

Gyrfalcons of the kings



Frank Wenzel



Frank Wenzel

FALCONER AND PHOTOGRAPHER

Began his great interest in birds of prey at the early age of 14. This led to the publication of his first book in 1957, in which the text was written by Wenzel himself and illustrated with his own photos.

Even before completing his apprenticeship as a photographer at the Danish national newspaper Berlingske Tidende, the 19-year-old Wenzel had been given the major task of illustrating the most comprehensive work concerning Scandinavian birds at the time, “Nordens fugle i farver”. As the chief photographer of this work, Wenzel contributed more than 600 photographs of all of the birds in Scandinavia.

With tireless energy, he has written and illustrated 11 books to date and produced a similar number of short films that are extremely popular amongst nature-lovers. In 1966 his film about the cuckoo, “Gøgen”, won the award of film of the year at the European Council’s film festival in Venice. The majority of his books and films have been used extensively in teaching at the country’s schools. Frank Wenzel’s great love of birds of prey – along with support from the Saudi Arabian royal family – led to the opening of Denmark’s only eagle sanctuary, Eagleworld, in 1979.

At Eagleworld, Frank and his wife Irene have managed to fulfil his innermost wish to provide information about the birds of prey, their unique way of life and behaviour – and not least to bring to life the age-old culture of the falconer. At the sanctuary the general public learn to admire and understand the birds of prey – in reality, the most important and effective way of protecting the birds in their natural habitats. Eagleworld has become one of North Jutland’s major tourist attractions and is visited by more than 50,000 guests every summer.



GYRFALCONS OF THE KINGS

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Frank Wenzel

GYRFALCONS OF THE KINGS

from Iceland and Greenland



Seal from King Cnut II, 21 May 1086

GYRFALCONS OF THE KINGS



Iceland gyrfalcon

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Preface

THE ICELAND FALCON AND THE GREENLAND FALCON

This special publication deals exclusively with the historic gyrfalcons from Iceland and Greenland, which are the biggest and the most beautiful falcons in existence, and it is these falcons that have the most distinct historical relations.

Today, when almost everything is examined, filmed, described in minute detail and shown in a succession of TV programmes from the farthest corners of the globe, it is difficult to understand that these large falcons found in the wilderness are like a closed book. They live almost unnoticed and have adapted to life in the world's harshest regions.

The large falcons have also played a significant role in one thousand years of Nordic cultural history and have even appeared on the political stage, which no other animal has done.

The fact that Denmark – the world's oldest monarchy – has close ties to the falcons from Iceland and Greenland also adds to the historical perspective.

Through its beauty, this superb hunter – the Greenland falcon – has thus attracted the attention of kings and princes for thousands of years. A description of the falcon can be found in the "KING'S MIRROR", which dates back to 1220 and is the oldest written source available from Greenland, although legends survive from much earlier times. One of the passages from the KING'S MIRROR states: "There are many falcons in this country, which in other countries would be regarded as a major treasure - white falcons, of which there are more than in any other country. But the country's inhabitants do not understand how to take advantage of this fact."

My knowledge of the gyrfalcons is first and foremost based on my own observations. This applies to wild falcons from Iceland and Greenland, but also to my own gyrfalcons which I have trained to hunt and which I have bred in captivity for many years. This combination of the falcons found flying free in their natural environment and the observations of my own falcons has given me a particular insight into the behaviour of this species which it has hitherto not been possible to study in depth.

In this publication I have chosen to describe a few examples of the observations that I have made over the years. However, I have not gone into any great depth, as this has never been the intention of this publication.



Geographical propagation and sources of food

THE BREEDING PAIRS' TERRITORY

The gyrfalcon is a species that is extremely widespread in geographical terms, where it can be found in northern USA and Canada, as well as throughout the entire Siberian tundra from the Kola Peninsula in the west to Kamtjathka in the east.

The southernmost location in which the gyrfalcon can be found is in the fells of southern Norway, although it can also be found throughout the rest of the country (Scandinavian gyrfalcon). It also lives in northern Sweden and Finland.

The gyrfalcon is divided into several races, but although this large falcon is widespread, it does not necessarily mean that it is common in any one area.

At the most favourable locations on Iceland and Greenland I have found 6 breeding pairs within a radius of less than 100 km. It should be added that there can be distances of up to several hundred km between the pairs. A high concentration of prey - especially ptarmigans, ducks and seabirds - is a prerequisite for the survival of the gyrfalcon, whilst mountain hares are also an important source of food. I have found fully grown hares that have been killed and dragged to the eyrie in small pieces. Small birds such as snow buntings and small rodents also make up the gyrfalcon's staple diet.

