

**STATUS OF THE LONG-TAILED JAEGER (*STERCORARIUS
LONGICAUDUS*) IN THE SOUTH ATLANTIC BIGHT,
AND RECENT DOCUMENTATION OF THE SPECIES'
OCCURRENCE**

William Post

Charleston Museum, 360 Meeting Street, Charleston, SC 29403

and

Nathan W. Dias

P.O. Box 3362, McClellanville, SC 29458

The eastern population of the Long-tailed Jaeger (*Stercorarius longicaudus*) migrates offshore along the coasts of Greenland and the Arctic islands of Canada in late July to wintering grounds in the South Atlantic. It usually travels singly, and is rarely within sight of shore (Wiley and Lee 1998). When its offshore migrations parallel the southeastern Atlantic Coast, the Long-tailed Jaeger occurs in deep waters near the outer Continental Shelf. In the region of the South Atlantic Bight, from South Carolina to northern Florida, the outer edge of the shelf is 150 km or more from the mainland, and is seldom visited by field researchers. Due primarily to paucity of pelagic data, the status of the Long-tailed Jaeger is poorly known in this region. Based on North Carolina occurrences however, it is possibly regular mid-May to early June and mid-July to late September (Lee and Booth 1979, Lee 1986, Lee 1995, Avendex 2009). Based on 3 sight reports, Post and Gauthreaux (1989) placed the Long-tailed Jaeger on the provisional list of South Carolina birds. Subsequently, McNair and Post (1993) questioned the validity of 2 of the sight reports.

Here, we provide information on the first specimen collected in South Carolina. Based on this record, a recent photographic record, and a reevaluation of earlier sight reports, we propose that the species' status in South Carolina be revised to a casual summer-autumn vagrant within 8 km (5 miles) of the coast, and accidental in the Piedmont. To put this proposed status change in context, we also reviewed records of the jaeger from Georgia.

Methods

We attempted to identify all instances in which the Long-tailed Jaeger had been cited as occurring in South Carolina and Georgia. We reviewed all issues of the *Auk* and *Wilson Bulletin* to 1950, the year that these journals, for the most part, ceased publishing information about the distribution of birds in North America. We reviewed *Bird Lore*, *Audubon Field Notes* and its successors, through the 2009 issues of *North American Birds*. We also reviewed local ornithological journals that cover the Southeast (*Chat*, *Southeastern Naturalist*, and *Oriole*).

Results

On 20 August 2008, Dias encountered a disabled jaeger on the beach of Kiawah Island, Charleston County, South Carolina. The staff of the Kiawah Island Nature Center attempted, without success, to rehabilitate the bird. The specimen was salvaged, and found to be a juvenile male, dark morph Long-tailed Jaeger. It was prepared as a study skin, with left wing detached. A bursa was present. The bird was emaciated: it weighed 176 g (compared to weights of 218-320 g for 38 Greenland males; Wiley and Lee 1998). Its measurements were: flat wing length, 28.3 cm; wing span, 78.7 cm; left testis, 3 x 1 mm. This specimen was the first for South Carolina, and the second state occurrence documented by physical evidence.

From our literature review, we found 11 South Carolina reports, from 1896 to 2008 (Table 1). Wayne (1910) reported seeing a light morph on Caper's Island, 21 December 1896. In his ledger for that day, he only wrote, "Saw a Jaeger on Caper's Island." Later, in *Birds of South Carolina* (1910), he stated, without further comment, that the bird was a Long-tailed Jaeger. This species is accidental in the Carolinas in December: Out of 105 other reports made between 1897 and 2004, only one was made in December (Avendex 2009). Wayne kept detailed records of birds that he had positively identified, usually as specimens. The unusual date of his sighting, and his waiting 14 years before mentioning it, casts doubt on its validity. Another jaeger was said to have been seen by Wayne on Dewees Island on 3 February 1908 (Bragg 1912). Other than this latter report, the Long-tailed Jaeger has not been recorded in the Carolinas in February (Avendex 2009). As this sighting is not mentioned in any of Wayne's journals or notes, its credibility is questionable. Although these 2 historical reports were never verified (McNair and Post 1993), they were accepted by

Sprunt and Chamberlain (1949), and have been cited in the literature as 2 of only 3-4 winter or mid-winter records on the Atlantic Coast south of North Carolina (Lee 1987, Wiley and Lee 1998).

