

## The Gyr Falcon

### A bird of my dreams and nightmares

In the late 80s and early 90s I was twitching birds on a regular basis. A twitcher is someone who keeps a list of birds, either for their local patch or county, but it is mostly a national list. They will do anything to add another species and in the case of a British list, will travel at the drop of a hat to the most far flung reaches of the UK. This usually involves long car journeys, then escalates into ferries and light aircraft. The term originated in the USA and comes from the agitated twitching of a birder when something rare turns up. They've just got to see it. All you need is the time, money and transport. It's an exciting, adrenaline fuelled pastime, with massive highs and deep lows as the following account shows, and it gets totally addictive. It can be very expensive and is a real test of any relationship. Most twitchers are "normal" birders who enjoy the more gentle pastime of working their local patch, with weekend trips to the coast, but when a rarity turns up all hell breaks loose. All birders have their lists of must see rarities, and most are the American wood warblers. Stunningly colourful and much sought after, they were near the top of my list. But for me, one bird stood head and shoulders above them all, and it wasn't even a rarity; the magnificent Gyr Falcon *Falco rusticolus*. Not just any old Gyr either, it had to be a white phase bird.

The Gyr Falcon is the worlds biggest falcon. With a wingspan as big as a Common Buzzard, it resembles a huge Peregrine. It has three colour phases that are geographical. The white phase birds are mainly from Greenland, with light grey morphs from Iceland and the dark grey morphs from Fenno-Scandia and Russia, but there is some overlap. They turn up in small numbers most years in Britain, occasionally on the mainland, but more often than not on islands off the Scottish and Irish coasts.

My first chance to see one came in February 1992, when a white phase bird was reported from Romney Marsh. Together with a friend, we were there at first light the next morning. There was quite a crowd and it was looked for over a wide area, but there was no sign and we all left disappointed as the light faded. Three days later we were back after it was reported again. A frustrating day was spent scouring the marshes, but it was another dip. The day was brightened up watching six Short-eared Owls, with a pair putting on a fantastic aerial display, and a pair of Hen Harriers. All was quiet for a couple of days, then it was reported yet again. The now familiar journey saw us, once again at first light, staring at the vast marshes for the rest of the day in vain.

The next morning, a message on my pager said that the Gyr Falcon had been relocated on the Isle of Sheppy. Once again we were off, arriving at midday. The road was lined with cars and a large crowd of birders were all staring through their scopes and bins across a field. We could hardly contain our excitement. We stumbled out of the car and ran to join the throng. I raised my bins and there it was, sitting on a fence post at the far side of a field. It was mobbed by a male Marsh Harrier and flew a short distance to another post. We set our scopes up for a better look, and a strange, nagging doubt started to creep in. The head and breast were white, but the rest of the body was a pale biscuit brown. It just looked odd, but the crowd seemed happy with it and I must admit I got carried along with that decision, and later that evening it was added to my list.

The next day I rang a friend, a much more experienced birder than me, and described it to him. "Well it's not a Gyr Falcon is it" was his crushing reply. And so it proved. A few days later one of Europe's leading raptor experts proclaimed that it was probably a Saker, of unknown origin, or a hybrid. Four trips in a week for nothing left me gutted. Reluctantly, I removed it from my list, and that bird was forever known as *Falco tippex*.

Nine months later another chance came to catch up with one. There had been a sighting just inland from Aberdeen in the Grampian Mountains at Bennachie. Together with another birder, we made the long overnight journey north, and were

on site at first light. We split up and wandered through the heather covered hillsides. I started scanning and after about an hour, saw a distant white object sat on a mound. I crept closer and got my scope on it. I was sure it was the Gyr, sitting there mocking me. I looked again and was convinced. I shouted for my mate and he came stumbling and falling through the heather. He got his scope on it. Then it ran away on all fours. A bloody Mountain Hare! I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me. I couldn't believe my brain had tricked me into making a complete fool of myself. My mate was not impressed. We made our way over to some birders huddled below an outcrop, and I spent the day in silence, until it was time to go.

