



Birds Australia Rarities Committee Unusual Record Report Form

This form is intended to aid observers in the preparation of a submission for a major rarity in Australia. (It is not a mandatory requirement) Please complete all sections ensuring that you attach all relevant information including copies of your notes, photographs or other supportive material. (PLEASE USE BLACK INK).

Full Name: Dr Nikolas K. Haass	Office Use
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Species Name: South Polar Skua (intermediate morph)	Scientific Name: <i>Stercorarius (Catharacta) maccormicki</i>
Date(s) and time(s) of observation:	14/04/2012; 9:43 am
How long did you watch the bird(s)?	30 seconds
First and last date of occurrence:	14/04/2012
Distance to bird:	down to 10 m

Site Location Continental shelf break, approximately 25 nautical miles off Sydney, NSW
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Habitat Pelagic. Continental shelf break.
Sighting conditions Good light conditions. Clear visibility, calm sunny weather. See attached pictures.
Optical aids used: Leica 12x50 BA (NKH) and others; Photos: Nikon D7000 (Nigel Miller), Canon Eos 1D Mark IV (Tony Dawe)

To your knowledge, is the species seen frequently at this site? Only four South Polar Skuas have been accepted by BARC off NSW (#144, #690 and two by NKH: #688 & #689).
Did you use a field guide? <i>The bird was identified spontaneously without using a field guide. Previously and subsequently NH has read following references:</i> BEAMAN, M. & S. MADGE (1998): The Handbook of Bird Identification for Europe and the Western Palearctic. London. • BEARHOP, S., R. FURNESS & B. ZONFRILLO (1998): Identification of <i>Catharacta</i> Skuas: variability in juvenile Great Skuas. <i>Birding World</i> 11: 355-359. • CRAMP, S. & K.E.L. SIMMONS (1983): Handbook of the Birds of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. Vol. 3. Oxford, New York. • ENTICOTT, J. & D. TIPLING (1997): Seabirds of the World. London. • HARRISON, P. (1983): Seabirds - an identification guide. - London & Sydney • HARRISON, P. (1987): Seabirds of the World. A Photographic Guide. London. • HIGGINS, P.J. & S.J.J.F. DAVIES (1996): Handbook of Australian, New Zealand & Antarctic Birds, Vol. 3, Snipe to Pigeons. Oxford, Melbourne. • HOYO, J. DEL, A. ELLIOTT & J. SARGATAL (1996): Handbook of the Birds of the World. Vol. 3: Hoatzin to Auks. Barcelona. • JIGUET, F. (1997): Identification of South Polar Skua: the Brown Skua pitfall. <i>Birding World</i> 10: 306-310. • JIGUET, F., O. CHASTEL & C. BARBRAUD (1999): A hybrid South Polar Skua x Brown Skua. <i>Birding World</i> 12: 118-122. • KAUFMAN, K. (1990): A Field Guide to Advanced Birding. Boston. • KING, J. & D. PARKIN (1997): OrnithoNews: Great skua upheavals. <i>Birding World</i> 10: 362-363. • LEWINGTON, I., P. ALSTRÖM & P. COLSTON (1991): A Field Guide to the Rare Birds of Britain and Europe. St. Helier. • MALLING OLSEN, K., & L. JONSSON (1989): Die Bestimmung der Raubmöwen Stercorariidae. <i>Limicola</i> 3: 93-136. • MALLING OLSEN, K., & H. LARSSON (1997): Skuas and Jaegers. A Guide to the Skuas and Jaegers of the World. London. • MILLINGTON, R. (2000): An interesting skua in Dorset. <i>Birding World</i> 13: 336-339. • MLODINOW, S.G., & M. O'BRIEN (1996): America's 100 Most Wanted Birds. Helena. • MOON, S. & D. CARRINGTON (2002): A Brown Skua in Glamorgan. <i>Birding World</i> 15: 387-389. • NEWELL, D., R. PORTER & T. MARR (1997): South Polar Skua - an overlooked bird in the eastern Atlantic. <i>Birding World</i> 10: 229-235. • SCOTT, M. (2002): A Brown Skua on the Isles of Scilly - the first for Europe? <i>Birding World</i> 15: 383-386. • SHIRIHAI, H. (2002): A Complete Guide to Antarctic Wildlife. Finland.

