

EXEMPLARY REPORTS OF RARE BIRDS FROM 2005

Gyrfalcon (*Falco rusticolus*) 2005-3-A

DATE(S) OF OBSERVATION: 27 February 2005

LOCALITY: Route 89, Varick, Seneca Co., NY

TIME & LENGTH OF OBSERVATION: 3 observations lasting 5-10 minutes each starting at (approximately) 15:20, 15:40, and 15:50.

SUBMITTER NAME: Michael Harvey

OTHER OBSERVER(S): Dan Lebbin, Michael Andersen, Tim Lenz, Jay McGowan, Bob McGuire, Matt Medler

LIGHT CONDITIONS: Moderately strong illumination (1st observation), and backlight (actually perhaps coming from about 45 degrees to the side of direct backlight) during the latter two observations

OPTICS: Bausch and Lomb Discoverer 10x42 binoculars, Leica Televid 77 scope with 20-60x zoom eyepiece, Nikon Coolpix 4500 digital camera.

NUMBER/SIZE/SHAPE

One individual. The bird was quite large, large enough so that it seemed it would be more easily passed off as a Red-tailed Hawk than a falcon on a brief glimpse. It was quite bulky in structure, with a relatively small head, wide shoulders, and a strongly hooked bill. The tail was quite long in relation to the wings, with the folded primaries ending a few inches short of the tail tip. The talons, projecting from beneath fluffed body feathers, appeared quite large. In flight, the bird was notably broad-winged, especially from the base to the wrist, the distal portions of the wings tapering to blunt points. The bulky appearance was noted in flight as well.

COLOR & PATTERN

Most views of the bird were from the front, with what was visible of the upperparts being a soft, fairly pale slate-gray. The head was largely this pale slate-gray without any especially strong markings. Looking closely, the moustachial (or possibly malar?) area exhibited a slightly, but not strongly contrasting, darker stripe. A thin, pale superciliary stripe was also noted. The throat was white. Dark gray underpart markings were set on a clean white background. These markings were small spots on the breast, enlarging and merging into thick and very noticeable bars on the flanks which continued down to the undertail coverts/crissum. The eyes were dark with bold yellow eye rings (broadest laterally). The cere was a somewhat paler shade of yellow. Talons were bright yellow with dark claws.

BEHAVIOR

No vocalizations were heard. During the first two observations, the bird perched on branches protruding from large, lakeside hardwoods. It was largely still at this point, making only small movements of the head and body. During the third observation of it perched, it preened several times, lifting its tail, wings, and legs in the process. When lifting its (left?) leg to its bill, no jesses or similar adornments were visible, nor were they visible during observations of the bird perched and in flight. The falcon flew with a strong and very direct flight. Lifting its wings briefly, it would drop off the perch and assume a constant, moderately deep flap with few if any glides interspersed. After the final observation, it flew rapidly and directly upwards and to the south, gaining quite a bit of elevation before it was lost from sight.

HABITAT

The bird was perched in large hardwoods (live in the first two cases, the top of a thick snag in the last) adjacent to a relatively large, deep lake. Adjacent upland habitat consisted of residential developments, vineyards, and scattered agricultural fields. The falcon was not observed directly associating with other species. Nearby avifauna consisted of large numbers of waterfowl (chiefly Canada Geese, but also the locally expected duck species) both on the nearby lake and coming and going overhead.

HOW IDENTIFICATION WAS DETERMINED

The bird's large size and low-contrast head pattern were the first things noticed that suggested this bird was really worth looking at!

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Observer's prior experience with this species is 2 individuals seen in Massachusetts - a gray-morph juv. on Plum Island and a dark-morph adult in Boston (2 sightings of the latter individual).

SIMILAR SPECIES:

PEREGRINE FALCON: easily eliminated by the low-contrast head pattern, large size, broad and less-pointed wings, and relatively long tail in relation to folded primaries of the bird in question. Prior experience with this species extensive from both the eastern and western US and more limited from Europe.

