

A SOUTH POLAR SKUA SEEN FROM LAND, WITH NOTES ON THE SPECIES' STATUS IN NEW YORK

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The various species of pelagic birds inhabiting the waters south of Long Island, New York vary considerably in their tendencies to approach land. For instance, although Leach's Storm-Petrel (*Oceanodroma leucorhoa*) is several orders of magnitude less numerous than Wilson's Storm-Petrel (*Oceanites oceanicus*) in New York waters, it has actually been recorded more frequently from inland sites in New York State (generally after hurricanes or other powerful storms; Askildsen 1998). Parasitic (*Stercorarius parasiticus*) and Pomarine (*S. pomarinus*) Jaegers provide another example, less dependent on exceptional weather. Both jaeger species are regular visitors to NY waters, but Parasitic is observed much more frequently from land, whereas Pomarine is generally the more numerous species far offshore. A few species of more or less regular occurrence offshore have been recorded from land so rarely that any such observations warrant special attention and documentation-e.g., Northern Fulmar (*Fulmarus glacialis*), Audubon's Shearwater (*Puffinus lherminieri*), Long-tailed Jaeger (*S. longicaudus*), Great Skua (*S. skua*), South Polar Skua (*S. maccormicki*), and Atlantic Puffin (*Fratercula arcticus*).

On Saturday, 23 Jun 2001, we had the good fortune to see a South Polar Skua from Democrat Point, at the western end of Fire Island, Long Island, NY. Below is an account of our experience, a detailed description of the bird, and a discussion of prior records of skuas in New York and adjacent states-especially those made from land.

A MEMORABLE SEAWATCH AT DEMOCRAT POINT

The weather on 23 Jun 2001 had been extremely unsettled, featuring high heat and humidity, increasingly strong winds from the south, leaden skies, and ocean fog. When we headed out to Democrat Pt. for an evening seawatch, we noticed immediately that the 20 mph onshore wind actually felt warm-at least 70° F. This was in marked contrast to the cool sea breezes we had experienced on other recent trips to this site, and we surmised that the water must have been unusually warm for the date. This perception was corroborated by unusually early reports of warm water fish on the LI shore (J. Fritz, pers. comm.) and by the *New York Times* weather map, which showed a bulge of 70° F water extending northward to the shores of southwestern LI that day.

We arrived at the jetty, our first targeted vantage point, at about 18:10 EDT and immediately noticed several shearwaters close to the beach. As we worked through these, we realized that dozens of Greater (*P. gravis*) and Cory's (*Calonectris diomedea*) Shearwaters were present. Excited, we set up our scopes

and determined that most of the shearwaters were flying past from west to east and that Greater outnumbered Cory's by approximately two to one. Single Wilson's Storm-Petrels appeared, three in all, and an immature Northern Gannet (*Morus bassanus*) flew by. We immediately called Gerta and John Fritz, and struggling with the fickle cellular service, managed to get word to them about what we were seeing.

Several Greater Shearwaters rested on the water just beyond the surf, only 50 m from where we stood. An adult Great Black-backed Gull (*Larus marinus*) attended them, lunging occasionally and causing them to lift off the water briefly between calmer moments when the whole group would settle back down together. Continued scanning revealed that other singles and small groups of shearwaters were present on the water, visible intermittently between cresting swells. Meanwhile the flight continued, and we had nearly constant views of shearwaters arcing past. Eventually we both returned our attention to the closer group of resting shearwaters. Simultaneously, we both saw a large, dark bird flapping and circling above them. The gull was no longer present. From the first glance, we recognized the new bird as a stercorariid and noticed that it was very large, bulky, short-tailed, and dark. With adrenaline rushing, we needed just a few more seconds to comprehend that the striking white wing flashes were present on the upperwing as well as the underwing and that the nape was extensively pale, contrasting with the otherwise uniformly dark, gray-brown plumage. The bird was surprisingly cooperative—it actually settled on the water among the shearwaters, allowing us to study it at length. Raw excitement evolved into elation as we became confident that we were indeed watching a South Polar Skua.

