

## AT A GLANCE

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December 2000



*Photograph by David M. Larson*

The final mystery species of year 2000 should at once be recognizable as a waterbird, possibly a gull or jaeger, based upon its relatively long, slim wings, apparently webbed feet — an impression created by the club-ended appearance of the partially closed webbed toes — and the fact that the bird is obviously over water! A closer examination reveals distinctly pale or whitish outer primary shafts on the bird's left upper wing surface, along with a diffuse pale patch on the undersurface of the bird's right wing. These features are key to unraveling the identity of this month's identification challenge.

Assuming that the most likely candidates for the bird in the photograph are either a gull or jaeger of some kind, the first step in identifying the mystery bird is to determine in which group it belongs. Fortunately, this is not a difficult task because the photograph clearly reveals the presence of heavily barred sides and flanks, distinctly checkered underwing linings, whitish or pale shafts to the outer primary feathers, and a distinct pale patch on the underside of the wing. These features are all quintessential characteristics of jaegers that are virtually unshared by any species of gull. In addition, immature gulls, which could appear as dusky underneath as the mystery bird, would ordinarily show more contrast in the primary/secondary pattern on the upper wing, would be unlikely to exhibit such strikingly light primary shafts,

and would never have a pale flash of white on the under-wing. With these differences in mind, it is safe to assume that the bird in the photograph is a jaeger.

Knowing that the bird is a jaeger — a group of birds notoriously difficult to identify — it is important to make some further assessments about the bird in the picture before attempting to determine to which species it belongs. Most important is to place the bird in an age class (i.e., juvenile/immature or adult) and to determine if possible whether the bird is a dark morph or a light morph, a task not always easy in a group of birds with so many complicated plumages. Fortunately the pictured bird clearly shows features that make these choices fairly straightforward. The presence of heavily checkered and barred underwing coverts, heavily barred flanks, and an indication of pale tips on the upperwing coverts all indicate that the bird is not an adult. Indeed, the prominence of these features suggests that the bird is a juvenile and not a bird more than a year old. The fact that the upper belly is pale in contrast to a somewhat uniform chest indicates that the bird is a light morph, a characteristic that would be even more obvious if the bird were slightly older. A dark morph jaeger would appear more uniformly dark below and would generally exhibit less conspicuous flank barring.

Now that it has been established that the pictured jaeger is a light morph juvenile, the identification task is rendered considerably easier. Especially helpful at this point is to note that only two of the outer primary shafts appear to be flashing white. In addition, the barring on the flanks and undertail coverts is sharp and distinct. These features, in combination with the unpatterned breast and pale upper belly, clearly point to Long-tailed Jaeger (*Stercorarius longicaudus*) in juvenile plumage. Both Parasitic and Pomarine Jaegers can be eliminated by their more extensive white primary shafts, less sharply defined flank and undertail barring, more extensive underwing patches, and broader wings.

In Massachusetts waters, Long-tailed Jaegers are rare offshore migrants along the outer continental shelf. Records suggest that they are most frequent in late May and early June, and then again from late August through mid-September. David Larson captured the pictured juvenile Long-tailed Jaeger on southern Georges Bank in late August by using a digital camera. 🐦

Wayne R. Petersen



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Photograph by Wayne R. Petersen



Can you identify this bird?

Identification will be discussed in next issue's AT A GLANCE.

Dear Birders Exchange,

I am contributing \$50 to help other bird lovers. I am a 10 year old birder and I have given to this fund because I get alot of pleasure out of birding and I know many more people could with the right equipment.

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David Allen



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Betty Petersen  
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