Greenland gyrfalcon



Breeding location for Iceland gyrfalcon

Capturing the essence of Greenland

FALCON AT ITS OBSERVATION POST

In the Arctic world there is no other animal that has such a magnificent history as the gyrfalcon. It lives in a habitat which abounds in glory, purity and untouched landscapes that surpass anything you can imagine. The falcon itself is nature's masterpiece in terms of beauty and elegant flying skills. Its appearance blends into the surrounding ice and snow-covered landscape. If the falcon is not busy hunting, it sits peacefully on its observation post, scanning the endless expanses for any sign of movement. Only the drifting ice is in a state of constant flux. Shadows in the open water send cascades of water into the air like floating fountains, whilst everything else lies dormant as if in a daze.

The silence of the landscape is broken only by a distant rumbling and thunder when the icebergs "calve" out into the fjord as they break up on their way out into the ocean. In the twilight the falcon is illuminated by all the colours of the rainbow. The northern lights dance overhead and the almost lifeless world is transformed by an indescribable richness of colours as night falls.

Only those who have experienced an Arctic night – in the company of the white falcons – are really able to appreciate this scene which exceeds your wildest imagination.

Experienced by the author on 20 September 1980, Disko Bay in Greenland.



The 2 pictures show a young Iceland gyrfalcon

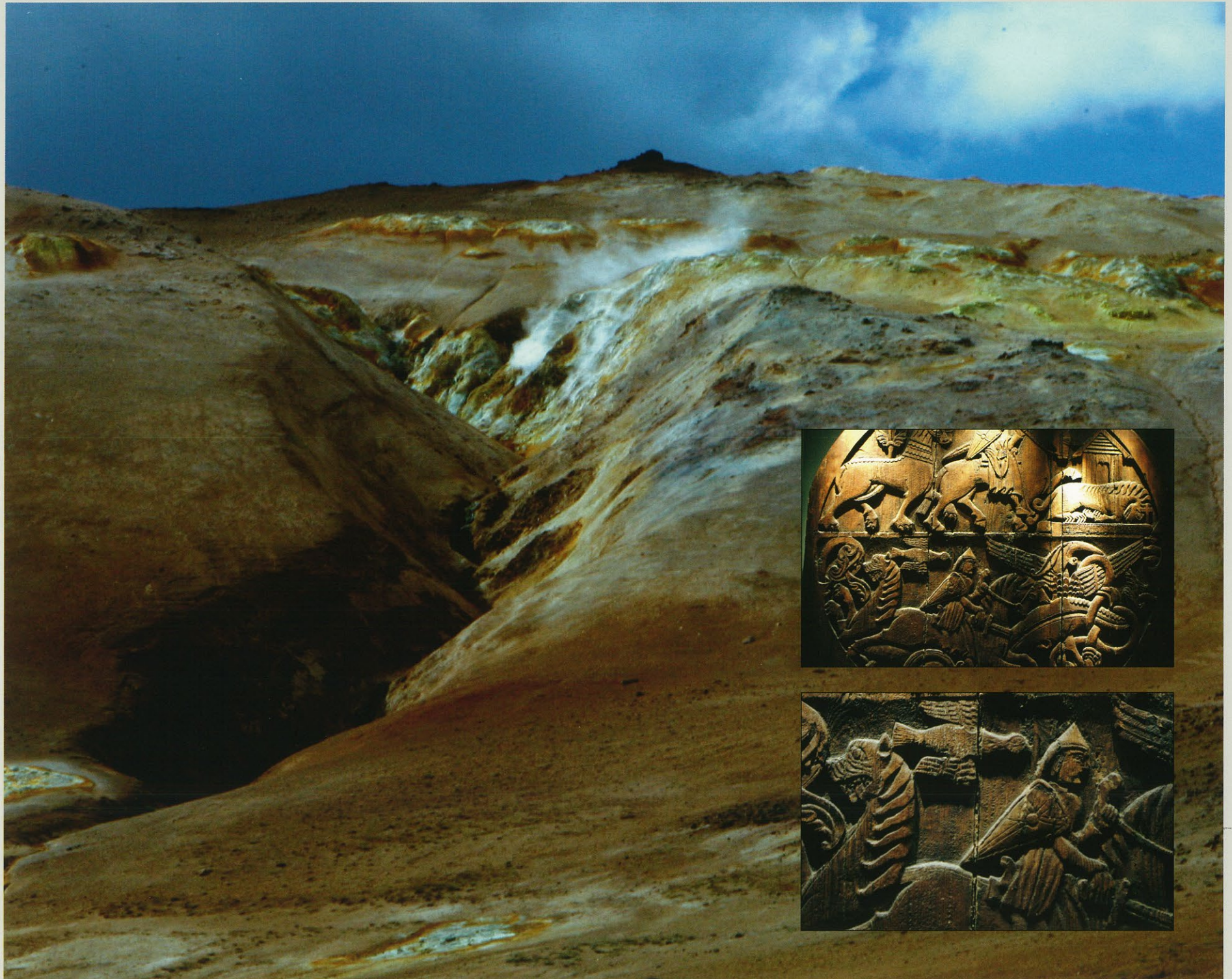


Summer

Large areas of Greenland's wilderness are only accessible by ship or by helicopter.
On the other side of the fell a breeding location for the gyrfalcon can be found



The Iceland gyrfalcon often has its nest in elevated lava formations



Active volcanic areas also provide a good habitat for the falcon. The small pictures originate from a 13th-century carving on an Icelandic church door depicting a rider with flying falcon.



Iceland gyrfalcon

The nest of the gyrfalcon

ON ICELAND AND GREENLAND

On several occasions from the end of the 1960s until the middle of the 1980s I have followed the life of the gyrfalcon at its breeding sites. I have noted events round-the-clock whilst sat concealed by rocks. Often this has proved not to be necessary as the falcons quickly accepted my presence. Only if I went too close did they begin to shriek their displeasure, and I quickly retreated once more. However, their confidence in my presence was so great that they fed their young without paying any attention to me. The nest I observed here was situated close to the Ice Sheet near an elongated lake into which melted water ran out. On the southern side there was a side of a fell where the falcons had their nest. This nest was occupied by three large, downy young who were constantly guarded by the female. The appearance of this gyrfalcon very much resembled the typical falcon from Iceland.

