

Gyrfalcon
27 Oct 1996
Grammer Grove W.A., Marshall Co., IA
*M. Proescholdt, *B. Proescholdt
IBL 67:21, 82

Record Number: 96-46
Classification: NA

DOCUMENTATIONS

Beth Proescholdt, Box 65, Liscomb 50148
Mark Proescholdt, Box 65, Liscomb 50148 [4/6/97]

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 67:21
Records Committee: IBL 67:82

VOTE: 2 A-D, 5 NA

NA, Again we have a silhouette description of a 15 to 20 sec. sighting with little detail just an overall impression. A Goshawk can have rather pointed wings, and could fly strongly for 15 seconds without gliding.

NA, The identification was based almost entirely on size and shape. Hanks' Hawks in Flight and a Photographic Guide to North American Raptors all stress the difficulty in separating Gyrfalcon and Northern Goshawk in flight by shape. Plumage characteristics seen were limited and non-diagnostic. Although the bird was documented by two experienced hawk-watchers, it's troubling that three others didn't submit documentation and/or disagreed on the identification. It may have been a Gyrfalcon, but given the description I can't make a definite determination.

A-D, This record is a struggle, not necessarily because of the identification given by the observers, but more whether or not the details are sufficient to withstand the test of time. The obvious candidates are Gyrfalcon, No. Goshawk, and No. Harrier. The hawkwatch at Grammer Grove does not allow patient study as the birds are generally barreling through. Significant, I think, is that Mark thought Gyrfalcon when he first saw the bird. The structural descriptions certainly do nothing to detract from the ID. I believe No. Harrier is adequately eliminated by the use of descriptors "massive, barrel-shaped, robust body". Both reports agree whole-heartedly on the pointed wings which eliminates No. Goshawk. The two-toned effect mentioned by Widner is supported by the Gyrfalcon's light flight feathers contrasting with dark coverts. Actually, this is a pretty "normal" Gyrfalcon record. It is one of the few birds that has such a dearth of field marks that it actually gets identified through process of elimination.

NA, A "what-was-it" should probably remain that way. The lack of objective findings on this bird make it hard to judge.

NA, Those who documented this record kept mentioning that they thought it had the characteristics of a Gyrfalcon as though they were not sure of the identification. Also indicated was the fact that it had a different shape than either a Peregrine Falcon or a Prairie Falcon. The color or possible color phase was not indicated either. Maybe this was a Gyrfalcon but I think we need

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more to make a decision on this one. With the right lighting maybe this was Falco species. With the color given I cannot tell.

NA, A frustrating event! While I think the odds are good this was indeed a Gyr, I suspect that whitish underparts more suggestive of Goshawk (see Kaufman, Advanced Birding) regarding wing shape. View brief--was bird alarmed, chasing, etc?

DOCUMENTATION FORM for extraordinary bird sightings in Iowa

What species? Gyr Falcon How many? 1

Location? Grammer Grove, Marshall County

Type of habitat? bluff paralleling Iowa River, wooded along river

When? date(s): Oct. 27, 1996 time: between to 1:00 and 2:00

Who? your name and address: Beth Proescholdt, Box 65, Lisco, IA 50148

others with you: Mark Proescholdt, Eloise + Eugene Armstrong,

others before or after you: Russ Witner, Jackie Stolzman

Describe the bird(s) including only what you observed. Include size, shape, details of all parts (bill, eye, head, neck, back, wing, tail, throat, breast, belly, under tail, legs, feet). Also mention voice and behavior.

October 27 was a good hawk-watching day - a calm wave with strong NW winds, 44° low (after very strong S winds and 70° of yesterday) - and raptors were really moving. 97 Redtails, 5 Bald Eagles, 1 Roughleg, 4/5 Harriers, plus more - 117 Curlews south during the 7 1/2 hours 4 of us watched that day.

During the 1:00 - 2:00 hour another bird flew from NW over the valley & toward us. It was low, just above the treetops and almost overhead, a huge bird with an unusual, puzzling wing shape (slightly like an Osprey's but not so exaggerated). (over)

Similar species and how eliminated: Goshawks, Harrier, other hawks (see in description)

Did any one disagree or have reservations about identification? yes

If yes, explain: Russ thought it a Harrier (see details)

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), and optical equipment: Good lighting from SW, close + low & almost overhead - Nikon 8 x 30's.

Previous experience with species and similar ones:

one sighting of a Gyr in Alaska
References and persons consulted before writing description: Hawks in Flight and Photographic Guide to N. American Raptor, the best.

How long before field notes made? made this form completed? Dec 1, 1996 that evening.

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Mark shouted, "Think Gyrfalcon", and he, Eloise + I jumped from our chairs to see it fly SE behind us, over the trees + out of sight, all in a period of 15 or 20 seconds.

Mark, Eugene + Eloise + I have watched hundreds + hundreds of hawks, but we stood puzzled and wondered "What was that?" It was unlike anything we'd ever seen, that close at least, an unusual shape — not an Osprey, definitely not a Redtail or any other buteo, not an accipiter, nor eagle, nor falcon.

It was a huge bird with massive, barrel-shaped, robust body, broad huge tail, really wide wings that tapered to a sharp point as we last saw it, with one wing turned up in some way emphasizing the pointed wing tip.

I saw mostly only silhouette with slightly whitish underparts. Mark saw light undersides, Russ noted a two-toned effect. Eloise saw possibly translucent areas near wing tips of those falcon-shaped wings.

