

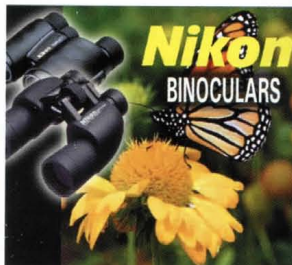
Nikon

Photo Quiz

(sponsored by Nikon Canada)



Figure 1



.clearer, brighter image
 .highest quality materials
 .heavy duty construction
 .superb handling

Naturally
 BETTER!

Nikon

www.nikon.ca

A dark, relatively slender-winged bird appears almost overhead and against a light sky (Figure 1). The primaries are quite pointed and there is a light patch on the underwing. Briefly, thoughts of a large falcon, Peregrine or Gyr, cross our mind. However, the wings are just too narrow and tapered to a point. The large falcons have a very broad "arm", the area between the wing base and the bend or "wrist". Moreover, the distinct light patches contrasting with the remainder of the wing do not fit these falcons. From what we can see of the bill, it is at least partially pale with a darker tip, which also does not fit. It is not a raptor.

The shape is that of a Larid. Could it be a gull? We know that most gulls in less than adult

plumage are dark to varying degrees. Our commonest large gull, Herring, can be quite dark blackish brown in juvenal and first basic plumage. Herring Gulls would, however, have some contrasting light on the face and head. At this age they might have some light at the base of the bill but not likely as much as on this bird. Most importantly, Herring Gulls show a light patch formed by the lighter inner primaries which contrasts with the outer primaries. The opposite is the case with our overhead bird. Young Heermann's Gulls are very dark but they do not have a lighter patch on the wing.

The group of Larids which are generally overall darkly plumaged at least at some ages and forms are the Stercorarids or Jaegers and




Figure 2

Skuas. They occur in a dizzying array of plumage morphs, compounded by molts over the four years to reach full adult plumage. Five species have occurred in Canada. The Great Skua (*Catharacta skua*) is a winter visitor to Newfoundland waters and occasionally farther south (Godfrey 1986). The validity of the bird reported from Niagara Falls on 15 December 1915 (Beardslee and Mitchell 1965) will likely never be determined, as the specimen has been lost. South Polar Skua (*Catharacta maccormicki*), a Southern Hemisphere species, is a scarce visitor off both Canadian coasts (Godfrey 1986). The two large skuas we can eliminate from consideration on several counts. They are very stocky, with very broad "arms", and have very extensive white at the base of the underwing primaries and do not have any central tail extensions.

Shape, size and proportions are notoriously difficult to determine with precision in the Stercorarids and more difficult in still photographs such as we have here. Nevertheless, along with other evidence, it is useful to understand some basic differences among the species. With apologies to non-fans of football, some comparisons may be drawn as follows. Imagine the defense on the playing field. The Great and South Polar Skuas are the lumbering but quick defensive tackles. Pomarine Jaegers are the

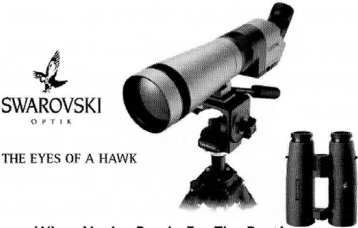
defensive ends, not quite as big and muscular and less bulky, but still imposing. The linebackers, rangy and strong and capable of bursts of speed and strength, are the Parasitic Jaegers. Long-tailed Jaegers are the defensive backs, of relatively slim proportions and smaller than Parasitics. Size and proportions can be relied upon too much and result in identification errors, but they can be a first clue to identity.

So our jaegers (astute readers will already have noticed that the photos are of two different birds, but more on this later) are members of the three species which occur with regularity on the lower Great Lakes, but in considerably different numbers. Identification



NATURE STORE
636 Point Pelee Dr. Leamington ON N8H 3V4
Birding • Nature • Optics • Books
Wildlife Art & Craft • Clothing

Canada's Largest Selection of Binoculars and Scopes!



SWAROVSKI
OPTIK

WITH THE EYES OF A HAWK

When You're Ready For The Best!

For **FAST** Mail Order Delivery or Quote...

