

A Visitor from the Far North Returns

Norman Smith

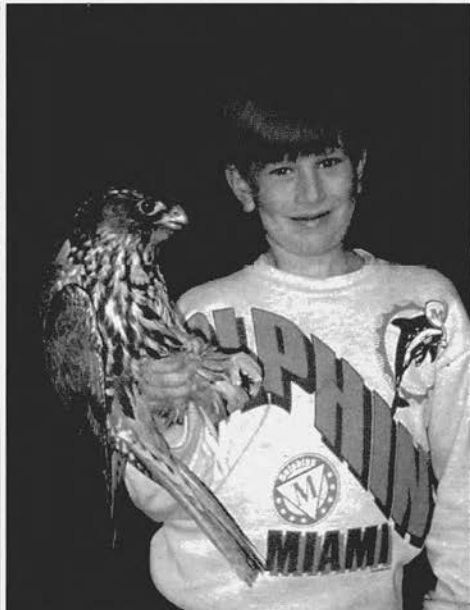
December 16, 2001, is a day I will always remember. I had just arrived home after spending the day at Logan Airport counting birds with Jim Powers, Supervisor of Massport Bird Patrol, for the Greater Boston Christmas Count. It was a great day, especially for one of my favorite birds, the Snowy Owl. This year, however, was different from past years because of changes in airport security. Weeks earlier, I had been told that my Raptor Research Assistant, Danielle, would not be allowed to accompany me because of the events that took place on September 11. I couldn't wait to tell her about the eleven Snowy Owls that were on the airfield and to plan our strategy for selecting three candidates for satellite transmitters.

When I walked through the door, my daughter Danielle asked if I'd seen anything good. I proceeded to tell her about all the Snowys and a Short-eared Owl that was being tormented relentlessly by a group of crows. She responded, "That's awesome; by the way Mike McWade called from a pay phone in South Boston and said he was watching an adult Gyrfalcon on a ledge of a building and that it had a band on its right leg." I called Mike to get the details. Mike, Ronnie Donovan, Billy Zuzevich, and Pat Brady had also spent the day birding for the Christmas Count. They were heading back on a boat from Thompson's Island when Ronnie noticed what appeared to be a falcon on a ledge of one of the buildings. They got off the boat and decided to drive over to the building to get a better look. When they arrived, the bird was preening, and the view they had was incredible. It was a Gyrfalcon, an adult with lots of streaking on the chest, a dark head, and it had a Fish and Wildlife band on its right leg. Mike's last comment is what I remember most. "Hey, I spent the last hour looking at my old Gyr photos, especially the head shots, and I think the bird we saw today was the same bird we banded at Logan in '98."

Logan Airport 1998

After hanging up the phone, I went to the VCR and put in an old tape I had of the '98 Logan Gyr to refresh my memory. It was 10:30 a.m. on January 10 when we left the North Gate on a Massport bus at Logan to drive the perimeter road in search of Snowy Owls. This was an annual trip I led for Massport and the Boston Natural Areas Fund to let residents of Boston experience the airfield in winter. We had good looks at two Snowy Owls and an American Kestrel. The bus had just crossed the approach of runway 33L and was heading toward the fire training area when I asked the bus driver to stop. Up ahead sitting on the top of a glide slope tower was a Gyrfalcon. Once everyone got a glimpse, I had the bus driver slowly approach to within 100 feet of the bird. It was a very dark juvenile that perched contently on the top of the tower, then flew down to a puddle beside the bus, and took a bath. After bathing, it flew back to the tower and held its wings open to complete the thirty-minute show.

Everyone was thrilled with the tour including Massport officials and some local residents who had no interest in birds but just wanted to see what it was like out on the airfield. After the bus left the airport to drop off passengers at the Blue Line, I went back out to relocate the bird. There it was sitting on the roof of a building, not far from where it was originally seen. I placed a bow net along the perimeter road to try to capture it. A State Police cruiser crossed the runway approach and was proceeding on the perimeter road in the direction of the bow net and then suddenly stopped at the building. The officer rolled down his window and used binoculars to get a look at the bird. The Gyrfalcon dropped off the building and headed out over the water toward Thompson's Island, so I headed down the perimeter road to retrieve the net. I was just about to pick up the bow net when I noticed the bird make a rollover move, reverse direction, and start pumping toward the bow net. After making four passes at the net, the bird was caught. The State Police officer drove up, got out of his cruiser with a National Geographic field guide in his hand and asked, "Is that a gear falcon? I just got this book for Christmas." I replied that yes, it was a Gyrfalcon, a very unusual bird for this area. He took a photo and said, "What an incredible experience, this is like watching National Geographic live. That was unbelievable." He thanked me for the exciting experience and then drove away. The bird was weighed, measured, banded, photographed, and released. I now knew that it was a female with some adult feathers coming in on its back and tail.