The male, on the other hand, was as white as snow. I saw him returning from a hunt on countless occasions, where his flight path always took him over the opposite north side of the fell behind which the Ice Sheet stretched out into the distance.

The reaction of the female and the young was easy to read when the male returned to the nest. They became very active and turned towards the incoming male. The female emitted an eager, drawn-out shriek and bowed forwards in order to show her pleasure as her mate returned with food.

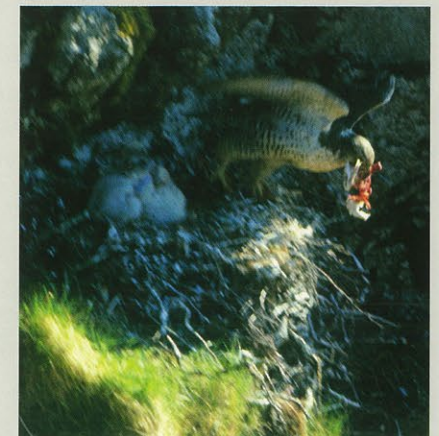
The female falcon saw the male long before I was able to see anything. She saw it on the other mountainside at a height of 700 metres, which is yet another example of the excellent eyesight with which the falcon is blessed.

The female falcon, which had been sitting on the nest, flew up to meet the male in good time, after which a peaceful air duel took place. Occasionally the female was challenged by the male taking evasive action in order to demonstrate his superior flying ability before he delivered his prey. The transfer of the prey took place in the air. Either the female took it directly from his talons or else the male released the prey in the air whereby it was caught deftly by the female. For the young in the nest the transfer of prey was a highly engaging spectacle which they followed intently. They were of course hungry the whole time.

During the many days in which I remained close to the nest, a pattern began to emerge. Activity was highest late in the evening from 10.00 pm until midnight, when the male often came home with prey 3-4 times in quick succession at intervals of 30-40 minutes. After midnight, the falcon nest settled down. Even though it was not dark, the falcons needed to rest after satisfying their hunger. The female falcon had taken up her observation post and often tucked her head under her wing, although she was always ready to react if one of her young in the nest made a sound.

At the other nest on Iceland there was similar activity late at night. From my hide I could see that the male returned with prey no less than 4 times between 11 p.m. and midnight. Each time he had a ptarmigan, which was plucked and ready such that the female could begin to feed her young immediately. The nest was in a cleft, at the bottom of which ran a roaring river.

The vast majority of falcon nests I have seen were originally built by ravens. The falcons do not build their own nests and if there are not any raven nests available in the area, the falcons usually make do with scraping out a lair in the sand or in small stones on a cliff bench or in a cavity on the side of the fell.



