

Southernmost record of Gyrfalcon in California

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OBSERVATIONS

On the morning of 21 November 2007, Summers was birding in eastern Kings County in the vicinity of Utica, 10th, and Tucson Avenues. This is an area where cotton is grown in the summer, but which, at the time of year of our observations, consists of barren tilled fields interspersed with irrigation canals. While driving south along a canal on 10th Avenue toward Utica Avenue, Summers observed a large raptor perched on a telephone pole. His initial impression of the bird as he approached it was of a *Buteo*. As he drew closer he decided it was a large falcon, which he initially presumed was a Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*). However, once viewed through 8x42 binoculars from approximately 60 m, the bird's overall size and bulky shape seemed large for a Peregrine Falcon and Summers began to think, "Why isn't this a Gyrfalcon?" While studying this bird in profile through a spotting scope (Kowa, 30x wide angle) he watched the bird fly down to the next telephone pole. The large size and distinct flight style led to him to conclude that it must be a Gyrfalcon (*Falco rusticolus*). He approached the bird again and had prolonged scope views of it perched. The falcon then left the pole and dived on a Great Blue Heron (*Ardea herodias*) perched at the edge of a canal. The heron ducked but did not flush. Summers continued to follow the falcon as it moved from pole to pole. At one point, the same Great Blue Heron flew by and the falcon flew after it, overtaking it and apparently striking it. The heron immediately landed and appeared disheveled, but not seriously injured.

Next, the falcon swooped over a small group of Snowy Egrets (*Egretta thula*) farther down the canal, causing them to duck. Having only a camera phone, Summers took a photo of the bird as it perched facing him and another as the bird flew (Figure 1). The falcon landed on the ground where it fluffed its feathers and stood briefly with wings drooped. It then flew back to a pole where an American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*) dived at it, causing it to fly to another pole where it was immediately mobbed by a flock of blackbirds. This drove the falcon into the air where it soared in a circling fashion until it finally drifted to the south and out of view.

Early on the afternoon of 23 November 2007, Pandolfino was birding in eastern Kings County. Having heard about Summers' observation, he drove through the same area. He first encountered an adult Peregrine Falcon



Figure 1. Phone camera photograph of a Gyr Falcon (*Falco rusticolus*) in Kings County, on 21 November 2007 (with inset close-up from the same photo).

Photo by Steven Summers

on a pole along Tucson Avenue and stopped to take digiscope photos of that bird. Four poles farther east on Tucson Avenue was another large falcon. He drove to within approximately 25 m of the bird and viewed it through 8.5x42 binoculars and then a spotting scope (Leica, 32x wide angle). This bird seemed slightly, but not significantly larger than the Peregrine Falcon. However, the plumage was distinctly different from any Peregrine or Prairie Falcon (*Falco mexicanus*). Pandolfino was fairly certain he had re-found the bird observed by Summers two days earlier. He took several digiscope photos of the perched falcon (Figure 2). After studying the bird for more than 10 minutes, he walked toward the falcon until it flushed at about 15 m giving brief views as it flew directly away to the north.

IDENTIFICATION

Description

The bird was a large grayish-brown falcon. The mantle and wing covers were evenly gray-brown with feathers finely edged with pale gray-buff, producing a neatly scalloped appearance to the back and folded wings. The tail was also gray-brown with many pale bars that extended all the way across the tail. The wing tips were distinctly pointed and came well short

of the end of the tail on the perched bird, barely reaching the third-to-last pale bar on the tail. The underparts were boldly streaked with broad brownish streaks against a pale background that extended from the throat to the belly. The legs were heavily feathered and those feathers were mostly brown. The head was uniformly gray-brown with a thin supercilium and a distinct "helmet" pattern formed by a dark malar area, crown, and dark nape bordering a paler cheek. The auriculars were solidly brown. The bill was bluish-gray with a dark tip and it was typically falcon-like, fairly short and blunt with a distinct hook. The cere and eye ring were bluish-gray and the feet were a much paler gray. In flight the underwings showed very pale, apparently unmarked flight feathers contrasting with darker underwing coverts. The wings, though pointed, were fairly broad. The tail was also markedly broad. The flight style both in level flight and when overtaking the heron was powerful with slow, deep wingbeats that, though appearing almost ponderous, produced remarkable acceleration.