Left: This Gyrfalcon was captured in November 1995 in the Blue Hills Reservation (photo by Mike McWade). **Right:** Josh Smith holding the same Gyrfalcon. Note how the bird's color varies in different lighting (photo by the author).

From January 10 through May 4, 1998, I spent countless hours of observing this spectacular rare visitor. I learned her varied hunting techniques such as gliding down

from an elevated perch and pouncing on Norway rats, or flying a foot above the ground following every contour and surprising prey like Killdeer and even an Upland Sandpiper. I witnessed the power she had in taking down Brant and saw the speed and relentless duration as she outflow Black Ducks. At times a Kestrel or Peregrine would come in and harass her while she sat tight ducking at each pass, and other days she



would be the aggressor, harassing everything on the airfield. Occasionally she would gain altitude until almost out of sight, then do a barrel roll into a power dive very much like a Peregrine. There were many interactions with the Peregrines that spring, and that is when I came to respect the speed and agility of a Gyr. I watched her easily outmaneuver, overtake, and even pass the Peregrines in level flight. Those Peregrines couldn't get away

Above: The author's first sighting of the Gyr falcon at Logan Airport in 1998 (1/10/98) (photo by the author). **Right:** The author with the Gyr falcon captured at Logan on 1/10/98 (photo by Mike McWade).



from her no matter how hard they tried. There is no doubt that Peregrines are really fast, but Gyrfalcons are even faster.

Even though she spent five months at the airport, unless you knew where to look or were at the right place at the right time, you wouldn't know she was there. Gyrfalcons are such proficient hunters that they spend most of the time roosting, preening, and relaxing. She would spend hours on end hanging out on the bridge cranes across the shipping channel, inside a window ledge on the control tower, or tucked in some hideaway on the ground.



The 1998 Gyr Falcon at Logan Airport (photos by Mike McWade).

Prior to this Gyr Falcon, I had seen four others at Logan Airport since 1982. All were brief encounters, and none stayed more than a day. I feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to observe her for such an extended period of time, and I assumed that this was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. As I rewound the videotape and put it away, I thought about what Mike had said and wondered whether the bird they saw today could be the same one.

Logan Airport 2001-2002

The following Saturday, December 22, 2001, I went to Logan Airport to capture some Snowy Owls. While I was on the airfield Jim Murray, one of Massport's Bird Patrol, pulled his truck alongside of my vehicle and asked if the owls were having a population explosion. There were more Snowy Owls on the airfield than he had ever seen in all the years he had worked at Logan. I started to explain to him about Snowy Owl irruptions when he pointed behind me and said, "The geese are up, that Peregrine must be chasing them again." As I turned around, several hundred Brant were airborne; flying through the flock and toying with them was a falcon, not a Peregrine but a Gyr Falcon. It chased the geese for a short time, and then pulled up and landed on the Hyatt Hotel. Several minutes later it crossed the channel and landed on a metal box on the roof of Boston Design Building. I began to explain the difference between

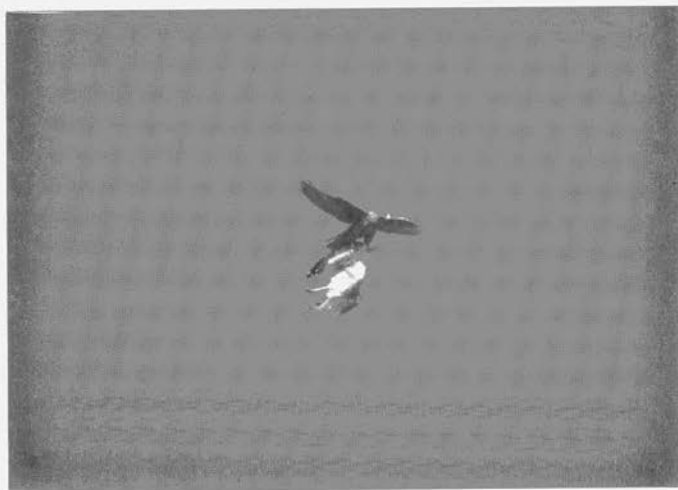


Left: The 1998 Gyr Falcon at Logan. (photo by Mike McWade) **Right:** The 1998 Gyr Falcon on the Black Falcon Terminal in 2002 (photo by Mike Beath).