CALL or FAX: 519-326-5193

E-mail: pelewing@wincom.net www.wincom.net/~pelewing

would be relatively easy if our birds were adults, but they are not. They have the generally dark plumage and essentially all dark heads of juvenile jaegers. A further complicating factor is that all three jaegers come in colour morphs ranging from light through intermediate to dark. It is not always possible to put any single bird into one of these three, as the gradation is somewhat clinal. For example, the bird approaching in Figure 1 appears to be a dark morph, but with some barring on the belly and marginal (leading edge of the wing) and underwing coverts. The bird overhead in Figure 2 is even blacker and less patterned in these same areas.

It is only a slight exaggeration to say that, under most field conditions, no single feature can be seen well enough to prove diagnostic for any one of the jaegers. So let's try to build a case for the identification of these birds. We will use a combination of proportions, bill, underparts pattern and tail shape. To return to shape, size and proportions, Pomarine has the broadest arm, but in the overhead bird where this feature can be examined it is not dramatically broad, although too "muscular" for Long-tailed. Parasitic tends to be chestier and Pomarine has a fuller belly, like the Figure 1 bird. Maybe we have Pomarines.

Bill shape, size and colour patterns are very useful. Pomarine has the most bicolored bill, with the basal two-thirds pale bluish flesh.

Parasitic shows less contrast between a dark bill tip and paler base, partly because the shades are less intense and partly because the entire bill is less stocky than in Pomarine. Long-tailed has about 40–60 percent dark distal half, mainly because this proportion of the bill is the nail. Although, alas, as is so often the case in the field, we cannot get an unequivocal look at the bills, they appear to be extensively pale. So they look more like Pomarines.

We can see the underparts of both birds rather well. On these very dark birds, the comparison of overall underwing shade to that of the flanks will not serve to distinguish Pomarine from Parasitic. The undertail coverts in Pomarine and Long-tailed are usually distinctively black and white barred. We cannot see this feature in Figure 1, and our Figure 2 bird is so dark and the photo perhaps underexposed so it is not visible here either. Juvenile jaegers of all three species have white bases to the primaries as seen from below. The extent of white – the wing flash – has been used in the past to distinguish the jaegers. It is said to be largest in Pomarine, less in Parasitic and smallest in Long-tailed, but it is not a reliable criterion on its own. Moreover, much has been made of the double white wing crescent on Pomarine Jaeger. This is created by the white bases and dark distal halves of the underwing primary coverts. This

feature can be seen in Figure 1. Note the white primary bases and the white primary covert bases separated by the dark primary covert tips. Two further points are instructive. First, note that it hardly shows in the darker, overhead bird. Second, one in 20 Parasitics can have pale bases to the primary coverts. So this category of evidence is quite suggestive of Pomarine Jaeger but is not 100 percent convincing. Nonetheless, taken together with the other features we've already examined, the case is building for Pomarines.

The length and shape of the central tail feathers even on juvenile jaegers can be very important. We cannot see these in the Figure 1 bird – a rather normal situation! However, the coal black bird overhead shows a noticeable extension of the two central rectrices. These are at the long extreme for juvenile Pomarine Jaeger, but they are blunt

or rounded at the tip rather than pointed as they are in Parasitic. Long-tailed central tail feathers are as long as this or longer and with blunt or rounded tips.

To conclude, we have two juvenile **Pomarine Jaegers**. We have arrived at the identification using a combination of bulk and proportions, bill pattern, underwing patterns, and tail feathering. Other features such as manner of flight, behaviour, upperpart colours, head patterning and the exact coloration of primary feather tips cannot be used in this case. These Pomarine Jaegers were photographed on the Bay of Fundy by Peter Burke, 23 September 2000.

Literature Cited

- Beardslee, C.S. and H.D. Mitchell.** 1965. Birds of the Niagara Frontier region. Bulletin of the Buffalo Society of Natural Sciences 22: 1–478.
- Godfrey, W.E.** 1986. The Birds of Canada. Revised edition. National Museums of Canada, Ottawa.

Bob Curry, 3115 New Street, Unit 30, Burlington, Ontario L7N 3T6