

THE LANCASTER COUNTY GYRFALCON INCURSIONS of 1981 - 1983

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INTRODUCTION

As far as we know, no Gyrfalcons (*Falco rusticolus*) appeared in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, during the past winter (1983-1984). Thus, this is an appropriate time to review the unprecedented incursion of Gyrfalcons into the state during the winter seasons of 1981-1982 and 1982-1983. This paper deals with the major events regarding the influx of these birds during those seasons.

This report would not have been possible without the aid of Robert Augustine, who freely shared his careful records and perceptive thoughts with me, of Tom Amico, whose "diary" of the birds' visit is the definitive chronicle of this remarkable event, and of the members of the Lancaster County Bird Club whose untiring efforts monitored the whereabouts and activities of these birds through two exhilarating winters.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE INCURSION

Unknown to Sidney Lipschutz and the author, their discovery of a white-phase Gyrfalcon on November 27th, 1981, near New Holland, Lancaster County, was the third record of a Gyrfalcon in Pennsylvania that fall. Two weeks earlier, on the 14th of November, a "brown" Gyrfalcon was identified at Baer Rocks on the Kittatinny Ridge of the Appalachian Mts. (Fingerhood & Lipschutz, 1982). Exactly a week later, on the 21st, another Gyrfalcon was seen in the same location. This one was described as "dark gray." (ibid.)

These two Baer Rocks sightings were not widely known until mid-January, 1982, when the excitement over the white-phase Gyrfalcon was at its height and reports of "dark" Gyrfalcons were numerous.

The white-phase bird was photographed on November 28th and placed on the Delaware Valley "Birdline" that evening. Subsequently, the word spread rapidly and many birders made their way into the area, greatly increasing the coverage.

On December 13th the important discovery was made that the white-phase Gyrfalcon roosted in an oak tree approximately two miles northwest of the discovery site (Amico 1982a). This site became known as the Balmers-town roost tree or "roost tree" for the rest of the season.*

An even more remarkable "find," however, went unnoticed until mid-January. Bill Yeager discovered a "dark-phase" Gyrfalcon in the vicinity of

*The property owner said the white-phase Gyrfalcon had roosted there since "sometime in October".

the roost tree on December 19th. Because Yeager went on vacation soon afterwards, word of this sighting did not surface for some weeks. (ibid.)

Meanwhile, local birders were electrified to learn that Jay George found a "very dark" Gyrfalcon near Manheim on January 1, 1982. (Fingerhood & Lipschutz, 1982) Manheim is 17 miles northwest of New Holland. So, two Gyrfalcons were now known to be roaming the fields of Lancaster County.

A major breakthrough that was to shape all future observations of the Gyrfalcons occurred on January 24th. Bob Augustine discovered both the white and dark Gyrfalcons at the Stoltzfus & Sons Quarry just north of Leola in the heart of Lancaster County and only five miles from the original sighting. The quarry and roost tree now became the loci of many future sightings. (Amico 1982b)†

A variety of contradictory and confusing reports of two different "dark" Gyrfalcons became common throughout January and into February. And, on January 30th, Graham Metson of Washington, D.C., feels he may have identified a "brown" Gyrfalcon at the roost tree. (pers. comm.)

Part of the "numbers game" was dramatically resolved on February 27th. Hal Wierenga and Bob Augustine saw two dark-phase Gyrfalcons at the quarry. Three definite Gyrfalcons were now known to be in Lancaster County! (Amico 1982b)

The next day Alan Brady made the only known photograph of all three Gyrfalcons in the air at once. Another of his photographs confirmed that the white-phase bird was smaller than the 1st dark-phase Gyrfalcon. Speculation that the two birds were a pair became common, the white-phase Gyrfalcon now being identified as a probable male.

From March 1-19, all three Gyrfalcons were seen. The 2nd dark-phase Gyrfalcon was seen less often and fleetingly, but definitely on at least four occasions. (Amico 1982b)

Sometime during the morning of March 19th the 2nd dark-phase Gyrfalcon was reported at the quarry. This was the last confirmed sighting of this bird. Soon after, on March 23rd, Tom Amico watched the white and 1st dark-phase Gyrfalcons settle down to roost for the night in the quarry. The next morning the white-phase Gyrfalcon was gone. It was not seen again that spring.