Other observers: Dion Hobcroft, Roger McGovern, Hal Epstein, Steve Anyon-Smith, Nigel Miller, Tony Dawe, Raja Stephenson, Graham Buchan, Robert Griffin, John Weigel, Max de Beer, Greg Mac and other pelagic participants on the Halicat. Nobody disagreed with the ID.

How confident are you of your identification? 100%

Other details:

The bird approached from E, approaching the bow at the starboard side and travelling to WSW parallel with the vessel. It flew past the boat, approximately 10 m above the water. It did not stop or deviate. It was presumably attracted by the boat itself as we were not chumming and there were no other seabirds following the boat at the time.

Physical Description

(1) **Number:** one individual was observed

(2) **Age, sex:** Second-year or adult, intermediate morph. Juveniles can be ruled out as they are not polymorphic (HIGGINS & DAVIES 1996; MALLING OLSEN & LARSSON 1997). They are very cold leaden grey, dark and uniform birds and show very little contrast between the head and body, and the wings (HARRISON 1987; HIGGINS & DAVIES 1996; MALLING OLSEN & LARSSON 1997; contra HARRISON 1983; ENTICOTT & TIPLING 1997; BEAMAN & MADGE 1999). In the bird reported here, all remiges looked quite fresh with no moult indication. This and the relatively small white patch at the base of the primaries of the underwing could indicate that this bird was a second-year bird (after post-juvenile moult). However, the wholly blackish bill indicated that the bird was an adult. Adult South Polar Skuas have three morphs: pale, intermediate and dark. Intermediate morphs vary continuously from pale creamy blonde to cold dark brown on the head, mantle and underbody. This bird is close to the pale end of the intermediate morph. Therefore, we conclude that this bird was a second-year or adult, intermediate morph.

(3) **Size and shape:** Typical *Catharacta*-Skua with bulky heavy-shouldered and -chested body and short but broad tail with no sign of elongated central tail feathers; larger and bulkier than Pomarine Jaeger, but more slender appearance than Brown Skua with relatively smaller appearing head and bill (including less prominent gonydeal angle). The wings looked strikingly narrow – a feature of South Polar Skua, in which the wings can appear more Pomarine Jaeger-like than Brown Skua-like in flight. The wings may appear that strikingly narrow, if the secondaries have not finished growing and hence the elongated tertials creating a conspicuous bulge where the wings join the body (Fig. 4).

(4) **Plumage colour and pattern:** Conspicuously uniform cold creamy ‘mushroom-coloured’ head, neck, mantle and underbody (Figs. 1-4). Face and throat appeared slightly darker than neck, nape and crown (Fig. 4). Dark cold brown back, scapulars, rump and upper tail (Figs. 5-7) contrasting with pale mantle and head (this was noted by several observers when the skua flew past the boat). The upperwings looked uniformly dark cold blackish brown with no indication of any golden buff shaft streaking or other blotching in these feather tracts and showed a conspicuous white patch across the base of the primaries (Figs. 1 & 5). Mostly very dark brown underwing (with slightly paler median underwing coverts) and underside of tail, contrasting strongly with the pale underbody (Fig. 4). Conspicuous, but unusually small, white patch at the base of the primaries on the underwing (Figs. 2, 4, 6). This smaller white patch does occur in South Polar Skuas, albeit not commonly (MALLING OLSEN & LARSSON 1997).

(5) **Colour of bill, eyes and legs/feet:** bill, eyes, legs and feet blackish

(6) **Calls:** none heard

(7) **Behaviour, movements, flight pattern, feeding, interactions with other birds, comparisons with other species**

Flight style: Typical *Catharacta*-Skua.

