It was very heavily streaked with brown on the breast, sides and belly--so much so that I did not notice any light areas at all.

The main thing that struck me about this bird was its build. It looked so heavy and large bodied, and the wings, although unmistakably falcon shaped, were so broad.

COMPARISON WITH OTHER SPECIES:

Northern Goshawk - as stated above, at first glance from the car and through the trees, I thought it could possibly be an immature Northern Goshawk because of its size and brownish color, but when I got a

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better look at the bird, the pointed wings and shorter tail (as compared to an accipiter), led me to believe this was a falcon. The absence of any facial pattern, and the dark color also steered me away from the initial thought that the bird might have been a Northern Goshawk.

Peregrine Falcon - the Peregrine Falcon is smaller than the Gyrfalcon, with a lighter build which makes the wings and tail appear longer than those on a Gyrfalcon. Although a large falcon, the Peregrine is slimmer bodied, and the wings are not as broad as those of a Gyrfalcon. An immature Peregrine would show contrast between the upperparts and underparts with brownish streaking below with a lighter base color showing through. The head would show the "helmet" pattern unlike the plainer face of the Gyrfalcon.

An adult Peregrine is dark in color, but is bluish-gray above, and light gray below which would be easily seen at the range I observed the Gyrfalcon.

Other Falcons - The Merlin is a dark falcon, but much smaller than either the Peregrine or the Gyrfalcon. The American Kestrel at all ages is also easily eliminated by size and color.

Conclusions

The main identification points that I considered when observing this bird was the large body, and overall large size of the bird. I have seen many Peregrine Falcons in flight in DE, NJ, VA, and at Presque Isle. The peregrine has a slimmer body and wings; and a lighter build overall. They are noticeably lighter on the under parts especially in adults, but also in immature plumage. The Gyrfalcon showed almost no contrast between upper parts and underparts, it was very dark brown overall. The wings were unlike any other falcon I've ever seen because of their broad shape, although the wings were typical pointed "falcon wings."

This was my first experience with a Gyrfalcon.

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation - Round # 1 of 2

Species: Gyrfalcon (*Falco rusticolus*)

Date of Sighting: 8 February 1997 to 8 February 1997

Location: PRESQUE ISLE STATE PARK

County: ERIE

Observer(s): Mike Fialkovich

Date of Submission: 1997

Submitted by: Mike Fialkovich

Written Description: YES

Photo: NO

Specimen: NO

Recording: NONE

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV	Class V			Abstain
					A	B	C	
F. Haas			X					
N. Pulcinella			X					
E. Kwater			X					
R. Ickes				X				
G. McWilliams			X					
P. Schwalbe			X					
S. Feldstein				X				
TOTALS			5	2				
DECISION								

Comments:

Go to Second Round.

Signature (Secretary):

F. C. Haas

Date:

8-16-97

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation - Round # 2 of 2

Species: Gyrfalcon (*Falco rusticolus*)

Date of Sighting: 8 February 1997 to 8 February 1997

Location: PRESQUE ISLE STATE PARK

County: ERIE

Observer(s): Mike Fialkovich

Date of Submission: 1997

Submitted by: Mike Fialkovich

Written Description: YES

Photo: NO

Specimen: NO

Recording: NONE

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV	Class V			Abstain
					A	B	C	
F. Haas			X					
P. Schwalbe				X				
E. Kwater			X					
R. Ickes				X				
S. Feldstein				X				
J. McWilliams			X					
N. Pulcinella			X					
TOTALS								
DECISION				X				

Comments:

Signature (Secretary):

F. C. Haas

Date:

4-19-99