

GYRFALCON (*FALCO RUSTICOLUS*) RECORDS IN PENNSYLVANIA

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The discovery by the writers of a White-phase Gyrfalcon in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania in November, 1981 prompted this review of Gyrfalcon records in Pennsylvania. Despite the prominence of the Philadelphia region in 19th century ornithology, a review of the literature records no Gyrfalcons in the area or the state from that or earlier times. However, an examination of the literature, manuscripts, museum records, county bird lists and personal contact reveals that there are at least 28 reliable and reasonably reliable Pennsylvania Gyrfalcon records in this century.

These birds have either been collected or sighted by experienced observers in 14 counties throughout the state. Dates range from October to February. All color phases are known in the state.

COLOR PHASES

All three color phases have been recorded. In addition, the brown immature Gyrfalcon has been both photographed and observed. (Color phase descriptions are those used in sources. Total does not equal 29 because in some cases color was not recorded or available.)

The phase distribution is as follows:

WHITE: 8 GRAY: 11 BLACK: 6 BROWN: 1

COUNTY DISTRIBUTION

The incidence of Gyrfalcon sighting and collecting by county shows that Berks and Schuylkill counties are the Pennsylvania "headquarters" for Gyrfalcon. These two counties lie astride the hogback of the Kittatinny Ridge situated at Hawk Mountain Sanctuary. The distribution of Gyrfalcon sightings in the 14 Pennsylvania counties in which the bird is known to have occurred is shown below.

BERKS	5	MONROE	1
CARBON	4	NORTHAMPTON	1
DAUPHIN	1	PERRY	1
ERIE	2	PIKE	1
JEFFERSON	1	SCHUYLKILL	9
LANCASTER	4	SULLIVAN	1
LEHIGH	4	WESTMORELAND	1