The skua remained on the water for 15 minutes, raising and flapping its wings a few times, lunging at one or another shearwater on occasion, and slowly drifting with them about 50 m to the westward. Where were the Fritzes? By now they were overdue. Between scope views we struggled with the cell phone, but after repeated failures to make a connection, we pinned our hopes on the bird's apparent satisfaction with the site. We had ample time to record our impressions and to consult the *NGS* guide.

At 18:35 the skua arose and flew strongly eastward. Its flight at this point was very different from the hovering/circling flight it had shown while inspecting the shearwaters. Now it flew with steady, powerful strokes 2-3 m above the water until it was about 500 m to the east, treating us to spectacular views along the way. Just as we were about ready to accept that the bird was gone, it banked to its left and returned toward us. As it approached, it rose to a height of 20 m and gave us excellent views of its underparts. When it was no more than 100 m from us, the bird turned to its left once more and angled out to sea on a southeast bearing, descending somewhat as it did so. We watched it until it vanished in the distance at 18:40.

Soon after, the winds shifted to the west, the sky brightened somewhat, and the fog withdrew. The shearwater flight abated. The Fritzes at last arrived, their delay caused in part by their discovery along the way of a moribund Cory's Shearwater. Together we counted several more shearwaters and another gannet, then set out on foot toward the inlet itself to see if any wayward birds had come in to rest among the sand bars and lagoons there.

We found nothing but the expected species ashore-these including Piping Plovers (*Charadrius melodus*), Roseate Terns (*Sterna dougallii*), a "portlandica" (one-year-old) Common Tern (*S. hirundo*), and newly hatched Least Terns (*S. albifrons*) - but scanning the waters from the mouth of the inlet we saw another Wilson's Storm-Petrel and had stunning views of Greater Shearwaters hanging almost stationary over the waves, just a few scant meters from shore. As our scope fields overflowed with the image of one particularly obliging individual, we realized that this combination of proximity, the bird's slow flight, and our own stable footing produced the best views we had ever enjoyed of a free-flying shearwater. Finally darkness precluded any further efforts and, exhilarated, we made our way back to our vehicles. Our final tally of shearwaters included 40 Greaters, 18 Cory's, and about 20 too distant for positive identification.

DESCRIPTION AND IDENTIFICATION

The bird was massive, broad-winged, and short-tailed. The tail was somewhat wedge-shaped and lacked projecting central feathers. In general, its plumage was uniformly dark gray-brown. This prevailing color had a very cold quality, lacking any reddish or golden hues. Its nape was extensively pale, somewhat golden or yellowish in tone, and in stark contrast to the rest of the upperparts. Bold white flashes were conspicuous on both the upperwings and underwings. These flashes involved the visible bases of all the primaries, where they emerged from the coverts. On certain views (particularly when the bird returned from the east at a greater height), we could discern that the underparts of the body were slightly paler than the underwing coverts and mantle, but otherwise similarly unmottled. The bill and eye were entirely dark. The bill was large but not massive.

In direct comparison with Greater Shearwaters the bird appeared twice as massive and about 15% (several inches) longer from bill to tail. The neck and breast were very deep. While on the water, it raised its head several times, extending its neck somewhat. When it did so, the neck still appeared very thick, and the pale nape was well shown. Both observers specifically noted that the bird lacked any speckling or pattern to the mantle or underparts and likewise lacked any hint at all of warm golden or light brown tones save for the nape. This impression was confirmed at leisure with the bird in flight and at rest, both before and after consultation of *NGS*.

This bird could not have been a Pomarine Jaeger. As noted above, it was too large; it was differently shaped (especially re its broad wings and strikingly short, wedge-shaped tail); and it was differently plumaged (especially re the extensive white upperwing flashes, but also in its lack of barring to uppertail, undertail, and underwing coverts).