Rockface with gyrfalcon nest



Iceland gyrfalcon feeding chicks that are just 17-18 days old





Iceland gyrfalcon in white plumage of East Greenlandic descent



Falconry

IN EUROPE AND IN SCANDINAVIA

In Scandinavia it is clearly Sweden that has made a deserved name for itself in the field of falconry ever since the Middle Ages. There are also a number of runic stones that depict falcon hunting. Swedish kings have had their own falconry. However, actual names do not appear until the time of Gustav Wasas' court in 1523 – where the names of the falconers responsible for falconry appear. Sweden had employed professional falconers from the Netherlands to a much greater extent than in Denmark, thus ensuring that the hunts followed the rules and, not least, that the falcons received the proper care and attention.

There is a large painting of Queen Christina from Sweden, 1632-1654. The original hangs at the Prado Museum in Madrid and a copy is held at Uppsala University's portrait and tablet collection. The painting shows the queen riding with a young falconer on a hunt.

During the time that falconry was at its height in Europe, the wild birds of prey enjoyed great esteem and respect, which unfortunately disappeared after firearms became popular for hunting. In a legal decree from England during the reign of King Edward II, it was stipulated that the harming of wild birds of prey was subject to particular punishment. The provision in the law refers to imprisonment and even the death penalty if a bird of prey was taken from its natural habitat or stolen from a falconer.

The actual development of falconry in Denmark has been very limited in comparison with the courts of other European countries, in particular in England, Germany and France, where falconry was a status symbol characterised by lavish luxury and splendour.

Falconry blossomed in the courts of the French kings, including those of Francis I and Louis XIII, where the hunts were held in great splendour – often with inspiration from the Orient.

In England the famous painter Holbein produced a portrait of Robert Cheseman, King Henry VIII's falconer, featuring an Iceland gyrfalcon. English history suggests a major import of gyrfalcons from Iceland and Norway at a very early age.

The largest and most beautiful falcons were handled by leading members of the court, most often by the king or queen, whilst the subjects had to make do with the more ordinary peregrine falcon or Saker falcon. Ecclesiastical officials customarily hunted using hawks. There was therefore a well defined order of rank with regard to who could keep the different species.

The Pope had to issue reminders on several occasions stressing that hunting was not suitable for church officials. However, Martin Luther states that the sin lay not in the actual pleasure of hunting, but in over-indulgence.

Church officials excused their sins by claiming that it was good for their health to take a break from their administrative duties. Why, their doctors had even recommended getting out into the fresh air and going falcon hunting...

In the Danish State Archives there is a letter dated 23 August 1375 in which Pope Gregory XI in Avignon thanks King Valdemar Atterdag for forwarding a number of horses and a gyrfalcon (Tillisch).

It should also be noted that falconry was one of the few outdoor activities in which women could participate, and this is depicted in a wealth of attractive paintings throughout Europe.



Iceland gyrfalcon (typical appearance)



Queen Christina of Sweden (1632 – 1654)



King Conradin 1268



King Henry VIII's falconer Robert Cheseman – with Iceland gyrfalcon

History

THE DANISH KINGS' INTEREST IN THE GYRFALCON

If the gyrfalcon is to be described in historical terms, it would require a very comprehensive work. In this publication I will simply state a few reference points, in particular those that are relevant in relation to the Danish monarchy. In this regard, it is only the Iceland and Greenland gyrfalcon that play a role.

There is comprehensive documentation of vouchers, letters and notes that are stored in the Danish State Archives. These documents confirm the desire of the Danish kings to exercise a monopoly on the capture of the most coveted gyrfalcons.

The reason that it meant so much to the realm was that it enabled closer relations to be established to the other royal courts in Europe. This monopoly ensured that the distribution of falcons did not take place without the permission of the Danish monarchy. A term known as “present falcons” was coined, which ensured that Denmark had the greatest possible influence. Niels Hessel-

bjerg Christensen has provided a systematic and detailed overview of all the vouchers and letters that concern the administration of the so-called “present falcons”, to which the king clearly wished to exercise exclusive rights.

