

## A MASSACHUSETTS RECORD OF A DARK-PHASE GYRFALCON

by Hugh Willoughby, Riverside, R.I.

On Sunday, October 3, 1976, at approximately 9:30 A.M., Robert Pease and I were birding in a section of West Barnstable, Cape Cod, Massachusetts. This area overlooks the western end of the great salt-marshes behind Sandy Neck; we had traversed overgrown fields with scattered junipers, thickets of stunted cherry, arrowwood, etc., to reach the edge of the marsh. Upon arriving there, Pease called attention to the large flock of Starlings which was harassing a very large hawk. Both of us almost immediately said "Peregrine!"--but it was quickly obvious that the bird was too massive to be of that species. (We are very familiar with all of the regular North American falcons, and indeed each had seen all of the normal New England species within a few days.) Pease saw the bird with 10-power binoculars, while I watched through 7-power glasses as the group of Starlings and their huge target came closer. I also had the bird in my 20 x 60 mm gunstock-mounted telescope when it was about 50 yards away and about 45 degrees above the horizon; by this time the bird was over an abandoned field. The light conditions were only moderately good, and viewing quality rapidly deteriorated as the bird flew from left to right and into the hazy, glarey sunlight southeast of our station. The hawk moved deliberately and steadily, passing beyond our range of vision heading southeast. It had been under observation a total of perhaps three minutes.

This hawk was clearly a falcon: it had pointed wings, a long tail, and a large head on a stubby neck. It did not resemble an Accipiter, a Buteo, nor a harrier. It lacked the broad, rectangular wings of an eagle. It was far too heavy-bodied and far too big to be any sort of kite, nor did it fly in their light and airy manner. It was much bigger than a Peregrine; not only was this the general impression, but also we had direct comparison with Starlings.

This bird was puzzling in the manner of its flight, which was unfalconlike: it was moving rapidly by soaring in looping ellipses, keeping its wings in a very flat plane as an eagle does. The ample tail was frequently spread out in a fan, while the almost-triangular wings remained pointed and without "fingers" as they felt the air. The wings were conspicuously wide from front to rear, especially near the body; the "fuselage" was broad, thick, and heavy. Although the bird was soaring, it was moving very rapidly and with a look of power--just as Peregrines do when they are soaring, which they do frequently when the wind is strong. During this sighting a three-day northeast storm was just breaking up; the wind was backing to northerly, but it was still blowing at about 15 to 20 knots at the surface.

When I first got the bird in my telescope, I experienced my only moment of doubt as to its identity, for the falcon showed clearly a facial pattern similar to that of a Peregrine, but less well defined. We had erroneously thought that the Gyr lacks this mark, as Peterson mentions, but other field-guides describe it and all of them picture it; a recent reading of page 75 in Peterson's Birds of Britain and Europe was responsible for the temporary concern. Fortunately, other features were also noted: there was indistinct but definite brown streaking (longitudinally) on the lower portion of the underparts; the chest area was uniformly dark gray. The top of the wings, the back, the rump, and the tail all appeared to be a very dark gray, with no patterns visible. The underwing was in shadow and was not so clearly seen, but it too appeared as a gray tone. There was little contrast between the upper and lower parts of the bird. Leg color was not seen. The only lighter parts were the face and throat areas and the lower belly (against which the brown streaking was visible). This was, in fact, the darkest of the five Gyrfalcons that I have seen, and the darker of the two which Pease has seen. The illustration which comes closest to delineating this individual is the one in Pough's Audubon Water Bird Guide, Plate 40--the black-phase bird. The literature indicates that the streaking of the underparts is a characteristic of young birds, so perhaps this individual is a wandering immature. Its occurrence at this early date is not unprecedented; one was seen, for example, at Block Island, Rhode Island, by several observers on October 5, 1963.

### BIRD CHOIR TOPS SOVIET TV

MOSCOW, May 5 (Reuters)--A choir of 60 trained songbirds led by a blackbird and a nightingale has overtaken ice hockey as favorite television viewing in the Soviet Republic of Byelorussia, the Tass press agency said. The birds have a repertoire of Russian folksongs and specialize in Strauss waltzes.

N.Y. Times, May 11, 1976