

200-01-2001

Subject: Gyr Falcon at Presque Isle SP, PA, 2/2/01

Date: Fri, 09 Feb 2001 01:44:54 -0500

From: Doug Couchman <atakdoug@csonline.net>

The following is submitted to supplement (I hope) documentation from others of the Gyr Falcon at Presque Isle Jan/Feb 2001. It is based on my own observations, recorded on an audio cassette about ten minutes after the sighting. No field guides were consulted prior to initial recording of impressions.

Species observed: Gyr Falcon (dark phase, probably first year)

Place: Presque Isle State Park, trail to Gull Point, about halfway from parking lot to point

Date and time: 2/2/01, about 2:30 pm

Weather: overcast; very light snow; wind 0-25 mph; light flat but good

Distance from bird to observer: initially approximately forty feet, but bird flew rapidly away

Time of observation: approximately ten seconds

Observers: myself (Doug Couchman) only; the bird had previously been reported on two occasions, I believe 1/27 and 1/29, in different locations in the park

Description: returning from Gull Point, I looked up to see a largish, dark brown raptor banking away from me. When I first saw it was flying at roughly ninety degrees to me, but it quickly turned to fly almost directly away from me; it seemed possible that it flushed from a perch as I approached. The bird was about forty feet away when I first saw it; I watched for about ten seconds as it headed over a marsh toward Beach 11. It flew directly away, with quick, powerful, steady wingbeats, not as deep as a buteo but not noticeably shallow, and seemingly at a very rapid cadence for such a large bird. It never got more than twenty feet from the ground, and I lost sight of it when bushes blocked the view.

My initial impression was of a raptor, smaller than a red-tailed hawk but larger than a broad-winged hawk. (Even at such close range, I don't believe size estimates of a moving bird traveling alone can be a lot more precise than this.) The blunt head, longish tail, and especially the direct, powerful flight were what identified it immediately as a raptor; as discussed below, details of the shape suggested falcon but there are other possibilities to consider. I discuss the details of the shape below.

I got only a brief glimpse of the head and underparts, but a clear look at the dorsal surface of the wings, back, and tail. (The bird was less than ten feet off the ground when I first saw it.) The head appeared dark brown, but I cannot say whether it had a darker cap, as it turned away before I could pick that out. The breast and belly were also brown and quite dark, probably finely

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mottled or streaked but the overall impression was of a nearly uniform brown, somewhat lighter than the wings. The wings (dorsal surface) were a uniform dark grayish-brown, as were the back and tail. Though I know that gyrfalcons usually show fine banding of the rectrices, I did not see these; my view was such that they could have been present if indistinct, but I would have seen distinct bands. I also saw no speckling on the wing coverts, scapulars, etc., hence my belief that the bird was not an adult. I did not see the ventral surface of the wings.

#### Distinction from similar species:

**Buteos:** The wings were substantially narrower than those of most buteos, without distinct primary "fingers". Though not pointed, they tapered toward the tips. The tail was also too long and narrow for a buteo, appearing longer than the breadth of the wing bases and about twice as long as broad (and nearly straight, neither flared nor tapered). The flight was also very wrong, with wingbeats steady, rapid (perhaps two beats per second), and wing held fairly straight, all giving the impression of speed more than anything else. Buteos with relatively narrow wings, e.g. Swainson's, have much "looser" flight action with wings that bend during the stroke.

**Harrier:** The flight was far too strong for a Harrier, and I could not have missed a white rump patch given the view I had.

**Anatum Peregrine:** Peregrines are substantially smaller than this bird was, with wings that appear pointed, not merely tapered. This bird's wingtips were somewhat rounded. As discussed below, I have seen both species in fairly quick succession, and know from personal experience that the impression of wing shape is very different. Also, typical anatum (eastern) Peregrines are substantially lighter in all plumages than this bird. Finally, a brown (therefore immature) Peregrine would have shown distinct streaking on the underparts; my view of the underparts was brief, but I would have seen such obvious streaking.

