

SOME COMMENTS ON IDENTIFYING JAEGERS

by Thomas H. Davis, Woodhaven N. Y.

For reasons not yet clear, Cox's Ledge, located 40 miles ESE of Montauk Point, N.Y., is a very productive place to see jaegers from mid to late September (and later?). Some counts obtained here during this period have been 16 (9-23-72), 17 (9-22-73), 34 (9-11-71), and 50 (9-16-73). Pomarine Jaegers outnumber Parasitics by over 2 to 1 at the Ledge, although Parasitic is the predominant species by far along Long Island beaches at this season.

A comprehensive report on all Cox's Ledge observations is planned for future publication. What I aim to note here are a few comments on jaeger identification, based on the large series of individuals I have seen at Cox's Ledge. These comments are meant to amplify statements contained in current popular field guides.

The length and appearance of the extended rectrices of adult Pomarine Jaegers: birds figured in the Peterson and Robbin's field guides appear to measure about 2-3 inches in this respect. However, lengths of 5-6 inches (or longer?) are not at all uncommon. Also, the twist of these feathers is not always apparent, giving the appearance of long, thin tail streamers. When, with a group of experienced birders, I first noted one of these extreme individuals, we were nearly duped into thinking it a Long-tailed, notwithstanding any size or flight differences between these two species.

The amount of white in the primaries: Pomarine and Parasitic Jaegers in all plumages show a large flash of grayish white in the primaries seen from below. From above, the amount of white seen is highly indicative of the species. On the average, 5 primary shafts are white in Parasitics, and about 9 in Pominines.* Thus, Parasitic Jaegers show a small white flash at close distances, while the Pomarine's larger amount of white is perceptible at much greater distances. Extreme amounts of white showing in the wings of several dark-phased Pominines gave them a decidedly Skua-like appearance. For example, an individual studied on September 23, 1972 with Peter Alden, Michel Kleinbaum, Benjamin and Joanne Trimble, et al., was seen harassing some gulls at a distance of about 100 yards. The almost solid core of white on the upper primaries contrasting with the dark plumage, plus the lack of extended rectrices puzzled us greatly. What convinced us that it was merely a Pomarine Jaeger was the comparison of its body size to the Herring Gull it chased.

It is quite clear to me that familiarity with jaegers comes only from constant experience seeing them. Great care should be exercised when considering the identity of any Stercorariid as Long-tailed Jaeger or Skua, two extremely rare birds in our region.

* The Peterson Field Guides show the average amount of white in the wings quite accurately. Eckelberry's drawings in the Audubon Water Bird Guide are not only accurate, but also show a wider spectrum of plumages. All of Singer's jaegers in Robbin's Birds of North America are shown with far too much white in their wings.

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NEW WORLD VULTURES

The vultures of the New World are only distantly related to the other Falconiformes (kites, hawks, eagles, falcons, etc.) and different from them in many ways:

The hind toe is non-functional, quite small, and elevated on the leg above the level of the other toes. The trachea is unspecialized and lacks a syrinx, so that the vulture is necessarily voiceless, except for grunting or hissing noises. The olfactory chamber is large, and indeed certain species have a keen sense of smell, which assists them in locating carrion. Sexes are similar in size, or else the male is larger. (Among most hawks, particularly the more aggressive species, the female is the larger bird.)

Hawks are, in general, solitary by nature, but vultures are quite social. Vultures build no nest, and they feed their young by regurgitation. When asleep, vultures squat like chickens, resting the breast on the feet. They seldom hide the head in the scapulars, although they may pull it back into the neck ruff while sleeping.

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