

PHOTOGRAPHS OF NEW YORK STATE RARITIES

2. Gyrffalcon.

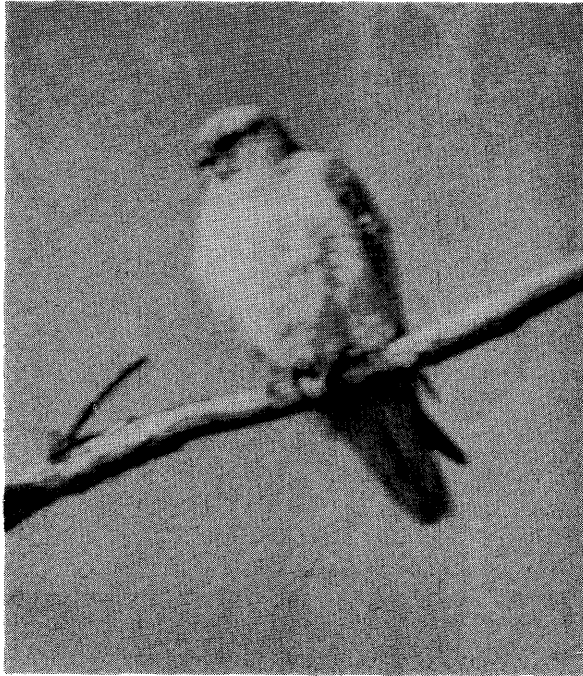


Photo by David G. Allen, Courtesy Bird Photographs, Inc.

During the morning of 24 February, 1965, a Gyrffalcon (*Falco rusticolus*) in nearly pure white plumage spent over an hour perched and flying at the Sapsucker Woods Sanctuary of the Laboratory of Ornithology, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York. The accompanying photographs were made by the *Kingbird's* photographic editor, David G. Allen, who was among the thirty or more observers who soon gathered in the Stuart Observatory to admire this most remarkable spectacle. Although Gyrffalcons have been seen and collected in New York State for over a century, this seems to be the first recorded by camera, and that it was the very rarely seen white form is all the more remarkable.

Since this appears to be the first record of a white Gyrfalcon in central New York, further particulars seem appropriate. Even during the gyrfalcon influx of the winter of 1961, in which white birds were reported at Katonah, New York, Rockport, Massachusetts and Montreal, and "fairly large numbers all white" in Newfoundland, none was reported in upstate New York. However, one of the two specimens collected in southeastern Pennsylvania in former years was a white bird, now in the Reading Museum.

The Ithaca bird was first identified by Dr. O. S. Pettingill, Jr. who observed it circling over the Stuart Observatory and perching in a tall elm in front of the "picture" windows. From the elm it made perhaps a dozen sorties over the six hundred or more ducks assembled on the ice or open water of the sanctuary pond. At each sortie, the ducks "hit the water" in panic and returned to comparative composure only after the falcon returned to its high perch. In flight the Gyrfalcon was extremely graceful and gull-like, not notably swift, and sometimes appeared to hover over the assembled ducks in the manner of an Osprey or Kestrel (Sparrow Hawk). On one occasion it seemed to "float" onto its perch, almost stalling its flight before gently alighting. While perched it often bobbed its head as does a Kestrel, but the also kestrel-like jerking of its tail was apparently a result of the strong wind.

With ample time for study by many observers, the following features were noted. The plumage seemed pure white below, but with dark wingtips and indistinct barring of both primaries and secondaries. The tail appeared pure white as were the "flags" feathering the thighs and legs. The back and upper wing coverts showed small markings. The eyes were dark, and the eye region darker than the rest of the head. The beak was bluish but with a dark tip, the cere and feet (including tarsi) bluish-gray, establishing the bird as an immature specimen, lacking the yellow feet, cere and eye-ring of the adult.

Although the term "phase" is generally used in this country to refer to the several chromatic forms of the gyr, it should be understood that white birds are from high latitudes, and the nearly pure population of extremely white birds ("candicans") of northeast Greenland have long been referred to as "Greenland Falcons". White birds also occur in the northern Archipelago parts of Alaska and Siberia.

Although regular fall flights occur in northern regions, incursions as far south as the United States take place infrequently, but a number of sight records have been recorded this winter. (See *Kingbird* Vol. XV (2) and also Field Notes this issue.) Some flights have been related to lemming



Photo by David G. Allen, Courtesy Bird Photographs, Inc.

cycles, but gyrs feed extensively upon ptarmigan, and some coastal falcons upon sea-birds.

On March 7, as reported earlier, Mr. Walter E. Benning observed a white Gyrfalcon, possibly the same specimen, perched upon a utility pole north of Clyde, New York.

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