The remaining dark Gyrfalcon lingered. It was seen nearly every day from March 23 to 30. About 1:15 p.m. on a cold, rainy afternoon on March 31st, Ed Altemus and George R. Clark saw the 1st dark-phase Gyrfalcon for the last time. (pers. comm.)

† Quarry workers claimed the white Gyrfalcon had been "hanging around the quarry for the last five years."

The "incursion" for the winter of 1981-1982 was over.

Speculation about the possible return of the Gyrfalcons was rife throughout the summer and fall of 1982. As the year deepened into late autumn and early winter, constant surveillance of the previous Gyrfalcon haunts was mounted by birders in Lancaster County. Already the season had produced five good records of Gyrfalcons moving along the Kittatinny Ridge. (See following article.)

On the last day of 1982, Mr. Paul Hoover, owner of the farm adjacent to Balmerstown Road, discovered the white-phase Gyrfalcon in the roost tree it had used so frequently the year before. And the next day, January 1, 1983, the gray-phase Gyrfalcon was seen in the general vicinity of the quarry. Careful examination of the birds' field marks compared favorably with detailed descriptions and photographs of the birds of the previous winter. Evidently, the same pair had returned.

Again, the Stoltzfus Quarry, just north of Leola, Lancaster County, seemed to be a favorite roost site. At first the birds acted normally; on January 6 they were seen flying together over the quarry, locking talons in mid-air. But it soon became apparent that the gray-phase Gyrfalcon was acting strangely. On January 9 it never moved from its perch in the quarry. This behavior was uncharacteristic of the usually energetic falcon. A careful watch was mounted on her. On the 10th she took flight briefly, but remained on the quarry wall most of the day. A wash of light green excrement began to cover the rocks below and adjacent to the bird. One of its eyes was often closed. Clearly, the bird was ailing.

By January 12 concerned birders planned a rescue effort. The gray-phase Gyrfalcon was so weak it could not stand. The white-phase Gyrfalcon frequently perched nearby, calling to the unmoving dark bird. The rescue effort was agreed upon for the following morning. At 7:00 a.m. the rescue party discovered the gray-phase Gyrfalcon, still warm, on a ledge below its favorite perch in the quarry. The bird had evidently died a short time before.

The dead bird was retrieved in the presence of Pennsylvania District Game Protector, Ted Fox, by Robert Schutsky and Tom Amico. Later that morning, Mark Robbins, Collection Manager of the Ornithology Department of the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, transported the bird to the Academy where he prepared it as a skin. The viscera were taken to Dr. Robert Snyder of the Philadelphia Zoo for an autopsy. He determined that the bird died of a lesion that quickly developed in the bird's duodenum. The

lesion, caused by an intestinal flatworm, allowed bacteria to enter the bird's blood stream, causing abscesses to develop in the liver and resulting in its death. (pers. comm. 3/13/84).

Examination of the dead gray-phase Gyrfalcon confirmed the suspicion that it was a fully mature adult female. A precise description of the soft parts and measurements are on record at the Academy of Natural Sciences. The skin was displayed at the D.V.O.C. meeting of January 20, 1983. Soon after, it was given to the Pennsylvania Game Commission as a permanent loan from the Academy of Natural Sciences. The bird is now mounted as the centerpiece of a display of Pennsylvania's raptors in the Visitor Center of the Middle Creek Wildlife Management Area.

It is impossible to know what goes on in the mind of a Gyrfalcon that watches its mate waste away, die, and be carried off by three wingless creatures. But we can describe its activity. We've seen how the white-phase Gyrfalcon fruitlessly called to the ailing dark bird. Tom Amico, who participated in the rescue attempt, writes:

When the rescue team entered the quarry on January 13 the white-phase Gyrfalcon flew out, circled above the team and then landed in the tree at the southeast corner of the quarry. It then flew due south out of sight around 7:30 a.m. Returning at 10:50 a.m., it sat in a crevice at the eastern corner of the quarry until 11:50 a.m. At that time it flew out crying, then alit where the dark-phase Gyrfalcon had been perched before its death. It stayed for approximately one minute, cooing, and then flew out circling and drifted southwesterly until it disappeared. (Amico, 1983, page 6)

Despite the death of the dark Gyrfalcon, the white-phase bird settled in for a long stay. From the day it was first seen (December 31, 1982) until its departure it was seen on at least 55 different days. In all, it was in Lancaster County 95 days. The bird was last seen at the Middle Creek Wildlife Management Area on April 4, 1983 by Leon and Jane Schreffler. No Gyrfalcons returned to Lancaster County the following winter.

