

DIFFERENTIATING POMARINE JAEGER FROM SOUTH POLAR SKUA

by Richard R. Veit, Boston

Photographs by Clayton Taylor, Moodus, Connecticut
and by Richard R. Veit

On an August, 1979, Brookline Bird Club boat trip to Stellwagen Bank, the stercorarid shown in Figures 1 and 3 was seen and identified by most observers as a South Polar Skua (Catharacta maccormickii). However, an excellent series of still color photographs of the bird, taken by Clayton Taylor of Moodus, Connecticut, indicates conclusively that the bird was a Pomarine Jaeger (Stercorarius pomarinus).

As the proper identification of skuas and jaegers is hardly a novel field problem, I would like to explain my identification of the bird in question, referring to two of Taylor's photographs of that bird (Figures 1 and 3), and to my photograph of a South Polar Skua.



Figure 1. Pomarine Jaeger

Devillers states that the South Polar Skua is "a small form with a slender and delicate bill" (Auk 94:417-29), which has given rise to the unwarranted belief that this skua is more likely to be confused with the Pomarine Jaeger than with any of the forms of Catharacta. Actually, the size difference between the skuas is a matter of millimeters; the South Polar Skua indisputably displays the robust structural characters of a skua rather than the comparatively streamlined characters of a jaeger.

The bird depicted in Figures 1 and 3 is definitely a Pomarine Jaeger because:

1. The sleek body is rather comparable in size to that of the Herring Gull it is harassing, not barrel-shaped as in the South Polar Skua illustrated in Figure 2. In comparison to the skua, the head is smaller and both the wings and bill are more slender. The rather ferocious attitude of the skua is simply not conveyed by the jaeger.



Figure 2. South Polar Skua

2. The bill is clearly bicolored - pale basally with a sharply delineated dark tip. This characteristic is typical of the immatures of the larger two jaeger species through the second winter plumage. The bill of all skuas is subtly bicolored during their first year of life, but the contrast between the blue-gray base and blackish tip is visible only at extremely close range in the field. Therefore, any stercorarid with a conspicuously bicolored bill is almost certainly a jaeger.
3. Figure 1 clearly illustrates the whitish uppertail coverts or bases to the rectrices of the bird. Most light-phase jaegers show this character, which is never present in Catharacta.
4. In Figure 1, the inner secondaries and flanks are finely barred transversely, a characteristic trait of Pomarine (and, to a certain extent, Parasitic) Jaegers in first winter plumage, and very different from the solidly dark corresponding feathers of Catharacta.

5. The relative amount of white at the base of the primaries is not a particularly useful criterion for distinguishing jaegers from skuas; this varies considerably in each species according to stage of molt and degree of abrasion of the wing coverts. Some observers commented on the presence of a pale nuchal collar; such a collar is present on virtually all jaegers, and is characteristic of some skua plumages.

Uniformly dark Pomarine Jaegers lacking elongated central rectrices can be distinguished from skuas mainly on the basis of proportions, as illustrated by the photographs. Once you are familiar with the distinctive appearance of skuas, mistaking a jaeger for a skua is quite unlikely, and the converse almost impossible.

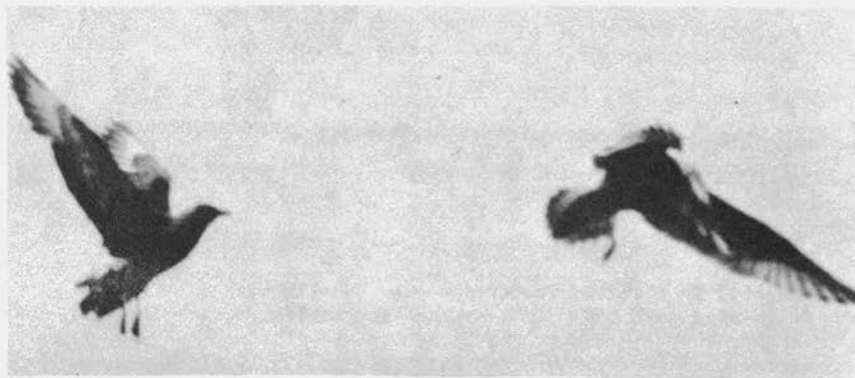


Figure 3. Pomarine Jaeger and Herring Gull

Combination List and Checklist for Birds of North America, James A. Tucker. River City Publishing, Austin, Texas, 1979, 32 pages, \$15.

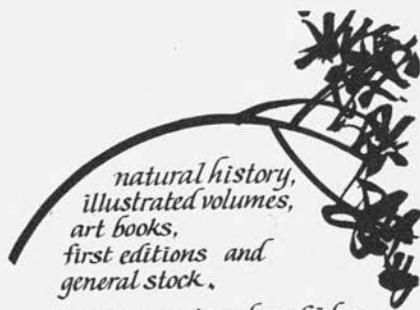
This "checklist" checklist is a listing of all the species that occur in North America north of the Mexican border. The nomenclature follows that of the American Birding Association (ABA) Checklist, 1975. Within its 32 pages the birder can record his or her life list, state list, year list, backyard list, area list, vacation list, and whatever other list one cares to keep. There is a space provided to record the date and place of the first observation as well as a seasonal data space to enter (in pencil for updating) early arrival or late departure dates for migratory species. The columns should have been headed as in the earlier editions: Fall early, Fall late, Spring early, Spring late, for better clarification.

This new edition comes in a very sturdy ring binder. I found that the binder is too big and bulky for the 32 pages; the older editions had a plastic ring binder that was much more flexible. This new binder was designed for a lot of use or abuse by the travelling birder. I would prefer to keep this binder at home and in good condition and record any additions after a birding trip.

The checklist has been updated. All the changes in nomenclature with the exception of the Common Flicker are included in parentheses next to the species. Future updates should include the change of Black-bellied and Fulvous Tree ducks to Black-bellied and Fulvous Whistling ducks.

The price of \$15 seems steep. I paid only \$2.65 for my 1966 edition; the fancy binder probably has a lot to do with the price. This book can be ordered from River City Publishing Company, P.O. Box 4471, Austin, Texas 78765. Include \$1.50 postage and handling charge.

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