

From what has been said, it is evident that this very rare species is a bird of interesting habits and well deserving of further careful study.

*2025 East 88th St., Cleveland, O.*

---

## THE STATUS OF THE BLACK GYRFALCON AS A LONG ISLAND BIRD.

BY E. P. BICKNELL.

THE Black Gyrfalcon has for so long a period held an unquestioned place among the rarer birds attributed to Long Island that it is an unhappy matter it should at length come to be put under the ban. Nevertheless the interests of authentic history require that there should now be told a long unpermitted excommunicating tale. This goes far back and traces certain devious happenings that unintendedly issued in a mistaken record.

Probably not many of us of those pioneer days, as they now seem to be, may intimately recall the indefatigable John Wallace and his taxidermist shop, of musty memory, in upper William street, New York. Thither as a youth I used often to go, hesitant of troubling this always busy man, yet how impelled by expectation! Almost always there would be news of unusual local birds, for many were the specimens that came to that work-shop, and it even might befall, on good days, that I should be allowed to take into my hands some rarity not yet dispossessed of the fresh beauty of its natural form and plumage. Thus I came to know the bluff proprietor and, as it appeared, to be in some degree the recipient of his confidence. So it was that in the course of time I was permitted to hear the somewhat secret story of this falcon and how nearly it had missed its place in ornithological history.

It had been brought in to be mounted by two men who kept a saloon in Harlem, as the then suburban part of the city was known, and who often went out gunning into the adjoining county of Westchester. It was from one of these expeditions that the men had returned with their bird. The undisclosed eye of the taxi-

dermist at once marked it as a prize and, in the interest of friendship, or of science, or whatever it might be, the specimen was promptly thereafter dispatched to Mr. George A. Boardman, of Calais, Maine. It was Mr. Wallace's pleasant custom to send unusual birds to Mr. Boardman and here was an opportunity. By no moral quibble could it be accepted that this choice thing should remain in profane hands, and to Mr. Wallace his course of duty lay plain before him. It followed that when the men returned for their bird they learned that by some mishap it had become damaged beyond repair, and they were offered in its place a mounted group of Bob-Whites, which would better fit their understanding and more appropriately adorn the counter of a saloon. With this they departed perhaps well enough satisfied.

Mr. Wallace seemed to plume himself on his tactics in thus rescuing this fine Falcon from oblivion and, in his hearty way, he treated his fair barter of merchandise as an excellent joke. He had made amends to the despoiled owners and the matter was left square. Not so, however, his account with the eternal verities, for there should be an atoning sequel. It seemed to me possible that Mr. Boardman might have noted down something as to the exact place of capture that Mr. Wallace had forgotten, five years having passed since the event. But a letter of inquiry only left the matter as it stood. He had no other information than that his specimen had been taken in Westchester County in the autumn of 1875.

Mr. Wallace had the impression that the bird had been shot in the neighborhood of Mount Vernon, and it was of particular interest to me that this might be established for it would admit the species within the limits of my own home region of those days. I questioned him closely therefore on this point, but he had no certain recollection of any locality that might have been mentioned more definite than "up on the Harlem Railroad in Westchester County." To his way of thinking that was locality enough for any not too exact mind.

Following all this it was in no small degree mystifying to read in the 'Bulletin of the Nuttall Ornithological Club' for April, 1881, a note by Mr. DeL. Berier reporting the capture of this bird on the north shore of Long Island in Queens County. I could infer nothing

else than that some confusion had here come about with the capture on Long Island in 1877 of another one of the Gyrfalcons (*Falco rusticolus gyrfalco*) then in the possession of Mr. Robert Lawrence of Flushing in Queens County, this specimen also having been obtained through the intermediary of Mr. Wallace. (Recorded in 'Bulletin Nuttall Club,' 5: 117, April, 1880, under the name *Falco sacer*, in accordance with the vogue of that period.) It fell to me therefore to write Mr. Berier mentioning my understanding that the Black Gyrfalcon had actually been taken in Westchester County, and in 1875, not two or three years prior to 1881, as his record ran. Mr. Berier rejoined that it was I and not he who was mistaken for he had his facts at first hand. Here indeed was a situation. It looked like a musty matter leading directly back into the taxidermist shop in upper William street. Accordingly, at my instance, Mr. Lawrence, who, also, was in the original secret, well knowing Mr. Wallace and often availing of his handiwork, approached him for a solution. This was simple indeed. Mr. Wallace laughingly admitted a direlection. Not foreseeing that misinformation carelessly tossed off might sometime reappear as a published record he had on the moment taken this ready way to rid himself of a troublesome questioner. Nor is it intricate that a man of short methods like Mr. Wallace who, as we have seen, could frankly cut across niceties of moral distinctions might, put upon his guard, thus meet the interrogatories of a self-introduced stranger. That, as I had it from Mr. Wallace, was then the status of Mr. Berier in upper William street. In all this no inference must lie against Mr. Berier. My brief correspondence with him, which was never afterwards resumed, assured me that while he might be difficult, and sensitively tenacious of his positions, his natural reliability took the straightest line. I never met him.

