

A FUDDLE OF FALCONS

by Nancy Clayton, Concord

One might question how anyone could become so utterly pre-occupied with the identification of a bird which she herself didn't even see. Well, that's the way some of us are about falcons! Thus it was with great excitement and not a little envy that I heard on the Voice of Audubon that a Gyrfalcon had been sighted at Squantum. The Brookline Bird Club's February 19, 1984 trip and Dave Brown as its leader were the fortunate ones. Dave had spotted a raptor - a large falcon - in the distance and had alerted the group. All were able to observe the bird approaching with slow, shallow wingbeats until it was circling directly overhead. Suddenly the wingbeats became deeper and faster providing that awesome acceleration which is so characteristic of falcon flight, and the bird took off to harass a Herring Gull and was finally lost to view as it climbed into the sky. If only I had been there! Three days of gyr-watching on Plum Island in December 1983 had only intensified an obsession.

Then came the great news that Stan Bolton, camera in hand, had been on the trip and had taken a half-dozen frames. The temptation to camp on his doorstep until the film was developed was resisted. Events now took a most intriguing turn - speculation had arisen that the bird might not have been a Gyrfalcon after all but actually a Lanner or perhaps a Saker Falcon - a vagrant from Europe, Africa, or Asia, or more likely an escaped falconer's bird. In the course of editing the BOEM records, two of Stan's "gyrfalcon" prints were shown to Dick Forster, Chris Leahy, and Jim Baird as evidence of the sighting. All three expressed the opinion that the bird as seen in the photographs did not have the obvious bulk of a Gyrfalcon - it did not seem to be heavy enough. Its wings did not have sufficient breadth, especially at the base, and the tail was too long and narrow. At this juncture I invested in a set of five of the photos for myself.

It was now April, and having been enticed some months earlier by a phrase in a travel brochure, "We shall also travel far out onto the blue waters of the Red Sea . . . Sooty Falcons breed on the islands," Alden and I were off for Egypt. Mark Beaman and Steve Madge, veterans of the raptor migrations at Eilat (Israel) and Istanbul and co-authors of a forthcoming guide to Western Palearctic birds, were the trip leaders. Arriving from London with their British cohorts, they probably did not anticipate more than minimal exposure to the two Americans on that first evening in Cairo. However, before they had finished their appetizers, the falcon prints were on the dinner table! Both were familiar with the Saker and expressed the opinion that the bird in the photographs was not that species since it did not appear to be broad and



*Falcon over Squantum
February 19, 1984*

Photos by Stan Bolton

heavy enough, not sufficiently robust, especially in the chest. Thereby the Gyrfalcon, a bird of even heavier and more powerful structure than Saker, was automatically ruled out as a possibility. They judged the bird not to be a Peregrine which is structurally so distinctive with its relatively short, broad-based arm, narrow hand, and very pointed wingtips. Its triangular-shaped wing, stocky body, and shorter tail give the Peregrine a more compact, less elongated look than that of other large falcons, the mystery bird included. Neither the Peregrine nor the Prairie Falcon has the solidly dark underwing coverts of the bird in Stan's photographs. Dave Brown had mentioned that he had been a bit puzzled by the size of the bird as it harassed the Herring Gull - it looked smaller than he would have expected a Gyr to be in relation to the gull. However, he had ruled out a Peregrine identification. In Mark and Steve's opinion the mystery bird was a Lanner or Lagger, the latter being very similar to the Lanner - its geographic replacement on the Indian subcontinent. After returning to England, Steve made a sketch of our bird as he remembered seeing it in the photos, indicating why he thought it might be a Lagger. He pointed out the very dark underwing coverts contrasting with the light flight-feathers, the dark flanks and belly, and the pale tip to the tail. He suggested I look at the photo of a Lagger in The Vanishing Jungle by Guy Mountfort. Recently I discovered even better photos of a Lagger in flight on pages 117-119 of Falconry by Humphrey Evans and a stunning view of a perched bird on page 43 of Der Sakerfalke by Wolfgang Baumgart.

Incidentally, although there were wonderful migrating raptors south of Suez, we never did find Sooty Falcon on the islands of the Red Sea. But there are new enticements from Beaman and Madge. Just back from China, Mark wrote that I would be amazed to hear that in Qinghai Sakers were really common and also rather tame. He was able to take frame-filling photographs of one by the roadside that allowed him to walk within thirty to forty feet.

For further corroboration the prints now went to Peter Alden. So generous with his time and expertise as always, Peter wrote a detailed analysis, taking twenty-one different falcons into consideration. One by one he eliminated all but the Gyrfalcon on the basis of pattern and color. Of the twenty-one possibilities he felt the Saker and Lanner were "close," but he concluded, "The bird is definitely a Gyrfalcon. The underwing pattern on this particular phase is emphasized in the European guides and is damn close to a Rough-leg."

Back to square one! The restoration of the Gyrfalcon identification took me by surprise. Guide descriptions, plates (particularly Figure 2 on Plate 42 in the Handbook of the Birds of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, Volume II,

edited by Stanley Cramp), and photographs (especially the top photo on the Lanner page of Flight Identification of European Raptors by R. F. Porter et al., which Dick Forster had suggested I look at) had convinced me that the mystery bird was an immature Lanner. The idea that Falco biarmicus had been chasing Herring gulls in the skies over Squantum was delightful beyond measure, so much so in fact that I decided to consult just one more expert before abandoning the cause. Dean Amadon came to mind. However, he had recently written me concerning quite another problem that regrettably his only experience with Gyrfalcon had been a very distant view of one on Long Island (but, at least, it had been a white one.)

