

Gyr Falcon

Falco rusticolus

The largest falcon in the world, the ghostly Gyr Falcon is a fierce predator in the High Arctic, where it chases down ptarmigans in flight or plummets from the sky at breathtaking speeds to strike prey to the ground. Nesting on remote cliffs in the far reaches of Canada and Alaska, Gyr Falcons in North America are safe from most human disturbance but face challenges from a warming climate. They are rare winter visitors to open habitats in the northern United States.

Keys to Identification

Size and Shape

Gyr Falcons are very large falcons. They have pointed wings, but they are not as pointed or as narrow as the wings of smaller falcons. The tail is relatively long. The body is thick and powerful, particularly in females, which are substantially larger than males.

Color Pattern

Although the classic image of a Gyr Falcon is a regal white bird with black spotting, the birds occur in shades of white, gray, and dark brown. In North America, gray birds are more numerous than the other two morphs.

Adults are heavily barred on the back, wings, and tail, with spotted underparts. Juveniles are heavily streaked; the flight feathers of dark juveniles are lighter and contrast with the rest of the wing.

Behavior

They hunt primarily birds in open country, sometimes flying high and attacking from above, but more often approaching fast and low, hugging ground contours. They often perch on the ground.

Habitat

Gyr Falcons breed on arctic tundra. When they come south for winter, they look for similar habitat: open fields, coastlines, dunes, prairie, and shrubsteppe.

Cool Facts

- Adult males are much smaller than females: males average less than 3 pounds while females average up to 4 pounds. Both males and females have highly variable plumage coloration, ranging from nearly pure white to dark gray-brown. In North America, most are an intermediate gray color.

Measurements

Both Sexes

- Length - 18.9 - 25.2 inches
- Wingspan - 48.4 inches
- Weight - 28.2 - 74.1 ounces

Relative Size

- Males are slightly larger than a Peregrine Falcon; females are about the size of a Red-tailed Hawk.

