

PA Rare Bird Report

Submission Date	2018-06-09 22:32:34
Observer's Name	Bill Etter
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Phone	2159643613
Observer's Address	407 S Cigar Rd Northampton PA 18067 United States
Names of additional observers	2/28 no additional observers; 3/01 Devich Farbotnik, Holly Merker, Billy Weber, Adam Miller
Species (Common Name)	Gyr Falcon
Species (Scientific Name)	Falco rusticolus
Number of individuals	1
Age(s) and Plumage(s) and Sex (if known)	Adult, dark morph
Observation Date and Time	02-28-2018 5:10 PM
Did you submit this sighting to eBird?	Yes
Link to eBird checklist	https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S43291178 also https://ebird.org/view/checklist/S43321351
County	Northampton
Location (City, Borough, Township)	East Allen Twp (near Bath, PA)
Exact Site (E.g. Name of park, lake, road)	Seiple's Farm pond
GPS coordinates of sighting	40.7040582,-75.4240501
Habitat	open agricultural fields with small farm pond and nearby tree edges
Distance to bird	~100 yards or less
Viewing conditions	clear, facing east with setting sun to my back.
Optical equipment used	8x42 bins and Nikon spotting scope; photos are freehand pics taken with iPhone through my scope.

Description

Very large, beefy looking falcon with all dark plumage. Approximately the size of a red-tailed hawk. All dark head, lacking the mask-like feature expected in most falcons as the face was all dark. Base of bill was yellow, and there was a bit of white in front of the otherwise dark eye. There was just a hint of very heavy streaking on the breast, but it would be accurate to say the breast was nearly solid brown. In flight, the wings were dark, very broad, and pointed.

Behavior (be as detailed as possible about what the bird was doing)

When I found the Gyrfalcon the evening of 2/28, it was perched and feeding on a freshly killed Snow goose beside Seiple's Pond. I was able to take a few freehand pictures through my scope of it feeding. After a few moments, it was knocked off of the kill by a Red-tailed hawk that snuck up from the treeline behind the Gyrfalcon. At this point, the Gyr stood around in the grass, then perched along the treeline for a moment. It was last seen flying off in the direction of a nearby quarry. The following morning, (03/01) I was joined by four other birders, see above. The Gyr approached from the southwest a bit before 7 AM and landed on the ground by the pond, where it proceeded to perch briefly, then hop around in the grass on heavily feathered legs, looking for goose parts from the carcass it was feeding on last evening. A Gyrfalcon hopping around in the grass is an LOL kind of moment...quite unexpected and very funny to see! We had views of it on the ground, perched in trees, and sitting on top of a utility pole. Also seen taking several short flights around the pond area, hunting. It made a pass or two at the Mallards around the pond, and tried to grab a farm cat at one point. Disappeared to the south around 7:20 AM, but returned shortly after that for a second show.

Separation from similar species (How you eliminated others)

Body structure and particularly the shape of the wings clearly indicated that this was a falcon. The all dark underwing would eliminate any dark phased buteo that I can think of. In this color phase, it would be difficult to confuse this Gyr with any other bird of prey. Superficially similar to a very dark, young Peregrine, perhaps, but this Gyrfalcon was completely dark all over...not streaked, but nearly solid dark plumage. Flight style was different from a Peregrine in that it was powerful, but a bit more belabored. The wings were also too broad for a peregrine.

Discussion – anything else relevant to the observation that will aid the committee in evaluating it:

This is almost certainly the same Gyrfalcon that was seen at various locations in nearby Warren County NJ intermittently from approximately late December to late February. I was able to see it in Alpha, NJ the morning of 2/20, perched on a utility pole less than a half mile from the Northampton County PA line. Common to all sightings of this bird was the presence of large flocks of Snow Geese, which roost/loaf in the thousands at Seiple's Pond in winter. Additionally, there was an unconfirmed Gyr sighting just a few miles away from Seiple's Pond near Northampton, PA back in late December 2017, several days prior to the first NJ report. I find it easy to believe that this falcon followed large flocks of wintering Snow geese all over the region this winter. Due to the fact that wide spread broadcast of this bird's presence would almost certainly have resulted in tension between birders, the land owner, and the owners of a few small businesses with rights to a very limited number of parking spaces, news of this bird was kept low key. Word of mouth among friends, and friends of friends, mostly. The Gyrfalcon was present at this location through at least 2/17. Appearances were often distant and brief, and it would go unreported for days at a time despite good coverage on the part of local birders. As of 06/09/2018, there have been 14 eBird reports filed, 10 of which include valid photos. I also know of many other records not reported within eBird. An eBird record from 2/18 should be deemed invalid in my opinion, as the observer has been unable to offer convincing details or even a credible story; there were many other observers at the exact time of this alleged sighting who did NOT see the Gyr. As this is deemed a Sensitive Species within eBird, records are not visible to most users. Regional or State level reviewers can get full access to eBird records of this bird. I am the Regional eBird reviewer for Northampton Co, so please advise if you need help accessing details of other records.

Are you positive of your identification ? (Why or why not)

Yes. Please see photos in the two eBird checklists linked above. If you need me to upload them separately, please advise. I'm only uploading one pic at this time, from 2/28.

During

N/A

After

N/A

Supporting evidence (check all that apply)

Photograph

Upload images, audio, video
or drawings



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