

A small group of widespread and highly mobile coastal or marine birds, medium to large. Plumages are highly variable but mainly brown and white, with white flashes in the outer wing. The small skuas are difficult to separate during moult from juvenile to immature, or immature to adult plumages, or between breeding and non-breeding plumages. Sexes alike. Flight is fast and direct, or twisting and turning in pursuit while relentlessly chasing terns and gulls to force them to drop or disgorge food. Strongly territorial when breeding, and aggressively defend their territory from intruders. Usually lay 2 brown eggs in a shallow scrape or cup of vegetation.

BROWN SKUA (*Hakoakoa*) *Catharacta skua*

Locally common native

63 cm; ♂ 1675 g, ♀ 1950 g. Very large stocky skua, like a large juvenile Black-backed Gull but *chocolate brown* except for some variable bronzy-yellow flecking on hindneck and *conspicuous white flashes on wings*. Wings broad and rounded; large hooked black bill; legs and feet black. Juvenile lacks yellow on hindneck, often more mottled and rusty on upperparts. In flight, slow powerful wingbeats and short glides. On breeding grounds, defends territory with raucous calls and low dives. **Habitat:** Breeds circumpolar subantarctic; in NZ region, on Chathams, Fiordland coast, islands around Stewart I, Solanders, The Snares, Antipodes, Auckland and Campbell Is, especially near seabird colonies. Disperse through southern oceans; occasionally seen on NZ mainland in winter, often at beach-washed offal. **Breeding:** Sep–Feb.



[Sp 228]



SKUAS

Stercorariidae

8 species: 2 breed in the New Zealand region, 2 are regular transients in spring and autumn as they pass between their Arctic breeding grounds and Southern Ocean seas, and 1 is a straggler from non-breeding areas in the central Pacific.

aerobic chases are most often seen in autumn when large flocks of White-fronted Terns usually have Arctic and/or Pomarine Skuas in attendance.

Skuas are strong-flying pelagic birds allied to the gulls. They have hooked beaks with a distinctive sheath covering the base of the upper bill. Most species have light- and dark-plumage phases, with some intermediate forms; all have conspicuous white flashes in the outer wing. The three small species have highly developed central tail feathers that extend well beyond the remainder of the tail, but these are rarely seen in birds in New Zealand waters.

During breeding, the large native skuas feed mainly on shoaling fish, petrels and their eggs and chicks, or penguin eggs and chicks. They also take carrion from beaches or coastal farmland. They are also renowned for their fierce territorial defence, diving noisily at people or other large intruders venturing into their breeding area. They strike at people with their legs as they pass close overhead.

Skuas are piratic, pursuing terns, gulls, shags and shearwaters, and forcing them to drop or disgorge their food. These spectacular

Reading: Furness, R.W. 1987. *The Skuas*. Calton: Poyser. Harrison, P. 1983. *Seabirds: An Identification Guide*. Beckenham: Croom Helm. Serventy, D.L. et al. 1971. *The Handbook of Australian Seabirds*. Sydney: A.H. & A.W. Reed. Young, E.C. 1994. *Skua and Penguin: Predator and Prey*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ Press.

228. BROWN SKUA *Catharacta skua*

Plate 53

Other names: Hakoakoa, Southern Great/Southern/Subantarctic Skua
Size: 63 cm, males 1675 g, females 1950 g
Geographical variation: Many experts treat the subspecies *lonnbergi* of New Zealand and elsewhere in the subantarctic as a distinct species, *Catharacta lonnbergi*.
Distribution: The subspecies *lonnbergi* is

circumpolar, breeding in the subantarctic and antarctic zones. In New Zealand, they breed on the Chatham, Solander, Stewart and outliers, The Snares, Antipodes, Auckland and Campbell Islands, and also on the Balleny Islands of the Ross Dependency. A few pairs also nest in southern Fiordland. In the summer, they remain close to their breeding

colonies, but transients appear at the Bounty Islands, and vagrants reach the Ross Sea. Although most northern breeding birds remain on their territory all year, most birds leave the southern colonies and disperse northward in autumn, especially to southern Australia and the western Tasman Sea. In winter, they are occasionally seen along the coast of the North and South Islands, and seldom inland, usually feeding on dead sheep and lambs.

colony at 4–5 years old, but do not start breeding until 5–8–14 years old. Many birds live to 20–30 years old.

Population: Widespread in the subantarctic, with many small populations. New Zealand probably has fewer than 2000 birds, with the main populations being on the Chathams (c. 260 birds), The Snares (c. 170 birds), Antipodes, Auckland (especially Enderby) and Campbell Islands.

Behaviour: Non-breeding birds normally form 'clubs' and then fill gaps as territorial members disappear. Brown Skuas normally maintain the same breeding territory and partner(s) year after year. Territorial displays include a conspicuous 'heraldic' display in which a bird, normally on the ground but sometimes while airborne, holds its wings stiffly upwards to display the white wing patches and extends its neck and head and utters a long call: 'charr-charr-charr'. They defend their territory very aggressively against other skuas and, with a screeching call, repeatedly and fearlessly dive at people or other intruders, striking out with their feet as they pass overhead. Usually solitary at sea away from the breeding grounds.

Conservation: Partially protected native. In the Chathams, some Brown Skuas are shot by fishermen and farmers, but elsewhere few are harmed.

Feeding: While breeding, the diet is mainly penguin eggs and chicks, or petrels. The latter are caught at night on the ground or are sometimes forced to the ground and then killed. Brown Skuas carry seabirds to a 'midden', where they leave the wings, head and legs in a pile, or they regurgitate pellets containing the remains of small seabirds, especially storm petrels. They also feed on fish, eggs of other birds, dead marine mammals or seal placenta, and scavenge dead sheep and cattle in the Chathams. Goose barnacles and Broad-billed Prions form the main part of their winter diet in the Chathams. Away from their colonies, their winter diet is presumed to be mainly pelagic fish, although the few seen on the New Zealand mainland coast are often feeding on carrion, or occasionally harassing other birds such as gulls and shags.

Breeding: Most breeding birds at The Snares and the Chathams defend their territory all year, although in winter their defence is less aggressive; at the more southern colonies, birds rarely overwinter. In the northern colonies, about 15% of territories are defended by trios (always two unrelated males and a female), but groups of up to seven birds have been recorded, whereas south of The Snares most Brown Skuas breed in simple pairs. Numbers at the colonies build up from September with members of each territorial group arriving back independently.

Reading: Hemmings, A.D. 1989. *J Zool* (Lond) 218: 393–405. Hemmings, A.D. 1990. *Emu* 90: 108–113. Hemmings, A.D. 1994. *J Roy Soc NZ* 24: 245–260. Moors, P.J. 1980. *Notornis* 27: 133–146. Young, E.C. 1978. *NZ J Zool* 5: 401–416. Young, E.C. 1994. *Notornis* 41(S): 143–163. Young, E.C. 1998. *Condor* 100: 335–342. Young, E.C. et al. 1988. *NZ J Ecol* 11: 113–117.

Laying is from mid-September to December, with a clear latitudinal gradient from the Chathams, where birds start laying in mid-September, to Campbell Island, where laying starts in early November. The nest is usually a bowl of dry grass, moss and lichen. They lay 1–2–3 brown eggs (74 x 52 mm) with dark brown blotches. Eggs are laid about 2 days apart. The adults share incubation for c. 30 days and feed the chicks during the c. 60-day fledging period. They continue to feed the chicks for at least 70 days after fledging. On the Chathams, young birds return to the