

GYRFALCON TRAPPERS IN THE RUSSIAN ARCTIC IN THE 13TH–18TH CENTURIES

JEVGENI SHERGALIN

*Falconry Heritage Trust, P.O. Box 19,
Carmarthen SA33 5YL, Wales, UK. E-mail: fht@falcons.co.uk*

ABSTRACT.—During a 500-year period from the 13th-18th Centuries, the Gyrfalcon (*Falco rusticolus*) population in the European Russian North was under constant trapping pressure. The magnitude of this long-term and large-scale withdrawal is important for understanding the modern concept of sustainable use, especially under the modern threat of poaching and smuggling. For the last 20 years, due to the opening of state borders and access to old archives, we have received new data on the scale and details of this Gyrfalcon trapping.

At the beginning of the 17th Century, the Dvina Gyrfalcon trappers (pomytchiki) sent two ships each year: one of the them was directed to the Zimniy coast and thence to the Terskiy coast, while the other went to Gavrilov, Kharlov, Pasov sites, Sem' Ostrovov (Seven Islands), and Kildin Island. This trapping took place from 12–23 June until 6–17 December. In 1723, four groups of pomytchiki (vatagas) were sent. Ships with food for each vataga cost at least 50 roubles. In 1734, Dvinskoe zemstvo (administrative authorities) annually sent 40 trappers to the Terskiy coast and Kanin. Twenty people were used to ship the birds, and all of this cost at least 700 roubles. In 1729, on the Dvina River there were 19 yards of Gyrfalcon trappers. In Arkhangel North, the peasants of Kuroostrovskiy, Uhtostrovskiy, Bogoyavlenskiy, and Troitskoi volost of the Dvina area, along with peasants from Pinega, were involved in trapping. Lower-ranked officers of Archangel and soldiers of Pustostrov Ostrog also trapped Gyrfalcons. From 50 to 100 Gyrfalcons were delivered to Moscow annually, the highest numbers delivered during the reign of Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich Romanov (1645–1676). The current number of Gyrfalcons occurring from Kola Peninsula to the south of Yamal is estimated at about 100 pairs, although the size of the Gyrfalcon population there in the 17th Century is unknown. It is remarkable that both overtrapping and undertrapping were considered as non-fulfillment of obligations by pomytchiki. The surviving place names are evidence of the wide scale and popularity of falcon trappers in the Russian arctic: for example there are (in translation) two Falcon Capes, Falcon Nose, two Falcon Mountains, Falcon Bay, Falconers' Village in Mezen R. Mouth and others. Maloe Zalesie village was formerly called Krechatinskaya and completely consisted of Gyrfalcon trappers. The toponymes, connected to falconry in areas south of Pomorie, are analyzed in the work of A.V. Kuznetsov, published in 2010. The Gyrfalcon's wings are on the coat of arms of Arkhangelsk Region. Details and ways of trapping, obligations, and benefits of trappers, composition of vatagas, and food for birds during travel are reported. *Received 28 February 2011, accepted 24 May 2011.*

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Key words: Gyrfalcon, Russia, Arctic, Siberia, falconers, trappers, pomytchiki.

FOR 500 YEARS FROM THE 13TH–18TH CENTURIES, the Gyrfalcon (*Falcon rusticolus*) population in northern European Russia was under constant trapping pressure (Dementiev 1935, 1951). New information on the scale and details of this Gyrfalcon trapping have become available over the last 20 years due to the opening of state borders (Potapov and Sale 2005) and access to old archives (Barsukov 1894, Fedorov and Malov 2005, Flint and Sorokin 1999, Okladnikov 1996, 1997, Smirnov 1912). The magnitude of this long-term and large-scale harvest is important for understanding the modern concept of sustainable use, especially under the modern threat of smuggling and poaching.

Trapping of falcons in the north by professional trappers named “pomytchiki” began many centuries ago, at least since the late 13th Century. The Great Prince Andrei Alekseevich received Gyrfalcons from Zavolochie between 1294 and 1304. Zavolochie was the old name of the region northeast of Lake Onega, north of Beloe Lake, and the rivers Onega, Severnaya Dvina, Mezen, and Pechora. To get a release from taxes and fees, the Tarkhan Deeds were given to Pechora falconers by Ivan Danilovich Kalita (1288–1340). In the 14th Century, the falconers bagged falcons in Zavolochie, Pechora, Ural, near Perm, even on Novaya Zemlya, and mainly near the White Sea. Before the liquidation of Novgorod independence, the shipment of falcons by falconers in Dvina Land was regulated by Great Novgorod.

