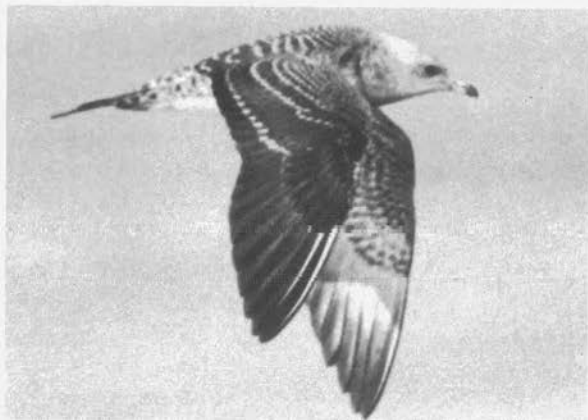


Seabirds pose identification challenges for birders partly because of factors such as poor lighting conditions and distance, but also because of intrinsic complexities in their variable plumage. Of the numerous seabirds regularly inhabiting Massachusetts waters, none are more consistently difficult to identify than jaegers, such as the individual in October's mystery photograph.

Jaegers exhibit extreme plumage variability from several perspectives. First, they are polymorphic—their coloration ranges from uniformly dark to dark above and whitish beneath, with varying amounts of dusky on the sides, flanks, and chest. Second, they exhibit the same protracted plumage development found in gulls, with individual birds undergoing a series of transitional molts between juvenile and adult plumage over the course of approximately four years. Finally, jaegers exhibit recognizably distinct basic (winter) and alternate (summer) plumages. Collectively these features can produce a baffling appearance that virtually defies identification especially when seen under poor conditions. Fortunately structure, flight characteristics, and behavior are useful features that can also be helpful in making accurate jaeger identifications.

The jaeger in the photograph is readily identifiable as a juvenile on the basis of the extensive whitish barring and spotting on the scapulars, secondary coverts, and underwing coverts, its uncapped head, and its pale-based bill. The very pale head and whiteness of the visible portion of the underparts indicate that the bird is in the light morph.

To specifically identify the pictured jaeger, attention should focus on the two white outermost primary shafts, which stand out in marked contrast to the adjacent primaries. This characteristic, along with the overall paleness of the bird (especially the head) and the extensive barring on the flanks and uppertail coverts, indicate that the bird is a Long-tailed Jaeger (*Stercorarius longicaudus*).



Long-tailed Jaeger

Photo by Jack Murray

Given a different view of the tail, the extended central tail feathers would display decidedly rounded tips rather than tapering to sharp points as in a juvenile Parasitic Jaeger.

The Long-tailed Jaeger in the picture was photographed in September 1991 slightly east of Stellwagen Bank.

AT A GLANCE

Photo by Wayne R. Petersen



Can you identify this bird?

Identification will be discussed in next issue's AT A GLANCE.

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