There was a major focus in the area and the king's wishes were backed up by concrete action. This is evidenced by the annual departure of fully equipped ships from Copenhagen with Iceland as the destination. This dedicated transport was led by experienced falconers – usually from the Netherlands. The Dutch falconers had a reputation for great expertise and were hired to ensure that the capture of falcons took place in a professional manner and that the careful tending and care of the falcons was paramount. Just a single damaged feather would mean that a falcon might not be chosen. It should be pointed out that extensive capture and export of Falcons had previously taken place from Norway. In this regard, Edward Asbjørn is named as an individual who had received permission to catch falcons in Trondheim. In the 12th and 13th centuries, however,

it was the Archbishop in Nidaros (Trondheim) and the Norwegian king who were responsible for the export of falcons from Norway (Hesselbjerg). Going back even earlier, in around the year 900, King Hakon Jarl is mentioned as paying taxes to King Harald Bluetooth of Denmark. The tax was 100 gold marks and 60 gyrfalcons per year. The tax is actually quoted as “hawks”, but this is an error, since the word “hawk” in Norwegian also covers falcons.

Icelandic farmers and landowners have jealously guarded their captured falcons for many generations and have maintained contact with foreign falconers. A special hall was even erected close to Reykjavik, where the falcons were kept and selected.

It is perhaps surprising that it was not until the 16th century that the Danish kings finally demanded the exclusive right to falcons, since there is plenty of evidence that German merchants from Hamburg received the coveted falcons from Iceland and Norway in the 11th – 13th centuries.



Inset: German-Roman emperor Frederick II

Iceland gyrfalcon in flight



A. Sexually mature Iceland gyrfalcon; B. Young Iceland gyrfalcon; C. Labrador gyrfalcon. Note the size of the beak and shape of the head

Appearance

SHAPE OF THE HEAD – SIZE OF THE BEAK AND FEET

A species such as the gyrfalcon, which is found in many countries, can of course vary greatly in appearance from one region to another. This applies to the markings on its plumage, but also the shape of its head, size of its beak and not least the size of its feet can be very different. As mentioned earlier, the Iceland falcon and the Greenland falcon are the biggest and the strongest of the falcons. The shape of the head of the Iceland falcon is flatter and its beak is very big. Its talons are large and strong and particularly well-suited to getting hold of large prey in the air. The southern population of the Greenland falcon has much in common with the Iceland falcon. The region north of latitude 70 degrees in West Greenland is a transition zone in which the falcon's appearance varies from completely white to darker markings. Further north,

almost all the birds are white, whilst the white falcons south of latitude 70 degrees north are somewhat rarer.

The Canadian gyrfalcon – also known as the Labrador falcon – has a more rounded head and a smaller beak. Its feet are also smaller. The North Greenland gyrfalcon is more similar in size and shape to the Labrador falcon than its relatives in South Greenland and in Iceland. It should also be noted that gyrfalcons from Labrador are known for their dark appearance – verging on black.

With regard to its song, there is a clear difference between the Icelandic and the Canadian gyrfalcon, an observation which I have never heard referred to by researchers. However, it is a fact that the intonation and sound is com-

pletely different when I have been able to compare them with the Iceland falcons of my own. I have only seen a few gyrfalcons from Siberia and Alaska, including a number of completely white examples. I have observed that the white birds from Alaska in particular – probably from the Arctic zone – have significantly smaller talons – almost certainly because they hunt smaller prey, including lemmings.

With regard to the Siberian gyrfalcon, I do not feel able to draw any solid conclusions, since the area is so extensive and unexplored that it has not been possible to draw up a basis for comparison. However, there is no doubt that in this case there are major differences in terms of appearance and size.



Iceland gyrfalcon with prey, pheasant



Rider training white gyrfalcon

Birds of prey and their cultural history in Denmark

EQUIPMENT AND TRAINING FOR FALCONRY

The fact that interest in birds of prey in Denmark had already been sparked in the 1960s is merited by the author of this publication, first and foremost due to the establishment of Eagle World, which has welcomed more than 2.5 million visitors to date, whilst Fredensborg Falkonergård run by Edith Wenzel and Finn Hansen has also made a serious and informative contribution to awareness of the birds of prey and their cultural history.

Without these initiatives, knowledge and respect for birds of prey would almost certainly not be as great as it is today, an interest that has been fully backed up by a general public that takes an interest in nature.

One of the overriding issues is that there has been a prolonged and at times fierce debate about birds of prey and hunting with falcons, which made itself felt at the highest level with the Danish Parliament's passing and revision of new hunting legislation in 1994 in which the implementation of falconry was proposed. However, the very question of keeping birds of prey in captivity was also on the political agenda.

Biologists and scientific institutions from all over the world with particular knowledge of birds of prey had addressed a direct appeal to our Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign

Affairs to recognise falconry. This request came about as a result of the fact that a number of reactionary ornithologists had misinformed the public and politicians to such a degree that falconry in Denmark had to be abandoned.

