

Pomarine Jaeger at East Fork State Park

by Jay G. Lehman

How to disrupt a Cincinnati Bird Club field trip? Find a great bird, and in particular, the third verified inland record for the state (v. *The Ohio Cardinal* 23:12), and reputedly the first verified record for southwestern Ohio.

30 October 1999 started like a typical fall day. The temperature was in the 50s, the sky clear to partly cloudy, and the last few leaves were still quite colorful. Those of us who went with leader Hank Armstrong on the day's field trip to East Fork State Park expected to see migratory waterfowl and some gulls—early, before the fishermen chased everything away—and the usual fall migrant land birds. None of us could forget, however, that East Fork had been famous recently for rarities, due to Hank's good fieldwork and constant vigilance. Little did we suspect what awaited us!

When I arrived at South Beach just before 8:30 a.m., everyone was lined up on the beach, scanning the lake to the north. The rising sun was just cresting the tree-line on the hills to the east, and the light was not yet good for viewing distant birds on the water. There was casual mention of a "large, dark, waterfowl-type bird" off to our left, which seemed to be hunkered down and usually facing away. We delayed trying to identify this bird because it was not in the sun's direct light. About thirty minutes later when the light was better and after we had scanned through the waterfowl and gulls, we returned to the large dark bird where it floated about 400 yards offshore. As we watched, a common loon swam up close to the bird in an aggressive posture, flushing it from the water. And then the excitement really started! Hank Armstrong and I shouted "jaeger!" simultaneously. We could now see the bird showed a very noticeable white flash at the base of the primaries, had relatively pointed wings, and flew with short, powerful wing-beats, then sailing low over the water with wingtips bowed down.

During its first flight of about 75 yards, I started yelling "pomarine jaeger!" recognizing its flight characteristics, and its size and shape. Excited, I was totally oblivious to what anyone else was saying or doing. This bird was approximately the size of a ring-billed gull but seemed larger, maybe due to its overall dark brown color, and relatively larger-headed and heavier-bodied shape. The wings were relatively wide at their bases. In flight, there was little to no buoyancy or lift to the bulky body during downbeats of the wings, giving an impression of powerful flight. The bill seemed rather large, approximately the size but not the shape of a ring-billed gull's.

A pomarine jaeger, here at East Fork State Park! Unbelievable! I was transfixed, and remained glued to my telescope and binoculars for the next two hours. It seemed something was wrong: here I was, standing on solid ground in the relative warmth of southwestern Ohio and using my telescope under dry conditions! In my previous 27 years of birding on the east coast (mostly in Delaware and New York), as well as elsewhere in North America, I have seen close to 500 jaegers and skuas, but almost always in the extreme conditions of east coast storms, Lake Ontario's cold fronts, the cold and wet of Alaska, or the bouncing decks of offshore birding boats. I expected this bird to disappear in the next instant, leaving only our first impressions, because the only inland jaegers I had previously seen were momentary fly-bys. Astonished, excited, even transfixed, and focused on the bird as we were, I do nonetheless remember that Hank and I ran to our cars for reference texts, then debated the relative merits of the identification of the bird as a pomarine jaeger.

Later, when a fisherman grounded his boat at the beach, Hank tried to convince me to negotiate a trip out to the bird, but I remained glued to my telescope. Eventually Bobby Foppe persuaded the fisherman to take Hank and me out to the bird. The fisherman brought us within 150 to 200 feet, whereupon Hank took some distant photographs while I studied the bird at 15-20X with a hand-held Swift Zoom telescope on a homemade gunstock. From the boat, viewing conditions were excellent. The sun was up, there were few if any clouds, and the light came from behind us. These conditions allowed observations of more details. Later, determined to see additional field marks after consulting other references, I returned to South Beach on 31 October 1999 from 8:30 to 10:00 a.m., where along with many other local area birders was able to view the bird under excellent and brightly back-lit conditions.

Unfortunately, the blown-up photograph shown in this article is not very distinct, but a sketch made by the author from the photograph is included to show proportions and plumage contrasts. Approximate dimensions of the bird on the sketch were compared to measurements from the photograph in an attempt to ensure accuracy.

Description

For general description and flight characteristics see discussion above. Generally, the wing-beats were short, powerful strokes, imparting little buoyancy to the flight. Sometimes when the bird took flight in pursuit of gulls, the wing-beats were rather deep, as if "digging deep to grab more air" to get started, but without causing much buoyancy. This impression is consistent with a relatively large, powerful bird, and, indeed, this bird was "full-bellied."