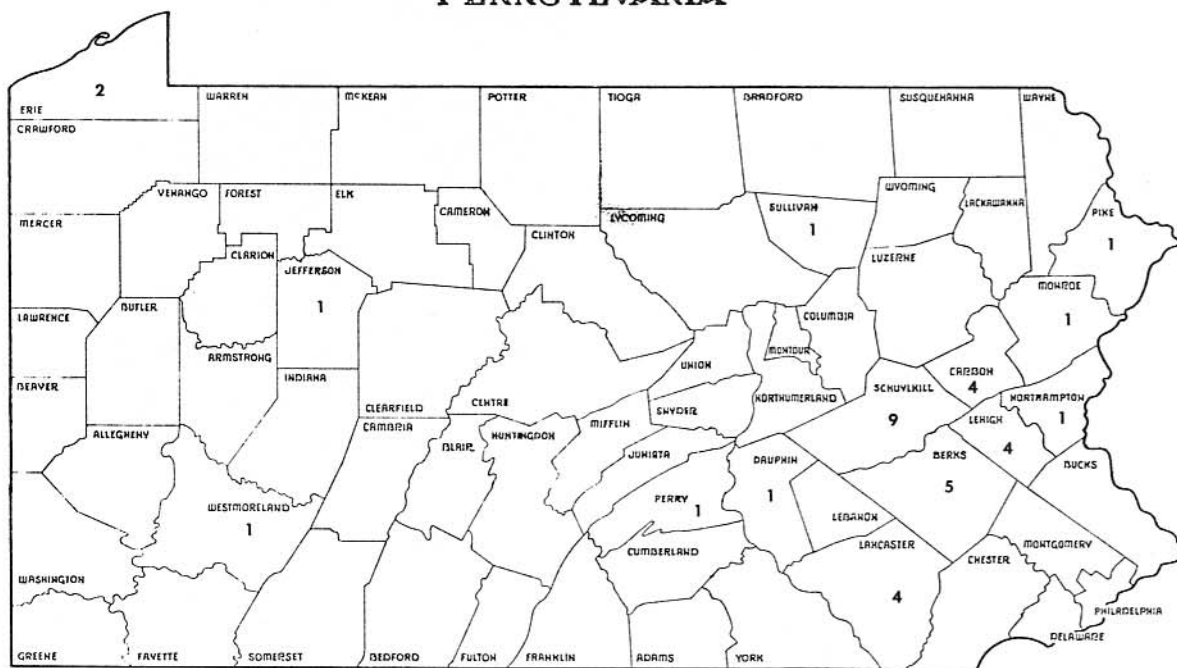
WHITE-PHASE GYRFALCON

Near New Holland, Pennsylvania

Photograph by Alan Brady

January, 1982

PENNSYLVANIA



Incidents and Counties where Gyrfalcon sightings have been recorded
 Birds were counted from every county in which they were seen even if the same bird crossed county lines. Thus a bird flying from the north to south lookout at Hawk Mt. would be counted in both Schuylkill and Berks counties.

As shown on the map, there is a tendency for sightings of Gyrfalcons to be concentrated in the eastern part of the state.

DATES

The Gyrfalcon is a fall and winter bird in Pennsylvania. Dates on which Gyrfalcons have been recorded range from October 12th to February 27th. A hypothetical sighting, if accepted, would move the date back to late September (see Annotated List #16).

The bulk of sightings occurred in November. Single birds seen over an extended period are listed for each time period in which they were observed.

1-15 October	1	16-31 December	4
16-31 October	2	1-15 January	4
1-15 November	7	16-31 January	2
16-30 November	6	1-15 February	0
1-15 December	1	16-28 February	3

CHRONOLOGICAL LIST OF SIGHTINGS

The following table lists Gyrfalcon records in Pennsylvania.

PENNSYLVANIA GYRFALCON RECORDS

Rat- #	ing	Date	Town/County	Phase	Observer(s)
1	A	16 January 1913	Salina, Westmoreland	Gray	A. A. Moun-ton
2	A	7 January 1927	Manheim, Lancaster	Gray	H. H. Beck, H. J. Roddy
3	A	11 November 1928	Forest Inn, Carbon	Gray	Samuel Kerns
4	B	12 October 1934	Hawk Mt., Berks/ Schuylkill	Black	Mrs. C. N. Edge, Mrs. M. H. Edey, Maurice Broun
5	B	2 November 1934	Schuylkill	White	Maurice Broun
6	B	16 October 1936	Schuylkill	Black	Maurice Broun
7	B	28 October 1941	Lake Ontelaunee, Berks	Gray	Earl Poole
8	C	24 November 1949	Kistler Valley, Lehigh	Dark?	Clint & Robert Miller
9	B	28 November 1949	Harrisburg, Dauphin	White	Edward S. Frey
10	C	Winter, 1949-1951?	Broad Mt., Schuylkill	White	John Stasho
11	B	13 November 1950	Fox Township, Sullivan	Gray	Jesse Brown
12	B	13 November 1952	New Tripoli, Lehigh	Gray	Fred Mangels
13	B	22 February 1953	Hawk Mt., Berks/ Schuylkill	Black	Clint and Robert Miller
14	B	29 December 1962	Allentown, Lehigh	White	Carl Montgomery
15	A	January 1964	Marysville, Perry	Gray	Dr. Wm. Rhein
16	H	25 September 1966	Bake Oven Knob, Lehigh	White	Donald Heintzelman
17	C	21 February 1970	Jefferson County	?	Merle J. Whitney
18	B	late November, early 1970's	Lehigh Furnace Gap, Carbon	White	Alan Grout, John Stasho
19	B	22 November 1972	Sunrise Mt., Pike/ Monroe	White	Larry Rymon
20	A	26-27 February 1973	Presque Isle, Erie	Black	Donald Snyder, Charles Krantz
21	A	10 November 1973	Baer Rocks, Carbon/ Lehigh/ Schuylkill/Berks	Gray	Ken Kranick, Chester Robinson
22	B	2 November 1975	Hawk Mt., Berks/ Schuylkill	Black	James Brett, Ned Smith
23	B	26-27 December 1980	Presque Isle, Erie	Gray	Jerry Williams, Sam & Jim Stull
24	B	27 December 1980	Bethlehem, Northampton	White	David DeRemus, Joseph Fritz, R. Manche
25	B	14 November 1981	Baer Rocks, Carbon/ Schuylkill	Brown	Ken Kranick, David Simpson
26	B	21 November 1981	Baer Rocks, Carbon/ Schuylkill	Gray	Ken Kranick, David Simpson
27	A	27 November 1981 through January 1982	New Holland, Lancaster	White	Edward Fingerhood, Sidney Lipschutz
28	B	1 January 1982	Manheim, Lancaster	Black?	Jay George
29	B	9 January 1982	New Holland, Lancaster	Gray	Jeff Gordon

