

A Leucistic Rough-legged Hawk in Ohio

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On 15 March 2000 a set of images (see below) was posted on the Ohio Birder Resources website. They were photos of a raptor found in Portsmouth (Scioto County) in early February and subsequently seen and photographed by a number of people. The bird had originally been identified as a gyrfalcon. When I studied the pictures, a couple of things bothered me about the identification. The bird was cream-colored, and had the overall shape of a buteo. Although no expert in gyrfalcon identification, I have seen a few through the years. Gyrfalcons should not be unmarked white, and they should show a typical falcon's shape.

The bird in the photos was creamy white overall, lacking any dark markings on the wings or back. When I see an all-white bird I suspect something other than a normal plumage, and first try to determine whether it might be leucistic or albinistic. Truly albinistic birds are extremely rare. Such a bird would be pure white, with pink eyes and pink legs and bill. In my 25 years of birding I can remember seeing only one albino bird. Leucistic birds, on the other hand, are a little more common. These birds are typically cream-colored and have soft parts of normal color. This bird's

bill, legs, and eyes showed no abnormal pinkish tones. I felt without a doubt I was looking at photos of a leucistic hawk. Which species, though?

My initial impression had been that this bird was a buteo. The heavy build, with smallish head and bill, were right for a buteo. The wingtips extending to the tail clearly ruled out all the accipiters, as well as gyrfalcon. The eyes also appeared pale, but this feature was difficult to see on the website picture. To get a better view I decided to save the pictures as JPEGs and play with them in Paint Shop Pro 7.0. Once in the program I was able to sharpen the image slightly using the "unsharp mask" function. I also increased the size of the image, and was able to see clearly a pale iris on the bird. All the Ohio falcons have a large dark eye. This bird's eye was



This leucistic rough-legged hawk appeared in Portsmouth, Scioto County, during February 2000. Photo by Brad Sparks.


LEUCISTIC ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK

pale and relatively small. I was now positive this bird was a buteo. But which buteo was it?

Species of buteos regularly occurring in Ohio include red-tailed, red-shouldered, broad-winged, and rough-legged hawks. The shape of the bird—fairly bulky, with wingtips appearing to reach the tip of the tail—was more like one of the larger species. Red-shouldered and broad-winged are smaller, trimmer buteos. Nor do the wingtips in either species come close to reaching the tip of the tail. The time of year—February—should also eliminate broad-winged hawk. This left me with a choice between red-tailed or rough-legged hawk.

When perched, red-tailed and rough-legged hawks' wingtips extend nearly as long as the tail. Rough-legged hawk's wings are a little bit longer, extending to the tip of the tail,

better matching the pictured bird. Another feature that stood out to me was the bird's noticeably small beak and head. Again, this is consistent with rough-legged hawk. With some effort, I was able to lighten up one of the pictures enough to see the legs and feet of the bird. The feet appeared proportionately small, and the small size of the branch the bird perched on seemed to confirm this. The tarsi appeared to be fully feathered. The bird's feathered legs, small feet, beak and head size, and long wings, along with its choice of small-diameter branches for perching, confirmed to me that this was a rough-legged hawk.

When invited to write this article I was given some additional photos. Included was one of the bird in flight on a cloudy day. In this picture a slightly darker narrow tail band is clearly evident. Leucistic birds will sometimes show the normal plumage bleeding through in shadowy patterns beneath the white, a feature readily apparent in this image. It leaves no doubt as to the bird's identity. It should be noted that a check through the literature and inquiries of experienced hawk watchers turned up no prior records of leucistic or albinistic rough-legged hawks. While a rough-legged hawk may not seem as exciting a find as a gyrfalcon, seeing what may be the first documented leucistic one is a one of a kind experience. 



Here is a flight shot of the Portsmouth, Scioto County, leucistic rough-legged hawk from February 2000. Photo by Kiley André.