Great Skua was excluded after careful consideration of the range of plumage variation in all ages of both species (Harrison 1983, Jonsson 1993, Malling Olsen and Larsson 1997, *NGS*, Mullarney et al. 1999). In brief, all Great Skuas, with the exception of some juveniles, are expected to show mottled upperparts, abundant brown tones to the plumage, and contrast on the upperwing between lighter mantle, scapulars, and coverts on the one hand and blacker flight

feathers on the other. We were able confidently to conclude that the bird we observed lacked these three characteristics. Furthermore, those few juvenile Great Skuas also lacking these features would be expected to lack also the conspicuously pale nape and all black bill shown by the bird we observed. The not-so-massive appearance of our bird's bill is also more consistent with South Polar Skua than with Great Skua. Similar reasoning apparently is adequate to exclude the remote possibilities of other southern skuas-i.e., Chilean Skua (*S. s. chilensis*) and the various forms of Brown Skua (ssp. *antarctica*, *hamiltoni*, and *lonnbergi*).

The only widely cited field mark of dark or intermediate morph South Polar Skua that we did not detect was the "pale frontal blaze"-or contrasting pale feathering at the base of the upper mandible. Neither observer knew of the importance of this character while the bird was in view, and thus it might have been overlooked. Several photos of darker South Polar Skuas in Malling Olsen and Larsson (1997) suggest that this feature is not always conspicuous, and we feel confident that our failure to record it does not constitute an obstacle to our identification.

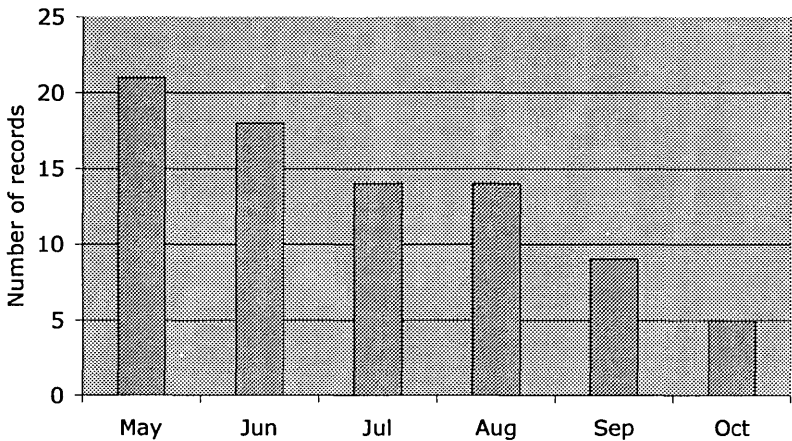
SOUTH POLAR SKUAS IN NEW YORK AND ADJACENT STATES

The historical record of skua observations in NY has been complicated-not only by the very real objective difficulties involved in distinguishing the various forms, but also by shifting taxonomic treatments and even a little birding parochialism. The fact that all forms of "large skuas" (the erstwhile *Catharacta*) were treated as a single species as recently as 1977 (AOU Checklist) has condemned most North American sight records prior to that date to a murky, uninterpretable status. Meanwhile, changing perceptions regarding listing jurisdictions over such important birding waters as Cox's Ledge, Block Canyon, and Hudson Canyon have produced unfortunate outcomes. Not only have many records been listed by more than one state (e.g., the White-faced Storm-Petrel collected 18 Aug 1953 near Block Canyon appears in official summaries for MA, RI, and NY!), but even worse, several outstanding records (including several skuas) have gone "unclaimed" by any state's archivists (e.g., birds observed in RI waters by NY birders sailing from Montauk). The situation has improved greatly since the late 1970's, following the elevation of *maccormicki* to full species status, the elucidation of this form's occurrence in the Northern Hemisphere by Devillers (1977) and Veit (1978), and a détente like stabilization of *de facto* state boundaries at sea.

