

# Pomarine Jaegers at Rocky River Park

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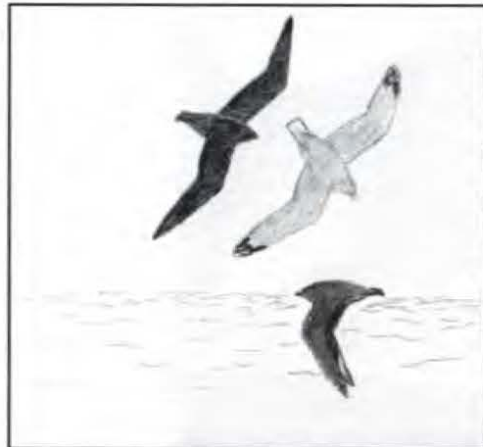
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Any occasion to see jaegers in Ohio is rare, but rarer still is a chance to study them at length. Fly-by jaegers often provoke little more than an increased heart rate and the opportunity to use the bold-face type on your sightings report, but lengthier observations can provide quite a bit more. Taking notes on behaviors such as hunting, roosting, and the birds' other interactions with their environments can heighten your enjoyment and might even add to our knowledge of these enigmatic birds.

A group of pomarine jaegers offshore from Rocky River Park (Cuyahoga County) provided me with one of these scarce opportunities. The first two birds were found by Gabe Leidy on 25 November 2001, and at least one was present through 7 December. During this period five individual jaegers were identified. They seemed to have accompanied an influx of gulls that appeared around Thanksgiving weekend. This concentration was unusually large for the area, totaling roughly 15,000 birds, approximately two-thirds of them Bonaparte's and one-third ring-billed gulls. The weather during the period mostly featured southwest winds, with only occasional shifts to the south or west. Temperatures were uncommonly mild for the time of year. After nearly two weeks the gull concentrations dwindled, and sightings of the jaegers seemed to do likewise.

Since comparatively little is known about the habits of these birds away from their breeding grounds, it is important for observers to take advantage of a prolonged stay by migrating jaegers. At such times, their interactions with gulls and waterfowl

fill such a unique niche that they are a continual source of interest, and a joy to study in the field. The Rocky River birds stayed far offshore for the most part, but occasionally approached closer, usually in search of gulls. This group of pomarines was observed harassing only ring-billed gulls, ignoring Bonaparte's and avoiding herring gulls. On more than one occasion herring gulls actually pursued the jaegers, as if to chase them off. Rarely, two birds would be seen cooperatively harassing a gull: one jaeger would "dog-fight" with the gull, the other chasing close at hand. When looking for a victim to pursue, the jaegers adopted a distinctive posture, in which the head was pointed straight



Two of the Rocky River, Cuyahoga County, pomarine jaegers harassing a ring-billed gull. Drawing by the author.

## POMARINE JAEGER

down and the legs dropped into the "down" position. The legs dangled there until the bird finally swooped after a gull. When the jaegers prepared to land they invariably performed the same distinctive gestures. When approaching the water they would begin to run their legs and flap their wings very daintily, in a manner reminiscent of a storm-petrel. When in the water the pomarines often associated with red-breasted mergansers, sitting either inside the flock or just on its periphery, perhaps to conceal themselves from nearby gulls. As night approached, the jaegers could occasionally be seen flying far offshore into open water before finally landing to roost for the night.

A later chance encounter with another pomarine jaeger at the Avon Lake Power Plant (Lorain County) on 8 December provided one more opportunity to study some of the behaviors of the species. This individual was much closer to shore than the group in Rocky River, allowing chances to examine it in more detail. Along with the usual harassment of gulls, this bird showed an interest in other food sources such as carrion. As

a dead fish floated past, the jaeger showed a keen interest, approached it, and began to feed. This food source perhaps enabled the bird to save energy, reducing the time spent in the air hunting. Hunting time consumed no more than two minutes of the hour and a half during which it was observed. When flying the jaeger exhibited one obvious characteristic not observed on the Rocky River birds: on long glides very near the water's surface, the wings were held in a deep arc, which I estimated to be roughly 90 degrees of a circle. The Avon Lake bird was aged as an immature dark morph.

