

First sight record of South Polar Skua *Catharacta maccormicki*, for Trinidad, West Indies

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AT APPROXIMATELY 9:00 a.m. July 13, 1980, I observed a skua, which appeared to be *Catharacta maccormicki*, the South Polar Skua, flying over the calm waters of the Gulf of Paria within 100 m of my position on the shore of Icacos Point, Trinidad (10°04' N, 61°56' W). The bird landed on the water, sat for 2–3 minutes, then rose and continued flying southeast into the Serpent's Mouth, the narrow channel separating Trinidad from Venezuela, and out of view. The bird was viewed through 7 x 35 binoculars under excellent lighting conditions (bright sun behind the observers). Mr. Shahid Mohammed of St. Augustine, Trinidad, also observed the bird.

A description of the bird, from notes made at the time of the sighting, follows:

A large, bulky seabird the size and shape of a large gull, but 'chunkier', with stubbier wings. A bit smaller than nearby Brown Pelicans (*Pelecanus occidentalis*), but dwarfing the occasional Brown Noddy (*Anous stolidus*) flying by. *Plumage*: Entirely sooty (vaguely brownish) except for: (1) striking white patches at base of primaries, visible above and below, and (2) off-white, 'creamy' head and neck blending,

with vague mottled effect, into gray underparts. The bill and eyes appeared dark. The bill did not appear overly large for the size of the bird. Leg and feet color was not discernible.

Of the various forms of skuas, light-phase *C. maccormicki* is perhaps the easiest to distinguish in the field (see Devillers 1977, Veit 1978). Its characteristic features are uniformly dark, sooty upperparts contrasting strikingly with pale, off-white head and neck, and lighter gray underparts. The lack of strong contrast between the underparts (except for the head and neck, which did appear pale) and upperparts of the Icacos Point bird probably resulted from the effects of countershading under the bright, tropical sun. The bird appeared devoid of warm, brownish tones characteristic of some other skuas. It was essentially identical to skuas I have seen off the coast of California in spring and fall, where *C. maccormicki* is the only skua known to occur with certainty (Devillers 1977).

There are no previous records of any skua for Trinidad (French 1980). There are apparently no records for Venezuela, either (Meyer de Schauensee and

Phelps 1978), which is only about 15 km from Icacos Point and was visible at the time of this sighting. Bond (1971) cites three records for the West Indies; two in November (Puerto Rico and Barbados), one in May (Iles des Saintes). The latter bird, banded in the South Shetlands, was identified as *C. skua lonnborgi* (Hudson 1968), but may actually have been *C. maccormicki*, according to Devillers (1977). More records of the South Polar Skua may be expected from the Caribbean region in the future, as it appears to be the most likely encountered southern hemisphere skua north of the equator in the austral winter (Devillers 1977, Veit 1978).

SOLDADO ROCK, about 9 km off Icacos Point, supports a large tern colony (*Anous stolidus* and *Sterna fuscata* predominate), and concentrations of these and other fish-eating seabirds form in June and July, the peak of the local rainy season, when large schools of fish are plentiful in the surface waters of the Gulf of Paria (*vide* local fishermen). As skuas klepto-parasitize fish-eating seabirds, they should be looked for in the vicinity of such seabird concentrations elsewhere in the Caribbean region.

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