

THE STATUS OF THE SKUAS OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON

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This paper is written at the suggestion of Mr. Adam Balmer, of Westport, Washington, who has in his collection five mounted skuas taken on the coast of Washington. Mr. Balmer was visited by Mr. Ludlow Griscom in July of 1939, at which time Griscom viewed critically the skuas and expressed the opinion that they represented two races. Since skuas are rare birds in the Pacific Northwest and since we have fallen into the habit of calling them *Catharacta chilensis*, Griscom's observations occasioned no small amount of interest. The subsequent examination and measurement of the Balmer birds has proved to us the accuracy of Griscom's diagnosis. In our opinion there is no question but that the birds are of two separate subspecies.

The author wishes to express his appreciation for aid in this study to Mr. Adam Balmer, Mr. Ludlow Griscom, Dr. Robert Cushman Murphy, Dr. Alden H. Miller, Mrs. Martha R. Flahaut, and Dr. George E. Hudson.

Skuas made their first appearance among the birds of Washington in June of 1917, when three were collected off the coast of the state and near-by Vancouver Island by Mr. Stanton Warburton, Jr. (Condor, 20, 1918:179). These birds were made into skins and identified by the late Harry S. Swarth. His opinion was that the birds were the Chilean Skua and they were labeled and tagged *C. chilensis*.

The second appearance of the skua on the coast of Washington was on July 12, 1935, when Mr. Balmer (Murrelet, 16, 1935:70) was brought a bird which we all assumed to be the Chilean Skua. He now has this bird and four others which he secured on August 31, 1936, and on August 16, 1937. Three of these were taken twenty-five miles off the mouth of Grays Harbor (Balmer, Murrelet, 19, 1938:18). The fourth was obtained close in near the harbor entrance. These birds are all mounted and in Balmer's collection and were labeled *C. chilensis*.

Still another skua has been taken on the Washington coast. On July 17, 1939, Dr. George E. Hudson (Murrelet, 20, 1939:71) caught at the water's edge near Grayland a weakened bird which by comparison with the Balmer birds he and Balmer agreed was *C. chilensis*.

It is possible that the skuas are somewhat more common off the coast of Washington than we have heretofore thought. Balmer has over a period of four to five years been able to pick up from the beach in Grays Harbor County at least four additional skuas. These birds were all in a state of decomposition or were injured by gulls to such an extent that it was impossible to make skins of them.

Murphy in his "Oceanic Birds of South America" regards the skuas, both Atlantic and Pacific, as subspecies of one species and lists five and possibly six of them. In this treatment are given careful color descriptions and critical comparative measurements of all the forms. With the Murphy volumes at hand and by careful comparisons of color and measurements I have concluded that the skuas so far collected off the coast of Washington belong to two races, namely, *C. s. antarctica* and *C. s. lönnbergi*. One of the Warburton skins is before me and by use of Ridgway's "Color Standards and Color Nomenclature" the following description is formulated: Chin, throat, and neck light drab paling to drab gray around the throat, the breast and abdomen darkening to hair brown; crown and neck darker than ventral areas of the head, darkening to fuscous across the back and becoming fuscous-black on rump and upper wing surface; tail fuscous-black; middle of primaries white. The measurements of this bird

(see table) and its coloration lead me to think that the Warburton skin which is now in the collection of the Washington State Museum should be identified as *C. s. lönnerbergi*.

The male skua collected by Balmer on July 12, 1935, has the chin, throat, and neck fuscous; the center shafts of these feathers are gold, giving a general yellow appearance against the dark background; the dark neck shades to fuscous-black on the breast and abdomen. The crown is fuscous, shading to gold on the lower back of the neck; the back, rump, and wings are almost black. The tail and wings are slightly more brown than the back and the primaries are white in the middle.



Fig. 75. Mounted Falkland Skua (*Catharacta skua antarctica*); male taken July 12, 1935, twenty miles off Grays Harbor, Washington. Photo by Adam Balmer.

The first male skua taken on August 31, 1936, is in coloration much like the bird of July 12, 1939, just described, but it is generally more drab and more uniform in color and shows considerably less gold. The second male of August 31, 1936, is lighter than the foregoing, especially on all the underparts, where the gold is duller and approaches a pale ochre.