In the 16th Century, the regular harvest of live Gyrfalcons in northern European Russia was organized by the local population for use by Tsars in Moscow. This catch was considered to be a state duty (“tyaglo”), and was an obligation required of the pomytchiki. An average of 100 Gyrfalcons per year were brought from Dvina Land to Moscow, though the number was reduced to 50 birds per year in the recess-

sion at the beginning of the 17th Century. According to Dementiev (1951), the pomytchiki received a special reward of money and gifts for the delivery of extra birds beyond the required quantity. Fedorov and Malov (2005), however, said that the delivery of either greater or fewer birds than the norm was banned and a punishable offence. The highest numbers of birds were delivered during the reign of Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich Romanov (1645–1676).

At the beginning of the 17th Century, the Gyrfalcon trappers of Dvina sent two ships each year: one of them was directed to the Zimniy coast and thence to the Terskiy coast (southeast coast of the Kola Peninsula), while the other went to Gavrilov, Kharlov, Pasov sites, Sem’ Ostrovov (Seven Islands), and Kildin Island. This trapping took place from 12–23 June until 6–17 December. Details of these trips appear occasionally in the literature. For example, in 1723, four teams (“vatagas”) of pomytchiki were sent. Ships with food for each vataga cost at least 50 roubles. In 1734, Dvinskoe zemstvo (administrative authorities) annually sent 40 trappers to the Terskiy coast and Kanin. Twenty people were used to ship the birds, and all of this cost at least 700 roubles. In 1729, on the Dvina River there were 19 Gyrfalcon trappers’ yards. In Arkhangel North, the peasants of Kuroostrovskiy, Uhtostrovskiy, Bogoyavlenskii, and Troitskoi volost (administrative units in tsarist Russia) of the Dvina area, along with peasants from Pinega, were involved in trapping. The Russian Army was involved in trapping too—records show that lower-ranked officers of Archangel and soldiers of Pustostrov Ostrog (Fortress) also trapped Gyrfalcons. Pomytchiki worked in teams (“vatagi”) of 20–40 men with an “ataman” in charge. Sometimes teams hired other people (“kormlenshchiki”). The contract (“oklad”) for each team was three Gyrfalcons per year. According to the contract, pomytchiki had no right to

