

## THE GYRFALCON

Potapov, E. & Sale, R. 2005. London, UK: T& AD Poyser and New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 288 pp. with 42 black-and-white and 48 colour illustrations and numerous tables and diagrams. Hard cover. ISBN 0300107781. US\$45.

*The Gyrfalcon* is a comprehensive monograph on *Falco gyrfalcon*, the world's largest falcon and a charismatic predator in the high northern latitudes. Potapov and Sale have assembled a very detailed and readable summary of biologic data, spiced with anecdotes and historical background. The 11 chapters cover paleogeography and systematics; identification and colours; distribution; population; habitat and landscape preferences; food and feeding habits; breeding cycle; dispersal, seasonal movements and winter distribution; competitors, commensals and conspecifics; man and falconry; and threats and conservation. The volume includes a useful glossary, a 30-page reference list and a detailed index. Following the Poyser/Yale tradition, this book is well produced, with many crisp, informative colour maps, diagrams and photographs.

Viewed across the Gyrfalcon's range, seabirds form a relatively minor component of the diet. Ptarmigan (*Lagopus* spp.) make up more than half the documented prey items, and small mammals (10%) and ducks and geese (4%) are also frequently taken. Even in coastal areas with large seabird populations (e.g. Iceland, Norway, and parts of Alaska, Canada and Russia), relatively low reliance on seabirds as prey is the indication of the data presented in this book (usually less than 5% of the documented prey in regional summaries). Seabirds are, however, important to some individual falcons nesting close to seabird colonies, and they are locally important for some falcons wintering on the coast. Black-legged Kittiwakes (*Rissa tridactyla*) and Atlantic Puffins (*Fratercula arctica*) are the most commonly taken seabirds, but other gulls, alcids, loons (*Gavia* spp.) and waterfowl are also taken regularly. The authors quote observations that suggest some Gyrfalcons are not adept at taking birds on the water.

The book contains much information that will be of interest to ornithologists in general. I was particularly interested in the discussion on ultraviolet (UV) perception by both the falcons and their prey: If UV reflectance is considered, the falcons do not appear white at all, and they might actually be quite conspicuous in snowy arctic habitats. The authors suggest that the white plumage is selected primarily as a means of reducing the cost of pigments during moult; Gyrfalcons living in more wooded environments tend to be darker, because camouflage gives an advantage there. It will be interesting to see whether this speculation on white plumage survives closer scrutiny and research. I'm sure that new insights into seabird plumages, too, would gain if we stopped viewing them only through our restricted primate vision.

*The Gyrfalcon* will be of interest mainly to marine ornithologists and naturalists working in the Arctic or in northern coastal areas frequented by wintering falcons. Others will enjoy the book too, especially the fascinating documentation of the Gyrfalcon's role in falconry. The text is aimed at a non-specialist reader, and if falcons pique your interest, this book is worth the price.

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