Rating Criteria:

- A. Record based on a specimen or unambiguous photograph.
- B. Record based on first hand observation by one or more reliable observers.
- C. Record based on second hand accounts or incomplete data.
- H. Hypothetical.

ANNOTATED LIST OF PENNSYLVANIA GYRFALCON RECORDS

- #1. This specimen was in the William Penn State Museum in Harrisburg, PA until it was destroyed by a leaky roof. It is recorded, however, on Museum Catalog File Card #1501. Earl Poole notes in his typescript that he never saw the bird. (Poole, 1958.)
Evidently, the bird was taken alive because the card notes that it was "chloroformed on June 20, 1913." Roland Bergner of the Museum staff tells us that the bird was classified as, "*Falco rusticolus gyrfalco*," and was assigned A.O.U. number 354a. That makes it a Gray-phase Gyrfalcon.
- #2. This mounted specimen is currently in the Ornithology office of the North Museum in Lancaster, PA. It is the earliest extant specimen of a gyrfalcon collected in Pennsylvania. Richard Bush, Museum Preparator, describes the bird as "dark gray." (Pers. comm., 16 Dec. 1981).
The Auk account describes the variety as "*gyrfalco* (or *rusticolus*)". The "back and wings are nearly solid lead gray . . . no fuscous or brown tints." (Beck and Roddy, 1927) The bird was shot by a farmer.
- #3. Earl L. Poole reported this bird to *The Auk* in 1933. The specimen was collected by Dr. Samuel Kerns of Slatington, PA. The bird may be the second extant Gyrfalcon collected in the state. Poole reported it as a "mounted" specimen in the Reading Public Museum. Mr. Samuel Gundy, retired curator of the Museum, is "quite sure" the bird is still in the collection. But, Mr. Bruce Detrick, Director of the Museum, had a search made for the specimen. Neither it nor a record of it was found. (Pers. comm. 7 Jan. 82)
Although the bird was classified as a "White Gyrfalcon (*Falco rusticolus candicans*), Poole wrote that the color "agrees with the dark phase of *candicans*." Based on the rest of his description we estimate that the bird is the gray variety of *Falco rusticolus*.
Note: "*candicans*" was the subspecific designation of the Greenland race of the White Gyrfalcon (A.O.U. #353) according to the *AOU CHECK-LIST OF NORTH AMERICAN BIRDS* (1931) in use at that time. Greenland Gyrfalcons were regarded as dimorphic with a white and gray phase. But there still was ambiguity in Gyrfalcon taxonomy. Current classification has lumped "*candicans*" with "*obsoletus*" (A.O.U. #354b—*CHECK-LIST OF NORTH AMERICAN BIRDS*, 1957). Many Pennsylvania Gyrfalcons are probably of this race.
- #4. Hawk Mountain was acquired by Mrs. Rosalie Edge in August, 1934. Maurice Broun became its first curator in September of that same year. Within one month they had the state's fourth Gyrfalcon record. Here is Broun's account:
"A Gyrfalcon in very dark plumage occurred in a flight of 369 hawks (of 13 species) on October 12, 1934. The bird spent two minutes swooping round the Lookout, plunging at passing Sharp-shins and Red-tails, to the amazement and delight of Mrs. Edge, Mrs. Alfred Edey and myself." (Broun, 1948)
Because the Hawk Mt. ridge straddles both Berks and Schuylkill counties, the bird is located in each.
- #5. One can only imagine Broun's amazement when a short time later he saw another Gyrfalcon. Broun records that,
"Three weeks later I had the rare good luck to see another Gyrfalcon. This time a bird in white plumage passed the Lookout very low, and leisurely, late in the afternoon of November 2nd. It was a perfect climax to a red-letter day which produced 1,013 hawks—and a Raven just to counterbalance the great white visitor." (Broun, 1948)
- #6. Hawk Mountain holds the distinction of the next Pennsylvania record, and again the observer was Maurice Broun. He writes,
"The circumstances attending the visit of the third Gyrfalcon were quite dramatic. I held a lonely watch on the morning of October 16, 1936. Low hanging clouds and heavy mists curtained the terrain. Not a hawk had come. After a time a large flock of wild geese swept out of the mists, and their clarion notes, resounding through the mountain, seemed to convey tidings of something wonderful about to happen. The mists presently scattered, and at 11:20 A.M. a huge falcon in very dark plumage, pulled up its sails almost directly above me, and within seventy feet. It veered a trifle, hesitated, and then sailed off towards the south, moving very slowly, a Gyrfalcon indubitably." (Broun, 1948)

