



FALCO ISLANDUS, J.F. Gmel.  
Iceland Falcon, adult.

J. Wolf & H. Richter del. a lith.

Walter imp.



## FALCO ISLANDUS, J. F. Gmel.

### Iceland Falcon.

- Falco islandus*, J. F. Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 271.  
—— *candicans islandicus*, Schleg. Rev. Crit. des Ois. d'Eur., p. 1.  
—— var. *β. islandicus*, Blas. List of Birds of Eur., Eng. edit., p. 1.  
—— *islandicus*, Brehm, Lehrb., tom. i. p. 44.  
*Hierofalco islandicus*, Gray, List of Gen. of Birds, p. 3.  
*Falco (Hierofalco) islandicus*, Gray, Handl. of Birds, p. 18.
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As the name assigned to this species implies, Iceland is its principal home; there it performs the task of reproduction, just as the Gyrfalcon does in Northern Europe, and the succeeding species (*Falco candicans*) in the arctic regions. It is a well-known law of nature, which more especially prevails among Eagles and Falcons, that the young are either driven forth by their parents or take upon themselves to wander into far-distant countries before they become domiciled in their native home. From this tendency of the young to wander, it is not surprising that Scotland and the northern and some other parts of England should from time to time be visited by examples of this species, records of which, and in whose collections they are deposited, may be found in the 'Zoologist' and other journals devoted to British ornithology. Nearly all, however, have been young birds of the year, which had not yet commenced their second moult, still less obtained the plumage borne for the remainder of their lives. Among these I may particularly mention a fine specimen kindly sent up for my inspection by Dr. Dewar, of Glasgow, who informs me that it was shot by a friend of his in the island of North Uist, one of the Outer Hebrides, in September 1864, and sent to him in the flesh. It had frequented his friend's poultry-yard for a considerable time, and killed numbers of his chickens. It was not at all shy. In April or May 1866 the same gentleman shot another, which had frequented the poultry-yard daily for a month; this, unfortunately, was not preserved. My thanks are also due to the authorities of the Norfolk and Norwich Museum for the loan of another fine but immature example. It is probable that instances of the appearance of the adult in Britain may also have occurred; and one at least has been recorded; for Professor Newton informs us that "Mr. Borrer possesses an adult Iceland Falcon shot at Mayfield, in Sussex, in January 1845." There is also another in the British portion of the National Collection, said to have been killed in England; but where, is unknown.

There are at least four naturalists who have paid especial attention to the history and changes of this fine bird and its two allies *Falco candicans* and *F. gyrfalco*, namely the late Mr. Hoy, Mr. Hancock, of Newcastle, Professor Schlegel, of Leyden, and Professor Newton, all the more important points of whose observations have been incorporated in a valuable article on the subject in the new edition of 'Yarrell's British Birds,' to which, as it is too lengthy to be quoted, I must refer my readers, and content myself with extracting a few passages having special reference to the present species. The subject has also been most ably treated in 'The Ibis' for 1862, p. 43 *et seqq.*

"As a constant inhabitant of Europe," says Professor Newton, "the Iceland Falcon is only known in the island whence it takes its name, and is there by no means uncommon, breeding in precipitous cliffs or ranges of rock bordering the numerous lakes, which are thronged during the summer by innumerable waterfowl, and thereby securing a plentiful supply of food for its offspring, though it is stated that Ptarmigans form the chief prey of the adults, and such of the young as pass the winter in that country, when it is comparatively deserted by aquatic birds. Most of the young, however, wander southward at that season; and examples annually visit the Færoes, Norway, Denmark, Germany and Holland. In the British Islands, probably, more have occurred than of the Greenland Falcon; but of the many so-called 'Gyr Falcons' recorded as seen or taken here, the number which can be with certainty determined to be Icelanders is perhaps rather fewer.

"This bird is believed to breed in Greenland, but only in the southern parts, and seems to be of not very rare occurrence along the coast of Labrador, where, according to Audubon, it also breeds. To judge from Richardson's account, it is not uncommon in the fur-countries, where it, as well as *Falco candicans*, probably breeds. On the western side of the continent adults have been obtained in Alaska, where it is said by Mr. Dall to be resident and usually confined to the mountains, breeding, according to Professor Spencer F. Baird, both there and on the Lower Mackenzie River, indifferently, on trees and cliffs. Whether *Falco islandus* crosses to Asia cannot be determined.