The head, crown, nape, back, upper wings, throat, breast, and part of the belly appeared brown and slightly mottled or barred. The brown color was relatively dark and quite uniform except for the fine barring. From a distance and at close range (150-200 ft) the undertail coverts showed wide barring with dark color (blackish-gray) on white, and there appeared to be a relatively sharp demarcation between the undertail coverts and the barring on the sides. This undertail color may indicate that the bird was older than its first year, whose plumage would show less distinct or no demarcation, according to Harrison (1983). The rump or uppertail coverts, seen well on 31 October, were brown with darker barring. Double white crescents on the outer underwings were seen well several times on 31 October, when the wings were raised during take-off or landing. There was no evidence of a pale spot at the junction of the bill and forehead when seen at close range on 30 October, or at longer range on 31 October. At some angles and light, there appeared to be a dark face patch, but this was due to shadows and disappeared at any range when the angle of light was directly perpendicular to the length of the bird's body, parallel to the line of sight and from behind the observer. The shadows were apparently caused by the head's structure, with the brow jutting above a recessed eye.

At closer range from the boat on 30 October, when the jaeger sat on the water and also while in flight, the bird still appeared relatively large-headed, with a bulky body. The bill was large, long, relatively thick, of uniform thickness to the tip, and gray at the base with a contrastingly dark gray-black tip. Bill length was estimated at approximately two-thirds the width of the head. The bill tip featured a rather large hook and a very noticeable sharp angle (gonys) near the end of the lower mandible. This structure of the bill tip was visible to this observer only at close range from the boat by tele-



Bumming a boat ride from fishermen, Hank Armstrong was able to photograph this pomarine jaeger at East Fork State Park, Clermont Co., on 30 October 1999.



To aid viewing of the pomarine jaeger photograph, Jay G. Lehman sketched the bird from that photograph to show details such as proportions and plumage contrasts. This sketch was originally published in *The Passenger Pigeon* in March 2000.

scope. From a greater distance, the bill tip was frequently not visible due to its darker color, making the bill appear shorter.

When chasing ring-billed gulls, the jaeger appeared approximately the same size, no smaller, and the bill was approximately the same size, in direct comparison. In this comparison, the jaeger appeared relatively larger-bodied and wider at the bases of its wings. In flight, the width of the wings where they joined the body was approximately equal to the length of the tail. Elongated central tail feathers were barely, if at all, noticeable to this observer, from several angles when the bird was in flight, even when the tail was spread during banking. Others who observed this bird reported elongated central tail feathers. To this observer, the central tail feathers were indeed longer than the outer tail feathers, as expected for the somewhat pointed tail of a jaeger, but only once was there a slight impression to this observer of elongation of the central tail feathers, and there was no evidence of pointed central feathers. When the bird was sitting on the water, the tail was noticeably shorter than the wingtips.

Identification

The combination of the above characteristics is consistent with pomarine jaeger but eliminates parasitic and long-tailed jaegers. This was an immature individual, possibly older than a first-year bird.

Even though there are overlapping characteristics among all North American jaegers and, particularly, pomarine and parasitic jaegers, this bird's size, shape, flight characteristics, and bill size eventually eliminated parasitic jaeger. First of all, the bird's body and bill were too small for skua—an even more unlikely occurrence—and the bird was too bulky, large, and long-billed to be a long-tailed jaeger. A typical long-tailed jaeger in flight would be much more tern-like. While the long-tailed jaeger's bill might be as thick, it would be very much shorter. A distant slide photo of long-tailed in flight (personal collection from Alaska) confirms the much smaller body size of a typical individual of this species in comparison to the East Fork bird. Another slide photo from Alaska of a sitting long-tailed jaeger confirms the thickness and the shortness of the bill relative to the East Fork bird.

The initial identification as pomarine and not parasitic jaeger was based upon flight characteristics and size and shape (jizz). Pomarine jaeger is more the size and shape in the air of ring-billed gull, while parasitic jaeger is more the size and shape in the air of laughing gull. The bill of pomarine jaeger is heavier and more the size of that of ring-billed gull, while the bill of parasitic jaeger is thinner and more the size of laughing gull's bill. I use these species as reference because prior to 1994, when I moved to Ohio, my birding experience had been primarily from the east coast, so I am very acquainted with both these gulls. The barring on the head, nape, and face rather than streaking around the head and side of face, the double white crescent under the wing rather than a single white crescent, and the lack of a light spot between the bill-base and the forehead indicate that this bird was a pomarine jaeger and not a parasitic jaeger. These are among the field marks indicated in the article in *Birding* (1997) on jaeger species in the region. The tail, excluding any elongated central feathers, was too short and about the same length as the wing width, which is consistent with pomarine and not parasitic jaeger. Parasitic jaeger would appear to have a longer tail even without the central tail feather extension, and narrower wings at their bases.

Behavior

The "hunkered-down" posture seen initially may be a characteristic behavior of jaegers to hide from passing gulls. At least once, this jaeger seemed to use this posture as a way to surprise gulls and ambush them. This jaeger was observed chasing ring-billed gulls several times on 30 and 31 October. This bird was "one tough dude," (Hank Armstrong), chasing the gulls, getting right on their tails until they dropped or disgorged food, whereupon the jaeger wheeled and dropped to the water to eat the booty. As Armstrong further elaborated in his report to the OBRC, "This bird didn't hesitate a moment in its attack on any gull that had food in its possession. Swift and powerful flight in its attacks. In over six hours of observation, I saw it only once retrieve a small fish from the surface of the lake that had not been dropped by another bird." During its stay at East Fork SP, the pomarine jaeger spent most of its time in the general vicinity of South Beach and the saddle dam. This area is typically used as a lounging, loafing, and staging area for the wintering resident flocks of gulls.