a Peregrine and a Gyrfalcon. Before I could finish, Jim replied, "That is the big falcon I was telling you about two weeks ago that was eating a black bird on one of the landing lights along runway 27." Back when he had told me, I just assumed the big falcon he had seen was a Peregrine eating a starling. He described his first encounter with the bird, and there was no doubt it was the Gyrfalcon eating a Black Duck. I asked if he knew the date he first saw it. He pulled out the bird record book and responded, "It was 9:30 a.m. on December 3."

Over the next few weeks the bird spent a great deal of the time at Logan, but was also seen on the roof of the Boston Design Building, the Tobin Bridge, and the Hyatt Hotel. I had made several attempts to capture it, but the bird always flew off before I could get the bow net set up. I had numerous great looks at the bird, and while it perched on a runway sign at Logan I was able to read two of the numbers on the band.

Early Sunday morning on February 3, 2002, Mike McWade called me from a pay phone and said the Gyr was sitting on a ledge across from a dirt parking lot where I could try to capture it. When I arrived, the bird was preening, so I had plenty of time to set up the bow net and lure bird. This time we were ready and waiting for the Gyr to make a move. The excitement increased as the bird ruffled its feathers, came to the edge of the ledge and looked at the lure bird. Suddenly it jumped



Left: Herring Gull harrassing the Gyrfalcon (2002). **Right:** The Gyrfalcon has enough, pursues, kills, and later eats that gull. Photographs by Mike Beath.

two feet to the right and pulled out a pigeon that it had cached on the ledge and began to pluck and feed on the carcass.

Assuming it was another foiled attempt at capturing the bird, I opened the door of the vehicle to put the bow net back in the truck when the Gyr jumped to the edge of the ledge again and began to intently watch the lure. In a split second it dropped from the ledge and stooped toward the bow net. At the last second it pulled up and hovered two feet above the trap, carefully examined the setup and landed on a snow plow twenty-five feet from my truck. The bird was very active, turning from side to side, preening, and stretching its wings and legs. During the next twenty minutes I was able to read five more numbers from the band. And now had seven of the nine numbers I needed to identify the bird. The remaining two numbers were unreadable due to blood and feathers stuck to it from the pigeon the Gyr had been feeding on earlier that morning. In a flash, an adult Peregrine came out of nowhere, made a pass at the Gyrfalcon, and a second later the Gyr disappeared in hot pursuit of the Peregrine. The good news, however, was that the seven numbers I had recorded from the band matched the numbers from the '98 Logan Gyrfalcon.

I knew after several more weeks of foiled attempts trying to capture the bird that I would have to come up with a different method. After thinking about it for a while, I remembered that out at the airport the Gyr would regularly harass Snowy Owls by stooping on them, often coming within a foot or two of the owls. I had a plan. After loading a mist net, net poles, and a stuffed Great-horned Owl in my truck in addition to the bow net and lure birds, I was off to the airport. My plan was to go out on the airfield near the fire training area and set up the mist net with the Great-horned Owl behind it. When the Gyr came to do its daily patrol of the airfield, it would no doubt stoop on the stuffed owl and get caught.

When I arrived at the airport, I checked in at the north gate and headed out on the perimeter road to count the birds on the airfield. I had already seen six different Snowy Owls and one Short-eared Owl and was only halfway to the fire training area. As I turned the corner by runway 33L, sitting on runway marker was a beautiful adult male Snowy that was in a hunting mode. I had seen this bird twice before and wanted to capture it as one of our satellite transmitter candidates. After setting out the bow net and lure bird, I started to back up the truck, and within minutes the owl was on its way to the lure. Then from across the runway appeared a second owl that chased off the adult male and landed beside the bow net. Oh no, not her! A very aggressive adult female that has done the same thing numerous times before. She chases owls away from the bow net and sits beside it staring carefully at the setup almost as if she has experienced the bow net in the past. I drove up to put the bow net back in the truck, knowing I would probably never catch her. She flew back to her favorite roosting spot. Just as she landed, a large falcon appeared out of nowhere and was in a power dive heading toward her. The owl ducked its head as the Gyr went by. On the return pass the Gyr came even closer, and the owl ducked once again. The Gyr looped around and came in at ground level, no more than one foot above the ground. This time, however, the owl inverted itself, feet first as the Gyr went by, grabbing the falcon by the wing. They tumbled to the ground, and after a moment the owl released



Gyrfalcon showing the band on the right leg (2002) (photo by Mike Beath)


her grip on the Gyr, which immediately took to the air. As the falcon circled overhead, the owl looked up, giving a high pitched shrill, and then took off chasing the Gyr past Castle Island until they were both out of sight. So much for the mist net and stuffed owl idea!