Later, the government's own advisory bodies, including The Danish Council of Ethics and The Danish Forest and Nature Agency, had recommended the reintroduction of falconry in Denmark, but without any success. The somewhat cliquish nature of the Game Management Council and green organisations' blind propaganda carried greater weight than sustainable and serious falconry. It had also been intended to take advantage of the opportunity to stipulate that all activities involving birds of prey, including training and breeding, should be prohibited and that all birds of prey in the care of humans should be destroyed. Such a grievous and unethical measure was, however, stopped at the last minute. This was due entirely to the fact that the Danish Parliament's Environmental and Planning Committee and political parties visited Eagle World to listen to my arguments and to see how the birds of prey thrived while in human care. This led to the happy conclusion that it would continue to be possible to be involved in activities with birds of prey in Denmark in the foreseeable future.



Classic equipment for falconry: Bells and hood

The origins and popularity of falconry

THE ART OF HUNTING WITH BIRDS

It is not absolutely clear when falconry came to Europe, but its spread and popularity can be attributed to the German-Roman emperor Frederick II, who lived in the 13th century. This widely-read ruler had conquered most of Europe all the way up to Denmark's southern border. Frederick II was a unique natural scientist for his time, but was renowned for his passionate interest in birds of prey and in particular the gyrfalcon. He exercised his hunts and passion with falcons with great professionalism at his castles in southern Italy and on Sicily. His technical insight as a natural scientist resulted in his famous work published in Latin, *DE ARTE VERNANDI COM AVIBUS*, or the art of hunting with falcons. This work is today protected behind the Vatican's solid walls as one of history's priceless cultural treasures. Paradoxically, this historic life's work on falconry from the emperor today enjoys great recognition and admiration, even though he was excommunicated by the

Pope on 3 occasions due to his aversion to waging the wars he was instructed to prosecute from Rome. His scientific conclusions concerning the origins and correlations of nature, as well as his respect for other religions and races, meant that he was not universally popular in Rome. The emperor's sarcophagus is situated in Palermo's cathedral.

It is difficult to establish when falconry actually began. Some of the oldest known evidence is a relief from the Hittites of northern Syria dating from 900 BC. The stone tablet shows a person with a falcon perched on his hand.

The oldest reports stem from a Japanese script in which a falcon hunt held by Emperor Wen-Wang from China in 689 BC is referred to (Tillisch).



The 11th-century Bayeux tapestry depicts prominent riders with falcons and dogs



Species, descent and races

THE GREENLAND FALCON IS A CLOSE RELATIVE OF THE ICELAND FALCON

During years characterised by large quantities of drifting ice, a large number of white falcons have made the journey to Iceland, since they have been able to rest on the ice during their long journey. Several of the white falcons that have reached Iceland have remained and have formed pairs with the indigenous falcons, which are darker and often a little bigger.

According to my own observations, it appears that around 10% of the breeding pairs in northern Iceland are completely or partly white.

The different races were classified according to Latin names 100 years ago: The most northerly Greenland gyrfalcon race is called *Falco rusticolus Candicans*, Gm; the southern Greenlandic race is designated Holbøll's gyrfalcon and the Labrador gyrfalcon *Falco rusticolus obsoletus* Gm; the Icelandic gyrfalcon is *Falco rusticolus islandus* Brunn; and the Scandinavian gyrfalcon is called *Falco rusticolus rusticolus*.

The above designations of race were originally based solely on examples that had been shot. Many of these shootings took place during the migratory season and thus do not provide a complete picture of where the birds actually originate from.



Top picture: The ptarmigan on Iceland is the gyrfalcon's preferred prey.
Bottom picture: Iceland gyrfalcon kills a pheasant by biting its neck



The name gyrfalcon

FALCO RUSTICOLUS - THE GYRFALCON

Birds of prey, or raptors, that are trained by falconers are often generally referred to as gyrfalcons, almost irrespective of which species they actually represent.

In scientific terms, there is only one species, which is correctly designated *Falco rusticolus*. This species is found more or less anywhere in the northern hemisphere, but is centred in the low Arctic zone.

The gyrfalcon also has a historical name - Gyrfalcon in English and Gerfalk in German - a name that can be traced back to the distant past and is probably of Old Norse origin. Today the most common name is still Gyrfalcon.

