

PARASITIC JAEGER'S SEEN FROM GREAT GULL ISLAND, NEW YORK

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The movements of the Parasitic Jaeger (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) in the New York area are still not fully understood. While it is the jaeger most frequently seen in shore, nearly all published data (Bull, 1954: 223-224) are of sightings in the open Atlantic, seen either from the Long Island or New Jersey shores, or from boats. The only two records I have found of sightings elsewhere in the New York area are one of six birds in Gardiner's Bay, July 8, 1911 (Bull, 1964) and a recent observation of two individuals seen off Rocky Point, near Miller Place, L.I. on July 20, 1967 (Bull, 1970:21). There are no Connecticut records for Parasitic Jaeger.

During August and September of 1970, 1971, and 1972 considerable numbers of Parasitic Jaegers were observed from Great Gull Island, New York. Great Gull Island is a seventeen-acre island seven miles south of New London, Connecticut. Lying at the eastern end of Long Island Sound, it is sheltered from the open ocean by the south fork of Long Island. Formerly an army fort, Great Gull Island now bears a flourishing colony of Roseate and Common Terns (*Sterna dougalli* and *S. hirundo*) and is operated as a research station by the American Museum of Natural History.

While no recent visitors had looked for jaegers at Great Gull Island before 1970, earlier visitors to the island had reported jaegers there. In 1888, Basil H. Dutcher visited Great Gull Island and adjacent Little Gull Island from August 6 to 16 (*Proceedings of the Linnaean Society* 1970:76). Without specifying which and when, he mentions having seen Pomarine and Parasitic Jaegers. One of the lighthouse keepers at Little Gull Island reported that the jaegers arrived about the same time as the bluefish and stayed as long as the bluefish were there. Dutcher reported seeing three to ten jaegers each day. In 1889 William Dutcher visited the two islands from July 8 to 16. He does not specify which jaeger he saw, but noted two for July 12 and one July 15. The keeper at Little Gull Island also noted one to three jaegers on five days during June and early July of that year.

During 1970, 1971, and 1972 Parasitic Jaegers were seen from Great Gull Island chasing terns, flying over the fishing boats east of Little Gull Island, resting on the water, soaring directly over Great Gull Island, or simply flying past. In 1970 and 1971 an intensive watch was maintained for jaegers during August and September. During 1972 no one was free to look regularly for jaegers. Consequently many fewer were recorded, and August and September 1972 observations will not usually be considered in this paper as the small amount of data is

not representative of the total number of jaegers that were probably present.

During 1970 and 1971 the frequency and movements of the Parasitic Jaegers were different each year. In 1970 all the jaegers were seen singly or in small groups, never more than five together, always flying towards Great Gull Island from the east and continuing west until no longer visible. Occasionally, a jaeger would circle around the island or chase another bird before resuming its course, but no jaeger was ever seen flying towards Montauk and the open ocean.

In 1971 many more terns were still carrying fish to young on the island in August than we had seen in 1970. Perhaps as a consequence of this, groups of up to eight jaegers were sometimes seen resting on the water, in between individual or group chases after fish-bearing terns. On the corresponding dates in 1970 not more than six jaegers had been during the entire day.

During 1971 jaegers were also seen circling Great Gull Island and in the Race, the stretch of water between Little Gull Island and Fishers Island. The Race was well crowded with fishing boats all summer and also attracted many gulls and terns. On days when jaegers gathered in the Race and did not simply fly past Great Gull Island as they had usually done in 1970, counting their numbers without fear of duplication was more difficult. We felt the most accurate way was to make a 360° scan around the island and note the numbers of jaegers counted at that time, rather than compile a total of all the birds seen during the day, which might include much duplication.

In 1970 the first Parasitic Jaegers observed were two harassing a tern on August 10. The second jaegers were seen seven days later, on August 17. From this date on, jaegers were seen almost everyday until September 13, when everyone left the island. In 1970 there were never more than six jaegers seen on any day before September 10, and two or three was the more usual number. However, on September 10 of that year, twenty-eight Parasitic Jaegers passed Great Gull Island. As they all flew from east to west without pausing near the island I do not believe there was much chance of duplication. On the following day seventeen Parasitic Jaegers flew past. Although wind did not seem to be a factor in driving the jaegers past Great Gull Island, an unusual aspect of the jaeger movement on September 10 and 11, 1970 was that all twenty-eight of the birds passing Great Gull Island on the 10th flew on the north side of the island, and the next day every jaeger flew by on the south side. On the day following this apparent peak in the jaeger movement none were seen, and the following day, September 13, two.

