

time on the Farallon Islands and at Point Reyes Bird Observatory. The Keith Hansen Wildlife Gallery in Marin County, California (address: P.O. Box 332-A, Bolinas, CA 94924, telephone 415-868-0402), includes nearly a hundred original works of art, western waterfowl identification cards, wildlife T-shirts, and wildlife stationery. The Snowy Owl first appeared on the cover of a Christmas Bird Count issue of *American Birds* in 1990. M. Steele

AT A GLANCE *October 1995* _____ *Wayne R. Petersen*

Seabirds represent identification challenges found in few other bird groups. Because they are so often seen at a great distance and under adverse lighting and sea conditions, and because some observers have relatively little opportunity to observe them at all, they can be especially difficult to identify with confidence and accuracy.

Perhaps of all the seabird species that regularly occur in Massachusetts waters, none present more identification problems than do jaegers, one of which is the October mystery bird. Jaeger identification problems include those associated with plumage variation due to age, season, sex, and morph type. Indeed, jaeger identification, much like hawk identification, relies as much on structure of the bird, flight style, behavior, geographic location, and seasonality as it does on actual plumage characteristics.

As a primer to jaeger plumages, it is helpful to remember that jaegers, like gulls, require anywhere from three to five years to acquire their breeding plumage; they have distinct winter and summer plumages; juvenile and immature jaegers often look quite different from adults in breeding plumage; and due to polymorphism, melanistic individuals are nearly totally dark, while light-morph adults have light underparts and a pectoral collar of varying extent across their upper breast. Given these plumage realities, it is possible to make some assumptions about the jaeger in the photograph.

First, because the pictured bird has a white lower breast and belly, it is a light morph. Second, the extensive barring on the wing linings, flanks, and undertail coverts indicate that the bird is not an adult, a point further suggested (but not conclusively made) by the short central tail feathers. It is further possible to determine that the bird is an immature (a bird at least one year old), not a juvenile. Juvenile Pomarine and Parasitic jaegers are ordinarily extensively dark below; Long-tailed Jaegers, although occasionally pale-bellied as juveniles, would be unlikely to show such a wide, dusky pectoral collar and would normally appear pale-headed, rather than dark-capped as in the jaeger in the

photograph. Furthermore, a Long-tailed Jaeger, even in immature plumage, would typically exhibit longer central tail feathers, and would appear grayer overall with slimmer and narrower wings, particularly where they join the body. On these points alone, it is safe to assume that the mystery jaeger is not a Long-tailed Jaeger.

The choice then becomes one between the two larger species, Pomarine and Parasitic. This is where the shape of the central tail feathers can be useful. In Parasitic Jaegers the central pair of tail feathers are acutely pointed in all plumages, while in Pomarine Jaegers (and also in juvenile Long-tailed Jaegers) these feathers are either blunt or somewhat rounded, as in the pictured jaeger. Furthermore, the body of the mystery jaeger appears heavy and robust, especially in the chest area, and the wings look broad at the base. These features, along with the breadth and duskieness of the chest collar, heaviness of the barring on the sides under the wings, and the relatively long appearance of the bill all point to the bird being an immature Pomarine Jaeger. What are not clearly visible in the photograph are the five or more ivory primary shafts (best seen from above) that are typical of Pomarine Jaegers, along with what typically appears as a second pale patch at the base of the primaries that is created by the light coloration of under-primary coverts.

Often more pelagic than the Parasitic Jaeger, Pomarine Jaegers are not uncommon in fall on the offshore New England fishing banks, and they are regularly seen from shore during northeasterly gales from September to November. The photograph of the immature Pomarine Jaeger (*Stercorarius pomarinus*) was taken at Cox's Ledge south of Block Island, Rhode Island.



Pomarine Jaeger

Wayne R. Petersen

AT A GLANCE

Photo by Wayne R. Petersen



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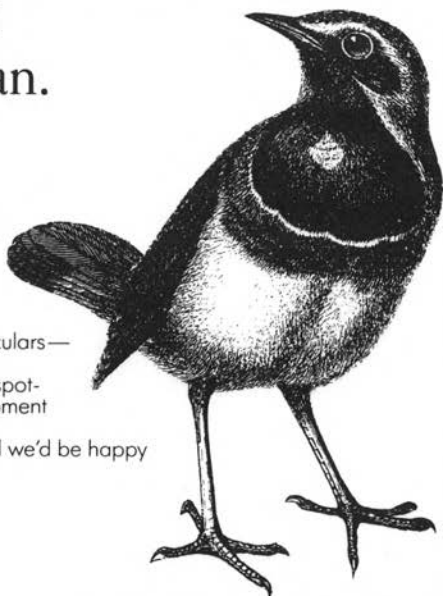
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