

and soaring maneuvers. Food is transferred to the female by the male either on the nest ledge or in flight.

Nesting begins in April or May. The cliff nests are nothing more than scrapes, but Gyrfalcons may use the previous stick nests of ravens, eagles, or other raptors. The usual clutch is four brown-spotted, white eggs. Both parents incubate, although the female does the majority of the work. Although the male has brood patches, they are not as well developed as in the female. Incubation lasts for about five weeks, and the chicks fledge seven to eight weeks after hatching. The male supplies food for the young during the first two to three weeks, but the female does most of the direct feeding of the young, usually dividing the prey equally among the chicks. During the nesting period the female may cache food within 100 yards of the nest. After four to six weeks the parents stop feeding the young directly; hence, the chicks must tear up prey brought to the nest.

Gyrfalcons have a variety of foraging strategies. They may perch on a rock and wait for prey, or actively search by flying back and forth low over the ground. They also soar along ridges. When attacking prey, they may fly low over the ground to reduce detection, or pursue prey directly. Sometimes they hover over their prey. Their chief food is ptarmigan, but they also take other birds ranging from sparrow-sized birds to geese. They also occasionally take mammals, especially hares.

The biggest threats to Gyrfalcons are the harsh arctic conditions and a scarce supply of food; their numbers south of their breeding range may reflect fluctuations in ptarmigan abundance. Their remote habitat has largely spared them from the pesticides and habitat alteration that have been so devastating to the Peregrine Falcon. Although North American Gyrfalcons have been largely spared from falconers collecting chicks and eggs, a practice that has caused problems for the birds in Russia and Scandinavia, they nonetheless remain highly valued by falconers. May the vigilant birder be fortunate enough to some day catch a glimpse of the magnificent "ice falcon."
W. E. Davis, Jr.

ABOUT OUR COVER ARTIST

Paul Donahue's artwork last appeared on *Bird Observer's* cover in August 1994. Paul can be reached at P.O. Box 554, Machias, Maine 04654.

The Gyrfalcon drawing first appeared in a catalog of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc. (VENT). Victor Emanuel has kindly given *Bird Observer* permission to use this drawing. VENT conducts birding tours around the world. Their address is P.O. Box 33008, Austin, Texas 78764.