

October's puzzler sets a precedent by entering an arena where taxonomic uncertainty complicates identification. The picture shows a dark and bulky bird with a slightly hooked beak, broad, pointed wings, and a conspicuous flash of white in the primaries. Although the bulk and breadth of the wings are vaguely suggestive of a raptor, the bill length and shape are more reminiscent of a gull. Since no North American raptor or gull exhibits this distinctive wing shape in combination with extensive white in the primaries, the mystery bird must be a jaeger or skua, a conclusion further supported by the hooked bill. Adult jaegers are uniformly dark on the back in breeding plumage. In winter plumage and as immatures, their uppertail coverts and backs are usually heavily barred with gray, white, or buff. The absence of barring on the uppertail coverts and the presence of streaking and spotting, not barring, on the back, in conjunction with thick wings, a bull neck, and a short, stubby tail remove jaegers as possibilities.

Having established that the mystery bird is a skua does not lessen the task of identifying the species. Two skuas regularly occur in Massachusetts pelagic waters—Great Skua (*Catharacta skua*) and South Polar Skua (*C. maccormicki*). Separating these species at sea is often difficult under the best of circumstances, but a photograph of good quality often simplifies the task. The pictured skua clearly displays the characteristics of a Great Skua. Most notable are the pale and dark—actually gold and rufous—streaks and spots on the back, a prominently streaked nape, and the appearance of a dark cap on the head. The polymorphic South Polar Skua in its intermediate and dark morphs would appear more uniform in dorsal coloration, would be unlikely to exhibit such a dark cap, and would possess a more uniform and unstreaked nape, if a pale nape were to show at all. A light morph South Polar Skua would appear unmistakably light below with a pale head, contrasting with a dark and unmarked back.

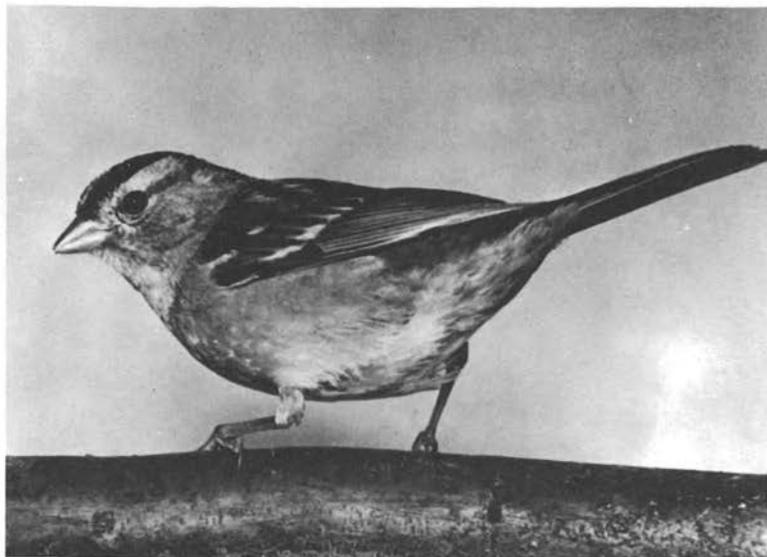
But the problem does not end here. The Great Skua is a polytypic species with breeding populations in both the northern and southern hemispheres. The 1983 A.O.U. Check-list recognizes two southern races of *C. skua*, *antarctica* and *lonnbergi*, and a third species, the Chilean Skua (*C. chilensis*). The various forms of the Great Skua are distinct enough to pose identification and taxonomic difficulties in areas where the races overlap. However, the North Atlantic breeding race is the only form of Great Skua to have been recorded in United States waters. The photo of this Great Skua was taken near a breeding colony at Punta Tombo, Chubut, Argentina, and hence, is of the form *antarctica*.



Photo by Christopher W. Leahy, courtesy of MAS

AT A GLANCE

Photo by M. G. Smith, courtesy of MAS



Can you identify this bird?

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