

Jaegers and skuas in the Western North Atlantic: some historical misconceptions

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FOR MANY DECADES LONG-TAILED Jaegers (*Stercorarius longicaudus*) were considered very rare spring and fall transients over the western North Atlantic. Wynne-Edwards (1935), for example, suggested that the species migrated chiefly over the middle of the North Atlantic, thus accounting for the sparse number of inshore records. Several South Atlantic states for example, had few, if any, known records for Long-tailed Jaegers prior to the mid-1970s. The earliest published documentation for south-eastern coastal states is: Maryland, 1974 (Rowlett 1980); Virginia, 1975 (U.S.N.M. 499381, Williams 1976); North Carolina, 1972 (*Chat* 36:114); South Carolina, 1896 (Sprunt and Chamberlain 1949); Georgia, 1963 (Denton *et al.* 1977); Florida, 1892–1893 (Howell 1932); Alabama, 1979 (Duncan 1980); Mississippi, (no records); Louisiana, 1965 (Palmisiano and Gauthreaux 1966); and Texas, 1961 (Oberholser 1974).

Offshore studies, however, have shown this jaeger to be not only a regular and rather common migrant, but also a species present in small numbers in summer and perhaps into early winter (Lee 1986, 1987, N.C.S.M. records). In fact, offshore the Long-tailed Jaeger is more common and certainly of more regular

occurrence than the similarly-appearing Parasitic Jaeger (*Stercorarius parasiticus*). Prior to the mid-1970s, comparisons of local abundance were biased by the Parasitic Jaeger's habit of migrating close to shore and the Long-tailed's primary occurrence farther at sea (although there is some overlap). In addition, misidentifications were encouraged by the lack of previous local records of Long-taileds. Although adult-plumaged birds should present little problem in sight identification, approximately 90% of the records off North Carolina for these two species are of immatures or of adults out of classic plumages. Pomarine Jaegers (*Stercorarius pomarinus*), on the other hand, have a higher percentage of adults and subadults (21% for all seasons, *pers. obs.*) among the birds migrating off North Carolina.

Examination of specimens reveals



Long-tailed Jaeger (*Stercorarius longicaudus*). Photograph/D. Roby VIREO/R05/1/70.

some interesting information concerning both historical occurrence and early naturalists' inability to separate the two small species of *Stercorarius* even with birds in hand. For example, the only verified evidence of winter occurrence of Long-tailed Jaegers in the United States is a single specimen from the Gulf Coast of Florida obtained in 1889. It was originally identified as *S. parasiticus* by Scott (1889). Other winter records are available for South Carolina in 1896 and 1908, for North Carolina in 1984, and for Florida in 1983; but these remain open to question because of the difficulty of identification in the absence of specimens and owing to the uncertainty of the limits of the wintering distribution of *S. longicaudus*. Its major wintering area is off southern South America (Murphy 1936, Veit 1985).

With *S. longicaudus* remaining un-

reported from North Carolina until 1972 and unverified until 1979 (*Chat* 36:114, Buckley 1973, Lee and Rowlett 1979), it is interesting to report the results of a re-examination of two pre-1970 specimens that had been identified and reported as *S. parasiticus*. Pearson *et al.* (1942) reported Parasitic Jaegers to be very rare migrants and went on to state: "We have but one definite record of a Parasitic Jaeger in North Carolina. It was shot near Cape Lookout by A. Piner, of Morehead City, in the Autumn of 1897, who skinned the unknown bird. Pearson, finding the specimen in Piner's possession, bought it and sent it to H. H. Brimley for the State Museum." This specimen (N.C.S.M. 2538) is actually *S. longicaudus*.

More recently, an August 25, 1960 TV tower mortality near Raleigh was reported as an immature Parasitic Jaeger (N.C.S.M. 215, Wray 1960). This specimen also proved to be a Long-tailed Jaeger. Actually until our museum's offshore studies were initiated there were no known specimens of *S. parasiticus* from North Carolina in our collections. There are, however, two pre-1970 North Carolina jaegers in the United States National Museum previously labeled as *longicaudus* which are *parasiticus* (U.S.N.M. 90439, 90441).

I cite these examples because they are ones familiar to me, not because identification problems with this genus are limited to North Carolina naturalists, or to workers dealing with specimens prior to the appearance of our modern identification guides. In fact a bird labeled as *S. parasiticus* was recently sent to us for identification from the Florida State Museum (UF 20488). The specimen, a victim of Hurricane *David*, was salvaged at St. Augustine, Florida, on September 1, 1979. It is a female in first-year plumage reported as a Parasitic Jaeger (*Am. Birds* 34:153), but it, too, is *S. longicaudus*.