We discussed it and wondered, eliminating most raptors. Then we hit the books — all we could find. As we

Beth Proescholdt - documentation of 96-46
Gyr Falcon (cont)

Indeed we realized the only other similar hawk would be a Goshawk. Both have big, barrel-shaped bodies, both have massive tails & huge wings.

I know documentations should not say this, but a photo in Hawks in Flight p. 217, lower left photo, shows exactly what the wings looked like - definitely falcon wings, just as we saw them, and not a Goshawk's rounded accipiter wings.

Mark, Eloise, Eugene & I are confident it was a Gyr Falcon after all our studying. Jackie loves to hawkwatch but really doesn't know much about hawks. Russ thinks it was a Harrier, "but bigger" - but he won't go any further in trying to identify it. (It was much too large and massive for a Harrier).

I have seen Gyr Falcons only once before - north of Nome, Alaska on the cliff at Mile 25 on Kaugaruk Road. We watched that site with scope for 2 hours and saw those two wonderful birds fly with massive bodies, wide wings & huge tail just like this bird.

So I'm confident this was a first Gyr Falcon for us to see in Iowa.

So exciting!!

DOCUMENTATION FORM for extraordinary bird sightings in Iowa

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What species? Gyr falcon How many? 1Location? Grammer Grove Co. Park Hawk Watch - (Marshall Co.)Type of habitat? A bluff along the wooded Iowa River valleyWhen? date(s): Oct. 27, 1996 time: 2:00 p.m. ~~to~~ approximately for maybe 15 secondsWho? your name and address: Mark Proescholdt, Box 65, Liscomb, Iowa 50148others with you: Beth Proescholdt, Eugene + Eloise Armstrong, Russ Widner, and Jackie Stolzmanothers before or after you: none

Describe the bird(s) including only what you observed. Include size, shape, details of all parts (bill, eye, head, neck, back, wing, tail, throat, breast, belly, under tail, legs, feet). Also mention voice and behavior.

Our hawkwatch had strong northwest winds and we had a count of 116 raptors this day with 5 Bald Eagles, nearly 95 Redtails, 4 Harriers, 3 Cooper's, 1 Merlin, 1 Rough-legged Hawk, 4 Sharpshins, and some others.

Things were moving! As this bird came toward us, I shouted "Think Gyr falcon" because it had a long, massive tail and was big and had pointed wings. The underneath side looked all light-colored to me.

The bird looked so different from anything else in shape. The wing tips were tilted up on the bird. It was a big bird with a long wide tail. As it was going away, I said maybe it was a Harrier. But it was much bigger than the four Harriers we had already seen. As it went away, I could see its wing tips seemed to be turned up. It
(on back)

Similar species and how eliminated: See on back. Buteos tails are not this long and massive and they all have different shapes. Goshawks just don't look like the right shape for this big falcon-shaped bird that was leisurely flying by.

Did any one disagree or have reservations about identification? Yes, Russ did.
See on back.

If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), and optical equipment:

Sky was partly sunny and partly cloudy with good viewing. I forgot to write down distance estimations - probably 300 yards to 100 yards - in that area. It wasn't up too high and came by pretty close to us. 8x30 Binocs.

Previous experience with species and similar ones:
Have watched 2 nesting Gyr falcons flying in Nome, Alaska.

References and persons consulted before writing description:
Looked at all the references I could find but that didn't affect writing description.

How long before field notes made? 8:30 p.m. this form completed? Dec. 1, 1996
that night

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flapped its wings a few times as it went away. It seemed to have big wide solid wings at the base next to the body and then outward. The wings were pointed like a large falcon. The wings were not held in a glide position then either.

There were some translucent areas out toward the wing tips that Eloise mentioned and I saw. These were not like Redtail's planks or Red-shouldered's crescents or like the areas for Ferruginous Hawks.

Eugene, Eloise, Mom, & I have seen 100's and 100's of hawks through the years at Grammer Grove and we weren't sure what we had just seen. It was different! Jackie Stolzman saw it but is a learning hawkwatcher and had never even heard of a Gyrfalcon. Russ later said he thought it was a Harrier, but he also said it was much bigger than a Harrier. Russ is too lazy to dig into books and references and try to find out what it was if it wasn't a Harrier.

This bird came from over the valley and then behind us and going SSE from us. It wasn't really too high. Of course, we wished we could have seen more of it and had longer looks!

It was too big for Peregrine and Prairie Falcons and a different shape. It wasn't a goshawk. It was too big for a Harrier. It wasn't an eagle - it had different shape and was light underneath. It wasn't a buteo - Redtail, Swainson's, Rough-legged, or Ferruginous Hawk.

Mom, Eugene, Eloise, and I talked it over back and forth for the rest of the day and were thinking it was a Gyrfalcon. At home that evening Mom and I looked through every source we had.

I thought with the long massive tail that the three choices for our bird were Harrier, Goshawk, or Gyrfalcon. It was too big for a Harrier. Two good resources to look at were Hawks in Flight and A Photographic Guide to N. American Raptors by Brian Wheeler & Bill Clark. They mention Goshawk as a possibility. After looking at photos in flight in both books, I think it was not a Goshawk but was a wonderful Gyrfalcon! Mom, Eugene, Eloise, and I all think we saw a Gyrfalcon at Grammer Grove!