FALCO CANDICANS, *J.F. Gmel.*

J.W. & H.C. Richter del et lith.

Greenland Falcon, light race adult and young

Walter Inp.

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- Falco candicans*, Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 275.
—— *grænländicus*, Daud. Traité d'Orn., tom. ii. p. 107.
—— *fuscus*, Fabr. Faun. Grænl., p. 56.
—— *arcticus*, Holb.
Hierofalco candicans, Cuv. Règn. Anim., edit. 1, tom. i. p. 312.
—— *grænländicus*, Brehm, Vög. Deutschl., tom. i. p. 16.
Falco (*Hierofalco*) *candicans*, Blas. List of Birds of Eur., Eng. edit. p. 3.
—— *gyrfalco grænländicus*, Schleg.
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THE bird under consideration is the *Falco candicans* of Gmelin, *F. grænländicus* of Daudin, and *F. arcticus* of Holbøll, specific names which at the same time furnish the reader with some idea of the colouring of this species and intimate the countries it inhabits. The native home, then, of this fine Falcon is the high northern regions, within rather than without the arctic circle, from which youthful (and, occasionally, adult) birds wander during autumn and winter to more temperate latitudes; and hence it is that some parts of America and Europe are now and then favoured with its visits. In the course of the present work hints have from time to time been thrown out as to the probability, nay, almost certainty, of the existence of some unknown land near the pole, to which rare birds retire to breed, and, perhaps, fat reindeer resort, as they do to Spitzbergen, for pasture, free from the molestation of man. If there be such an open country, then the present bird, doubtless, also frequents it. For myself I have always considered the very high northern regions to be the principal habitat of this the whitest of Falcons, a bird which possesses features whereby it may at all times be distinguished from its near allies. Even from a very early stage it differs from both the Iceland and the Gyrfalcon, and on attaining maturity acquires characters which neither of those birds possesses; there are also other differences, which indicate its distinctness still more strikingly, namely the light or yellowish-white colouring of the cere, legs, toes, and even the claws, and the fact that the young birds in their early plumage are white or nearly white, while the young of the other two species are very dark. Surely, if these differences are constant, we should not hesitate to adopt the distinctive appellation assigned to it.

“The Greenland Falcon,” remarks Professor Newton in his edition of Yarrell’s ‘British Birds,’ “seems to be most plentiful in the inhospitable regions which enclose Baffin’s Bay and extend to the westward. From this tract adult birds seldom wander to other lands, though the young, especially in autumn and winter, occur regularly in Iceland, and not unfrequently in the Dominion of Canada from Newfoundland westward, the United States, the British Islands, and even in countries still more remote from the place of their birth. They are, no doubt, driven away by their parents, as is commonly the habit with birds of prey, and follow the large flocks of Waterfowl, which are bred in the north, on their southward migration, though it would appear that the ptarmigan forms the chief sustenance of the old birds. At the same time it must not be supposed that in Greenland the white form only is found. In the southern districts of that country the Iceland Falcon is certainly numerous; and, on the other hand, there is good reason for believing that the Greenland Falcon breeds in some of the northern parts of British America. Writing of what was doubtless this form of Falcon, Sir John Richardson in the ‘Fauna Boreali-americana’ says:—‘In the middle of June 1821, a pair of these birds attacked me as I was climbing in the vicinity of their nest, which was built on a lofty precipice on the borders of Point Lake, in latitude 65½°. They flew in circles, uttering loud and harsh screams, and alternately stooping with such velocity that their motion through the air produced a loud rushing noise, they struck their claws within an inch or two of my head. I endeavoured, by keeping the barrel of my gun close to my cheek, and suddenly elevating its muzzle when they were in the act of striking, to ascertain whether they had the power of instantaneously changing the direction of their rapid course, and found that they invariably rose above the obstacle with the quickness of thought, showing equal acuteness of vision and power of motion.’

“It has already been said that this Falcon occurs yearly in Iceland; but it does not breed there; and the only instance on record of its having been seen in that island in summer is that mentioned by Herr Preyer in his travels. It has very probably occurred on the continent of Europe; but, owing to the way in which it has been confounded with the cognate forms, the point cannot at present be decided. The same confusion renders useless many of the records of the appearance of large Falcons in the United Kingdom.

"Midway between Asia and America this white Falcon was seen at sea, a little north of Behring's Island, by Mr. Bannister. Crossing the Pacific, it is, according to Professor Schlegel, known to the Japanese; and it certainly occurs on the continent of Asia, though whether its character in Siberia is that of a native, or a visitor only, there is not at present enough evidence to decide. . . . Captain Salvin and Mr. Brodrick, in their 'Falconry in the British Islands,' state that they 'have been informed by travellers that some few large white Falcons, which must be Greenland Falcons, are caught annually in their passage over the Caspian Sea, and that they are highly prized by the falconers of Syria and Persia.'"