Young Iceland gyrfalcon gliding ▲ *Adult Iceland gyrfalcon swoops down on a pheasant* ▶





Iceland gyrfalcon feeding chicks that are just 2 days old



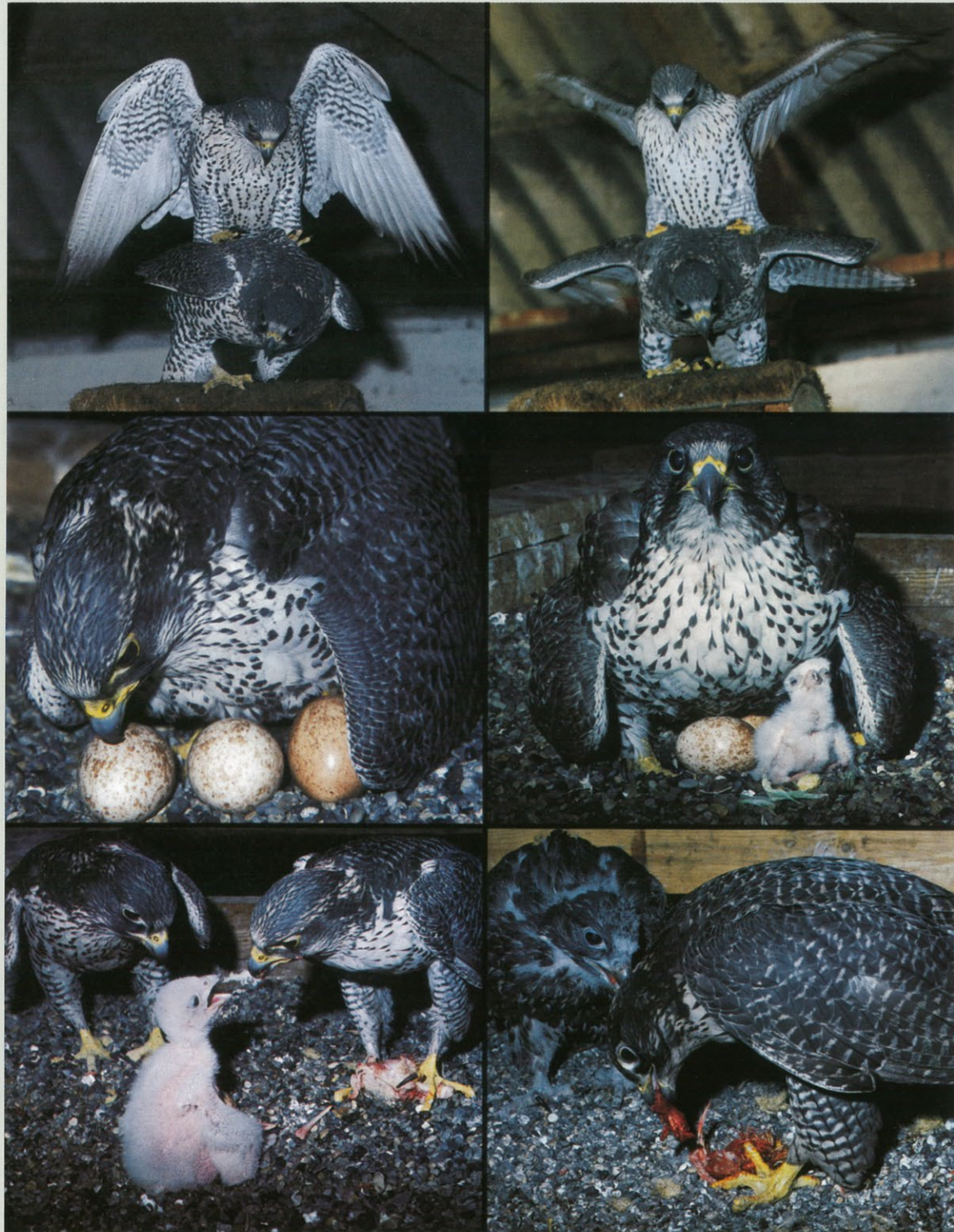
Greenland gyrfalcon feeding its young

My Gyrfalcon

THE FIRST DOCUMENTATION

I have had Iceland falcons for more than 40 years and have looked after 3 generations of the original pair. Two of the gyrfalcons have reached the ripe old age of 22 years and at the time of writing are still fit and healthy, although they have both lost their ability to fly. One of the gyrfalcons managed to breed at an age of 18 years. From a clutch of three eggs, one chick – a male – survived. The chick that emerged from the egg was surprisingly big in relation to the very small egg. It is a fact that old falcons lay very small eggs. I have not heard from any other source that gyrfalcons were able to live so long and were still able to breed at such an advanced age.