- #7. Earl Poole reported that the only living Gyrfalcon he saw in Pennsylvania was "light gray". (Poole, 1933-42) The Cassinia note classifies it as "*Falco rusticolus candicans* . . . a white Gyrfalcon" (Cassinia, Vol. 32). Evidently, Poole considered this bird the gray phase of the A.O.U. subspecies, "candicans" (AOU, 1931). See #3 for another example of a dark phase White Gyrfalcon.
- #8. The only reference we have to this sighting is the one in the Lehigh County list (Morris, 1979). Clint and Robert Miller are experienced and reliable observers. Bernard Morris informs us that he included this record in the Lehigh County list "probably from Clint Miller's records." He added that had the bird been a white phase he would have noted it. Thus, his best recollection is that it was a "dark" bird. (Pers. comm., 1981)
- #9. It's interesting to note that this, the second record for a Gyrfalcon in November 1949, is separated by only four days and approximately seventy miles from the previous record. This coincidence suggests that Frey may have spotted the same individual in Dauphin County that the Millers saw in Lehigh County. The color phase ambiguity remains to be resolved (*Audubon Field Notes*, 1950).
- #10. The Poole typescript (1958) makes note of a "positive" identification of a White-phase Gyrfalcon by John Stasho. Stasho is quoted as saying that the bird was seen in the winter "several years ago." The manuscript note was made, apparently in 1953, hence, the ambiguity about the year of the sighting. No further data other than location is given.
- #11. This bird was shot by Jesse Brown. Poole states that he made a color illustration of it in 1956 (1958). The bird was mounted and stood in the office of Mr. Pat Plasterer, Bounty Officer of the Pennsylvania Game Commission in Harrisburg until he retired in October, 1957. He gave the bird to a Mr. Walt Koller who may have been the one who mounted it. Koller was a taxidermist who is now dead, but his widow, who may know that fate of this bird, lives in Lemoyne, just across the river from Harrisburg.
The current whereabouts of the color illustration, as well, is not known (Pers. comm., Mr. Ted Godshall, Information Officer, Pennsylvania Game Commission, 11 Dec. 81).
- #12. Probably the best reference to Fred P. Mangels' sighting of a Gray-phase Gyrfalcon is the one which is cited below. Bernard Morris, et al., in the *Field List of the Birds of Lehigh County* (Morris, 1979) makes note of a Mangels Gyrfalcon record for "11/3/52." In as much as the source for the Lehigh County list was probably *Audubon Field Notes* (1953), we can safely assume that the November 3 date is a printer's error.
Not so easy to explain is the notation in Earl Poole's manuscript (1958) of a "light gray" Gyrfalcon seen by Mangels in New Tripoli on 10 December 1952. Was this the same bird in the published account? Is the date mistaken? Was this another observation of the same bird as reported on 13 November? Earl Poole was a meticulous record keeper. It's unlikely he noted the date incorrectly. Gyrfalcons will stay in an area for a considerable time—certainly a month sets no precedent. Since the authors could find no solution to the problem, we have chosen to stick with the published report, present what we know, and leave the judgement to the reader.
- #13. The fourth Hawk Mountain sighting was at 2:55 P.M. from the North Lookout (Poole, 1964). (Additional data from James Brett, Curator of Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, letter, 10 Dec. 81).
- #14. This bird was found on a Christmas Bird Count by the observer and his family. The bird was seen at 100 feet. Unfortunately, no definite locale was mentioned other than the area covered by the Allentown Christmas Bird Count (*Audubon Field Notes*, 1963).
- #15. Dr. William L. Rhein of Mechanicsburg, PA writes us that in the winter of 1964 he was photographing ducks from a blind on the Susquehanna River. He tells how in the "middle of January" the river was nearly frozen solid "for a full two weeks . . ." He continues:
"I had noticed a large bird chasing ducks approximately in the middle of the river. Close to my blind a small area was unfrozen due to the rapids—it was there that the ducks grouped. Later the falcon alighted on a rock quite close to my blind. I was able to make one exposure . . . the color phase was gray brown with streaks on the breast." (letter, 30 Dec. 1981).
Rhein gave a color print of the bird to Mr. Walton Weber (at that time a staff artist for *National Geographic Magazine*). Weber considered the bird an immature Gyrfalcon.