In 1971 the number of jaegers around Great Gull Island seemed much larger than in the previous year, and the greatest concentrations occurred on different dates. The first of the season were two seen

flying by on August 11. The next were seen on August 16. After August 16, they were seen nearly every day. I was on the Island until September 22, but no jaegers were seen after September 15. In 1971 the daily average was between five and eight Parasitic Jaegers. There were two periods when many more jaegers seemed to be present; as in 1970 each of these peaks lasted two days and was followed by a sharp drop. The first 1971 peak occurred on August 25 and 26. On August 25 at least thirteen jaegers were seen, with a possible three to seven more. On August 26 the jaegers were circling the island and congregating in the Race. At 12 noon that day we counted fifteen, at 5 P.M. twenty, and at 6 P.M. sixteen. The second peak occurred in early September. On September 4 we saw twenty-eight and on September 5, twenty; on these days the jaegers were flying past the island rather than circling it or pausing to chase the terns, of which, in fact, there were very few left.

Besides the terns, Parasitic Jaegers were also seen chasing the immature Laughing Gulls (*Larus atricilla*), which sometimes congregated on the island's piers, although no gull ever had any food in its bill visible to us. Sometimes after being pursued by a jaeger the Laughing Gull would veer around and chase the jaeger, and the gull seemed to show agility equal to the jaeger's in following feints and dodges. However, after having driven the jaeger from the pier area, the gull returned to a perch and was left unpursued. Jaegers were never seen to chase the Herring and Great Black-backed Gulls (*L. argentatus* and *L. marinus*) also common on the pier. Once however, when three Mute Swans (*Cygnus olor*) were flying westward low over the water, a passing jaeger followed close behind the rear bird without actually harassing it, and continued after the group until no longer visible as they approached Plum Island.

The jaegers' course by Great Gull Island was not the result of strong winds or stormy weather driving them inland from a more usual flight path farther out at sea. Most of the days we saw jaegers were hot and windless. Coast Guard weather readings for September 10 and 11, 1970, when at least forty-five jaegers passed Great Gull Island, show temperatures in the sixties with periods of calm at mid-day and winds from the south at no more than fifteen miles per hour at other times. Were the jaegers' presence the result of winds, one would have expected strong easterly or southeasterly winds.

That jaegers are not easily driven by winds was further proven to us during hurricane Doria on August 28, 1971, when we measured winds at 70 m.p.h. on the island. Even during the height of the storm the jaegers flying past the island exhibited complete mastery, and seemed to lose no control over their flight. The gulls and terns, meanwhile, were being severely buffeted whenever they attempted flight. During early

September of 1972 two strong tropical storms hit Great Gull Island, but these did not precipitate any increase in jaeger numbers.

Most Parasitic Jaegers seen were adults in the light phase. Some darker birds were seen, but it was not always possible to tell if they were immatures or birds in the dark phase. Of the forty jaegers seen in 1970, eleven, or 27.5%, were dark. In 1971, of the minimum 101 jaegers counted, thirty, or 29.7%, were dark. Of the fifteen jaegers seen in 1972, four, or 26.6%, were dark. The small number of dark jaegers, either dark phase adults or light phase birds less than three years old, seemed remarkable. It may be that most young birds follow a different route or pass this area at a later date.

Although there have been observers on Gull Island during weekends in October the last three years no jaegers have been seen at that time. However, on December 31, 1971, while crossing from Niantic, Connecticut to Great Gull Island, David Duffy observed a Parasitic Jaeger in Long Island Sound. This represents a new extreme date for the species, which had not been previously recorded later than December 5 (Bull, 1964).

Whether the Parasitic Jaegers seen from Great Gull Island represent a regular fall movement down the New England coastline can only be determined by further observation. Along the coastline to the east of Great Gull Island, the Parasitic Jaeger is regularly seen in Rhode Island during late summer and early fall. Its numbers are greatest there during late August and early September, at the same time the largest numbers are seen off Great Gull Island. The maximum seen in Rhode Island is 11 at the mouth of the Sakonnet River on August 18, 1940. If these observations can be coordinated with others in Long Island Sound, Gardiner's Bay and at Montauk Point, we may be able to determine more precisely what previously "unknown" routes these jaegers use in the New York area.

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