PRAIRIE FALCON: eliminated by the fairly uniform graying face, size, structure, and relatively uniformly pale underwings of the bird in question. Limited prior experience with this species from Montana and California.

MERLIN: eliminated by size and subtleties of plumage. Extensive prior experience with this species in North America, limited experience in Europe.

VARIOUS EUROPEAN FALCONS (Saker, Lanner, etc.) often kept in captivity are also eliminated by the uniform gray face pattern and upperparts, even larger

size, barred flanks (vs. streaked in Saker), and relatively broader wings of the bird in question. A hybrid is more difficult to eliminate, but judging by the close consistency of all features with Gyrfalcon and the apparent lack of any features approaching any European falcon species, this possibility is not very plausible. No prior experience with these species/hybrids.

BRIEF NOTES EXACTLY AS WRITTEN DURING INITIAL FIELD OBSERVATION:

- yellow legs
- yellow eye ring
- pale (yellow?) cere
- dark eye
- plain gray face
- spotted breast
- barred/spotted flanks on white background

PHOTO FILES ATTACHED:

17825414_Gyr1.JPG Michael Harvey, 27 February 2005

17825414_Gyr2.JPG Michael Harvey, 27 February 2005

OTHER EVIDENCE: Photos by Dan Lebbin, Jay McGowan, and Tim Lenz.

DATE/TIME WRITTEN: 28 February 2005

Michael Harvey, 7322 Lowrise 7, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14853

Sandwich Tern (*Sterna sandvicensis*) 2005-46-A

DATE(S) OF OBSERVATION: August 31, 2005

LOCALITY: Breezy Point, Queens County, NY

TIME & LENGTH OF OBSERVATION: 6:45 p.m.-7:30 p.m.

SUBMITTER NAME: Shane Blodgett

OTHER OBSERVER(S): None

LIGHT CONDITIONS: Scattered storm clouds with sun setting behind observer. Would judge lighting conditions as very good to excellent.

DISTANCE IN METERS: 15-30 meters

OPTICS: Nikon Venturers 10x42, Zeiss Diascope 85mm w/ 20x-60x zoom

NUMBER/SIZE/SHAPE

2 terns intermediate in size between the surrounding Common Terns and Black Skimmers. Decidedly larger than the Common Terns, with longer legs that made

them stand taller than the Commons around them. Similar in shape to the Commons, though larger with back to front length accentuated by long bill. Flat aspect to crown very prominent, accentuated by ragged crest on back of head.

COLOR & PATTERN

Bird 1 was a uniform pale gray on the upperparts, paler overall than surrounding Commons. There was a hint of darker shading in the area of greater coverts/lower scapulars. The underparts were white, and the primaries were very dark, contrasting with the upper parts. One of the visible primaries exhibited a very prominent white shaft.

The head pattern was distinctive with the top and front of the head being white with a band of black that started just behind the eye, initially being as wide as the eye and then widening and reaching around the back of the head, with the blackish feathers at the back of the head forming an obvious crest. The black was not jet black, as some white feathering amongst the black gave a kind of salt and pepper look. At times the crest was more relaxed and hung down the back of the nape. There was a small area of white between the back of the eye and the beginning of the black, and a very noticeable white eye crescent, particularly on the underside and back of the eye. There was also some black in front of the eye.

The legs were black and longer than the commons, again making the bird stand taller. The bill was longer and deeper than the Commons, all-black with a solid 1/4-1/2 inch yellow tip.

Bird 2 (which I aged as a juvenile) was paler even than Bird 1 with the upperparts approaching white. There were some dusky markings on the greater coverts and upper back. There were more pronounced markings in the carpal bar area than Bird 1. The tertials were dark-centered with pale edging and the primaries were similar in color to Bird 1. The legs were black, again longer, and the bill was black with some yellow smudging, particularly along the line where the mandibles meet. No prominent yellow tip like on Bird 1. The crest on Bird 2 was browner than on Bird 1, and was not quite as long.