Fifteen months had passed and the Gyrs that never were, were distant memories. In April 1994, I was stood at Earls Barton gravel pits in Northants, with three other birders, watching a Marsh Sandpiper, when news of a white phase Gyr Falcon broke. It was on Stronsay, an island to the east of Orkney. One of the birders said "Do you fancy going for it?" I replied "Yes, when?" and he said "Now". Blimey, there were birders even more crazy than me. So that night the four of us journeyed up to Scrabster and got the ferry the next day to Stromness. We had rung ahead and sorted out a nights accomodation with local birder John Holloway. We got a taxi to Kirkwall, then another ferry to Stronsay where we were met by John in an open top vintage car. He took us to his house, where his wife Sue had prepared a great meal, then told us where the bird had been seen.

The weather suddenly changed for the worse and in a howling wind and driving rain, we trudged around the island looking for the bird. We were told it had roosted the previous night in the quarry. This would probably give us the best chance as it wouldn't be flying in this weather. When we got to the "quarry", we stood there open mouthed. It was a tiny sunken semi circle of ground, filled with garden waste and the wall was no more than four feet high. No self respecting falcon was going to roost here. We trudged back to the digs, worn out, wet, cold and fed up.

I started to think that we had been lured here under false pretences, and were going to be sacrificed the following day because last years crops had failed, like Edward Woodward in The Wicker Man. We were up at 5am the next morning, and in

appalling weather, we drew another blank. After breakfast it was time to go. We thanked our hosts for their hospitality, took another ride in Chitty Chitty Bang Bang down to the ferry for the return to Kirkwall. A taxi ride took us to Stromness and we hung around waiting for the ferry back to the mainland. I thought to myself that it couldn't get any worse, but fate had another trick up its sleeve.

Just as we were about to board the ferry, the pager went off. The Gyr Falcon was sitting on a fence post on the perimeter of Kirkwall Airport. We had two choices. Miss the ferry and go for the bird, or miss the bird and go for the ferry. We decided on the former. We never considered the third choice, miss the ferry and miss the bird. We ran to a phone box and rang for a taxi. A few minutes later an ancient Volvo Estate crawled up to us, driven by an even more ancient woman, who could just see over the steering wheel. I explained where we wanted to go and emphasised how urgent it was. I asked if I could drive, but she said "No, no, I know a short cut, we'll be there in next to no time".

We piled in and she turned down a couple of side streets and our hearts sank. We were stuck behind a funeral procession. By the time we got to the airport, we knew our chance had gone. We hung around for a couple of hours, but with no more sightings or news, made our way back to Stromness and found a youth hostel for the night. Phone calls and excuses were made to our respective work places, saying we were stuck on Orkney because of bad weather, and the following day we made the long journey home. We did stop off at Grantown on Spey and had fantastic views of three male Capercaillies, but it was little compensation.

By the mid nineties, I'd had enough of twitching, and gave it up, but I always promised myself I would go for another Gyr. I had to wait 22 years for that chance, when one turned up off the west coast of Scotland on North Uist on 4th January 2016. It was reported on and off for a few weeks, then daily as it fed on a dead Mute Swan that had flown into telegraph wires. I kept thinking about going, but my old twitching mojo had long gone. It was a big journey I wasn't prepared to do alone, and I gave up on the idea.

On Wednesday 6th April, I found out that a friend and his wife, Rob and Yvonne, were going at the weekend, but they were staying for five days. I asked, well pleaded, if I could tag along and share the driving and expenses and they said okay. On Friday 8th we set off on the 10 hour, 510 mile overnight journey to Uig on the Isle of Skye. We were in plenty of time for the morning ferry to Loch Maddy and struck up a conversation with a birder, Gavin, whose friend was already on the island. On board the ferry, he was in contact with him getting the latest news on the bird. As we neared the port, his friend said that the Gyr was feeding on the swan right now. Our heart rates increased, we got back in the car and as soon as the ramp was lowered, we were off like a shot. Yvonne asked if we could go and check out the cottage first. Robs reply is unprintable!