Other sightings: Surprisingly, no other jaegers/skuas were seen on the day. White-faced (1) and Wilson’s (1) Storm-petrels, Gibson’s (3), Black-browed (2), Campbell (1) and Indian Yellow-nosed (1) Albatross, **Kermadec** (1), Grey-faced and Providence Petrels, Flesh-footed, Wedge-tailed and Short-tailed Shearwaters, Little Penguin (2), Australasian Gannets, Crested Terns, Silver Gulls and an **Intermediate Egret!** In addition, Pilotwhales (spec.), Risso’s and Oceanic Bottlenose Dolphins, Flying-fish (spec.).

Other species with which you think it might be confused and how these were eliminated?

Brown Skua *S. (C.) antarctica*: bulkier; more chestnut/warmer brown; lack of strong contrast between head/mantle, and the remainder of the dorsum; lack of strong contrast between the underbody and underwings; [probably this form should be split into three species: Falkland Skua *S. antarctica*, Tristan Skua *S. hamiltoni* and Brown Skua *S. lonnbergi* (for review see KING & PARKIN, 1997)]

Great Skua *S. (C.) skua*: bulkier; dark cap; darker primaries/secondaries than coverts; upperparts with whitish, yellowish or reddish spots or streaks; more chestnut/warmer brown; lack of strong contrast between head/mantle, and the remainder of the dorsum; lack of strong contrast between the underbody and underwings.

Chilean Skua *S. (C.) chilensis*: cinnamon underparts and underwing coverts; dark cap; pale blueish bill; lack of strong contrast between head/mantle, and the remainder of the dorsum; lack of strong contrast between the underbody and underwings.

Pomarine Jaeger *S. pomarinus*: smaller, lighter, longer tail, more pointed wings; less white in wing (half-moon); juvenile with double half-moon and barring; even pale morph never uniform cold creamy.



Figure 1: South Polar Skua off Sydney, NSW, 14 April 2012, 9:43 am (Photo: Nigel Miller)



Figure 2: South Polar Skua off Sydney, NSW, 14 April 2012, 9:43 am (Photo: Nigel Miller)



Figure 3: South Polar Skua off Sydney, NSW, 14 April 2012, 9:43 am (Photo: Nigel Miller)



Figure 4: South Polar Skua off Sydney, NSW, 14 April 2012, 9:43 am (Photo: Nigel Miller)



Figure 5: South Polar Skua off Sydney, NSW, 14 April 2012 (Photo: Tony Dawe)



Figure 6: South Polar Skua off Sydney, NSW, 14 April 2012 (Photo: Tony Dawe)



Figure 7: South Polar Skua off Sydney, NSW, 14 April 2012 (Photo: Tony Dawe)

Was the description written from notes and/or sketches made (tick box):
 during the observation or; shortly after the observation or; from memory?

Please indicate supportive evidence available.

Was the bird: photographed, taped or video taped? If yes to any of these, by whom?
Photos by Nigel Miller & Tony Dawe

What experience have you had with the species in question?

NKH has extensive experience with skuas and jaegers having been pelagic trip leader on many trips off California, New Jersey/New York and Delaware/Maryland and having participated on many pelagic trips off North Carolina, Galapagos, Queensland, New South Wales, Tasmania and New Zealand. In addition, NKH has done a lot of "sea-watching" in Germany, France, Portugal, Scotland, Norway, Morocco, Senegal and Namibia. Specifically, NKH has seen many South Polar Skuas on pelagic trips off California, New Jersey and Delaware and two birds likely this species while sea-watching from Cap Vert, Senegal (see HAASS & ENGELHARDT (2001): *Calonectris* Shearwaters off West Africa. Birding World 14: 514). This is NKH's third South Polar Skua off NSW (see BARC #688 [HAASS & STEPHENSON] & #689 [JAMES, STEPHENSON, HAASS, MCGOVERN]) and he immediately knew that it was a rare bird in the area. NKH also has extensive field experience with Great and Brown Skuas and all three jaegers. NKH has been an active member in the Rare Birds Committees of Hessen (Germany), Schleswig-Holstein (Germany), and New Jersey (USA).

Signature:

Date: 14 April 2012

Sent by e-mail



Please forward all material to: The Secretary, Birds Australia Rarities Committee, Birds Australia HQ, Riverside Road, East Hawthorn, VIC 3123