BEHAVIOR

Roosting among several thousand Common Terns of all ages, with another ~ 1,000 Black Skimmers. The birds were flushed and changed position 4-5 times while observing. When flushed I immediately lost them in the mass of birds and only once was able to catch the juvenile bird in flight just as it was about to land. As it lit I noticed how much paler and longer winged (and larger) it was. Upon realighting I was quickly able to relocate them as, once again they were decidedly larger and stood above the surrounding Common Terns. Initially spotted at a distance of about 20 meters, the birds landed at various other distances ranging from 15-30 meters. Initially both birds were preening, but Bird 2 stopped and started to exhibit begging behavior toward Bird 1, much to Bird 1's annoyance. 2 out of the 4-5 times the birds flushed they relit in different areas though never more than 15-20 feet apart. It almost seemed as if Bird 1 was consciously trying

to get some space between them. Bird 2 would walk back over to Bird 1 and start begging again.

Although I did not see them calling, and don't know the Sandwich Tern's call, twice when the flocks were in the air I heard an unfamiliar tern-like call that did not match anything that I have heard either a Common Tern or Black Skimmer make. I have not been able to find a satisfactory recording of Sandwich Tern on-line (the e-nature recordings sound like a chattering flock), but the description in Sibley's (keeriik) closely approximates the call I heard.

HABITAT

Barrier beach with dunes separating beach from Breezy Point Cooperative. Birds were roosting on beach nearer dunes with some birds amongst beach grass but most out in open.

HOW IDENTIFICATION WAS DETERMINED

Size, paleness of upperparts (particularly Bird 2), ragged black crest with white forehead and crown, black legs, and long black bill with prominent yellow-tip on Bird 1, yellow smudging on bird 2.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

There were thousands of Common Terns about ranging from near full breeding plumage to juvenile with a smattering of 1st and 2nd summer birds. Some of these birds had black legs and black bills and even a tiny bit of yellow on the tip of the bill, but none approached the size of or the amount of yellow on the bill of the Sandwich. When I first saw these plumages I took out my Sibley's to review the Sandwich Tern's field marks, not at all expecting 2 of them to fill my scope not more than 5 minutes later. Every time they moved I was quickly able to relocate them, based on size alone. The juvenile was so pale as to appear white at a distance, standing out prominently amongst the grayer backed Commons. Both birds were somewhat bedraggled and weather beaten, neither appearing to be in fresh plumage.

I have seen Sandwich Terns in Hatteras and have a lot of experience with the medium sized Common and Forster's terns. They were too small for Royal and Caspian, too large for Common/Forster's/Arctic/Roseate/Black, bill was not right for Gull-billed and upperparts too pale for Sooty/Bridled. I think most experienced observers would agree that with sufficient looks a Sandwich Tern is a fairly straightforward ID, if not a slam-dunk.

This report was written based on notes I wrote upon arriving home on the 31st. I did not consult any field guides between the sighting and the writing down of the notes.

I initially had gone out to look for pelagics as the winds had been SSE for 4-5 days before. When I got to the beach around 4:00 p.m. the winds were due S at 35-40 mph+, a remnant of Hurricane Katrina. By the time the sun was setting winds had dropped to around 10 mph from the SW. With winds scheduled to shift the next day to the N I was afraid these birds would not be long for these

parts. I posted the sighting on-line but as there has not been any subsequent postings I am assuming the birds were either not relocated or even looked for.

OTHER EVIDENCE

Unfortunately I had forgotten my digital camera and my cellphone (I'm still kicking myself). Due to the lateness of the day I felt certain that were I to walk back to find the nearest telephone (which would have taken at least 20-30 minutes) to get the word out, it would be too dark to see by the time anyone could arrive. I felt the time would be better spent observing.

DATE/TIME WRITTEN: Sept. 2 - 10:00a.m.

Shane Blodgett, 423 Westminster Road, Brooklyn NY 11218

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