

# FIELD NOTES

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## Spotless Robin

*Jeffrey Boone Miller*

After a multi-year, off-and-on quest, I finally observed an American Robin in New England that had no white at all on its tail feathers. The sighting occurred on March 21, 2005, in Mount Auburn Cemetery, Watertown, MA.


I began looking for “spotless” robins in the East because I grew up in the state of Washington where essentially none of the robins have white spots on their tails. (I also needed something to do when no other birds were around.)

I estimate that I have carefully looked at well over 1000 (though less than 10,000) robins during the past few years without previously finding a “spotless” one.

Tail spotting is quite variable, ranging from only a narrow crescent on the outermost feathers to larger areas of white on the ends of the three outermost feathers on each side. Often, the spots are visible only in flight. Robins with missing feathers or juveniles occasionally presented problems, but the bird I observed at Mount Auburn was a bright adult male with a full complement of tail feathers.

In the only paper I know of that addresses the frequency of “spotless” robins in the East, an observer found only one out of 162 American Robins trapped in Pennsylvania to be without white on the tail feathers. (Wood, H.B. 1945. The Robin does not Change its Tail Spots, *Auk* 62: 141-42.) This paper also showed that the spotting pattern on each individual is stable through successive molts.

Given the normal variability in tail spotting, one should probably suspect that the spotless American Robin I observed was a native eastern bird with an outlier phenotype. One could, however, also consider the possibility that it was a vagrant from the west coast. Varied Thrushes quite often make appearances in New England, so why not a western American Robin?

If anyone knows of or has made additional observations in this area, please contact the author at [miller@bbri.org](mailto:miller@bbri.org). 

## “Owl, Duck!”

*Glenn Williams*

On a late-October afternoon in 1999, I made the long trek down the beach and out to the tip of Griswold Point in Old Lyme, Connecticut, in hopes of seeing my then life Gyrfalcon – a white morph, no less. Already on the point was Dave Provencher, who found this bird of birds a day or two earlier. Though the day was bright, the fading sun and cold front found me underdressed. Dave remarked that the mouth of

the Connecticut River is the coldest place in Connecticut when the north winds blow down the river valley.

The Gyrfalcon never appeared, but several interesting species were noted — Forster’s Terns, a Snow Bunting, a Snow Goose, a few migrating hawks, etc. — summer birds leaving with the winter birds at their tails. Two American Bitterns appeared over the river at high altitude, migrating southwest. Dave and I were surprised to see an occasional bat winging it west down the beach, over the marsh, and across the river mouth in what would still be considered daylight. Though they appeared to be of the larger variety, we had no idea what species they were. (I still await “Bats in Flight.”) I enjoyed the incongruity of bats and the brisk northwest winds that had me shivering in my thin coat. As dusk approached and the sky turned salmon, a Short-eared Owl rose, bounded over Great Island marsh, and dropped back down out of view. Shortly thereafter, it or another appeared again, this time rising high and heading southwest in apparent migratory flight. A bat approached from the rear and overtook the owl. The much smaller mammal made several quick and aggressive swoops, appearing to make contact with the hapless Short-eared, before flitting past it.

I have been unable to find any information on “bat mobbing” or observe this phenomenon again. Though a number of bats end up as pellets, I did not realize that they expressed their rivalry in a manner similar to their passerine comrades. I finally did get to see my first Gyrfalcon a year later. It was being harassed by a Peregrine. No bats in sight. 🦅



GYRFALCON BY GEORGE C. WEST