

# POSSIBLE PRESENCE OF AN ANTARCTIC SKUA IN NEW JERSEY WATERS

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For twelve years, the D.V.O.C. and the Urner Club have jointly sponsored a late May pelagic trip off the coast of New Jersey in search of seabirds. We were truly pioneers, traveling up to ninety miles from Barnegat Light chasing the Japanese and Russian trawlers from 1976 to 1981; later, after the fishing grounds in the Hudson Canyon were abandoned, we checked out the scallop fleet from fifty to seventy miles offshore.

Birds seem to be more attracted to fishing boats than ocean depths. Before we were sure of this, we spent many hours searching for birds in the deep water of the Hudson Canyon only to find that we had passed the most productive area in the darkness on the way out.

Of all the seabirds, the skuas were always the most desired. The excitement and magic of finding this most powerful and elusive pelagic species is greater to seabird aficionados than the thrill that any landbird could bring. On May 29, 1976, we were extremely fortunate in finding and photographing for the first time in the North Atlantic a South Polar Skua (*Catharacta maccormicki*). The photo was published in *Cassinia 56* (1976), but captioned a Great Skua. A year before, in 1975, Pierre Devillers, a Belgian ornithologist, discovered the skin of a South Polar Skua taken in Greenland in 1902 that also was mislabeled a Great Skua. (*C. skua*). In July 1975, a South Polar Skua that had been banded as a chick six months earlier on Near Anvers Island on the Antarctic Peninsula was shot by an Eskimo in Godhabs Fjord in Greenland. This appears to be the longest flight of any banded bird in history. This incredible flight and the discovery of a South Polar Skua taken in Greenland many years before suggested that these powerful birds might be making this journey into the North Atlantic annually and that most spring Great Skua sightings could be inaccurate. Subsequently, South Polar Skuas began to be seen frequently from Maryland through New Jersey to the Grand Banks and beyond.

For the next ten years on spring trips, we frequently observed one or two South Polars. On some occasions, we had sightings of birds that appeared too large and dark to fit the South Polar mold, but usually too distant for acceptable photographs. On May 29, 1987, we again found ourselves about seventy miles off the New Jersey coast in the midst of a large concentration of Greater and Sooty Shearwaters (*Puffinus gravis* and *P. griseus* respectively) following the loose formation of the scallop fleet. At 4:30 a.m. the first skua appeared, and by 10:30 a.m. we had seen our seventh skua, a record number for these trips. The high count of skuas may have been due to the quantities of shearwaters, but we have had other years with estimates of 10,000 shearwaters with no skua sightings.

Another possible attraction for them could have been the presence of a pod of over 100 large whales including Finbacks (*Balaenoptera physalus*), Minke (*B.*

*acutorostrata*), and Humpback (*Megaptera novaeangliae*) feeding on sand eels. One South Polar Skua was seen parasitizing a Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*) (photo, page 57) that was endeavoring to escape with a sand eel. Most of the skuas, however, were following the boats, sitting in the water picking up floating remains of the scallop shucking. Each boat seemed to be followed by a cloud of shearwaters and a single skua.

Perhaps the most important find of the day was a rather ragged-plumaged skua (see cover photo). This bird's back was heavily streaked with pale, black, and rufous feathers. It had mottled dark blotches below, a dark head—almost as if hooded—and was extremely long-billed.

Its plumage contrasted sharply with the South Polar Skua's, the dark phase of which shows a light collar on a smooth, dark bird. Pale-phase South Polars are readily identifiable with their light-colored head and underparts. The bills of the South Polar Skuas were appreciably shorter than that of our ragged bird. We saw no noticeable size difference between the two birds, but, no close size comparison was possible at the time.

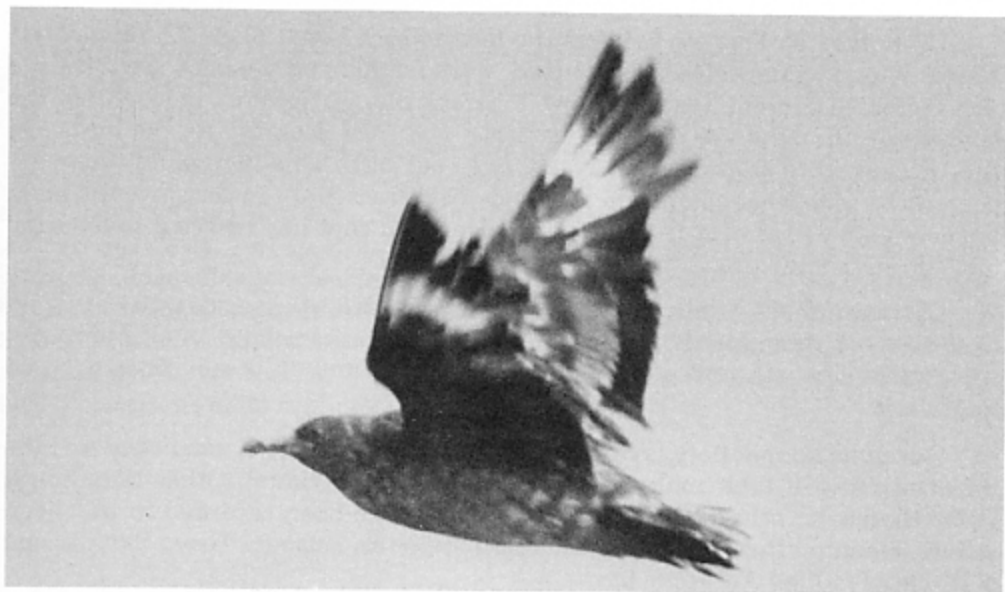
Since the bill length of this bird appeared unusually long, I measured it against other skua photographs that I have taken by making slides of nine different flight photos of South Polars and three of this bird. I projected each bird to a length of 21 inches (53 cm), the average length of a South Polar, and measured each bill. The bills of the nine South Polars measured from 38 mm to 48 mm, with an average of 43 mm. On the three photos of the ragged bird, the bills measured 53 mm, ten mm longer than the average South Polar, which has the same bill length as the Great Skua.

