SKUA IDENTIFICATION

by Simon Perkins

Thus far, the only two skua species that have been positively identified in the North Atlantic are Great Skua *(Catharacta skua)* and South Polar Skua *(C. macormickii)*. These two species present one of the more difficult identification problems of any species pair. The reasons relate, in part, to their oceanic habits and to the fact that even to seagoers skuas rarely offer themselves to close scrutiny. Below, I review methods by which Great and South Polar skuas may be separated at sea, and report on two recent skua sightings in New England waters.

Great Skua nests from April to August in the British Isles and Iceland and winters throughout the North Atlantic. South Polar Skua nests throughout coastal Antarctica from September to March and winters in our summer, primarily north of the equator in the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. Therefore, most skuas that occur in New England waters in winter are probably Greats, while those in summer are probably South Polars. During spring and autumn, at a time when one species is returning *to* its breeding ground as the other is returning *from* its breeding grounds, the potential is greatest for seeing either skua species, and birders may be faced with the problem of distinguishing between the two.

South Polar Skua is a polymorphic species that exhibits at least three distinct morphs, while Great Skua possesses only one known color morph. Light morph South Polar Skuas are essentially unmistakable being pale gray from the head and nape through the underparts. The darker morphs of South Polar more closely resemble the wholly brown plumage of the Great Skua, with the darkest morph being most similar. The only completely diagnostic difference between dark South Polar Skuas and Great Skuas is the appearance of their mantles (the area including the scapulars and upper back). In an adult Great Skua the mantle is variably, but always conspicuously, streaked with yellowish buff. The mantle feathers on an immature Great Skua are boldly margined with pale buff, and these pale margins impart a scalloped or mottled appearance. In comparison, the mantle of a South Polar Skua of any age or morph is relatively dark and uniform. Balch (Balch 1981) points out that in light or intermediate morph South Polars, the dark mantle contrasts with a relatively paler nape, and he claims that this contrast is diagnostic.

Other differences often cited in the literature include a more extensive area of white in the outer wing of the Great Skua, a larger average bill size in the Great, and a body plumage that tends to appear more reddish brown in the Great Skua versus a colder, gray brown in the South Polar Skua. Observers should bear in mind, however, that these three characters are subject to vagaries of light

and molt, and should be used with caution.

At least two times in the fall of 1991, birders reported Great Skua sightings in New England waters. On a boat trip to Cashes Ledge in the Gulf of Maine, September 7 and 8, 1991, one adult Great Skua was identified and two or three other dark skuas were seen. On October 31, during a coastal storm at First Encounter Beach in Eastham, three or four additional Great Skuas were identified from an estimated twelve skuas sighted that morning (see page 84 for a description of the birds seen during the coastal storm).

Many observers on the Cashes Ledge trip agreed that all the skuas sighted that day appeared wholly warm brown. But most of the skuas remained sufficiently far from our boat that conclusive identification was not possible. We observed the one identified Great Skua from two to three hundred yards through binoculars, and only then were its diagnostic mantle streaks visible.

In Eastham, the Great Skuas were also identified on the basis on mantle streaks. Birders observed these skuas from distances of 150 to 250 yards through fifteen to twenty power spotting scopes. All other skuas either were too distant or failed to provide views adequate for making positive identifications.

The most intriguing sighting in Eastham involved three skuas that landed on the sand flats at a distance of roughly 150 yards. Two of these birds showed bold mantle streaks and were thus recognizable as adult Great Skuas. The third bird, however, lacked any visible dorsal markings and appeared uniformly blackish brown. Since this individual appeared different from, yet associated closely with, the two Great Skuas, observers wondered if the bird may have been a Great Skua in immature plumage. However, the apparent lack of any dorsal markings remained puzzling. A bird at the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University, labeled as a juvenile Great Skua and collected in November, still retains very broad pale feather edges despite a moderate amount of feather wear on the mantle. Therefore, this explanation seems implausible when applied to the Eastham bird observed in October. The bird best fits the description of a dark morph South Polar Skua, but, like many skuas, it remains unidentified.

In summary, assessing the appearance of the mantle is the only definitive way of separating Great Skua from dark morph South Polar Skua. Other characters are highly variable, and they must be used with extreme caution. Great Skuas tend to be more readily identifiable at greater distances due to their relatively conspicuous mantle markings. Dark morph South Polar Skuas must be seen more closely in order to determine that an observer's failure to detect streaking, scalloping, or mottling on the mantle is actually due to a lack of such markings.

There is still much to learn about the precise status of skua species in the western North Atlantic, and as we begin to fill in the picture, birders should remain very conservative in their approach to skua identification.

Reference and Suggested Additional Reading

Balch, L.G. 1981. Identifying Skuas in the ABA Area, *Birding* 13:190-201

Devillers, Pierre. 1977. The Skuas of the North Pacific Coast, *Auk* 94: 417-429.

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The Audubon Society of New Hampshire (ASNH) is seeking qualified volunteers to assist with a monitoring program in the White Mountain National Forest (WMNF). The program includes surveys of habitat and breeding activity, Whip-poor-will populations, high-elevation birds, and wetlands wildlife. Prospective volunteers should be experienced in the identification of northern birds by sight and sound, in excellent physical condition, and available during June and early July. For further information, please contact: WMNF Surveys, ASNH Wildlife Department, P. O. Box 528-B, Concord, NH 03301. Telephone: 603-224-9909.