Other prints of the bird are owned, it seems, by Weber (or the magazine), Hawk Mt. Sanctuary, Mr. Ted Hake of Harrisburg and, we suppose, Dr. Rhein himself.

- #16. Donald Heintzelman lists the status of Gyrfalcon as "hypothetical" at Bake Oven Knob on the basis of this one sighting. He and two other observers saw a "large white raptor" near eye level along the northern slope. He was able to describe a number of other features from color pattern to flight characteristics that suggest Gyrfalcon. His tentative conclusion was "a white-grey Gyrfalcon." Given that others were collected or sighted in the same general area, the conclusion is not unreasonable. However, if this were, indeed, a Gyrfalcon, then it is the earliest fall record in the state (Heintzelman, 1969).
- #17. *Audubon Field Notes* (1970) makes the following frustrating statement, "The details submitted with this record seem to warrant its acceptance." That's all!
- #18. This white-phase bird was seen several times during the day by Mr. Alan Grout and Mr. John Stasho at Lehigh Furnace Gap. It was seen sometime from "mid to late November in the early 70's." Mr. Grout was unable to locate his records to determine the exact date. However, he recalls that the bird "swooped at a passing glider." (Pers. comm., Alan Grout, 13 Jan. 82).
- #19. The observer saw this bird over the Delaware River at the border of Monroe and Pike counties. He was the sole observer and saw it flying southeast at 4:15 P.M. Rymon speculates that the bird was "migrating." (Pers. comm., 28 Dec. 81).
- #20. The photograph, unfortunately rather obscure, of this bird was made by Charles Krantz. The published record of the bird specifies the color phase as "dark." Based upon the photograph, it appears to be the black variety (*Audubon Field Notes*, 1973).
- #21. This sighting was a fly over. Mr. Kenneth Kranick identified the bird. A short while later that day, five and a half miles east of Hawk Mt., Mr. Chester Robinson captured and banded a Gyrfalcon. It was probably the same bird. No color phase was described in the published records (*American Birds*, 1974), but the bander, who has a photograph of the bird, describes it as having "lots of brown on the back and the breast is heavily streaked." Robinson calls the bird's color "intermediate" (gray) and feels it was an immature bird. He adds that he never got a report of it. (Pers. comm. 22 Dec. 81).
- #22. Forty one years to the day, Hawk Mt. recorded its fifth Gyrfalcon, but this time it was a black, rather than a white-phase bird. Here's Michael Heller's account.
"As an ample Sunday crowd worms its way up to the lookout November 2nd, no one has the slightest inkling of the unusual sight they'll witness. The day is calm and mild, 61 degrees—there seems little prospect of a good flight. Shortly after noon the idle chatter is interrupted as two birds are sighted far to the east. Speculation suggests a Red-tail and a Sharp-shin. Even this evokes excitement as they are only the fifth and sixth birds of the day. As the larger bird cuts across the valley with labored wing-beats, patches of white are spotted in the wings and tail. George Weinstein voices our thoughts. "Well since the big one's an immature Golden Eagle, that other bird's no 'Sharpie'". Each eye strains to pick out every detail as the smaller bird heads directly toward the lookout. An eerie silence is finally broken when Jim (Brett) shouts almost reluctantly, "Gyrfalcon!". A view to be treasured forever is afforded as this huge arctic falcon veers in front of the summit and sweeps past, 50 yards to the south. (*Hawk Mountain Sanctuary Association Newsletter* 48, Apr. 1976).
Thus far, this is the last Hawk Mt. sighting. In 1948 Maurice Broun estimated that the chances of seeing a Gyrfalcon at Hawk Mountain were "one in sixty thousand." (Broun, 1948). Considering the myriad of hawks that have been counted at that site, it seems he underestimated the odds.
- #23. There is a report in *American Birds* (1981) of a Gyrfalcon sighting at Presque Isle, Erie county on 6-7 December 1980. Somehow the "2" was dropped from before the six and seven. The actual sighting dates were the 26th and 27th of December. This gray-phase bird was seen by many observers at Gull Point and the Bay. (Pers. comm., Sam Stull, 14 Dec. 81).
December 27th was the day of the Presque Isle Audubon Society's Christmas Bird count. (*American Birds*, 1981).
- #24. Meanwhile, across the state, another Gyrfalcon was seen on another Christmas Bird Count. This Gyrfalcon was seen and identified by two parties on the Easton-Bethlehem Count, (*American Birds*, 1981).