The only species that has a discernable difference in bill length from all others is the Tristan Skua, *C. antarctica hamiltoni*, a subspecies of the Antarctic Skua whose average bill length is 7 mm longer than that of the Great Skua. My measurements may not be exact, but by using twelve different photographs and a consistent measuring method, the relative differences in bill lengths were obvious.

Devillers describes *hamiltoni* as being a smallish, long-billed skua of Tristan da Cunha and Gough, often capped, streaked with rufous and straw on the back. The timing of the molt cycle also suggests a southern form. This close description of our bird would seem to present the possibility of *hamiltoni* in our waters.

There is also the possibility that this ragged bird could be a Great Skua in its post-juvenile molt, which takes place between March and August of its second calendar year. (Adult skuas, on the other hand, molt six months after their breeding season.) But, the plumage descriptions of birds in this post-juvenile molt do not match the photographs of our bird. For instance, the heavily blotched, dark blackish-brown underparts of our bird are quite different from the second-calendar-year Great Skua, whose underparts are "uniform cinnamon brown." The neck is not "uniform black-brown" but rather strongly mottled black-brown. The mantle and scapulars are not "dull black or sooty black," but heavily streaked with

1987 SKUA SIGHTINGS



ANTARCTIC SKUA (*Catharacta antarctica hamiltoni*)?

70 miles east of New Jersey coast, May 29, 1987

Photograph by Alan Brady.



SOUTH POLAR SKUA (*Catharacta maccormicki*), pale phase

70 miles east of New Jersey coast, May 29, 1987

Photograph by Alan Brady.

black, pale and rufous. (Description of the Great Skua post-juvenile molt, Cramp 1983.)

Dr. Robert W. Furness believes the bird to be a Great Skua (*C. skua skua*). Nevertheless, he indicates that the pale, worn feathers on the back are a feature that increases in prominence with age in Great Skuas. However, in juveniles, the feathers on the back are extremely smooth and fresh-looking. As the birds age they appear more mottled and ragged, as in our bird. This individual, then, appears to be somewhat older than a second-year Great Skua in post-juvenile molt. Furness also writes that it could be an older bird that has reverted to a spring molt through some unknown accident (pers. comm.).

Of the southern forms, the Chilean Skua (*C. chilensis*) seems quite unlikely as it does not resemble the photograph. The Chilean is capped in all plumages, underparts are cinnamon or tawny cinnamon, and it is not known to be migratory.

Our predicament here is that the known descriptions of *C. skua skua* and the understanding of their molt cycles do not fit this individual. Other than South Polar Skuas, no other southern skua species have been recorded in northern waters, meaning these photographs record either an aberrant Great Skua or one of its closely allied Antarctic forms.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I appreciate the comments on the photographs and generously shared knowledge by the following persons, some of whom also believe the possibility of the appearance here of a southern Skua: William Buckley, Robert W. Furness, Peter Grant, J. R. Jehl, Jr., Allan Keith, Stuart Keith, Jon Dunn, Ruud van Halewyn, Wayne R. Peterson, Daniel Roby, Richard Rowlett, Will Russell, and James Williams, whose color slide confirms the bird's colors.

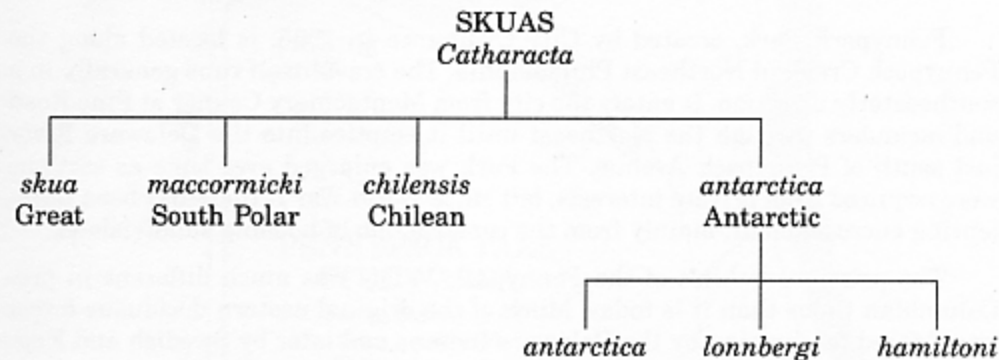
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*Editor's Note:* Currently, the American Ornithologists Union's Check-list (1983) accepts two skuas for North America north of Mexico, the Great Skua (*Catharacta skua*) and the South Polar Skua (*C. maccormicki*) (p. 211-12). It considers the Great Skua to be divided into three subspecies, *skua*, *lonnbergi* and *antarctica*; the latter two not recorded in North America. It does note, however, that "some authors prefer to treat the two southern forms [*lonnbergi* and *antarctica*] as full species, (p. 212). As, for example, in Peter Harrison's recent, *Seabirds, An Identification Guide* (1983), which recognizes four skua species, the Great (*C. skua*), the South Polar (*C. maccormicki*), the Chilean (*C. chilensis*), and the Antarctic (*C. antarctica*). The last bird, Harrison further divides into three subspecies, *C. a. antarctica*, *C. a. lonnbergi* and *C. a. hamiltoni*. (p. 323). Schematically, Harrison's skua complex is as follows:



If, as the author of the foregoing article suggests, the bird described and photographed does come from the Antarctic complex as defined by Harrison and others, his is the first evidence for this species in North America.