Over the years I have learnt a lot about the flying techniques of the gyrfalcon and have seen thousands of flights and hunting situations that have given me invaluable insight. From August until November I often have several young gyrfalcons that spend a lot of time every day honing their skills. It is not unusual for 5-6 young birds to be in the air almost every day, in addition to which there are adults that are trained throughout most of the year. When the falcons are at their most reproductive (between the ages of 6 and 15), there are often 3-4 young in a clutch, and the same applies to the wild falcons.



◀ The pictures show the Iceland gyrfalcon:
Mating, brooding and feeding



Four Iceland gyrfalcon chicks in the nest. This is the third generation of chicks at Eagle World

Four Iceland gyrfalcon chicks

- DESCENDENTS OF THE THIRD GENERATION 2008

The fact that my gyrfalcons had been bred in my care for a number of years since 1970 attracted a great deal of attention from biologists and falconers prior to an international breakthrough for breeding birds of prey in captivity.

My results were verified with numerous photographs and different situations of the gyrfalcons' breeding activity that had not previously been seen. Gyrfalcons had only bred in such a way at 2 other places in the world at that time in the 1970s: in Germany and in the USA. My results with the ICELAND FALCON were probably unique – and certainly the first of their kind.

Along with just a handful of others, I was one of the pioneers 40 years ago who defined a new agenda for a future legitimisation of the fact that birds of prey and human beings not only have a strong bond from the past, but will continue to do so in future generations.



Iceland gyrfalcon – the biggest and strongest falcon in the world

Present falcons

IN CONTEMPORARY OIL AND ENERGY CRISES

I can also confirm that the concept of “present falcons” remains alive and well right up to the present day, thanks to an incident in which I was personally involved. The Greenland falcon, around which the case revolves, was assigned an important role in foreign policy by former Minister of Foreign Affairs K.B. Andersen. The falcon from Greenland ended up actually rescuing Denmark from a serious energy crisis in which a ban on driving on Sundays had already been imposed as a result of shortages of fuel.

As a falconer and falcon specialist, I was contacted by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which requested my assistance in connection with the organisation and planning of a forthcoming falcon mission whose job it was to give the Saudi Arabian king a gift of a falcon from Greenland. Owing to the complexities concerning conservation rules, I ended up giving one of my own gyrfalcons to the king in person. The government was behind this important diplomatic mission, which helped to establish relations between Denmark and Saudi Arabia, as later evidenced by a visit by our Queen and Prince Consort, where the Saudi Arabian king received a polar bear fur from Greenland as a gift.

Chief falcon-master C. C. Gram, 1763

”Such that the Iceland falcons, which have hitherto been so famous throughout the world and which it has also been a special prerogative of His Majesty ahead of all other powers to be able to make a present hereof to emperors, kings and princes, do not become too commonplace ...”



The desert king

WITH MY BOOK "BIRDS OF PREY IN EUROPE"

Audience with King Khaled Ben Abdulaziz of Saudi Arabia on 24 September 1979 at His Royal Highness' summer residence in Geneva.



My daughter Edith and representatives from the Saudi Arabian embassy in Copenhagen were present. It was in connection with this event that I gave the king one of my Iceland gyrfalcons. However, the king was most interested in my latest book, "BIRDS OF PREY IN EUROPE". His Royal Highness had many other fine gyrfalcons, so it was my book that received the greatest attention. The chapter on falcons in particular caught the king's eye and HRH asked me questions about every picture, where the falcons lived and what they hunted.

It was in all likelihood my book and my knowledge of the falcons that were the reasons why I was invited to take part in the king's falconry expeditions, a privilege that only a very few westerners have enjoyed. The falcon hunts were of course magnificent and featured the best falcons. They all took place in a very remote region of the Saudi Arabian desert.

The king's enthusiasm for my gyrfalcon was so great that I was invited to take part in a falcon hunt as a personal guest on three occasions with the privilege of being the king's adviser as falconer and falcon specialist. The conditions of care and health were themes that were followed with particular interest.



My experiences in the desert in the king's camp rekindled stories of One Thousand and One Nights in the company of probably the last desert king who preferred to live his life in the magnificent desert and go hunting with his falcons.

◀ *Top picture: Geneva. Middle picture: The king's camp. Bottom picture: My Iceland gyrfalcon in flight over the steppes.*





Ørnereservatet

KNOWLEDGE AND INFORMATION

A world centre for information about birds of prey, their nature and cultural history
– breeding and behaviour biology.

Founded in 1979 by Frank Wenzel.

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