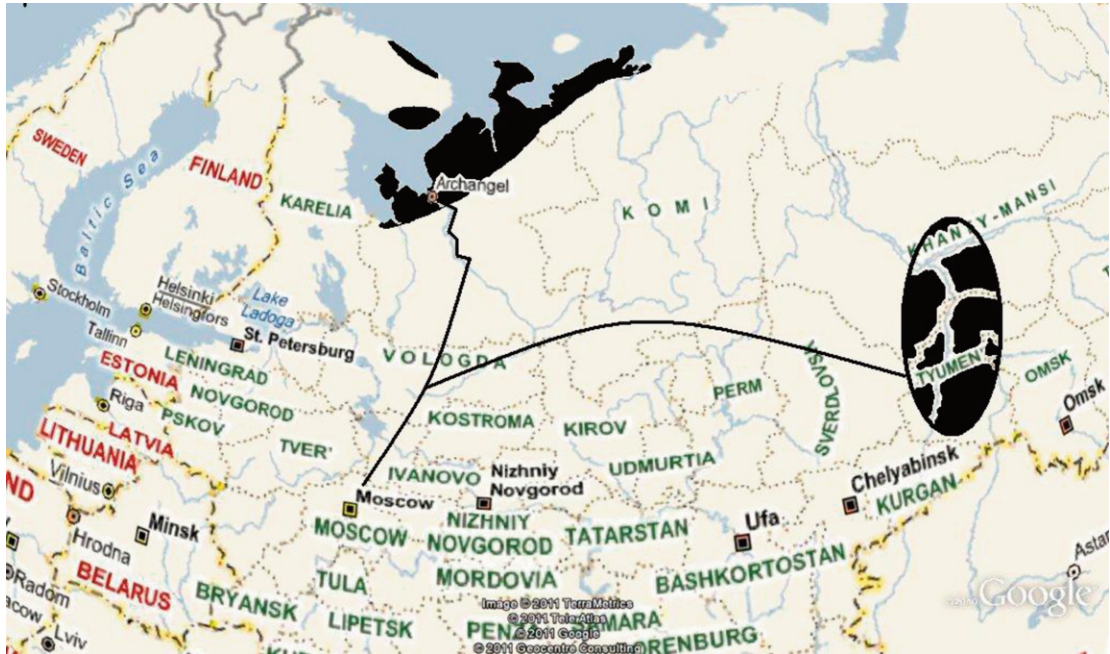


Figure 1. Trapping areas in the North of European Russia (where trapping zones are relatively well-known) and in the Tyumen region of Siberia, where zone borders are estimated because no exact information exists on the actual trapping area. Black lines show the main routes of bird traffic to Moscow.

give, sell, or pass over any extra Gyrfalcons captured. All falcons were considered to be the property of the Tsar. Pomytchiki also could not fish if it might harm their falcon trapping. Besides professional pomytchiki, Gyrfalcons were delivered to Moscow by other people too, including Nenets people from the North, soldiers from Kola, and others.

Birds were transported with the greatest care on special sledges from Kholmogory, a small village not far from the Mezen River mouth, and Vologda. Enclosed sledges were upholstered on the inside with thick felt and bast mats (made from the bark fiber of linden or birch trees), or birds were kept in special upholstered boxes fixed to the sledge. They were fed reindeer meat bought for them. Usually not more than 3–4 birds were allocated to one sledge. Gyrfalcons were transported

slowly; sledges or boxes were lifted over obstacles, with all precautions available to avoid any disturbance to the birds or damage to their feathers.

Local authorities in the “Uezds” (administrative units in Tsarist Russia) were obliged to provide transport and money for birds’ food. The pomytchiki had a special deed with a red seal that listed their privileges, which included the right to receive food money, transport vehicles, and be released from all local taxes and dues. These privileges and orders remained until the end of the 17th Century and into the 18th Century (Dementiev 1951). There are many written records of the pomytchiki fighting to save their privileges after the death of the tsar Alexei Mikhailovich during the reign of several of the subsequent tsars and tsarinas (Barsukov 1894, Smirnov 1912).



Figure 2. The Gyrfalcon trapper from Severnaya Dvina [Northern Dvina] River. Drawing by Vadim Gorbatov. Courtesy of Artist.



Figure 3. Transportation of trapped falcons from Northern European Russia to Moscow. Drawing by Nikolai Samokish (1860–1944).

Figure 4. Gyrfalcon trapping in Northern European Russia. Drawing of Vadim Gorbatov. Courtesy of Artist.



Trappers of Gyrfalcons existed in Kazan, Perm Region and in Siberia. Siberian Gyrfalcons were transported by the following route: Tyumen-Turinskiy Ostrog-Verkhoturie-Sol'-Kamennaya-Kai-Gorodok, Sol'-Vychevodskaya, Ustyug Velikiy-Tot'ma-Vologda-Yaroslavl-Pereslavl-Zalesskiy-Moscow (Dementiev 1951) (see map).

Salaries of pomytchiki in Siberia were much lower than salaries of trappers in Dvina and Pechora regions. The distance of trapping areas from Moscow for northern birds and Siberian falcons was about 1300–1500 km. According to the inventory of 1746, the total number of all pomytchiki was 868. This type of hunting and falconry as a sport declined during the reign of the Ekaterina II.

The surviving place names in this region are evidence of the wide scale and popularity of falcon trappers in the Russian Arctic: for example there are (in translation) two Falcon Capes, Falcon Nose, two Falcon Mountains, Falcon Bay, Falconers' Village in Mezen River mouth and others. Maloe Zalesie village was formerly called Krechatinskaya (Krechet means Gyrfalcon in Russian) and consisted solely of Gyrfalcon trappers. The toponymes connected to falconry in areas south of Pomorie were analyzed in the work of Kuznetsov (2010). The Gyrfalcon's wings are on the coat of arms of Arkhangelsk Region.

The first Russian Nature Reserve was established especially for the protection of Gyrfalcon breeding sites on the Seven Islands, on the northern shore of the Kola Peninsula. They still breed there today. The current number of Gyrfalcons occurring from Kola Peninsula to the south of Yamal is estimated at about 100 pairs (Ganusevich 2001), although the size of the Gyrfalcon population there in the 17th Century is unknown.

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