I tried to relocate that adult male Snowy Owl again. It was nowhere to be found. However, twenty minutes later I saw a Snowy Owl flying in to the airfield from over the water. It was that adult female coming back to her favorite roost. The Gyr wasn't seen for the next four days. When I saw the Gyr again at Logan, it was doing something I hadn't seen it do before. Instead of patrolling the airfield, it was flying into the hangers and catching pigeons, leaving blood, feathers, wings, and heads all over the floor.

In April 2002 the Gyr began to spend most of the day on the Boston Harbor Islands, just like the '98 Logan Gyr did. As the sun went down each day, it would fly up to a window ledge on the control tower at Logan. The same window ledge the '98 Gyr roosted on. Its favorite perch at Logan was the same glide slope tower the '98 Gyr used. The last time I saw the bird was when it came in to roost on the control tower on April 20, 2002.

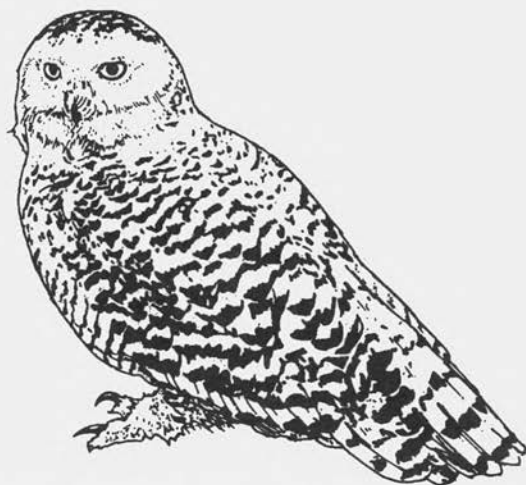
This Gyrfalcon created a great deal of interesting conversation and debate. Was it a male or female? A gray morph or dark morph? Why would someone band a bird that might never return? Would a Gyrfalcon really stoop like a Peregrine? Was it an escaped Gyrfalcon used to control birds at Logan Airport?

In May I went to meet with Mike Beath to look at some photos he had taken of the adult Gyrfalcon. There were two photos that I was particularly interested in. They were closeups of the falcon sitting on a pigeon that clearly showed the band. Mike McWade scanned the photos into Photoshop, creating enlargements of the band. We could clearly read the remaining two band numbers I needed to undisputedly identify the bird. Mike McWade was right, the '98 dark morph, female Logan Gyrfalcon had returned.

During the winter of 2002 we captured thirty-six Snowy Owls at Logan. Two of them were owls banded in the past that had returned; one owl had been banded in 2001, and the other owl in 2000. The Gyrfalcon had foiled all my recapture attempts, but the numbered bracelet on her leg confirmed she was here in 1998. For the record, Logan Airport has only used a captive falcon once to patrol the airfield; it was during a demonstration at a bird strike conference that was being hosted by Logan and resulted in an Upland Sandpiper being hit by a jet. The decision was made at that time not to use captive falcons at the airport. There is no doubt that this spectacular visitor from the far north will be remembered by many for years to come. I still wonder: where did she come from? Where did she go? Will she return? 

Norman Smith, director of the Massachusetts Audubon Society's Blue Hills Trailside Museum, has spent the past thirty years passionately exploring the world of raptors in Massachusetts. His daughter Danielle and son Joshua have played an important part in trying to understand these magnificent creatures.

Editor's note: Norman Smith has been studying Snowy Owls since 1981 as part of a larger research program of the Snake River Birds of Prey Refuge in Snake River, Idaho. His Snowy Owl satellite telemetry project is described in the April 2002 issue of Bird Observer. Danielle Smith's Saw-whet Owl banding project, the first of its kind in New England, also appears in that issue.



SNOWY OWL, ANON.