**Pealei Peregrine:** Distinguishing Peale's Peregrine from dark-phase Gyrfalcon is decidedly difficult: Peale's is not only darker than eastern Peregrine, but substantially larger, approaching the size of Gyrfalcon (perhaps matching male gyr -- I don't know). The first (and only) time I saw a Peale's, my first thought was that it was a Gyrfalcon (though at the time I had only seen three Gyrfalcons before, and had no idea that Peregrines could be so large and dark). Still, Peale's Peregrine does not appear as uniformly dark as a dark Gyrfalcon -- distinct streaking on the breast would probably have been noticeable, as would a very prominent black cap (my look at the head was brief, but I would have seen a blackish helmet contrasting with white cheeks). Finally, though the birds are similar in size their wing shape and flight actions are different: Peale's still flies like a Peregrine, with very stiff, pointed wings, while Gyrfalcon shows rounded wingtips and more bend in the wing. (Please note that the field guides are not consistent on this point; I am basing this distinction on personal observation of both species.) The Presque Isle bird showed the rounded wingtips of a Gyrfalcon, and its wingbeats were deep enough with enough bend at the wrist that "Peregrine" never came to my mind.

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Other falcons: The bird was far larger than Merlin, and far too dark for Prairie Falcon. As for extralimital falcons, I believe the shape characteristics that distinguish my bird from a Peregrine apply at least as well to them: Gyrfalcon's size and attendant more rounded-appearing wings are unique among falcons.

Goshawk: Another non-trivial distinction in many cases. Goshawk's wings usually appear rounder than this bird showed, but given my low angle it is possible I could have missed the difference. However, a young (brown) Goshawk would have had obvious heavy streaking of the underparts, which was not present, and fairly heavy banding of the tail which I would have seen -- this tail was either uniform dark brown, or very nearly so. Most observers do not have as clear a view of the tail of either of these birds, but that is the part I saw most clearly. Finally, the long, direct flight across the marsh is suggestive of a falcon rather than a Goshawk, though obviously not itself dispositive.

Observer experience with this and similar species: I have previously seen 7 Gyrfalcons, in Alaska, Washington, Idaho, and Manitoba. I saw four different Gyrfalcons in October 2000 (three months before this observation) in Manitoba, including one dark-phase bird at a distance of about 150 feet (taking down a Canada Goose!). Six of the seven were observed in flight at some point. Shortly after seeing the dark gyr, I saw a Peregrine at a similar distance and noted the flight action differences, which were obvious.

I have seen numerous Peregrines over more than twenty years, in 14 different states and provinces and under varying conditions, including snowy fields and marshes. Only one of these birds was an apparent Peale's Peregrine, but that bird was seen at similarly close range and low angle, as was the 2/2/01 bird. I have seen many individuals of all other reasonably possible species, including Goshawk.

Submitted via e-mail 2/9/01.

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Report received  
1/25/01

Subj: **Gyrfalcon and Snowy Owl**  
Date: 1/27/01 8:15:19 PM Eastern Standard Time  
From: RCStringer@GCC.EDU (Stringer, Randy C.)  
Sender: PABIRDS@LIST.AUDUBON.ORG (Bird discussion list for Pennsylvania)  
Reply-to: RCStringer@GCC.EDU (Stringer, Randy C.)  
To: PABIRDS@LIST.AUDUBON.ORG

Dea Pa Birders,

My thanks to Ken Behrens for posting the Gyrfalcon earlier today on the chat line.

I arrived at Presque Isle State Park around 7:15 AM with a fresh layer of 4+ inches of snow along with bitter winds gusting 25+ mph. As Jerry McWilliams has stated in the past, there is little open water available for waterfowl. After an hour it became apparent that it might just be better to leave and find a warmer spot.

Arriving at the North Pier I found open water with a decent variety of waterfowl besides a lonely sentinel on the North Pier Lighthouse- a Snowy Owl that posed for nearly twenty minutes without moving.

