

JAEGERS IN THE GULF OF MEXICO

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INFORMATION on pelagic bird life in the Gulf of Mexico has been slow in accumulating. Current literature on the status of the jaegers is particularly deficient. A fairly recent summary¹⁹ listed fewer than 20 separate records of all three species in accounting for virtually all records for the entire Gulf through about 1952. Although the number of records has increased greatly during the past decade, the current A.O.U. Check-list³ lists neither the Parasitic Jaeger (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) nor the Long-tailed Jaeger (*S. longicaudus*) as occurring in the Gulf, and it lists only two localities in the Gulf for the Pomarine Jaeger (*S. pomarinus*). This represents no change since the 1931 A.O.U. Check-list.² Now enough data are available to evaluate better the status of these birds in the Gulf of Mexico.

An important source of information on jaeger distribution is *Audubon Field Notes*, which has reported most of the jaeger observations in the Gulf in recent years. Table 1 lists these records through 1963 and all other records except my own made in 1961 from the U. S. Coast Guard cutter "Gentian" off the Texas and Louisiana coasts. The latter records appear in Figure 1.

So few jaegers have been collected in the Gulf that any realistic evaluation of the status of the three species must take sight records into account. In this report all records which have come to my attention are included.

For purposes of this report the waters of the Atlantic Ocean west of 81° west longitude and north of 22° north latitude are considered to lie within the Gulf of Mexico.

HISTORY

Long-tailed Jaeger.—The earliest records of jaegers in the Gulf are the indefinite statements by Audubon⁴ that he observed them in flocks around the Florida keys. The first definite record, however, is a specimen of the Long-tailed Jaeger taken by a "Mr. Hart" at Marco, Florida, in the winter of 1884 and erroneously reported^{38, 39} as a Parasitic Jaeger. (The error of identification was corrected by J. L. Peters at the Museum of Comparative Zoology, where the specimen was eventually deposited.¹³) The only other specimen of the Long-tailed Jaeger from the Gulf is one taken at Matanzas Bay, Cuba.⁶ I saw one off Galveston, Texas, on 15 November 1961 (Figure 1) and there are three other sight records (Table 1) for a total of six records in all.

Parasitic Jaeger.—The second jaeger to be recorded in the Gulf was,

TABLE 1
JAEGER RECORDS FROM THE GULF NOT IN FIGURE 1

Reference	Locality ^a	Date	Species ^b
4, 13, 40	Florida keys, Florida	April ^c	PA
38, 39	Off Marco, Florida	Winter, 1884	LO ^d
13, 40	Bay of Florida, Florida	26 April 1903	PA ^d
56 ^e	Galveston, Texas	prior to 1909	PA
13, 40	Palma Sola, Florida	5 November 1909	PA
13, 40	Palma Sola, Florida	11 December 1911	PA
13, 40	Tampa Bay, Florida	14 June– 30 June 1910	LO
12	180 miles off western Florida	14 March 1918	PO IV
13	30 miles off Key West, Florida	Late December 1928	PO II
13, 40	Matecumbe Key, Florida	27 February 1929	LO
10	Off Contoy Island, Mexico	3 August 1930	PO
9	30 miles south of Key West, Florida	28 December 1931	PO VIII
51	Off Bolivar Peninsula, Texas	16 and 27 June 1933	PO
1	Matagorda Island, Texas	12 June 1937	PO
1	Matagorda Island, Texas	13 June 1937	PO ^d
6	Matanzas Bay, Cuba	29 November 1937	LO
11	St. Andrews Bay, Florida	21 May 1939	PA
19	28 miles south of Southwest Pass, Louisiana	21 April 1948	PA
19	56 miles south of Southwest Pass, Louisiana	21 April 1948	PA IX
19	Mid-Gulf of Mexico	22 April 1948	PA IV
19	101 miles south of Louisiana	2 May 1948	PA
16	Pensacola, Florida	19 September 1948	UN
19, 40	30 miles north of Carrabelle, Florida	17 September 1950	PO
19	158 miles north of Progreso, Yucatan, Mexico	10 January 1951	PO
18	Pensacola, Florida	17 July 1951	PA II
40	Florida Bay, Florida	January 1952	PA
7	Florida Bay, Florida	26 January 1952	PA
8, 17	28°25'N 92°33'W, off Louisiana	10 April 1952	PO
17	27°45'N 92°54'W and 27°34'N 92°54'W	11 April 1952	PO ^d II
46	Florida Bay, Florida	23 April 1952	PA
11	Cape San Blas, Florida	4 September 1953	PO ^d
22, 14	Off Alabama Point, Alabama	11 March 1955	PA
23	Off Cape San Blas, Florida	1 February 1956	PA II
24, 14	Mobile Bay entrance, Alabama	21 April 1956	PA
24	Off Santa Rosa Island, Florida	22 April 1956	PA VII
36	Between Fort Myers and Dry Tortugas, Florida	23 March 1957	PA
25	Pensacola Beach, Florida	21 April 1957	PA
26	5 miles off Panama City, Florida	21 July 1957	PA III
27, 14	Dauphin Island, Alabama	18 October 1957	PO
28	Isle au Pitre, Louisiana	26 April 1958	LO
50	Off Santa Rosa Island, Florida	28 April 1958	PA
29	45 miles SSW of Grand Island, Louisiana	4 June 1958	PA II
30	30 miles south of Pensacola, Florida	16 August 1958	PO
41	Off Piney Island, Wakulla County, Florida	20 December 1958	PA
42	Off Wakulla Beach, Florida	1 January 1959	PA ^d

^a As given in reference unless modified by the observer through personal communication.