Plumage sequences in jaegers seem not completely understood. Some immature plumages are not yet well mapped out, making them important to note in jaeger observations. As far as identification goes, the Rocky River birds showed the usual deep steady wing beats, big head, short body, and large size typical of pomarines. Good opportunities for size comparison arose while one was harassing a ring-billed gull, when the jaeger showed a slightly longer wingspan. Before I realized there were several jaegers present, I was in a bit of a quandary. I kept finding birds with contrasting field marks. Once a gathering of birds proved that five individuals were present, I realized the source of my confusion, and set about trying to distinguish among them. There was one adult light morph, but the rest were immature. Their distance from shore, and their customary solitary appearances, posed a real challenge for distinguishing among the latter individuals. All the immatures showed a contrast between the lighter uppertail coverts and the dark tail; less often seen was the contrast between the dark tail and the barred undertail coverts and vent. The mantles and bellies of these birds were dark, and in most individuals there was contrast between the belly and the still darker head. When they were cooperative, it was




The Avon Lake Power Plant, Lorain County, immature dark morph pomarine jaeger as drawn by the author.



The author's drawing of the adult light morph pomarine jaeger at Rocky River, Cuyahoga County.

possible to see the two pale crescents on the underwing—one on the base of the primaries, another on the wing linings. Some showed more white on the dorsal side of the wings than others, but this was visible only when the birds were closer to shore. The only easily distinguishable immature bird was noticeable because of its tan-colored head and nape, possibly an indication that it was an intermediate morph.

It was truly a treat to be able to spend so much time with these birds, and I will not soon forget it. In some instances these birds approached close enough for great scope views, revealing

the real personality of a jaeger—close enough to see the bill, feet, and even the eye. A chance to see an adult—the rarest plumage for jaegers in Ohio—at this range added to the excitement of the sighting. Just watching the jaegers in pursuit I could not help but marvel at their flight capabilities. The way they twist and turn in flight is certainly something to admire. I was blessed to have these birds for a whole two weeks, and even more so to have them just down the street! 



This immature dark morph pomarine jaeger (right) posed for photographs next to a herring gull at the Avon Lake Power Plant in Lorain County. This image was obtained by holding a point-and-shoot camera up to the eyepiece of a Nikon Fieldscope. Photo by Bill Whan on 8 December 2001.

## Recent Actions of the Ohio Bird Records Committee

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One of the missions of the OBRC is the validation of records of rare birds reported in the state. Thanks to observers who submitted documentation, the following decisions have been made since the last published summary of Review List species reported in Ohio.

### Accepted Records

Documentations received from observers for the following records were judged sufficient to verify them for the record by at least nine of the eleven members of the Committee.

Glossy Ibis—Wyandot County, 13 April 2001, observer R. Rogers  
Glossy Ibis—Erie County, 5 May 2001, observer G. Bernhardt  
Mew Gull—Lake County, 12 March 2001, observer L. Gardella  
Least Tern—Clark County, 13 August 2001, observer D. Overacker  
Hoary Redpoll—Cuyahoga County, 20-21 January 2001 and 16-18 February 2001, observer C. Rieker

### Records Not Accepted

Documentation received for the following reports received fewer than six votes to accept. Such votes do not reflect on the sighting itself, but on the adequacy of the documentation to validate it for the permanent record.

"Harlan's" Red-tailed Hawk—Holmes County, 18 November 2000  
Long-tailed Jaeger—Lake County, 15 September 2000  
Black-legged Kittiwake—Warren County, 2 December 2000  
Chestnut-collared Longspur—Marion County, 10 April 2001

### Records in Recirculation

These records are being recirculated, the documentation for which having received between six and eight votes to accept.

Eurasian Collared-Dove—Crawford County, 1 September 2001  
Bewick's Wren—Hocking County, 16 June 2001  
Shiny Cowbird—Lucas County, 5 May 2001

Two species potentially new to Ohio are in recirculation, and as many as three others are among those to be circulated for the first time in December. The next packet of documentations for the committee will include:

*Oporornis* warbler—Lucas County, 21 May 2001  
Le Conte's Sparrow—Butler County, 21 October 2001  
*Plegadis* Ibis—Van Wert County, 28 October 2001  
Long-tailed Jaeger—Lake County, 27 October 2001  
Le Conte's Sparrow—Cuyahoga County, 18 October 2001  
Le Conte's Sparrow—Cuyahoga County, 24 October 2001  
Vermilion Flycatcher—Lucas & Ottawa Counties, 4 November 2001  
Bicknell's Thrush—Lucas County, 28 October 2001  
Brown-headed Nuthatch—Geauga County, 21 November 2001  
Rufous Hummingbird—Adams County, 8 November 2001