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Notes

Gyr Falcon Harassing a Snowy Owl

by
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On 7 March 1993, three companions and I were driving a concession road on the west end of Amherst Island, near Kingston. Suddenly, a low-flying dark phase Gyr Falcon (*Falco rusticolus*) flew directly at a Snowy Owl (*Nyctea scandiaca*) perched on a large rock in a pasture, 60 to 70 m south of us. Although no contact was made, the Gyr Falcon came very close to the owl. As a result, the Snowy fluttered awkwardly into the air and then landed again on its rock perch. The Gyr Falcon flew away.

Backtracking east, we looked for the Gyr Falcon, and stopped ten minutes later overlooking another pasture. A second Snowy Owl perched on a two metre pole some 60

to 70 m south of our position. Suddenly, the Gyr Falcon appeared, again flying close to the ground, and flew directly at the Snowy Owl. This owl didn't flinch, and at the last second the Gyr Falcon veered slightly upward to miss the owl. The Snowy remained perched, and the Gyr Falcon flew away and was lost from sight. No vocalizations were heard in either episode.

Wondering if this was a common interaction between these dominant Arctic raptors, I referred to the literature. I found no information on confrontations between Gyr Falcons and Snowy Owls either on the breeding or wintering grounds. However, one article (Cade 1953)

reported a juvenal Gyrfalcon in Alaska making abortive stoop attacks on a variety of raptors (not including Snowy Owls), as well as Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*) and Red-throated Loons (*Gavia stellata*).

Subsequently, I contacted birders who have observed Gyrfalcons overwintering in the Ottawa area. This produced only one reported instance of a Gyrfalcon buzzing a Snowy Owl (J. Harris, pers. comm.). Stewart MacDonald (pers. comm.) informed that he had never witnessed an interaction between many Gyrfalcons and Snowy Owls seen in close proximity in the Arctic.

Bruce Mactavish (pers. comm.) reported seeing three close range clashes between Gyrfalcons and Snowy Owls overwintering in Newfoundland. In two cases, white Gyrfalcons initiated attacks. The third case saw a Snowy Owl drive a dark phase Gyrfalcon off prey. The first two instances involved much vocalization, and in all three cases there was no physical contact between combatants.

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Reports of Gyrfalcon/Snowy Owl interactions in Ontario are no doubt rare because of the low likelihood of the species encountering one another or being observed. Nevertheless, if the species apparently don't interact on northern breeding grounds perhaps a different set of parameters apply on southern wintering grounds. Dramatic but contact-free displays could involve food territories, the defence of winter territories, or other factors. Whatever the reason, this type of interaction between Gyrfalcons and Snowy Owls warrants further study.

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Book Review

Peregrine Falcons. 1992. By *Candace Savage*. Douglas & McIntyre, Toronto. (Hardcover) 145 pp. \$35.00.

"Peregrine Falcons" is a slim, beautiful coffee table book detailing the biology of peregrine falcons, and recovery efforts, in Canada. The

colour photographs by a wide variety of wildlife photographers and peregrine falcon researchers are beautiful, breathtaking, and