Two very distinct phases of plumage are found among individuals of this bird, one of which may be characterized as light, the other as dark; these, by some naturalists, are regarded as races only, and not as indicative of a distinction of species. Examples of both have from time to time made their appearance in our islands; indeed these occurrences are too numerous to be detailed here *in extenso*; but I may mention two of the more recent instances. In June 1865 Mr. R. C. Musgrave informed me that a fine example in the possession of his father "Sir George Musgrave, Bart., of Edenhall, in Cumberland, was shot in the preceding January by a blacksmith near Crosby Ravensworth, in Westmoreland, whilst in the act of eating a Grouse. It is a very fine specimen of a Greenland Falcon, and is remarkable for its extreme whiteness, the breast being perfectly white and the leg-feathers nearly so." In the autumn of 1867 another fine individual was observed at Loch Stack, in the western part of Sutherland, by Lord Belgrave (now Earl Grosvenor), who informed me that he saw it strike down a Grouse before him, both falling in a little hollow; he crept up to within ten yards, and threw his stick at the Falcon as it flew away. Lord Grosvenor tells me it was a splendid white bird. Both these individuals were probably young birds of the year, of the white race, as the bird killed by Lord Cawdor's gamekeeper in Pembrokeshire, and now in the British Museum, is of the dark one. It was from this latter specimen that the figure of what is termed the Jerfalcon in my 'Birds of Europe' was taken; it is also the original of the figure, likewise so termed, in the three editions of the late Mr. Yarrell's 'History of British Birds;' it has therefore an historical value.

Little is known of the nidification of this Falcon; but it probably differs but slightly from that of its ally the *F. islandus*. Three eggs in Mr. Wolley's collection, said to have been procured by Captain Holböll in Greenland, are described by Professor Newton as being "suffused with pale reddish orange, having a few spots of a darker orange-red, or dull red, or are mottled with pale brownish orange on a white ground."

A few words of explanation are necessary to enable the reader to understand the accompanying Plate.

The middle figure represents an unusually light and beautiful young bird of the year, with tear-drop-like markings on the whole of the upper surface; the larger figure the adult, distinguished by having a small, somewhat heart-shaped spot at the tip of each feather of the upper surface, faint specks of brownish black on the under surface, and the tail creamy white.

FALCO CANDICANS.

J. Wolf & W. Hare, del et lith.

Greenland Falcon, dark race. adult.

Walter, Imp.

FALCO CANDICANS, J. F. Gmel.

Greenland Falcon, dark race.

THE birds figured on the two accompanying Plates differ from both the white or true *Falco candicans* and the *F. islandus*, and moreover are so inconstant in their markings that I have never seen two specimens that had the tail similarly marked; for while the barrings of the feathers are perfect in one, in another they are interrupted. In one the second and third feathers from the middle ones may be wholly white; in another the same feathers may be more or less barred. A degree of inconstancy also occurs in the markings of the back and wings, although generally to a less extent; but the young of the year of the white *F. candicans* and the young of this dark race assimilate in being lightly coloured, in which respect they offer a decided contrast to the young of *Falco gyrfalco* and *F. islandus*, which at the same period of their existence are both dark. By some persons it may be supposed that the individuals of the dark race change their plumage as they advance in age, and ultimately become white; but if the assertion of those ornithologists who have paid special attention to these Falcons, that the plumage they assume at their second moult is carried throughout life, be correct, this will not be the case; and that this theory is the true one would seem to be confirmed by the fact that a Greenland Falcon which lived for some years in the Gardens of the Zoological Society never exhibited any subsequent change. Professor Newton states that the true Icelandic is believed to breed in the southern parts of Greenland. If this is the case, it appears to me probable that this dark or mongrel race may be due to the interbreeding of *F. islandus* and *F. candicans*, in which event the progeny would naturally be intermediate in colour and markings. As an instance in point I may cite the results of a cross between our two species of Pheasants (*Phasianus colchicus* and *P. torquatus*), the progeny of which not only differ in their plumage from the parent stocks, but even as compared with one another. If this is not the cause of the abnormal state of plumage of these Falcons, I am at a loss to account for it. I may mention that these strongly marked birds appear to be more exclusively natives of South Greenland, and that it is from the Danish settlements in that country that specimens are sent to Europe. It is the young of these indistinctly marked birds that most frequently visit Britain, of which Lord Cawdor's specimen, now in the British Museum, is an example, and is represented in the second figure, or young of the dark race, in the accompanying Plate.

Whether these noble Falcons have all sprung from one stock is a question not easily answered; neither is it easy to say, in that case, which most approximates to the common progenitor; but we may, I think, fairly conclude that it must have been the *Falco candicans* in its whitest and purest state, inasmuch as it is the bird which inhabits the highest northern regions, or the icebound portions of the arctic zone. Geologists will tell us that, in ages gone by, Iceland and Northern Europe were in the same state, and that glaciers, instead of the peaty morasses which now exist, then prevailed. May not the physical changes that have taken place in more recent periods have had an influence on the colouring of these Falcons? That such a change has been effected in the case of the common Grouse (*Lagopus scoticus*) I feel assured, inasmuch as I find no difference, except that of colour, between it and the white *Lagopus saliceti* of Norway and America. To assert positively that the milder atmosphere of our more humid sea-girt islands, and their more peaty and heathery soil, is the cause of the difference in colour between the two birds, would perhaps be speaking too strongly; yet I think it probable that such a theory would be the right one.

