

FALCO GYRFALCO, Linn.

Norwegian or Gyrfalcon.

Falco gyrfalco, Linn. Faun. Suec., p. 64.

— *norvegicus*, Wolley, Sale Cat. of Eggs, 1858.

— (*Hierofalco*) *candicans*, var. *γ. gyrfalco*, Blas. List of Birds of Eur., Eng. edit., p. 3.

— () *gyrfalco*, Gray, Hand-list of Birds, p. 18.

WITHOUT a few words of explanation it might appear to some of my readers that I am extending the present work beyond its proper limits by figuring on the opposite Plate a bird which has never yet been identified as a visitor to the British Islands; but such is not my wish. It is given because the chances are that, although not recognized, the bird does occasionally visit us, and that I may be enabled to throw a clearer light upon a subject of great importance than I could do by leaving it undelineated. To render my meaning more apparent, I must inform those of my readers who are not well versed in ornithology that it is a question among naturalists whether the Norwegian, the Iceland, and the Greenland Falcons are one and the same species, or whether each possesses characters of sufficient importance to distinguish it from its congeners. Whatever conclusions some may have arrived at with regard to their specific value, I for my own part cannot but regard them as distinct from each other.

The true Gyrfalcon or Norwegian bird is by far the darkest in colour, and somewhat the smallest in size, the fully adult male being but little larger and having wings scarcely longer than the female of *Falco peregrinus*, to which it assimilates rather closely in colouring and in possessing the beautiful greyish bloom which pervades the plumage of that species. These differences (by which the bird may be at once distinguished from its congeners) being so much more readily appreciated by the eye than they can be conveyed to the mind by the most accurate description forms an additional reason for giving the accompanying Plate. The young Gyrfalcon, on leaving the nest, is much darker than a young Icelfalco of the same age—the back, wings, and tail being of a nearly uniform blackish brown, while the feathers of the under surface (which are also of the same colour) are but narrowly edged with white.

“No falconer in time past or present,” says the reviewer of Dr. Bree’s ‘Birds of Europe,’ in ‘The Ibis’ for 1859, “would ever think of calling an ‘Icelfalco’ a ‘Gyrfalcon.’ With him the Gyrfalcon is and always has been the large Falcon obtained in Norway, with dark, almost Peregrine-like cheeks, a stout body, short tail, and other distinctive marks which it is unnecessary here to describe. At the present time many people have but a faint idea of what a Gyrfalcon is; but we beg to assure our readers that the different words ‘Gyrfalco,’ ‘Gyrfalcon,’ ‘Gerfaut,’ and ‘Geierfalke’ should never be applied to any but the great Falcon of Scandinavia. That the true Gyrfalcon has occurred in this country we certainly think probable; but it must be borne in mind that nearly all the large northern Falcons killed here are young birds of the year, and that it is not easy, though, we think, always possible, to detect the Icelfalco from the Gyrfalcon when immature.”

The countries inhabited by the Gyrfalcon are Norway, Lapland, and Finland; in all probability it is also found in the northern parts of Russia, if not in Siberia. It habitually breeds in the three countries first mentioned, and probably also in the two latter. In autumn many of the young and, doubtless, some of the old birds proceed directly south, and winter in more temperate latitudes; thus it is at that season that it appears in Holland.

With respect to the habits and manners of these large Falcons as detailed by the older authors, it is by no means an easy matter to distinguish to which of them some of their remarks apply; but there can be no doubt as to what has been written respecting the nidification of the Gyrfalcon by that very estimable man and correct observer of nature, the late Mr. John Wolley, who not only sought out the breeding-places of this noble Falcon and many other of our rarer birds, but passed several winters in Lapland for the purpose of carrying out his researches in the ensuing springs.

“Mr. Wolley was, I believe,” says Professor Newton, “the first naturalist able to give from his own observation any particulars of the breeding of this noble bird. The curious fact that the Gyrfalcon, like so many other *Accipitres*, adapts itself to circumstances (breeding in trees when rocks are wanting near places that abound with food for its offspring) will not escape notice. It was not until the fourth summer of Mr. Wolley’s residence in Lapland, that he became acquainted with this fact; and then, as his remarks show, he was justly sceptical concerning it at first.”