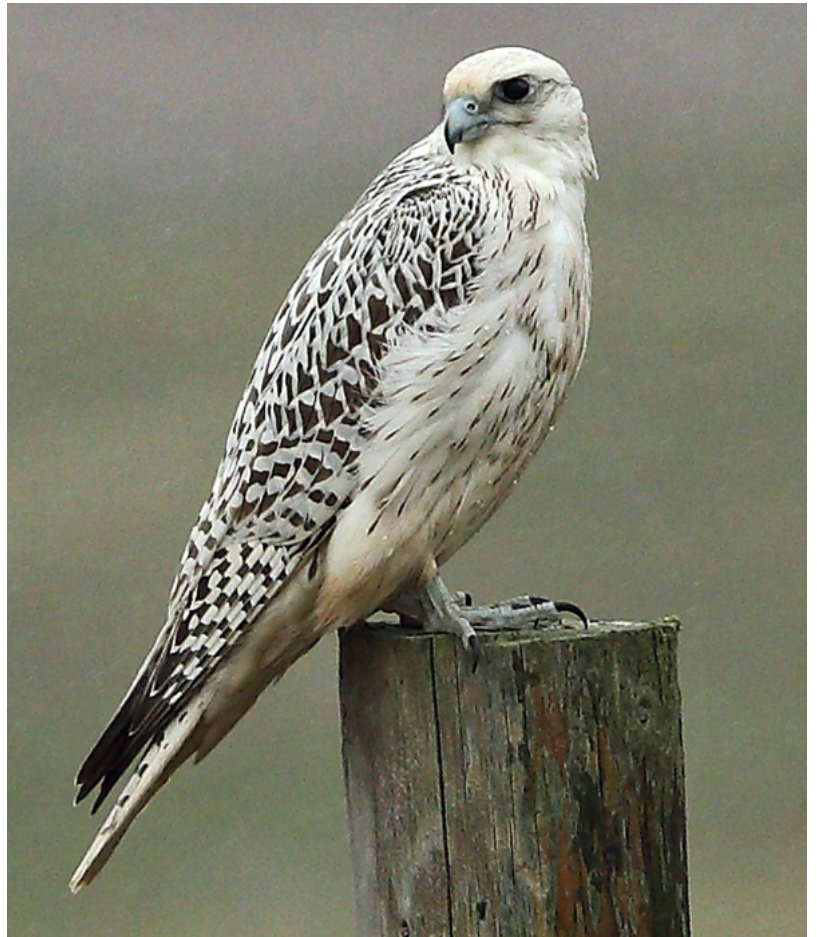
He hammered it to Balranald and we arrived at the swan carcass, to be told the Gyr had flown off. We had missed it by two minutes. I leant against a rock and felt the life drain out of me. I slumped to the ground and sat staring at the corpse of the swan. It had been picked clean. It wouldn't be coming back to that. Rob said that he would take Yvonne to the cottage, I decided to stay at the carcass and Gavin went to check out the area behind the camp site. Five minutes later I noticed a cloud of dust approaching at speed. It was Rob and he was flashing his headlights. He screeched to a halt and shouted that Gavin had refound it. We drove down a sandy track then ran across a field to a fence and joined him. At last, there it was, a white phase Gyr Falcon sat on a post, being bombarded by Lapwings and Oystercatchers. Although it was a bit distant, it was such a relief to have finally caught up with this stunning raptor. All the lows from the last three decades had instantly evaporated and the old twitching high had returned.

We watched it for ages, and lady luck smiled at us again. The Gyr got fed up with the constant mobbing and flew off, not away, but towards us. We could hardly believe it as it landed on our fence, no more than 60 yards away. We took some shots, then slowly eased closer. It wasn't bothered by our presence and we got some cracking pictures. It eventually flew into the cemetery and landed on a gravestone, like the angel of death, before chasing some waders over a small loch. The speed and agility

of such a large bird was incredibly impressive.

The next morning we found it on the far side of a loch near the carcass. It was constantly mobbed. Eventually it had enough, flew over the loch towards us, over our heads and out to sea where we watched it disappear into the distance. It was not seen again. It had been present for over three months and we saw it on its last two days. I think the moral of this story is; if at first you don't succeed, fail, fail and fail again, give up completely, leave it till the last moment and then just have one more go.

**By Sean Browne**



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