

## First Gyrfalcon Report for North Carolina

Bob Holmes  
4003 Trent Pines Drive  
New Bern, NC 28562

Wade Fuller  
103 Little Rossie Drive  
New Bern, NC 28560

On 10 February 1992 we observed a gray morph Gyrfalcon (*Falco rusticolus*) at the "New Ditch Farm", approximately 3 miles N of Bayboro, Pamlico County, North Carolina. This farm consists of a huge field of some 5,000+ acres, interrupted by small patches of woods and a grid of ditches and one-lane farm roads. The sighting was around 0900 h. The day was overcast with a steady 10–15 mph north wind.

The Gyrfalcon, most likely a female (based on its size), was first seen from our vehicle at a distance of 75–80 yards. It was perched on a small hump of dirt in the bare, plowed field and had a distinctive "hunched" appearance. When we exited our vehicle to view the bird through binoculars, it promptly took flight, moving directly away from us, and landed again on the ground in front of a 3-foot high dirt ditch bank that transected the field some 500 yards away. The senior author had 9 x 35 binoculars and the junior author had 10 x 40 binoculars. A large tract of woods was less than 75 yards from the bird's new location. The bird's selection of a perch on the ground rather than in the nearby woods is behavior typical of the tundra-based raptors such as Gyrfalcon, Snowy Owl (*Nyctea scandiaca*), and tundra Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus tundrius*).

After driving closer to the bird's new location, it took flight again and we picked it up in our glasses after it had crossed the dirt ditch bank and was in process of crossing an adjoining field. It moved directly away from us, then flew to our left which allowed for a view from a different angle, before turning 90° and finally flying out of sight. Our viewing time totaled about three minutes. Efforts to relocate it were unsuccessful.

The bird's long, pointed wings, its tail that was relatively wider than but not as long as that of an *Accipiter* and the nature of its flight clearly marked it as a falcon. The wing beats were continuous (no alternate flapping and gliding), rapid and shallow, with most of the movement in the wings confined to the wrists. The wing beats were below the horizontal of the shoulders; that is, the wrists and the tips of the primaries never rose quite to a point horizontal to the shoulder. This manner of wing movement was noticeably different from the flowing motion typical of Peregrine Falcons where the wing movement originates at the shoulder and the wings rise well above a position horizontal to the shoulder. When this bird flew to our left and then turned to our right, we were able to appreciate the width of its wings. Even though its wings were long, they appeared noticeably wider than those of a Peregrine Falcon. In spite of this rather broad wing, this individual still had the "pointy" look of a falcon. Becoming airborne required a few deep, heavy wing beats; but once in flight, its speed was impressive. This bird covered a considerable distance in a very short order. Its line of flight was direct and it never exceeded 15–20 feet in altitude.

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The Gyrfalcon's length and wingspread were noticeably greater than that of a Peregrine Falcon's. A more impressive difference was its greater bulk. The torso appeared to be as large or larger than that of a Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*). (Prior to our encounter with the Gyrfalcon, we had seen three Red-tailed Hawks - two in flight and one perched in a tree at about the same distance from us as the Gyrfalcon first was. The falcon's medium-gray color was lighter than the slate gray of typical adult male Peregrines, but darker than typical adult male Northern Harriers (*Circus cyaneus*). The underparts were somewhat lighter than the upperparts, but without the dark/light contrast that most Peregrines show. The bird's darkest plumage was on the crown and produced some contrast, though without clear demarcation, to the lighter face so that there was not a helmet-like appearance. Neither was there a distinct mustache. Our only close-up view of this bird perched was for a brief instant just as it started to take flight. Unfortunately, other than discerning that the bill was that of a raptor, we did not note eye color or bill color due to the lighting and brief view of the face. As the Gyrfalcon took flight moving away from us, we were able to discern that the tail was relatively wide and tapered slightly toward the somewhat squared-off, not rounded, tip. The tail was slightly lighter gray than the back and showed no distinct barring or terminal band. Within 5 minutes of losing sight of the Gyrfalcon, we encountered a Northern Harrier in flight at about the same distance as when the falcon first took flight. We both had the immediate impression of the Gyrfalcon being almost  $1\frac{1}{2}$  times the size of the Harrier.

We felt that the above observations of shape, size, flight characteristics, color patterns, and proclivity to perch on the ground convincingly identified this bird as a Gyrfalcon and distinguished it from Northern Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*) and Peregrine Falcon, the two species with which it is most likely to be confused.

A question which could be posed is whether this individual might have been an escapee from a falconer. With this in mind, the senior author wrote letters to a number of falconry clubs and to the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, asking if there was knowledge of a lost Gyrfalcon. Feedback from this effort was scant, but we were assured that no one in North Carolina owned such a bird and further, that the value of a Gyrfalcon is such that it would surely have a radio transmitter attached to it. We saw no evidence of electronic devices or jesses attached to it. Its wariness did not suggest a bird accustomed to captivity. Parenthetically, one might add that Goshawks are usually fairly approachable birds.

Not until some time after we identified the Gyrfalcon did we learn that the fall and winter of 1991-92 proved to be a "Gyrfalcon year", with the movement into New England being described as "the biggest invasion in years" (American Birds 46:225). Individuals were seen as far south as Hackensack, N. J. (Am. Birds 46:241) and Kansas (Am. Birds 46:115).

We believe this to be the first report of a Gyrfalcon having been seen in North Carolina. Details of the observation were submitted earlier to the Bird Records Committee of the Carolina Bird Club which gave a unanimous vote to accept the sighting and subsequently added this species to the state's Provisional List as no photographs were taken (Chat 58:85).