

Gyr Falcon in LaSalle County

by Cindy Alberico

On the afternoon of 4 January 2003, I decided to continue birding from my current location in Grundy County to see if I could relocate the Snowy Owl that had been reported in the area of the LaSalle Nuclear Power Plant. The Snowy Owl had been previously seen near the intersection of 1900N and 2700E so I decided the quickest way to find the owl was to drive south on Route 170 all the way to 1900 and turn west until I found the right intersection, and start scanning the fields from there.

Immediately upon turning onto 1900N, I noticed a very large brown raptor perched on a tree on the south side of the road. My initial impression was of a very large accipiter mainly because the tail seemed extremely long for a hawk.

The bird was sitting in profile facing south. It was dark chocolate brown with no markings on the back. It had a very long tail and very heavy streaking on the breast. The wings were long and extended about half of the way down the tail, which was finely barred underneath. The bill seemed to be bluish gray at the base going toward dark gray/black at the tip. There was an indication of a dark mask, and the feet were grayish.

I stayed in the car and edged a little closer, but the bird flushed and flew over me to a utility pole behind me. I noticed some checkering on the underside of the wings and also noted that the wings seemed to be less pointed and more rounded at the tips. I turned the car around to get a better look as it was now facing away from me, when the bird took off and flew quickly to the east towards Grundy County where I lost sight of it.

I looked through the field guides that I keep in the car (National Geographic 2002, Peterson 1980 and Robbins 1983) and quickly eliminated any accipiter species by size, uniformity of color, color of streaking on the breast and



Above & left: Immature Gyr Falcon. LaSalle County. Winter 1991. Photos by Barb Dodge.



Below: Dark morph juvenile Gyr Falcon. LaSalle County. Photo taken in January 2003 by Gregory S. Lambeth.



the amount of the barring on the tail. Red-Tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) was eliminated based on coloration, feather pattern, size, length of tail and the shape of the wings when the bird flew. Prairie Falcon (*Falco mexicanus*) was ruled out based on size and coloration. Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) was a little harder for me to quickly eliminate as the bird did seem to have an indication of a mask, and the coloration resembled that of an immature Peale's as pictured in the National Geographic.

Though I never did see the bird again that afternoon, I did get to see the Snowy Owl right where it had been seen previously.

Once I got back home, I consulted Sibley (2000), Dunne (1988) and Clarke (1987) and concluded that the bird I saw had in fact been a dark morph juvenile Gyr Falcon (*Falco rusticolus*).

I cautiously posted the sighting of a large brown falcon on the Illinois List serve (IBET), and the bird was subse-

quently seen quite a few times during the next few weeks by many birders, although some had better luck finding the bird than others.

At least one Prairie Falcon was also seen in the vicinity of the Gyr Falcon during the 2003 winter season. Interestingly, in 1991, two Gyr Falcons and one Prairie Falcon were seen in the same general area as the Gyr Falcon and Prairie Falcon were seen during the 2003 winter season.

Bohlen (1989) lists both Gyr Falcon and Prairie Falcon as rare migrants and winter residents. The Illinois