^b PA, Parasitic Jaeger; LO, Long-tailed Jaeger; PO, Pomarine Jaeger; Roman numerals represent number of individuals when more than one was reported.

^c Year not given in reference.

^d Specimen examined in hand, whether or not preserved.

^e From *Check-list of the birds of Texas* by L. R. Wolfe, published about 1956.

TABLE 1
(Continued)

Reference	Locality ^a	Date	Species ^b
47	Off Alligator Point, Florida	6 February 1959	UN
32	Pensacola Beach, Florida	28 April 1959	PA
42	40 miles off Carrabelle, Florida	29 June 1959	UN
32	On beach, Santa Rosa Island, Florida	17 July 1959	PO ^d
43	Clearwater Beach, Florida	17 September– 24 October 1959	PO
44	10 miles off Alligator Point, Florida	12 July 1960	UN
44	35 miles off Carrabelle, Florida	27 July 1960	PA
47	5 miles off Alligator Point, Florida	25 November 1960	UN
31	1 mile off Horn Island, Mississippi	26 February 1961	PA ^d
37	1½ miles off Port Aransas, Texas	14 July 1961	UN
49	10 miles off Port Aransas, Texas	14 July 1961	PA
45	Near Coot Bay, Florida	30 December 1961	PA
15	Calcasieu Pass, Louisiana	14 January 1962	PA ^d II
15	Calcasieu Pass, Louisiana	21 January 1962	PA
15	Mississippi Sound off Pascagoula, Mississippi	24 February 1962	PA ^d V
53	On beach near Cameron, Louisiana	20 April 1962	PO ^d
46	30 miles east of Dry Tortugas, Florida	7 May 1962	PO
48	Bay St. Louis, Mississippi	11 June 1962	UN
35	Off Alligator Point, Florida	6 April 1963	PA

like the first, collected and preserved. This was a Parasitic Jaeger taken by A. C. Bent, 26 April 1903, from the Bay of Florida.¹³ The second specimen of the Parasitic Jaeger was taken at Galveston, Texas, on an unrecorded date prior to 1909;⁵⁶ and the third was secured close ashore at Wakulla Beach (Wakulla County), Florida, on 1 January 1959.^{41, 54} The remaining four specimens of this species from the Gulf were obtained in 1962 at Calcasieu Pass, Louisiana,^{15, 52} and off the Mississippi coast in 1961 and 1962.⁵⁵ Records for the Gulf total 7 specimens and 78 sightings of the Parasitic Jaeger.

Pomarine Jaeger.—The first specimen of the Pomarine Jaeger from the Gulf was obtained on 13 June 1937, when A. R. Hines secured one at Matagorda Island, Texas.¹ It was identified in hand by H. C. Oberholser.³⁴ The first sight record of this species dates back to 14 March 1918, when Helmuth¹² saw four individuals about 180 miles (290 km) off peninsular Florida. The second, third, and fourth specimens were taken from the Motor Vessel "Oregon"¹⁷ off the Louisiana coast in 1952 (Table 1). The remaining three specimens were taken in 1953 and 1959 off northwestern Florida, and in 1962 in Louisiana (Table 1), to bring the total to 7 specimens and 46 sight records.

DISCUSSION

Table 1 and Figure 1 present records of at least 160 jaegers in a ratio of 85 Parasitic to 43 Pomarine to 6 Long-tailed, with 26 unidentified.

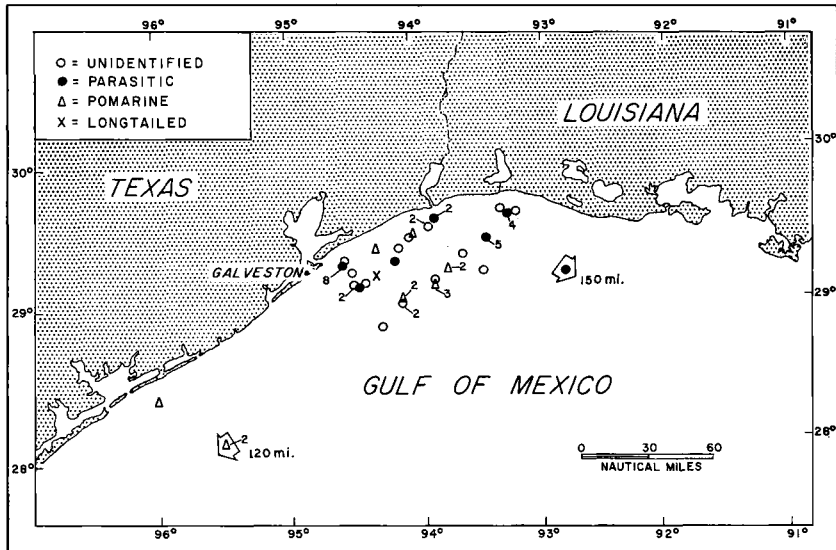


Figure 1. Locations of 54 jaegers seen from the U. S. Coast Guard cutter "Gentian" in 1961. Records not on the map are indicated by symbols within arrows.