The female of August 31, 1936, has the chin, throat, neck, and crown generally hair brown with but a sprinkling of the gold seen in the other birds. The breast and abdomen are drab to hair brown; the back, rump, wings, and tail are fuscous with but a hint of gold; the primaries are white in the middle. This bird has a considerable quantity of gold on the flanks. The male of August 16, 1937, is much like the female of August 31, 1936, but the gold is lighter on the head and neck and the same color is almost wanting on the flanks.

Of the five skuas in the Balmer collection, the last two described should then be referred to *C. s. lönnerbergi* and the other three to *C. s. antarctica*. The three *antarctica* are most unusual records for this far northern latitude.

Hudson's bird is now mounted in the Charles R. Conner Museum at Pullman, Washington, and bears the accession number 39-86. I have not examined it and Dr. Hudson is not able to send me a color description based on Ridgway but since I have measurements of his specimen and since he and Balmer compared this bird with Balmer's two small dark skuas, we are of the opinion that Hudson's bird should also be referred to *C. s. antarctica*.



Fig. 76. Mounts of skuas taken twenty-five miles off Grays Harbor, Washington, August 13, 1936. Left, *Catharacta skua antarctica*, male; right, *Catharacta skua lönnerbergi*, female.

Through the courtesy of Dr. Murphy and the American Museum I have borrowed from them a series of skuas for comparison with our birds. We thought at first that our small skuas from the northwest might be a dark phase of *C. s. chilensis*. However, measurements and general coloration do not compare favorably with the American Museum skins of this race. Besides lacking light red, our birds consistently average somewhat smaller. This difference in size is not great but it is significant.

Our small northwest birds at first examination did not appear to possess the bulbous form of the bill of *antarctica* which Murphy explains is a "subtle but perfectly distinctive" character "which enables one to distinguish them from any other skuas." The northwest birds we believe do not show to any marked degree this characteristic because the upper bill plate apparently is shed when the birds reach our northern waters. None of our birds of either race possesses this plate but it is apparent that in one of our August specimens it is starting to grow back. The specimens from South America and Little America of the various races possess this plate, which is quite



Fig. 77. Bills of *Catharacta skua antarctica*, $\frac{1}{2}$ natural size. Left, male taken off Washington coast, August 31, 1936. Right, no. 44445 Amer. Mus. Nat. Hist., taken October 28, 1915.

obviously loose at its forward edge (fig. 77). Supporting our theory that the upper bill plate might possibly be lost is the fact that all five of the skins in the Balmer collection were just coming out of the molt when taken on the northwest coast during July and August.

Measurements of skuas in millimeters

		Sex	Wing	Exposed culmen	Middle toe with claw	Tarsus	Tail
Balmer birds	<i>C. s. antarctica</i> July 12, 1935	♂	359.0	46.0	67.5	60.0	160.0
	<i>C. s. antarctica</i> August 31, 1936	♂	360.0	47.0	67.0	64.0	155.0
	<i>C. s. antarctica</i> August 31, 1936	♂	357.0	46.0	65.0	58.5	151.0
	<i>C. s. lönnerbergi</i> August 31, 1936	♀	411.0	48.0	71.0	65.0	170.0
	<i>C. s. lönnerbergi</i> August 16, 1937	♂	365.0	45.0	66.0	62.0	142.0
	Hudson specimen	<i>C. s. antarctica</i> July 17, 1939	♀	400.0	47.0	67.0	61.0
Wash. State Museum specimen	<i>C. s. lönnerbergi</i> June 30, 1917	♂	390.0	48.0	70.0	63.0	137.0

Summary.—A critical study of seven skuas taken off the coast of Washington shows that two southern hemisphere races have made their way to this distant northern latitude. The smaller, darker form is *Catharacta skua antarctica* whereas the larger, lighter form is *Catharacta skua lönnerbergi*. To date there is a total of nine skuas taken off the coast of Washington and Vancouver Island. Of this total only two (collected by Warburton) have not been included in the present survey.

Aberdeen, Washington, April 15, 1942.