Sisson (1958) provided a detailed report of a Long-tailed Jaeger that she saw from the beach on Pawley's Island on 13 July 1958. The report was cited, and presumably accepted, by Burton (1970), and by Post and Gauthreaux (1989). However, McNair and Post (1993) noted that important details were missing in the note, particularly the age and color morph of the bird.

Five occurrences have been cited in the "Briefs for the Files" section of the Chat (Table 1). These 5 reports do not exclude the possibility that they were of Parasitic Jaegers (*Stercorarius parasiticus*), because the immature and basic plumages of *parasiticus* are often not distinguishable from corresponding plumages of *longicaudus* (Wiley and Lee 1998).

In addition to the Kiawah Island specimen reported here, one other occurrence has been documented by material evidence. This, the first confirmed South Carolina report, was a light-phase juvenile that Jim Flynn photographed on 28 August 2005 in the upper Piedmont, on Lake Hartwell, near Hartwell, Georgia. The jaeger flew into South Carolina on 31 August. The nearest South Carolina town was Holland Store, Anderson County, about 309 km (190 miles) from the Atlantic Ocean. The jaeger was last seen in the lake area on 12 September 2005. Outside the Florida peninsula, the inland occurrence of this species is "exceptional" (Wiley and Lee 1998).

Discussion

Lee (1989) discussed the difficulty of separating Parasitic and Long-tailed Jaegers, especially juveniles. Specimens of the 2 species have frequently been identified as each other (Lee 1989, Wiley and Lee 1998). For example, the Parasitic Jaeger collected on the Savannah River south of Augusta, Georgia, in 1936 (Murphey 1937) was later identified as a long-tailed (Lee 1989), and most recently, as a parasitic (Beaton et al. 2003). The Long-tailed Jaeger that struck a television tower near Raleigh, North Carolina, in 1960 was first identified as parasitic (Wray 1960), but later determined to be a long-tailed (Lee 1989). In Florida alone, 5 jaegers in museum collections that were identified as parasitic have turned out to be long-tailed (Stevenson and Anderson 1994).

The apparent rarity of the Long-tailed Jaeger in South Carolina and Georgia is undoubtedly an artifact of inadequate observer coverage. For the most part, this poor coverage is related to the great distance from the coast to the edge

of the Continental Shelf, where the largest concentrations of seabirds occur (Haney 1983). Off the North Carolina coast, in contrast, the Long-tailed Jaeger is classified as “a regular and rather common migrant” (Lee 1995), a reflection of the proximity of the outer Continental Shelf.

In summary, the Long-tailed Jaeger specimen described in this report represents the first one collected in South Carolina. As of 2010, South Carolina has 2 verifiable records: the 2008 onshore specimen reported here, and the jaeger photographed in the upper Piedmont in 2005. Similarly, Georgia has 2 verifiable reports, both based on photographs of single birds, one offshore in 2000, and one in the upper Piedmont in 2005, the same individual that was seen in South Carolina.

Literature Cited

- Avendex. 2009. [online] www.redshanksoftware.com. Version 1.7.6.
- Beaton, G., P.W. Sykes, Jr., and J.W. Parrish, Jr. 2003. Annotated checklist of Georgia birds. Georgia Ornithological Society, Occasional Publ. No. 14.
- Bragg, L.M. 1912. Birds of South Carolina supplement. Bulletin of the Charleston Museum 8:19-33.
- Burleigh, T.D. 1958. Georgia birds. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.
- Burton, E.M. 1970. Supplement to South Carolina bird life. South Carolina bird life, revised edition. University of South Carolina Press, Columbia. p. 573-642.
- Hallett, B. 2000. The anatomy of a jaeger record. Georgia Ornithological Society. GOShawk 27:4.
- Haney, J.C. 1983. Previously unrecorded and hypothetical species of seabirds on the continental shelf of Georgia. Oriole 48:21-32.
- _____, P. Brisse, D.R. Jacobson, M.W. Oberle, and J.M. Padgett. 1986. Annotated checklist of Georgia birds. Georgia Ornithological Society, Occasional Publ. No. 10.
- Lee, D.S. 1986. Seasonal distribution of marine birds in North Carolina waters, 1975-1986. American Birds 40:409-412.
- _____, 1987. December records of seabirds off North Carolina. Wilson Bull. 99:116-121.
- _____, 1989. Jaegers and skuas in the western North Atlantic: some historical misconceptions. American Birds 43:18-20.
- _____, 1995. Marine birds off the coast of North Carolina. Chat 59:113-171.
- _____, and J. Booth, Jr. 1979. Seasonal distribution of offshore and pelagic birds in North Carolina waters. American Birds 33:715-721.

