

On Raptors In The WESTERN ARCTIC

by R. F. HOYER

"While I have not kept serious biological notes on the number of sighting of raptors in the arctic, I have made the habit of jotting down noteworthy observations in my flight-time booklet. I can therefore look back and refresh my memory as to when and what was observed. Thus, for instance, I see that on May 7, 1958, when in Pakistan, I chased a hawk carrying a snake. It dropped the snake and upon landing (with the helicopter) I found the reptile to be a cobra. Similarly, on July 23, 1960, I note that (in the arctic) three wolverines were observed; the first I had ever seen.

"Now to the matter at hand. The summer months of 1952 and 1953 were spent in southeastern Alaska in the vicinity of Craig, on Prince of Wales Island." (This is the heavily-timbered rainforest region of the Alaska Panhandle, comparable in climate and bird-life to the Queen Charlotte Islands, F. L. B.) "Field notes were not kept but many peregrines, accipiters, and of course, thousands of bald eagles were seen in the region.

"My third trip to Alaska was an assignment to Ladd A. F. B. at Fairbanks, Alaska as a helicopter pilot in an air-rescue squadron. During this time, (May 1957 to Feb. 1958) many falcons, as well as some accipiters and eagles, were seen during the course of routine training and rescue flights.

"During these three seasons no purposeful observations of raptors were attempted, and the encounters were nothing more than casual observations, yet even in here the timbered country far south of the true arctic the impression is that peregrines are certainly not rare.

"Since my separation from the Air Force I have flown helicopters commercially for the past four summers from 1958 through to 1961. Three of these seasons were spent in the western arctic; one in Canada, the other two in Alaska.

"The summer of 1959 was spent in the Northwest Territories of western Canada in the vicinity of Sitidgi Lake and Liverpool Bay, east of the MacKenzie River delta. The greater part of this region is at low elevation, from near to sea-level to about 500 feet. At the time of



our arrival at Tuktoyaktuk on the arctic coast on the 21st of May all open water, fresh or salt, was still frozen, the ground snow-covered, and morning temperatures near to zero. Even so gyrfalcons and golden eagles were seen. By mid-June the weather had improved so little that the oil-exploration camp was moved some seventy-five miles south to Sitidgi Lake.

"This took us just south of the tree-line. Here, in a small tree, on a small island in a small lake, a nest containing four large downy gyrfalcons was discovered on June 20th. I removed the largest of the four, despite the protests of the beautiful pale-grey parent. At that time I felt I was observing at close-range one of the rarer North American birds of prey."

(One hundred years ago, some seventy miles to the eastward, on the Anderson River, MacFarlane took several egg-nests of gyrfalcons from tree-nests. This report, and another last summer (1962), of a bird being taken from a tree-nest far to the eastward in the Thelon River region, marks the re-discovery, after over a century, of this population of tree-nesting gyrfalcons. They have undoubtedly been there, unrecorded, all that time). (F.L.B.)

"About August 17, we again moved camp to the head of Liverpool Bay, just at the tree-line (just to the eastward the tree-line shifts abruptly southward for some fifty miles. F. L. B.). Here a complex of streams, rivers, lakes, marshes and salt-water bays provide ideal water-fowl habitat while the more upland tundra abounds in ptarmigan. This tremendous bird population was not in evidence when we first arrived earlier in the season. Here, between August 17 and Sept. 7, the fewest number of falcons seen on any one day, mostly gyrfalcons at that, were seven. Many times, especially during clear weather, twice that number were observed. Some of these were obviously family groups, roaming the country at random in the manner observed in many other species of raptors at this stage of the reproductive cycle.

"Peregrines were fairly abundant in this area also, but they were definitely outnumbered by the gyrfalcons. Regarding the female that was taken; she was lost due to a broken swivel just two days before I was to head south. She was raised on a diet of lake-trout, muskrat, ground-squirrel and caribou. The day she was lost I spent some time luring; the lure being



an old Eskimo mocassin made of caribou hide; which lure, by the way, is still in use. My gyrfalcon did not return, but a bold goshawk came in to within 50 feet or so.

"Golden eagles were common north of the tree-line and a few bald eagles were seen. One golden eagle nest was found. The nest contained mostly duck carcasses, and one adult was seen to take a duck from the water of a small lake. The gyrfalcon nest had some waterfowl remains, but most of the kills were ptarmigan.

"The 1960 flying season was spent in arctic Alaska on the north slope of the Brooks Range. The flying extended from the Chandler River on the west (just east of Umiat on the Colville) eastward to the Canning River. It included the interior mountain areas northward some thirty to forty miles to cover the foothills out to the edge of the arctic prairies. Base camp was at Sagavanirktok Lake at 1,800 feet elevation. This is fairly well-drained country and had nothing like the waterfowl population seen in the region I had worked the previous year. Some dozen major streams and their branches drain this region, all flowing northward.