These reidentifications inspired me to examine the specimens of small *Stercorarius* in the Charleston Museum. One of two southeastern United States specimens labeled as *S. parasiticus* (this is one of only three records of Parasitic Jaegers reported by Burleigh (1958) for Georgia) was also a *longicaudus* (CM 52 117 050). It is an immature female collected by Dan Henderson on the Savannah



Great Skua (*Catharacta skua*). Photograph/D. Roby VIREO/R05/2/129.

River five kilometers below Augusta, Richmond County, Georgia on November 7, 1936. While this record has been regarded as a Georgia bird it could just as easily be considered as a South Carolina specimen, as it is mentioned by Sprunt and Chamberlain (1949) under Parasitic Jaeger. Denton *et al.* (1977) listed *longicaudus* hypothetical in Georgia. Their basis for inclusion on a Georgia list was "A bird was seen on Little Cumberland Island, Camden County, March 16, 1963 by George W. Sciple and Herman W. Coolidge (1963. *Oriole* 28:31-32). Additional records are required before acceptance on the Official List." Thus the Charleston Museum specimen, the first confirmed record for Georgia (or South Carolina), was actually obtained half a century previously. The remaining specimen in the Charleston Museum collection is *parasiticus* (immature female off Charleston, April 26, 1935; ChM 35.110.1).

A parallel situation exists for the skuas (*Catharacta*) in the western North Atlantic. Until 1977 only the

Great Skua (*C. skua*) was known to occur in the North Atlantic. Nevertheless it was well known that Southern hemisphere forms of this genus migrated north in the austral winter as far as Japan and British Columbia in the North Pacific. Apparently based on this migration pattern, Griscom and Snyder (1955) speculated that summer sightings of skuas in the North Atlantic could include birds from southern populations. [This suggestion had been made before, as quoted in Bent, 1921.] This thought was ignored by many subsequent bird students, some of whom continued to apply the name *C. skua* to all North Atlantic records. Devillers (1977), while studying Pacific skuas, found in the Copenhagen Museum a single specimen of South Polar Skua (*C. maccormicki*) that had been collected in Greenland in July 1902. It had been previously identified as *C. skua*. About the same time the report of a South Polar Skua banded near the Antarctic Peninsula and collected by an Eskimo in 1970 in Greenland became known (Fullager 1976, Salo-

mensen 1976). Armed with this information, Veit (1978) reported on a trip he made to Georges Bank off Newfoundland in June and July 1977. At this time he identified eight to ten of 25 skuas he saw as definite South Polar Skuas. The other individuals he saw were "uniformly blackish." A year later one of these blackish individuals was collected. It at least, proved to be a Great Skua banded on Foula in the Shetland Islands (Furness 1987). The first reported specimen of the South Polar Skua from eastern North America was from Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, in May 1976 (U.S.N.M. 593001, Lee and Rowlett 1979). (There are however much earlier records and specimens from the western United States and Canada.) Subsequently additional specimens have been collected off the Grand Banks and North Carolina (U.S.N.M. and N.C.S.M. records). Combined, these specimen records cast doubt on the validity of all North Atlantic sightings made prior to the 1970s, and the non-breeding distribution of species of *Catharacta* in the Atlantic to this date remains poorly known.

In view of the recent discovery of the South Polar Skua in the North Atlantic, it is intriguing to report the presence in the United States National Museum of an adult male *Catharacta* originally identified as *C. skua* (U.S.N.M. 75209); in reality it is a *C. maccormicki* collected off the Grand Banks in July 1878. Thus, as in the case of the Long-tailed Jaeger, documentation for occurrence was obtained in the last century; but, because of earlier workers' inability to differentiate cryptically-plumaged jaegers and skuas, the information was not generally available.

It is reasonable, and expected, that bird identification will be strongly biased by preconceived assumptions of what species are expected in a given area or season. It is necessary to recognize the difficulty of separating species in cryptically-plumaged species groups. Considering the high rate of misidentification among the several historical specimens discussed here, it would be a valuable exercise for persons concerned with local bird records to critically re-examine the specimens of skuas and immature jaegers on which regional faunal lists have been prepared. Sight identifications are at best difficult for skuas and immature

jaegers and it is obvious that the original specimen oriented data base has biased sight records.

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