

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.

LONG-TAILED SKUA *Stercorarius longicaudus*

Rare Arctic migrant

35 cm (+ projecting tail feathers), 300 g. Smallest skua. Like small slender Arctic Skua but more buoyant tern-like flight; greyer upperparts with darker primaries, which have only 1–2 pale shafts; legs short and blue. Similar variety of plumages and changes with age as in Arctic Skua. Pale phase usual in NZ, dark phase rare, and intermediates very rare. Breeding adult has greyish-brown upperparts contrasting with dark brown primaries and trailing edge to secondaries; very long and thin central tail streamers project 20 cm beyond rest of tail. Non-breeding adult lacks or has short pointed tail projection, and undertail is barred brown and white. Juvenile and immature have short tail projection, heavily barred underwing and undertail, and often a barred rump. **Habitat:** Breeds Arctic and subarctic. Winters in tropical and southern temperate oceans. Mostly straggles to North I, sometimes in moderate numbers. [Sp 232]



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.

aerobatic 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 renown 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.

232. LONG-TAILED SKUA *Stercorarius longicaudus*

Plate 52

Size: 35 cm, excluding central tail feathers; 300 g

were found dead on Northland and Auckland beaches, an immature was seen alive at Lake Taupo and two immatures were seen near Picton; in January–February 1983, at least 16 birds, perhaps 50+, were seen or beach-wrecked between Northland and Wellington; and in November–December 1988, two birds were wrecked on Horowhenua and Northland beaches.

Distribution: Breed in the arctic and subarctic of North America, Greenland, Scandinavia and Russia. They migrate south in September and pass through the tropics to winter at sea in the Southern Hemisphere. In the South Pacific, most winter in central and eastern waters, but a few visit the southwestern Pacific. The first accepted record in New Zealand was a beach-wrecked bird at Muriwai (January 1964). Since then there have been three small 'wrecks': in summer 1981/82, two

Behaviour: Little is known of the wintering behaviour of Long-tailed Skuas, but generally they are more pelagic than Arctic Skuas and are usually solitary; however, 'El Niño'

weather patterns may occasionally force birds west from their usual wintering range to New Zealand. None of the birds seen in New Zealand were harrying terns, as is usual with Arctic Skuas.

like Arctic Skuas. Long-tailed Skuas recorded in New Zealand generally have shorter wings (272–295–315 mm cf. 298–315–325 mm), bill (26.5–28–31 mm cf. 29–31–33 mm), tarsi (37.5–42–45.5 mm cf. 41.5–43–48 mm) and mid-toe and claw (34.5–38–41.5 mm cf. 41–43.5–45 mm) than Arctic Skuas in Australasia. A combination of these measures should reliably separate most birds.

In the hand: Non-breeding Long-tailed Skuas and Arctic Skuas can be hard to separate even in the hand; however, about 50% of Long-tailed Skuas have diagnostic blue tarsi, the rest have grey tarsi

Reading: Melville, D.S. 1985. *Notornis* 32: 51–73.