Enough data have accumulated during the last 25 years to demonstrate that Great Skua is a rare winter visitor to the waters off the New York Bight, primarily Dec-Mar, and that South Polar Skua occurs considerably more frequently as a spring/summer visitor to this area, primarily May-Sep (Balch 1981). A series of records from Hudson Canyon during late May 1976-1979, just as the general status of the species was beginning to emerge, created the perception that South Polar Skua shared with Sooty Shearwater (*P. griseus*) a pronounced "Memorial Day peak." Implied was a clockwise migratory path around the North Atlantic during the austral winter, along the course of which South Polar

Skuas were believed to pass NY during a relatively brief period from late May to early Jun. Subsequent field work south of Block Island, at Cox's Ledge, and at George's Bank has produced many skuas during the period Jul-Sep, the great majority of which were likely South Polar (Veit and Petersen 1993, *Field Notes of Rhode Island Birds*, R. Ferren, in litt.). Thus, this species' diminution after mid Jun might prove to be less abrupt than first suspected (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Seasonal occurrence of known and presumed South Polar Skuas in NY, NJ, and RI.



Eighty-one records of known and presumed South Polar Skuas from NY, NJ, and RI are summarized in **Table 1** (Bull 1976, Askildsen 1998, Walsh et al. 1999, *North American Birds* and antecedents, *Kingbird*, *Field Notes of Rhode Island Birds*, Focus on Nature Tours Website, R. Ferren in litt.). Five of these were seen from land, only two of which were explicitly identified as South Polar Skuas on the basis of field marks. Buckley, Lauro, and Paxton observed one at Fire Island Inlet on 8 June 1974 (*Kingbird* 25:62); and Baldelli and McGuiness observed one from Easthampton's Main Beach on 16 July 2000 (*Kingbird* 50:445). The other three land-based records are the oft-cited individual that struck the Montauk Lighthouse 10 Aug 1896, an enigmatic inland record from Braddock's Bay, Monroe County 7 Oct 1973 (Lloyd and Sunderlin, *Kingbird* 24:59-60), and a bird seen harassing terns at Robert Moses State Park on 1 Oct 1977 (Spencer, *Kingbird* 28:62).

It is particularly striking that two of the five previous land-based, NY records of known or presumed South Polar Skuas came from around Fire Island Inlet-the location of our observation on 23 Jun 2001. Also noteworthy is the fact that a third land-based record, that of 16 Jul 2000, was made under very similar circumstances to those we encountered: an unusual inshore incursion of shearwaters after sustained southerly winds. Thus, although our observation was admittedly very unusual, it was certainly not without precedent.

Table 1. Records May-Oct of skuas (South Polar and other "*Catharacta*" not specifically identified as Great Skua) from New Jersey, New York, and Rhode Island.

Area	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Totals
NJ s + w HC	5	1		1			7
Hudson Canyon	9			1			10
LI shelf waters, w MP			1				1
20-30 mi. s MP	1	2	2	1			6
NY from land		1	1	1		2	5
Block Canyon	2	1			1		4
Cox's Ledge	4	12	9	6	3	1	35
Other RI		1	1	4	5	2	13
Totals	21	18	14	14	9	5	81

Virtually absent from the historical record are reports of South Polar Skuas from the shelf waters south of LI and west of Montauk Pt., between the immediate shore and the continental slope. In fact, just a single record exists from these waters: three birds 30-70 miles south of Fire Island Inlet, 5-7 July 1975 (*Kingbird* 25:235). This deficit stands in marked contrast to the experience on shelf waters in the vicinity of Montauk Point and in neighboring RI, where relatively extensive coverage has produced approximately 50 records within 40 miles of land. When one considers further that these 50 records have translated into just a single summer skua from land at Montauk (the August 1886 specimen) and none from RI, the LI South Shore's four land-based records (including the one reported herein) would seem to promise that enhanced coverage of the waters 10-50 miles south of LI, between late May and early Oct, should produce additional records in the future.

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