In the 'Bulletin of the Nuttall Club' for October, 1881, Mr. Berier returned to his subject, giving some additional particulars, consistently supplied by Mr. Wallace, and correcting the date of the bird's capture. Here also he brushed aside an earlier anonymous record in 'Rod and Gun' (7: 153 Dec. 4, 1875) ascribed to Mr. Boardman, which attributed the capture to Westchester County. This record had appeared in editorial form, according to an old notebook of mine wherein I now find it fully transcribed,

its authorship having been at that time unknown to me. My notebook further reports the substance of a later conversation with Mr. Wallace wherein he once again confirmed that the bird had been shot in Westchester County, and retold, now evidently with some compunction, how he had carelessly misled Mr. Berier. Thus had the whole sorry matter stumbled on to its infelicitous outcome. Nor could the faulty record yet be set right. As the circumstances then were, no other course was open than to hold all the facts in reserve subject to their appropriate future hour.

After what has been recited it may be felt that something of doubt may cloud even the record for Westchester County. Yet the case for that locus unfolds itself in a very natural and credible way. Mr. Wallace so reported the locality to his friend, Mr. Boardman, when sending him the bird soon after he received it, and five years afterwards he so reported it both to Mr. Lawrence and to me. And still again, when the tangled web he had started began to draw, he confirmed his original statement to both of us. And nothing could have been more ingenuous and, let us say, more in good part, than his self-condemning explanation of how he had become entangled.

After all, the two localities that are involved are not many miles apart. The point is that one is of the mainland of New York State across the Sound from Long Island. If the statement in Eaton's 'Birds of New York' attributing this Falcon to Bellport cannot be substantiated it follows that we have no authentic record of this form of the Gyrfalcon ever having occurred on Long Island.

Having thus, reluctant but of necessity, stirred up the ancient history of this specimen, I find myself asking how surely may it be accepted that it was indeed of the variety *obsoletus*. Not that there is any reason at all to doubt this long-standing disposition. It is only that in this group of Falcons exact determination had its greater difficulties in that time than now, and if this specimen has never received an adequate visé, and I do not now recall how this matter may be, it would be apropos could there now be had an authoritative word as to its exact status under the accepted ruling of the present day.

Here is a case that may well put to reflection those who decry all records of rare birds unsubstantiated by a specimen. A very definite record and its required specimen have unworthily stood the test of more than forty years. Better for the cause of truth had this bird been seen convincingly by an experienced and authoritative observer and put on record having, happily, been allowed to keep its freedom!

*100 Broadway, New York.*

---

## A REVIEW OF THE WEST INDIAN BLACK SWIFTS.

BY LUDLOW GRISCOM.

SOME time ago in arranging the collections of this species in the American Museum of Natural History I was struck not only with discrepancies in the statements of writers on this group, but also with the fact that old and fresh specimens from one island differed more from each other than comparable specimens of two supposed races from two different islands. Further, Black Swifts are so difficult to collect, that no Museum in this country possesses an adequate series, and nothing definite is on record regarding individual or seasonal variation. It was obvious, therefore, that no advance could be made without good representation of seasons and localities. I am accordingly greatly indebted to Mr. Outram Bangs and Dr. Charles W. Richmond for loaning me the invaluable specimens in their respective institutions, without which this paper could not have been written. Last fall I was able to examine the series in the Field Museum of Natural History.

As is now well known the true *Nephoecetes niger niger* is from Santo Domingo. In 1910 Mr. Ridgway briefly described *N. n. jamaicensis* from Jamaica, as being "much darker (especially the adult female)." The group is fully discussed, however, in the 'Birds of North and Middle America,' Part V, pp. 704-709 including footnotes. This shows that he had one male from Cuba, five females from Santo Domingo, and six males, three females from Jamaica. Of this material only that from Jamaica was in part recently collected. He also had a male from Dominica and two females from Guadeloupe which he was unwilling to identify