

LONG-TAILED SKUA AT ROBE

by JOHN B. COX

At about 11.00, on 12 April 1971, at Cape Dombey, Robe, the South-East of South Australia, my wife and I observed a Long-tailed Skua *Stercorarius longicaudus*. It was first seen coming from the direction of Robe Harbour at a height of c. 20 feet, and then to round the Cape low over the breakers at a range of c. 50 yards. It flew out to sea in a southerly direction.

Good views were obtained with 10 x 50 binoculars, but the very long projecting central tail feathers left no doubts about its identity from the time it was first sighted. Conditions earlier were calm, but shortly before the bird was seen a gusty south-westerly wind had sprung up and the first rain showers had fallen.

Although I do not claim to be familiar with the species, I have seen it on four occasions in the North Sea, the last in 1966. These sightings included both adults and immatures.

Compared with Arctic Skuas *S. parasiticus*, of which species two light phase and three dark phase birds were also observed the same morning, this bird was much more lightly built and lacked their "heavy-shouldered" appearance. Flight was buoyant and almost tern-like. A narrower wing accentuated this feature. When the bird was lower and closer the long thin central tail feathers appeared upcurved towards the tips, although this may have been due to the wind or air pressure close to the waves. It was also noted that whereas the closed tail of the Arctic Skua appears to taper evenly to a point, the tail of this bird, when closed, did not; this made the long central feathers very noticeably distinct from the other tail feathers.

The bird was obviously an adult of the light phase, and much cleaner in appearance than the light phase Arctic Skuas. The entire underparts were an off-white colour darkening only towards the tail, which was very dark on both surfaces. The face was whitish with a yellow tinge towards the neck. This contrasted sharply with a neat blackish cap which was divided from the dark back by a light "collar." Back and wings were brownish, the rump slightly paler. Pale bases to the primaries were barely

visible, and although these were particularly looked for they were hard to determine. The under wings were not clearly seen because when the bird was at its closest range it was at a lower level than the observers.

There is one other well documented record (Carter, 1966) of the species in Australia, an adult seen near the entrance to Port Phillip Bay, Victoria, on 4 April 1965. Iredale (1940) also says "I caught sight of one (i.e. about 1930) which appeared to be of this kind one evening in Sydney Harbour."

A beach-washed specimen was obtained at Muriwai (west coast, near Auckland), New Zealand on 10 January 1964. It was described by Sibson (1967). Sibson states that it was in moult. His description ("... lacked the very long characteristic tail of an adult . . . Nape streaked grey-brown and white with a hint of yellow . . . some bold barring on flanks and lower belly") agrees, I believe, with that of an immature bird in the transition stage of moulting into adult plumage, although, unaccountably, he makes no mention of its gonads.

He says, "Such gaps in its wings must have gravely impaired its powers of flight. The preceding weeks had been cool and blustery; and this skua had evidently succumbed to one of a succession of strong westerly blows . . ." (Muriwai is almost due east of Bass Strait—only 3° N. of Lat. 40° S., which intersects King Is. and Flinders Is.). He further says, "If we follow the distribution map . . . the New Zealand specimen is likely to belong to the subspecies *pallescens* which breeds in north-east Siberia and across Arctic America."

Nevertheless I believe it is reasonable to suggest that this and the Australian sightings are likely to be the nominate race originating from the European breeding grounds, and that the birds travelled south via the Atlantic Ocean and drifted in the prevailing westerly winds to Australia. This is the probable route of other North Atlantic species recorded in Australia and New Zealand, e.g. North Atlantic Shearwater *Calonectris diomedea*, New Zealand, January 1934 (Serventy *et al.*, 1971). Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus*, South Australia, November 1961 (Condon, 1969). Leach's Storm-petrel *Oceanodroma*

leucorhoa leucorhoa, Victoria, July 1965 (Serventy *et al*, 1971); *New Zealand*, Muriwia, winter 1922 (Falla *et al*, 1966). Several specimens of the Arctic Tern (*Sterna macrura*) and the European race of the Common Tern *S. hirundo hirundo* have also been recovered in Australia; at least five of which (including both species) bore European bands (Serventy *et al*, 1971).

It seems likely that there will be further records of the Long-tailed Skua in Australian waters.

Although immature birds can be confusing, I feel that adults are not as difficult to identify in the field as some writers suggest. It is true that the long central tail feathers may be broken short or missing in moult, but the white collar, more sharply-cut black cap, and the more uniformly-coloured and grey-brown back as compared with the somewhat

varying-in-shades brown back of the Arctic Skua are also diagnostic. The Long-tailed Skua is also much slimmer in build, without the heavy-shouldered appearance of the Arctic Skua; its wings are narrower; and its flight is very buoyant and tern-like.

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