"The work on this expedition was concerned with flying geologists to promising rock-outcrops in the mountains. On days when the higher country was under clouds we would move out into the lower plains country, checking small stream-gorges and low mesas. This kind of flying took us into falcon terrain and during the first half of June six gyrfalcon aeries were found and a seventh located. They were spaced out in a linear distance of about thirty



miles along the north edge of the mountains. Later, in July and August, some dozen more recently vacated areas were found farther out to the north of the mountains. It was at this time too that the remarkably large peregrine population brought itself to our attention. Peregrines had been observed before, all along the base of the mountains, but here our search for exposed rock formations along the streams brought us in intimate contact with these falcons. There was scarcely a landing made where peregrines did not voice their protests, sometimes much to the annoyance of the geologists.

Twice we took trips down the Shaviovik and Canning rivers, on one such trip I counted fifty immature peregrines at or near their nests. On August fourth I located not less than seventy young birds on a similar trip. Besides these there were many outcrops at which we did not land but at which peregrines were seen. Throughout this entire region there does not seem to be any cliff or rock-outcropping of any size at all

that is not tenanted by a pair of the small arctic type peregrine falcons.

"During this summer several birds were taken. On June 13th two gyrs, both females, were taken from an aerie and brought to camp. On June 18th one of these was returned to the nest for being too noisy and a male was taken in her place. The male made his first flight on the fourteenth of July; the female two days later. I took a third gyr, another male, from another nest on July 14th and on August 5th took a peregrine back to camp. This last bird won the camp crew's attention and affection and for a little while everyone wanted a pet falcon. During this same time I was photographing the progress of a young golden eagle. The adults of this bird provided some half the food given to my assorted young falcons. Like the former falcon these birds were fed about fifty percent on lake trout; the remainder (mostly provided by the eagles) a mixture of duck, ptarmigan, beefsteak, red-fox, gull and ground-squirrel.

"While my notes concern mostly falcons and eagles I should note at this point that the most abundant raptore of all throughout this region is the American roughleg hawk. The young are most colorful and photogenic.

"From August 16 to Sept. 17th base camp was shifted to Ruby Creek Mining camp on the Kobuk River. This is on the south slope of the Brooks Range; the region is heavily grown with trees and brush. This region abounds in merlins, it being much more abundant than any other raptore hereabouts. Recently used falcon aeries of larger species were noted on nearby cliffs.

"What was in many respects the most interesting area of all was worked in 1961. This season was spent on the Alaska Peninsula, again in connection with geological oil exploration. Both coasts of the peninsula were worked for almost the entire length, plus a good part of the interior south of the Port Heiden-Chignik areas. Southward of King Salmon tree-growth disappears, alder-brush being the only woody growth prominent southward of this point. Much of the peninsula is open tundra.

"By long odds the most numerous raptore in this region is the bald eagle, but peregrines are also abundant, both along the coasts (both north and south coasts) and inland. The peregrine in this region show great variation in size and color, from big dark birds on the islands off the south coast that either are, or resemble Peale falcons, to small arctic type falcons in the interior, but many birds do not fit the descriptions of any subspecies. One very small falcon, observed several times, was almost black.

"Golden eagles were more abundant here than in the arctic, despite the damp year-

round climate. Three nests were located but there were many more as numerous adults and young were seen throughout the season. Gyrfalcons are present, one aerie with four well grown being located between Chignik and Black Lakes. Peregrines were much more abundant, eleven aeries were found during June and a great many more recently used sites were seen later in the season after the young had flown. The roughlegged hawk was the most abundant species inland.

"These seasons in the north left me with the impression that Alaska and northern Canada support tremendous populations of raptorial birds. While my observations are confined to the mainland of the western arctic there is every reason to suspect that the areas to the east support equally large, perhaps even larger populations. The tree-line dips far to the southward to the east and the truly arctic areas become increasingly extensive. The islands of the eastern arctic archipelago, with their high sea-cliffs, great seabird colonies, and mountainous interior country are better and much more extensive gyrfalcon habitat than anything in the western arctic.

The carnivorous mammals of the northern regions of this continent have been subjected to continuous commercial exploitation for fur for over two centuries. They are not now, and probably never were, anywhere nearly as abundant as the northern raptorial birds, yet in all this time none of them have been reduced to populations considered as serious or dangerously low by wildlife authorities.

From what I have seen I do not think that the foreseeable demands of North American falconers can have the least effect on a population of birds so uniformly distributed throughout one of the greatest desolated wilderness regions in the world.