Bill Clark, former Director of the National Wildlife Federation's Raptor Information Center, bander of raptors here and abroad, and presently working on a greatly anticipated guide to the raptors of North America, was the logical choice, and I summarize from his reply: "I am almost certain that the falcon in the photos is not a Gyrfalcon it does not have any of the gestalt or jizz of that large and heavy falcon. The wings are too long and narrow and the tail is too narrow. It is also not a Peregrine; the two-toned underwing and slender build argue against that identification. So that leaves the Lanner group. It is too light in build for a Saker and even a bit slender and long-tailed for a Lanner. My best guess is that it may be an Eleonora's Falcon. This is very strange as they are primarily insectivorous and cannot do well in Massachusetts in winter. But whatever it is, it is not one of our native falcons, so it is most likely an escapee from a zoo or falconer, and thus any falcon species is possible." He based his case for Eleonora's Falcon on the very long tail, the very dark underwing coverts, the thick malar stripe, and the very narrow wings. But he repeated that he was not certain of the identification and emphasized that the immature Lanner was very similar. He suggested that I send the photos to Richard Porter.

Eleonora's Falcon! Having only seen one and that a dark-phase bird high in the Israeli skies, I was hardly qualified to appraise this new candidate. I remember my Eleonora's as being unbelievably long and narrow-winged with an exceptionally long tail giving a more rakish appearance than the bird in Stan's photos. Yet when I consulted R. F. Porter's photo pages of Falco eleonorae, I was impressed by the similarity in the underwing pattern of the light-phase bird with its dark brown coverts and pale flight-feathers bordered by a broad, dark trailing edge.

Bill noted that the bird had a broken or missing primary that he said a falconer would have mended since they like their birds in top flight. I assumed our bird was in transitional plumage moulting into adult, but this comment on the missing primary brought to mind a passage in Tom Cade's

Falcons of the World concerning falconry as it is practiced in Arabia. Falconers there consider high flying a dangerous way to lose a falcon and fly them right from the fist in direct pursuit as we do with Goshawks and then follow on horseback (or Cadillac - my addition - World of Falconry by Schlegel). The Kuwaiti falconers even tie the outer primaries together to prevent their falcons from going up. Could the ties on the left wing of the mystery bird have fallen off leaving the right still fastened but allowing this bird to take off from some Arabic compound on Long Island?

I am now reminded of HMANA (Hawk Migration Association of North America) chairman Paul Roberts' experience with a photograph identified as an albino Redtail that was submitted to him by a Colorado State ornithologist. Paul sent the photo to nine different raptor experts, who, between them, came up with six different species ranging from Ferruginous Hawk to Merlin. All were positive of their identifications. BOEM readers, veterans of the Skua/Pomarine jaeger and Red and Red-necked phalarope disputations, to say nothing of the Audubon's/Manx shearwater controversy, are aware of the perils of identification based on photographic evidence. Wayne Petersen gave such an insightful analysis of this in his article, "Small Shearwaters Are Not Always Black and White - and Neither Are Photographs" in the October 1982 issue of Bird Observer.

I must resign myself to the fact that field problems cannot always be solved by photographs and that this wondrous falcon will always be a mystery bird. And yet, the idea is tantalizing, what might Richard Porter say? Off to England - the prints are on their way.

Addendum: Porter Perceptions.

Richard Porter replied in a most gracious and informative letter that large falcons are notoriously difficult to identify, especially from photographs. However, he was fairly confident that the bird was a Lanner. He wrote that he could "safely rule out gyrfalcon, peregrine and Eleonora's for a number of reasons and the species left for serious consideration are saker, laggar, and lanner." He ruled Saker out on a combination of the uniformity of the darkness of the underwing coverts and strength of the moustachial streak. He was less certain about Laggar as he felt this species can appear very similar indeed to Lanner. However, he felt it did not have quite the right "feel" for Laggar, and if it were that species, he would expect it to be more noticeably streaked below. He "plumped" for Lanner for the following reasons: size and structure, uniform underwing coverts, head pattern, and the degree of streaking below. However, he reiterated that this was not a positive identification, and he doubted if one could be made on the basis of the existing photographs. He regretted that a photo with the upper head pattern was not available. He assumed, of course, that it was an escaped falconer's bird.

NANCY CLAYTON. During World War II, Nancy worked for the U.S. Department of State at AFHQ in Caserta, Italy, totally unaware of the existence of Eleanora's Falcon, much less that it was breeding eighty-odd miles away on Tremiti. Later during the occupation, she spent a year at the American Embassy in Vienna, completely oblivious of the Saker Falcon, which was at that time nesting in eastern Austria. She became hooked on hawks in February 1970 in New Canaan, Connecticut, when an adult and an immature goshawk frequented her backyard feeder in tandem for almost a month. For the last six years she has been membership secretary of the Hawk Migration Association of North America.

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