The species ratio of specimens on record is 7 : 7 : 2 for the same species, respectively. The sample of specimens is small, but taking the sight records into account it seems safe to conclude that the Parasitic Jaeger has occurred more frequently in the Gulf than the Pomarine Jaeger, and neither species should be considered unusual there. The Long-tailed Jaeger should be regarded as rare.

The seasonal distribution of these species is suggested by Figure 2. Probably some distortion in the apparent seasonal pattern results from the plotting of records by months rather than by some smaller units of time (weeks or days), but the information given with many of the records does not lend itself to more detailed treatment.

The more frequent occurrence of jaegers in the Gulf during spring and fall than at other seasons might reflect migration activity but the Gulf of Mexico is not on a logical migration route for pelagic birds. Thus the pattern of spring and fall peaks of abundance (Figure 2) raises several questions. Spring abundance and occurrence in summer might be accounted for if northward-bound migrants en route through the West Indies are funnelled into the Gulf through the Yucatan Channel and become trapped in the Gulf where they either (1) remain for the summer, (2) wander around and escape through the Florida Straits, (3) migrate northward overland, or some combination of these possibilities.

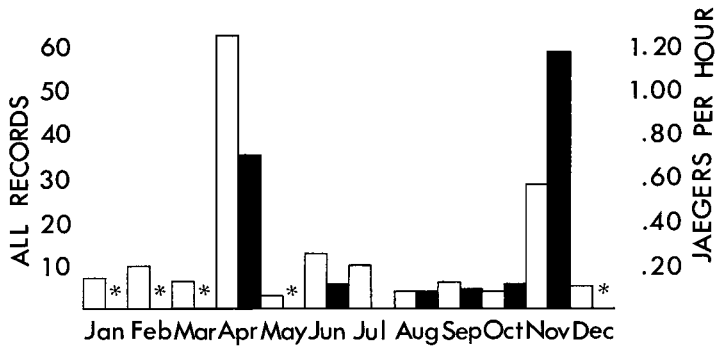


Figure 2. All records of jaegers (white bars) from the Gulf, plotted by months (scale on left); and the numbers of jaegers recorded per hour of observation (black bars) from the U. S. Coast Guard cutter "Gentian" in seven months of 1961 (scale on right). Months in which no time was spent in observation from the "Gentian" are marked by asterisks (*).

The high November frequency, on the other hand, cannot be explained by such a "trapping" hypothesis. It seems best explained by hypothesizing that jaegers either enter the Gulf through the Florida Straits during the southward migration, or come to the Gulf over the continent from their northern breeding grounds, or, both. Although the data are not conclusive, it is interesting in this connection to note that there are no November jaeger records for the Florida Straits and only two November records for the eastern Gulf, while in November, 1961, I observed no fewer than 25 jaegers in the western Gulf off the coast of Texas (Figure 1). The presence of more jaegers in the northwestern Gulf than along the overwater routes they would be expected to travel to reach these waters lends weight to the speculation by Bent⁵ (pp. 20, 27) and Rollo H. Beck (Murphy,²¹ p. 1039) that jaegers carry out much of their migration overland. The numerous inland observations of jaegers reported in various issues of *Audubon Field Notes* and the A.O.U. Check-list³ are proof of some overland migration, although they offer no clear indication of its magnitude. Further, for jaegers to reach the Texas coast in their fall overwater migration via the Florida Straits would require about 800 miles westward displacement and 350 miles of reverse migration back toward the north. Although conclusions regarding the origins of the jaegers in the Gulf would be premature at this time, the possibility that overland migration is extensive or even the rule deserves investigation. More field data (negative as well as positive) from the extreme western and eastern Gulf, and particularly in the Florida Straits, for April and November would be useful.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I appreciate the assistance of those who furnished their unpublished records or other information. Their personal communications are listed in "References." Henry M. Stevenson offered some helpful suggestions during the preparation of the manuscript.

SUMMARY

The three species of jaegers are considerably more abundant in the Gulf of Mexico than is indicated in the A.O.U. Check-list and other summary literature. The records of more than 160 individuals, in the ratio of 85 : 43 : 6 : 26 for Parasitic, Pomarine, Long-tailed, and unidentified jaegers, respectively, date from Audubon's indefinite statements of 1835 and from the first specimen, taken in 1884. There are seven specimens each for the Parasitic and Pomarine jaegers and two for the Long-tailed. There is some substantial evidence that most jaegers which occur there in fall reach the Gulf by flying southward over the United States mainland. This hypothesis deserves further study.

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