- #25. This bird circled and went off to the west below eye level on the northwest side of the ridge about 2:50 P.M. The observers saw the bird for about two minutes before it passed at about 150 to 200 feet. (Pers. comm., Mr. Kenneth Kranick, 12 January 82).
- #26. Kranick and Simpson saw and identified another Gyrfalcon a short while later. Mr. Alan Grout also saw the bird. This bird was described as "dark gray." It came from the northeast (Carbon County) and disappeared below the ridge at about 12:25 P.M. The bird was seen at about 400 feet from above. (Pers. comm., Mr. Kenneth Kranick, 12 January 1982).
- #27. For details see General Notes in this issue of Cassinia. The 1957 edition of the A.O.U. *Check-list of North American Birds* notes Pennsylvania as the most southerly penetration of the Gyrfalcon. Among the Pennsylvania records, this sighting appears to be the furthest movement south of the bird in the state.
Also, no Pennsylvania Gyrfalcon was recorded in the state for more than two days prior to this sighting. This bird was seen intermittently by delighted observers in approximately the same area from 27 November 1981 through January 1982.
- #28. On 1 January 1982 Jay George observed and photographed a Gyrfalcon. It was described as "very dark" and was seen along Doe Run Road northeast of Manheim, Lancaster County (Armas Hill, Pers. comm., Jan. 1982).
- #29. Eight days after the Manheim sighting, a bird characterized as "light slate grey" was seen by many observers in the area of New Holland, Lancaster County (Armas Hill, Pers. comm., Jan. 1982). An amazing phenomenon occurred when this bird roosted in the very same tree used the previous week by the White-phase Gyrfalcon (No. 27).
One might speculate whether the two 1982 sightings of dark birds represent the same or different birds. In addition, one could ask if the bird seen at Baer Rocks on 21 November 1981 is the bird seen here or at Manheim.

SUMMARY

The authors make no claim to have undertaken a comprehensive search of all possible published and unpublished sources for Pennsylvania Gyrfalcon records. However, all major and a number of minor sources have been thoroughly consulted. We are confident that the records presented and materials reviewed include all important records of *Falco rusticolus* in Pennsylvania. We would appreciate notice of any records that we may have inadvertently missed.

This review of Gyrfalcon records in Pennsylvania reveals that there are more occurrences of the bird than previously thought. Although the Gyrfalcon is still a rare visitor to the state, it is not quite so rare as imagined. Whether the increase in sightings in the state in the past decade is due to more competent observers in the field or more fundamental processes cannot be determined by this data. Whatever the case, *Falco rusticolus* is a welcome addition to Pennsylvania avifauna at any time.

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