Epilogue

The East Fork pomarine jaeger was also seen by the Cincinnati Bird Club field trip leader and attendees on 30 October 1999: Hank (leader) and Lynette Armstrong, Erick Heineke, Doug Wallace, Bobby Foppe, Mark Morgan, and Thomas and Donna Hull; many of these observers returned on 31 October 1999. Local birders Dave Styer, David A. Brinkman, Neill Cade, Ned Keller, Frank Renfrow, Darlena Graham, Norm Walker, Jeff Hayes, and Bill Stanley independently identified this bird. In addition, a number of birders from outside the area came to East Fork SP to observe the jaeger. Doug Overacker led a group of five birders from Dayton on 14 November 1999 and observed the jaeger for over an hour. A birder from Pennsylvania stopped at the park office, asked for directions to the area where the bird was being seen, and observed the bird that day. Two birders from Indiana also observed the bird after asking directions to the area from park manager Charlie Clark. The bird was last seen by Hank Armstrong on 15 November 1999. This record has been accepted by the Ohio Bird Records Committee, based upon documentation submitted by David A. Brinkman, Hank Armstrong, and the author (J. G. Lehman).

REFERENCES

- Farrand, J., Jr., ed. 1983. *The Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, New York.
- Harrison, P. 1983. *Seabirds: An Identification Guide*. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, Massachusetts.
- National Geographic Society. 1983. *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. First Edition. National Geographic Society, Washington, D.C.
- National Geographic Society. 1999. *Field Guide to the Birds of North America*. Third Edition. National Geographic Society, Washington, D.C.
- Sherony, D., and K. Brock. 1997. Jaeger Migration on the Great Lakes. *Birding* 29:372-385.

Book Review

Harry Church Oberholser. 1999. *When Passenger Pigeons Flew in the Killbuck Valley: The Birds of Wayne County, Ohio, 1896*. Kurt Knebusch, ed. Introduction by Bruce Glick, with a checklist of Wayne and Holmes counties by Dennis Kline. The Wooster Book Company and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center, Wooster. 158 pp, ill. Paper, \$8.95. ISBN#1888683961.

The career of Harry Church Oberholser (1870-1963) as an ornithologist was long and prolific. His best-known published works are monumental monographs describing the avifauna of Texas (posthumous, 1974) and Louisiana (1938). A classifier and accumulator of objects by temperament, he obsessively collected specimens in the US and data on birds brought back by explorers from far-flung climes in every continent. He is regarded as one of the foremost "splitters," painstakingly describing plumages and morphology among discriminable forms, ultimately naming 560 species and subspecies. In 1939 Phillips named the dusky flycatcher *Empidonax oberholseri* in his honor.

Oberholser's tenure with the US Bureau of Biological Survey (later the US Fish & Wildlife Service) began in 1895 and lasted until 1941, when he assumed the office of curator of ornithology for the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. He died in Cleveland on Christmas day in 1963. His early career involved the state of Ohio as well, as the twenty year-old Oberholser, while clerking at his father's dry-goods store in Wooster after having left Columbia University without a degree, began in 1890 to compile an annotated list from four years of observation of birds in Wayne County. The work had been commissioned by the Ohio Agricultural Experiment Station (now OSU's Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center) in Wooster, and the fruits of his labors appeared as *A Preliminary List of the Birds of Wayne County in 1896*. This was Oberholser's first publication in a career that was to produce nearly 900 scientific papers.

When Passengers Flew in the Killbuck Valley resurrects this publication, original copies of which are pretty scarce these days. Kurt Knebusch of the OARDC edits it for readers of today (adding modern nomenclature and taxonomic order), Bruce Glick introduces the text, and Dennis Kline appends a very useful modern-day checklist of Holmes and Wayne County birds. It appears from The Wooster Book Company, a Wayne County publisher whose future plans include a second edition of Peterjohn's *The Birds of Ohio*, scheduled for release this fall.

The word "Preliminary" in the title is more than an instance of standard scientific modesty. Oberholser apologizes early for his sketchy data—he reports only 183 species in all—citing the study's short duration and the demands of "an active business life." Oberholser, though an observer of birds since his boyhood, had not grown up in Wayne County, and his career as a specialist—where he distinguished himself in museum work—had yet to begin. Unsurprisingly, the commoner species are more fully treated. The American robin receives the lengthiest account, whereas many less familiar species are pretty much given a lick and a promise, even in the case of the passenger pigeon of the new title, which appears and disappears in three sentences. Lack of time and opportunity, rather than any matters of actual occurrence, seems to explain