

GYRFALCON IN LOWELL, MA

by Linda Hunnewell

Saturday, February 1, 1997, started out as just another soggy winter weekend day but ended as the most exciting day of birding I have ever had. By late afternoon, tired of being in the house, I decided to go out and photograph some foggy winter landscapes along the Merrimack River in Lowell, MA. When I arrived at the public beach, I found several hundred Mallards and about forty Canada Geese.

I had just begun photographing when wings started flapping and water started to splash. I noticed a large raptor flying low over the mass of waterfowl. At first I assumed it was a Red-tail, but when it circled back and showed a falcon-like shape, I began to think it was a Peregrine. It passed overhead one more time, and as I watched, I kept saying to myself, "It seems awfully big to be a Peregrine." I noticed, also, that the underwing looked two-toned. That's when I remembered that I was holding my camera. As the bird passed by one more time, I snapped off a frame that I hoped would show the underwing pattern. I only managed to get that one shot of the bird in flight before it flew off down the river.





I could see where it landed in a tree, and after grabbing my binoculars from the car, I went after it. It was perched on the top of a tree, preening and scanning the river. I watched for ten minutes, trying to get down everything I could about the bird: it was big, dark, and heavily streaked on the breast, and its wings didn't reach the end of its tail. I got several shots of the perching bird before dark, and I just didn't feel sure that it was a Peregrine. Thoughts of a Gyrfalcon came to mind.

That night, I looked through every field guide I own and still didn't feel 100 percent sure about that bird. Having never seen a Gyrfalcon before, and knowing how rare they are in Massachusetts, I kept trying to make the bird into something else. Even after the film came back and I saw the slides, I continued to have doubts. A Gyrfalcon in Lowell? Ten minutes from my house? No way. I thought about it, studied the slides, searched for the bird in the hope of another look. It was driving me crazy! Finally, the following weekend provided an opportunity for me to solve the problem: I had prints made and brought them to a Massachusetts Audubon birding program I was attending. Paul Roberts and Simon Perkins confirmed that I had seen an immature dark morph Gyrfalcon! I kept returning to that spot nearly every day for weeks, but I've never seen the bird again. It was truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience, one that I will never forget.

Linda Hunnewell lives in Lowell, MA, where she works as a graphic artist. A birder for about ten years, she's happy to watch anything that flies.