"From information supplied to Mr. Hewitson by Mr. Proctor, the latter saw in northern Iceland several



deserted nests of this Falcon, being too late to find any tenanted by the owners; this was in the beginning of August; and from one of them he took an addled egg. The nest was composed of sticks and roots, and lined with wool, much resembling that of a Raven, to which bird it might have originally belonged. Strewed around it lay the remains of many Whimbrels, Golden Plovers, Guillemots, and Ducks. All the nests he saw were in cliffs forming the boundaries of freshwater lakes, but none of them so high in the mountains as he expected to find them. A similar account is given by Faber of a nest seen by him in 1821. This, the only one he found, was in South-western Iceland; it was large and flat, placed on the upper part of an inaccessible wall of rock. There were three full-grown young, two of which, on the 6th of July, had already left it and sat near by. The old birds flew around screaming, but did not attack him. Remains of various sea-fowl lay about. Faber adds, both young and old approach the homesteads, where they sit on elevations and often fight with the Ravens. Four seems to be the proper complement of eggs; they are suffused or closely freckled with reddish orange or pale reddish brown on a dull white ground, which commonly is hardly discernible between the markings, though these are sometimes collected into blotches of considerable extent; specimens measure from 2.48 to 2.13 inches by from 1.91 to 1.72."

"In the days when falconry stood first on the list of sports," says Mr. Hoy, "the Iclander was considered a present worthy the acceptance of a king. The King of Denmark sent a vessel annually to Iceland to bring all the Hawks of this kind it was possible to procure for the use of his falconers, and to be sent as presents to the different princes on the Continent; they were even sent to the Barbary states and into the Eastern countries; so much were they esteemed. An old falconer, lately dead, assured me that he had seen upwards of fifty Iceland Falcons at the same time in the care of persons who were about to start with them as presents to the different courts of Europe. A falconer who was in the hawking establishment of Louis XVI. of France informed me that they had several casts or pairs sent annually from Denmark. The Iclander was greatly prized, not only on account of its superior powers of flight, but its tractable, gentle disposition. It is not so difficult to reclaim and manage as the Ger Falcon; there is also a decided difference in their flight and manner of striking their prey; the Iclander, in the language of falconry, flies more nobly, pouncing his prey with more lofty stoops. The flight of the hare with the female, the male being used for the Heron, Kite, and Buzzards, was considered one of the finest sights the sport could afford. An open country is requisite to see this flight in perfection. The hare being started, the Falcon was immediately thrown off the fist, and, instantly catching sight of its prey, mounted to a considerable height; a slow dog, well trained with the Hawk, was used to keep the hare running, as it would otherwise squat on being once stooped at by the Falcon. The Falcon kills the hare by repeated blows on the back and head, coming in an almost perpendicular direction upon it from a great height and with wonderful velocity, the blow being almost imperceptibly given in passing, and the Falcon again rising, or, as they term it, shooting up steeple-high after every stoop; occasionally the victim is killed the first stoop, and driven several yards by the violence of it. In a good flight several lofty stoops are made. Again, in the air the Iclander kills the Crane, Heron, or Kite by repeated blows, the great interest taken in the flight being to watch the exertions of the Falcon to out-soar its prey and then precipitate itself with closed wings and astonishing rapidity and force, its prey seldom reaching the ground without being mortally disabled. An instance has occurred of a male Iclander striking the head from the neck of a Heron by a single blow in the air."—*Mag. Nat. Hist.* vol. vi. 1833, p. 108.

On comparing either sex of the present species with the corresponding sex of the Norwegian or Gyr Falcon, it will be found to be of larger size, to have the upper and under surface much lighter in colour, the face and crown striated and without any Peregrine-like appearance in its countenance, the bars of the tail quite perfect and well defined, the feet and cere pale yellow and not orange-yellow as in the Gyr Falcon, and the head more bluff or less elegant in shape.

I must not fail to mention that the markings of the under surface are of a striated form in the youthful birds, and that these marks become of a transverse or barred form in the adult. To illustrate these and the other remarkable differences between the adult and young, I have considered it necessary to give two Plates, the one representing the former, the other a bird of the first autumn, both somewhat less than the natural size.





FALCO ISLANDUS, J.F. Gmel.

Iceland Falcon, young.

Walter, Imp.



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