

200-02-2001

Subject: Presque Isle Gyrfalcon description

Date: Thu, 05 Apr 2001 20:50:30 -0400

From: aeridia@velocity.net

To: Nick Pulcinella <nickpul@BELLATLANTIC.NET>

Mr. Pulcinella,

Here's a write-up for PORC of the two times I saw the white-morph Gyrfalcon at Presque Isle on 3/31/01 and 4/2/01.

I was able to observe the white-morph Gyrfalcon at Presque Isle State Park on March 31, and April 2, 2001. Both sightings were in bright sunlight, with some clouds moving in on the 2nd. The optics I was using on the 31st were Tasco 7x35 binoculars, and on the 2nd, I was using Scope 7x35 binoculars.

From both sightings, the impression I got of the bird was that it was very robust and deep chested. The plumage was almost pure white over most of the body, with obvious dark markings on the tips of the primaries, and a few faint dark markings on the upper surface of the wings, the scapulars, and the back. There may have been a few faint markings on the belly and flanks of the bird.

In powered flight, the bird flapped hard and fast, with almost no gliding at all. The flight was generally rapid and strong. The wings were pointed, but somewhat blunt, and the tail was incredibly broad, and fairly long. Both features were especially noticeable when the bird was flying perpendicular to my vantage.

On March 31, 2001, at about 2:30PM, I was birding with David Wilton when Matt Tenney and Rachel Ashbaugh found us and told us that they had seen a "white-phase Gyr" at beach 11. We went over to the beach 11 and Thompson Bay area, parked, and then walked north along the west shore of Thompson Bay. Matt and Rachel described where they had first seen it, and what it had been doing. At roughly 3:30 PM, we were on beach 11, close to, but slightly past the Osprey platform. We were looking around when Rachel noticed the Gyrfalcon flying at an altitude of a few hundred feet going from the Pines area over towards the base of Thompson Bay, flapping from our left to our right, heading towards Gull Point. It turned, then flapped along towards the mouth of Thompson Bay. There was a flock of over a dozen ducks (I think they may have been Red-breasted Mergansers) flying in the opposite direction as the Gyr, and it flew past them quite closely, then wheeled around and made a few half-hearted strikes at the ducks. I didn't see any contact. The length of the Gyr seemed to be a little shorter than the ducks. The ducks took evasive action, and dodged steeply to either side. After this, the Gyrfalcon then scared up and harassed a large flock of gulls standing on a sandbar into the air, and I lost it as it flew east towards the tip of Gull Point. I would say we had watched it for several minutes. The bird had passed fairly close to us,

On the 2nd of April, 2001, I was standing on beach 11, between the road and the bathhouse and the water of Thompson Bay. It was partly cloudy, with ample sunlight. There were large flocks of American Crows across Thompson Bay perched in trees near the Osprey platform. They seemed to be nervous, and took flight often. I was talking with Ian Ashbaugh when EJ Meyers walked up. He told us how he had seen the Gyr at 8:58AM that morning. Almost immediately after he said that, at about 1:45PM, I saw a white flash fly up from brush near the Osprey platform, putting up most of the crows. It was the Gyrfalcon again. We signaled to two other birders up in their car, and they came over and watched as well. It flew back and forth around in the same area around the Osprey platform,

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rising above the level of the trees. As it was flying above the platform, I got excellent views of the breadth of the wings and tail. As before, the dark on the wingtips was quite noticeable. As the bird circled around, we also saw a Northern Harrier and a Red-tailed Hawk in the same thermal. At one point, the Gyr was pretty close to the Red-tailed, and a size comparison was possible. It seemed to be very slightly smaller than the buteo. As the Gyr was soaring, it occasionally would flap a few times. As a bank of clouds moved in, I lost sight of the white Gyr in the white clouds. I didn't see it again. Total observation time was maybe 10 or more minutes, but, for me, a good bit of the time was spent relocating the bird after I lost sight of it in the clouds, or in the blue sky. Distance from the bird was maybe 1500 feet.

These notes were compiled from my birding journal entries, which were written as soon as I got back from the field on the day of the observation.

Ben Coulter
3431 Argyle Ave
Erie, PA 16505

200-02-2001

To: Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee
From: Patrick M. Kramer
Date: April 3, 2001
Subject: Sighting of Gyrfalcon at Presque Isle on 3/31/01

I was asked by Jerry McWilliams to inform you of my sighting and provide you with my observations. At around 12:30 on Saturday, March 31, I stopped in at Stull Interpretive center and overheard some gentlemen talking about a white morphed Gyrfalcon. After hearing where it was I went to the location.

The location was a stand of trees on the opposite shore of Thompson Bay from beach 11. Just in front of the stand of trees there was a nesting platform I suspect is for Great Blue Herons. I parked at an unnamed parking lot across the street from Thompson Circle and walked a short trail there to the bay.

Once there I spotted the bird almost immediately and I was able to get my scope on it. The Gyrfalcon seemed uneasy because it wouldn't stay put for very long. It had no captured prey and was not seen interacting with any other birds. It would perch on a branch and then glide to another rather often.

Some notable features I was able to see include:

- 1) An all white falcon that was about the size of a Red-Tailed Hawk.
- 2) It had a long white tail with a rounded look that, when the bird perched, extended much farther than its black wing tips.
- 3) When perched, its wing tips appeared crossed.
- 4) The bird had also some gray throughout its plumage.

I was able to view the bird for approximately 20-25 minutes until the falcon flew into Gull Point's interior. I hung around for nearly a half hour but the bird didn't return in that time.

There is no doubt in my mind that this bird was an adult Gyrfalcon in its white phase. Upon returning home, I looked through some other field guides and reference books I have and nothing else fits the bill.

If there are any questions, please feel free to contact me. My address is 10036 Sampson Ave., Lake City, PA 16423.

Thank you for your time,



Patrick M. Kramer

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Tabulation Form - Round One

Species: Gyrfalcon (Falco rusticolus)

Date of Sighting: 3 March 2001 to 2 April 2001

Location: PRESQUE ISLE STATE PARK

County: ERIE

Observer(s): Ben Coulter, Patrick Kramer

Date of Submission: 2001

Submitted by: Ben Coulter, Patrick Kramer

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: 7/0

Signature (Secretary): 

Date: 4/2/03