Those who have studied the birds of the world in their entirety must have been struck with the fact that, while certain forms are abundant in one portion of the globe, they are totally absent from the opposite one. For instance, in the northern or arctic hemisphere Auks, Puffins, and Guillemots abound, while none of these forms are to be found in the opposite or southern hemisphere, their place there being occupied by Penguins and Albatrosses. This is not easily to be accounted for, since, on the other hand, Cormorants haunt the sea-girt rocks of every part of the globe, and Gulls and Terns are no less universally dispersed. This absence of certain forms, again, from countries not very far distant from those in which such forms are numerous is further exemplified in the fact that, while there are neither Swallows nor Crows in New Zealand, Norfolk Island, or perhaps the whole of Polynesia, Swallows, Martins, and Swifts are abundant in Australia, and Crows are as numerous there as in any other country—all, however, being specifically different from the birds thus called which inhabit the same latitudes in the northern hemisphere. Were it necessary, other instances of this apparent limitation of species in certain parts of the globe might be cited almost *ad infinitum*; and we might theorize to a similar extent as to why a Crow should not inhabit New Zealand as well as Australia, or why Swallows should be plentiful in the one country and not in the other. The

existence or non-existence of food of a particular kind suited to a species is one of the causes of its absence or presence: thus the fact of the majority of the trees of Australia not having a bark adapted for insect life would indicate the absence of the Woodpecker family; and accordingly no one of its members is found there. The large White Falcons figured in this work are restricted to the northern hemisphere, to which the Ptarmigan, Grouse, and Ducks upon which they mainly subsist almost solely resort, only a single representative species, the *Falco hypoleucos* of Western Australia inhabiting the southern hemisphere. On the other hand, Peregrines or Duck-Hawks not only frequent the northern hemisphere, but are also found in all southern countries; thus there is a Peregrine at Cape Horn, another at the Cape of Good Hope, and a third in Tasmania.

Not wishing to multiply generic terms in a work like the present, I have retained that of *Falco* for the birds under consideration; but I am not less of opinion that Cuvier and the older writers were right in giving them a separate generic appellation—that of *Hierofalco*; for they certainly do differ in many respects from the Peregrines, for which the term *Falco* is rightly employed.

“Of all the birds used in falconry in this country,” says J. C. Belany, in his ‘Treatise on Falconry,’ printed for the author at Berwick-on-Tweed, in 1841, “the Gerfalcon has ever been ranked the foremost. Superior in strength and agility to every other bird of its size, and endowed with powers of flight equalled by none that wing the air, with a corresponding courage, he dashes into the air fearless of every other bird, however large; nor will he, at times, hesitate to dispute precedence with the ‘monarch of the skies.’ Nor need any one acquainted with the anatomical structure of this bird wonder at his power. The breadth of the sternum, the depth of the keel affording a vast extent of surface for the muscles that move the wings, the furcula, circular, broad, and strong, giving a firm support to the shoulders, with his long acuminate wings, and with the feathers firm, narrow, and so arranged as to pierce the air and resist pressure, give him powers which few of the feathered tribe possess. Mr. Mudie considers him the boldest, the most perfectly winged, and, in proportion to his weight, the strongest, both for action and endurance, of all the feathered tribe.” Notwithstanding this affirmation, I question whether the *Hierofalcones* are equal in either flight or courage to the female of the true Peregrines.

Latham, without distinguishing one from another, says:—“This species, with its varieties, has ever been in much estimation for its use in falconry; and Iceland has the reputation of furnishing the most generous breed. The King of Denmark is said to send there annually to buy up all that can be procured, the established place being Bessested, to which the Icelanders bring them as soon as taken, the white ones being in most esteem: and they must be very docile; for people catch them, in nets, of any size or age. Bell, in his Travels in Russia, says that about Zabach-Yeer and Casan are caught the best and largest Falcons in the world, which are purchased by the Turks and Persians; the Russians prefer the old ones, which are taken in nets with a live bird as a decoy. These will fly at Swans, Herons, or Cranes, and will take a Duck out of the water when only the bill appears. The Tartars also fly them at antelopes and hares. Some of the Falcons are as white as a Dove.”

I cannot conclude without calling attention to the admirable delineations of all these large northern Falcons, for which I am indebted to the pencil of Mr. Wolf, whose abilities as an artist are so justly celebrated, and who thoroughly understands the subject. I trust they will be duly appreciated by the possessors of the present work, as I feel every one must have been delighted with the illustrations of Messrs. Schlegel and Verster van Wulverhorst’s ‘Traité de Fauconnerie,’ by the same master hand.

FALCO CANDICANS.

Greenland Falcon, dark race young.

J.W.H. & H. Richter, del. et lith.

Walter, imp.

Gould, John. 1873. "Greenland Falcon, *Falco candicans* [Pl. 13-15]." *The birds of Great Britain* 1, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.323795>.

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