Elimination of Similar Species

Peregrine Falcon was eliminated based on a combination of plumage, structure, and flight style characteristics. The helmet and dark malar area were much narrower and less distinct than on any Peregrine except *F. p. tundrius* (Wheeler 2003). That subspecies was eliminated by the lack of pale areas on the crown, presence of a distinct supercillium, and lack of any break in the malar mark on the bird we observed. The pattern on the underwing — pale flight feathers contrasting with darker wing coverts — was also inconsistent with Peregrine Falcon. Also inconsistent with Peregrine was the short wing tip to tail ratio and the broad appearance of the wings and tail in flight (Clark 1987, Wheeler 2003). Lastly, the flight style with slow, deep wingbeats was unlike the shorter, flicking wingbeats typical of Peregrine Falcon. Prairie Falcon was eliminated by the overall dark plumage, the lack of dark axillaries, and the other structure and flight style features noted above. Lastly, we were able to estimate the size of this bird by knowing the approximate width of the crossbar on which it was perched in Figure 2 and using that as an internal "ruler." This produced an estimate of the length of the bird from top of head to tail tip of approximately 52 cm. This puts it within the published size range for Gyrfalcon (48-60 cm) and beyond that of Peregrine and Prairie Falcon (35-45 cm) (Peterson 1990, Wheeler 2003, and Dunn and Alderfer 2006).

Of some concern was the possibility that this bird could have been a falconer's escaped Gyrfalcon, Saker (*Falco cherrug*), or a hybrid of some sort (e.g., Gyrfalcon x Peregrine; Saker x Peregrine; etc.). Since neither of us has had any experience with Saker or any of these hybrids, and very limited experience with Gyrfalcon, we contacted numerous raptor experts and falconers. Nearly all falconers we contacted commented that such a valuable bird would have had some sort of hardware associated with captivity



Figure 2. Digiscope photograph of a Gyr Falcon (*Falco rusticolus*) in Kings County, on 23 November 2007.

Photo by Edward Pandolfino

and that jesses would persist for at least a year after escape (E. Kerster and others, pers. comm.). We saw no evidence for the presence of jesses or bands or anklets. The plumage of this bird was pristine, showing no signs of the sort of wear that is sometimes associated with captivity, although falconers were quick to comment that a responsible falconer keeps his or her birds in good condition.

We also reviewed more than a dozen photos of Sakers available from various internet sites. Based on input from experts, review of available photos, and published sources (Bruun 1970, Heinzel 1972, Cramp and

Simmons 1980, Cade 1982, Flint et al. 1984, and Mullarney et al. 1999), we eliminated Saker because of several plumage characters, particularly the barred tail of this bird versus the spotted tail of a Saker (Cade 1982, Peterson et al. 1993). Given the wide variety of direct hybrids and backcrossed hybrids created by falconers, it may be impossible to completely eliminate the possibility of this bird being a hybrid of some sort (especially e.g., Gyrfalcon x Saker). However, given the lack of any signs of captivity and the assurance of various experts (B. Anderson, T. Booms, M. Patterson, B. Wheeler; pers. comm.) that the bird showed no obvious signs of being anything other than a Gyrfalcon, we are reasonably confident that hybrid origin can be eliminated. Based on the characteristics we observed, described above, we conclude that this bird was a gray-variant juvenile Gyrfalcon (Clark 1987, Wheeler 2003).

DISCUSSION

In early 2009, the California Bird Records Committee (CBRC) accepted this record of a Gyrfalcon (G. McCaskie, pers. comm.). This is the 11th record of Gyrfalcon for California (CBRC 2007), the third for the Central Valley and the most southerly (35° 57' N) record for California by over 300 km (Glover et al. 2007). All but two of the prior California records have been from the northernmost parts of the state (Del Norte, Humboldt, Siskiyou, and Modoc counties). California's first Gyrfalcon was a bird collected 23 October 1948 at Lower Klamath Lake, Siskiyou County (Jewett 1949). All accepted records have been of gray variant, first year birds (CBRC 2007) and all occurred from mid-October to February. Prior to this report, California's most southerly record was from southern Solano County in December 2001 (38° 14' N). There is a published report of a Gyrfalcon near San Jose, Santa Clara County (Balgooyen 1988), but this report contained no details and no documentation was submitted to the CBRC. The most southerly record for North America is from Lubbock, Texas, (33° 35' N) December 2001 - February 2002 (Lockwood et al. 2002) and there are two other North American records endorsed by state bird records committees which are more southerly than the Gyrfalcon reported here: one from north of Bayboro, North Carolina, (35° 11' N) February 1992 (Holmes and Fuller 1995) and one from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, (35° 32' N) December 1982 (Grzybowski 1983).

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