- McNair, D.B., and W. Post. 1993. Supplement to status and distribution of South Carolina birds. Charleston Museum Ornithology Contrib. No. 8.
- Murphey, E.E. 1937. Observations on the bird life of the Middle Savannah Valley, 1890-1937. Contributions from the Charleston Museum IX.
- Post, W., and S.A. Gauthreaux, Jr. 1989. Status and distribution of South Carolina birds. Contributions from the Charleston Museum XVIII.
- Sciple, G.W., and H.W. Coolidge. 1963. Two unusual occurrences on the outer beaches of a barrier island. Oriole 18:31-32.
- Sisson, K. 1958. Long-tailed Jaeger at Pawley's Island. Chat 26:43-45.
- Sprunt, A., Jr., and E.B. Chamberlain. 1949. South Carolina bird life. Contributions from the Charleston Museum XI.
- Stevenson, H.M., and B.H. Anderson. 1994. The birdlife of Florida. University Presses of Florida, Gainesville.
- Wayne, A.T. 1910. Birds of South Carolina. Contributions from the Charleston Museum I.
- Wiley, R.H., and D.S. Lee. 1998. Long-tailed Jaeger (*Stercorarius longicaudus*). In: A. Poole and F. Gill, editors. The birds of North America, No. 365. Philadelphia, PA.
- Wray, D.L. 1960. Parasitic Jaeger at Raleigh TV tower. Chat 24:97-98

Table 1. Reports of the Long-tailed Jaeger from South Carolina and Georgia. All are of single birds, unless indicated.

| Date | Locality | Source | Details available? | Comments |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|--|
| 21 December 1896 | Capers Island, SC | Wayne 1910 | No | Light morph; midwinter reports not likely; probably a Parasitic Jaeger. |
| 3 February 1908 | Deweese Island, SC | Bragg 1912 | No | Reported as a Wayne record; not mentioned in Wayne's journals. |
| 2 April 1951 | 32 km NE of St. Mary's, GA | Haney et al. 1986 | No | Not mentioned by Burleigh (1958); not accepted (Beaton et al. 2003). |
| 13 July 1958 | Pawley's I., SC | Sisson 1958 | Yes | Inconclusive sight report (McNair and Post 1993). |
| 16 March 1963 | Little Cumberland I., GA | Seiple and Coolidge 1963 | Yes | Details suggest it was not a <i>longicaudus</i> (Beaton et al. 2003). |
| 6 June 1984 | 137 km east of Cumberland I., GA | Oriole 49:50 | No | Accepted (Beaton et al. 2003). |
| 4 June 1995 | Pawley's I., SC | Chat 60:73 | No | Not accepted by SCBRC ¹ (# 06-95-02). |
| 9 August 1997 | Myrtle Beach, SC | Chat 62:134 | No | Report not submitted to SCBRC. |
| 5 May 2000 | Murrell's Inlet, SC | Chat 64:155 | No | Report not submitted to SCBRC. |
| 17 June 2000 | 42 km off Murrell's Inlet | Chat 65:41 | No | Two reported; not accepted by SCBRC (# 06-00-03). |
| 28 August 2000 | Off Wassaw I., GA | Hallett 2000 | Yes | Accepted (photo); GCRC ² 2000-08; GOShawk 27:4. |
| 11 May 2002 | Murrell's Inlet, SC | SCBRC 06-00-03 | Yes | Report submitted to SCBRC. Not accepted. |
| 8 November 2003 | Murrell's Inlet, SC | Chat 68:51 | No | Late autumn occurrences are very rare. |
| 13 August - 12 September 2005 | Lake Hartwell GA, SC | Jim Flynn | Yes | Accepted (photo); GCRC # 2005-16. Adult, first GA inland record, third GA record; Oriole 70-71:72. |
| 20 August 2008 | Kiawah I., SC | This paper | Yes | Dark morph; salvaged, first onshore record. |

¹ SCBRC: South Carolina Bird Records Committee.² GCRC: Georgia Ornithological Society Checklist and Records Committee.