My hesitation was to go back to the motel and call it a morning. I headed for Sunset Point at 8:36 AM in hopes of seeing a Northern Shrike or anything else of note. Heading west from Sunset Point after a quick scan of the lakefront, about two hundred yards from the north end of Sidewalk Trail it happened about 8:40.

Flying low over the road and almost directly over my vehicle, a raptor was flapping in an attempt to enter the top portion of a tree and capture a Blue Jay. Quickly, I pulled off the road and jumped out with my binoculars. In one fell swoop I watched it grab the bird. It then circled low for about a minute before landing about fifty feet away from me on an exposed perch. It began to pluck on the jay and often turned in my direction to observe me as I set up my Kowa Scope.

I was able to view a dark morph adult gyrfalcon (admittedly the bird does not have all of the traditional dark-morph characteristics found in the field guides, owing to the possibility of it being a sub-adult). It is heavily mottled below with a definitive two-tone underwing pattern. With the bird perched and facing to the right I was able to clearly see through the scope a grayish brown back that was neatly mottled on the tail and back. The wings from above were a more solid brown/gray color overall, with a mostly dark head and dark cheek patch that were neatly offset by a clear, whitish throat. The eye was dark with a complete eye ring. There were some flecks of whitish feathering on the back of the neck and the back of the head. From a distance, without the scope, the bird looks dark gray/brown overall and heavily mottled below especially when seen in the air. In flight the overall heavy body, broad tail and rounded wings are clearly evident.

After ten minutes or so the bird flew east about 100 yards into an area of pines before it dropped out of sight. Best wishes to any and all who seek to find it tomorrow.

Presque Isle State Park is in Erie County, just north of the city of Erie, just west of I-79.

Randy C. Stringer  
Grove City

Randy C. Stringer  
Professor: Grove City College  
Grove City, PA 16127  
Have Binoculars, Will Travel  
Wire Birdman

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----- Headers -----

Return-Path: <owner-pabirds@LIST.AUDUBON.ORG>  
Received: from rly-yb05.mx.aol.com (rly-yb05.mail.aol.com [172.18.146.5]) by air-yb04.mail.aol.com (v77.31) with ESMTP;  
Sat, 27 Jan 2001 20:15:19 -0500  
Received: from cherry.ease.lsoft.com (cherry.ease.lsoft.com [209.119.0.109]) by rly-yb05.mx.aol.com (v77.27) with ESMTP;  
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for <PABIRDS@LIST.AUDUBON.ORG>; Sat, 27 Jan 2001 20:14:18 -0500  
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Message-ID: <3286640012DED211B1F700805F85C15E0303728E@mail.gcc.edu>  
Date: Sat, 27 Jan 2001 20:03:58 -0500  
Reply-To: "Stringer, Randy C." <RCStringer@GCC.EDU>  
Sender: Bird discussion list for Pennsylvania <PABIRDS@LIST.AUDUBON.ORG>  
From: "Stringer, Randy C." <RCStringer@GCC.EDU>  
Subject: Gyrfalcon and Snowy Owl  
To: PABIRDS@LIST.AUDUBON.ORG

**Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee**

**Tabulation Form - Round One**

Species: Gyr Falcon ( Falco rusticolus )

Date of Sighting: <sup>27 January</sup> 2 February 2001 to 2 February 2001

Location: PRESQUE ISLE STATE PARK

County: ERIE

Observer(s): Doug Couchman *et al*

Date of Submission: 2001

Submitted by: Doug Couchman, *Randy Stringer*

Written Description: Yes

Photo: No

Specimen: No

Recording: No

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A				Abstain
					Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	
G. Armistead		X						
D. Heathcote		X						
P. Hess		X						
J. Stanley		X						
E. Witmer				X				
R. Leberman		X						
M. Sharp		X						
TOTALS		6		1				
DECISION		X						

Comments: *6/1*

Signature (Secretary): *[Signature]*

Date: *6/2/03*