FIELD MARKS

All three Lancaster County Gyrfalcons were clearly marked if they could be studied under reasonably good conditions of light and weather. Although it was impossible to identify which dark-phase gyrfalcon was seen before the two were studied on February 27th, 1982, subsequent sightings became more definite. The identity of the "brown" falco species of January 30, 1982 is undetermined.



1st dark-phase Gyrfalcon, January 30, 1982.

Photo by Bob Augustine.

White-Phase Gyrfalcon:

This bird was distinguished by a very black eyeline that extended almost completely around the head. It had black barring on the dorsal side and gray barring on the ventral side of its tail. (Fingerhood & Lipschutz, 1982; photographs)

1st Dark-Phase Gyrfalcon

This Gyrfalcon's back and wings were a dark chocolate gray. The breast was mottled dark and "sandy." The flanks and undertail coverts were broadly barred and streaked with near black. The undertail was finely barred with gray and white. The bird had a white ring around the eye which broadened slightly to the front. (pers. comm., Bob Augustine photographs, specimen)

2nd Dark-Phase Gyrfalcon

This bird could be distinguished from the 1st dark-phase Gyrfalcon by its overall color which was slightly lighter, by the presence of a distinct black moustache and light eyeline. (pers. comm., Leon Schreffler, Bob Augustine)

SUMMARY

It's tempting to assume that the Gyrfalcons seen at Baer Rocks early in November 1981, and along the Kittatinny Ridge in 1982, were among those that showed up in Lancaster County a few weeks later. Baer Rocks and the Ridge are only about 25-45 miles northeast of the Lancaster County location where the Gyrfalcons were later seen. If this, indeed, were the case, it can never be confirmed.

What is sure, however, is that never before had three Gyrfalcons been recorded south of Canada at one time in one area. Even the "explosive" Gyrfalcon invasion of the winter of 1971-72 failed to produce such a concentration of Gyrfalcons in the lower forty-eight states as occurred in Pennsylvania in the winter of 1981-82. (Buckley, 1972)

Prior to the winter of 1981-82, no Gyrfalcon had been seen in Pennsylvania beyond February 27th. The last days for these birds were:

2nd dark-phase: March 19, 1982

white-phase: March 23, 1982

1st dark-phase: March 31, 1982

Prior to this winter, no Gyrfalcons in Pennsylvania had been seen for more than two days. The Gyrfalcon visit that winter was:

white-phase: November 27, 1981-March 23, 1983, 116 days

1st dark-phase: December 19, 1981-March 31, 1982, 102 days

2nd dark-phase: February 27-March 19, 1982, 21 days

The only previous Lancaster County record of a Gyrfalcon was from Manheim; until then, the most southerly penetration of Gyrfalcons in the state. The area just southwest of New Holland where the white-phase Gyrfalcon was discovered is approximately 17 miles southeast of Manheim. Thus, the Gyrfalcons of the winter of 1981-82 were the most southerly Pennsylvania Gyrfalcon records to that time.

The return of the pair of Gyrfalcons in 1983 also was unprecedented. As best I can determine, at no other time for Pennsylvania or the contiguous forty-eight states had the same pair of Gyrfalcons returned to winter over in the same area for two consecutive seasons. The visits in the winter of 1983 were:

dark-phase: January 1-13, 1983, 13 days

white-phase: December 31, 1982-April 4, 1983, 95 days

The white-phase Gyrfalcon wintered in Lancaster County for a longer period the previous season (116 days), but did not stay as long the first year (departed March 23, 1982). In the winter of 1983 it lingered till April 4. Thus the known season for Gyrfalcons in Pennsylvania was extended by four days over the previous spring.

FINAL REMARKS

No simple recital of the facts regarding the Gyrfalcon incursion into Lancaster County during those winters can express the drama and excitement caused by the visit. The dramatic swoop, the driving, yet effortless, low flight, and the playful interaction of the mated pair fill the mind with indelible images. The white gyr's stoop on a Snowy Owl, the 1st dark-phase's aggressive attack on the 2nd dark-phase Gyrfalcon, the blizzard of pigeons as the gyrs came screaming through the quarry; the regal pose; the "book-end" roosting of the pair, and the sad death of the gray bird, leave the mind teeming with visions and memories.

The events of those winters rank as an important milestone in the history of Pennsylvania bird life; for those of us that experienced it, it was the very stuff of field ornithology.

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