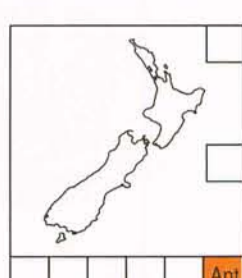


A small group of widespread and highly mobile coastal or marine birds, medium to large. Plumages are highly variable but mainly brown and white, with white flashes in the outer wing. The small skuas are difficult to separate during moult from juvenile to immature, or immature to adult plumages, or between 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.

SOUTH POLAR SKUA *Catharacta maccormicki*

Locally common native

59 cm; ♂ 1275 g, ♀ 1425 g. Large stocky skua, like Brown Skua but smaller; shorter stubbier black bill; more yellow feathering on hindneck. Variable plumages from pale to all dark, but all have prominent white wing flashes. Wings broad and rounded; tail short; legs and feet black. Pale phase has head and underparts pale ashy grey-brown with yellowish collar and brown back, wings and tail. Dark phase has body brown; back, wings and tail paler brown; white flecks at base of bill; buff collar. Juvenile lacks collar and has pale feather edges on upperparts, giving a scaly appearance. **Habitat:** Breeds Antarctica, including Ross Sea, usually near seabird colonies. Occasionally beach-wrecked or seen off coast of NZ mainland while on passage to N Pacific, usually Jan–Apr. **Breeding:** Nov–Mar.



[Sp 229]



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 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

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229. SOUTH POLAR SKUA *Catharacta maccormicki* **Plate 53**

Other names: Antarctic Skua, MacCormick's Skua

Size: 59 cm; males 1275 g, females 1425 g

Distribution: Breed on the shores and offshore islands of Antarctica, mainly near penguin and petrel colonies. They winter at sea, some ranging into the North Pacific, North Indian and North Atlantic Oceans. In New Zealand, they breed at over 50 sites around the Ross Dependency; the main colonies (>300 pairs) are at Cape Crozier, Possession Island, Cape Bird, Sven Foy Island and at Cape Adare. They presumably migrate well offshore, as they are rarely seen near the New Zealand coast and only a few have been beach-wrecked, mainly along the west coast of the North Island. A bird banded at Cape Hallett in 1964 was recovered in Japan in 1966.

brown, c. 3–5 days apart, in a simple scrape. Both birds share incubation evenly in spells of 90–180 minutes, and the female is regularly fed by the male during this time; however, where pairs have access to penguin eggs or chicks, both sexes forage. Incubation starts when the first egg is laid, and the eggs hatch 1–2–5 days apart, after 24–29–35 days. In the Ross Dependency, the second chick is virtually always evicted from the nest by the older one and dies, but at some sites two chicks are usually reared. The fledging period is 49–59 days. The chick continues to be fed by its parents for several weeks after fledging. Young normally return to their natal colony at 1–3–5 years old. A few females breed at 4 years old, and males at 5, but most females start breeding when 6–7 years old, and most males start when 8–9. South Polar Skuas are very long-lived; the annual survivorship of birds aged over 10 at Cape Crozier is 96%, giving a life expectancy of over 35 years. As a further indication of the good survival at Cape Crozier, 42 of 224 chicks banded in 1961 were still alive 22 years later.

Population: Moderately common around Antarctica; in 1981–83 c. 15,000 birds were at 55+ sites in the Ross Dependency, with Cape Crozier (c. 1000 pairs) having the largest population.

Conservation: Protected native. About 80% of breeding South Polar Skuas are associated with penguin colonies, and, in the long term, numbers may change in line with the penguin population. Numbers showed a minor decline in the northern Ross Sea area between the 1950s and early 1980s, but an increase, especially in non-breeders, in the southern McMurdo Sound, where birds had access to the refuse dump associated with McMurdo Station.

Behaviour: Non-breeding birds normally form 'clubs' near the colony before the breeding season, and they start courting and forming pairs. Territorial displays are similar to those of the Brown Skua, with a conspicuous 'heraldic' display, in which a bird holds its wings stiffly upwards to show off the white patches and calls 'charr-charr-charr'. They defend their territory very aggressively against other skuas and, with a screeching call, repeatedly dive at people or other intruders. Little is known of the social behaviour of South Polar Skuas away from the breeding grounds, but they appear to be solitary at sea.

Breeding: Birds arrive at their Ross Sea colonies in mid- to late October, slightly earlier at more northern colonies. Usually a pair occupies the same territory year after year; however, a pair will occasionally shift their territory several kilometres between years. They rarely change mates, except when one bird dies. A single communally breeding trio has been reported from Ross Island. Laying is from mid-November to late December, but the season varies slightly from colony to colony and year to year, depending on weather and food availability.

Feeding: While breeding, the incubating or brooding female is mainly fed by the male, who disgorges food a short distance from the nest. Diet is mainly a shoaling fish, the Antarctic Silverfish *Pleuragramma antarcticum*, but if a territory includes a penguin rookery or petrel colony, a major part of the owners' diet during part of the season will be eggs and chicks and spilt krill. Some skuas

They lay 2 tan eggs (71 x 50 mm) speckled

specialise at attacking breeding penguins to gain eggs and chicks, and a pair sometimes works as a team to displace an incubating or brooding penguin from its nest. They also feed on dead birds and seals, and some feed at rubbish dumps associated with research bases. In the New Zealand sector of Antarctica, refuse disposal has improved markedly and this source of food is substantially reduced. In the non-breeding season, they feed on shoaling fish, and in the seas off Japan they constantly harass feeding shearwaters and get much food by piracy.

but measurements overlap, e.g. bill 47–51–53.5 cf. 48–49.5–51.5 mm and wing 400–415–430 cf. 390–410–420 mm.

Reading: Ainley, D.G. et al. 1985. *Condor* 87: 427–428. Ainley, D.G. et al. 1986. *Notornis* 33: 155–163. Ainley, D.G. et al. 1990. *J Anim Ecol* 59: 1–20. Hemmings, A.D. 1994. *J Roy Soc NZ* 24: 245–260. Pietz, P. 1987. *Auk* 104: 617–627. Reid, B.E. 1966. *Notornis* 13: 71–89. Spellerberg, I.F. 1970. *Notornis* 17: 280–285. Spellerberg, I.F. 1971. *Ibis* 113: 357–363. Wang, Z. & Norman, F.I. 1993. *Notornis* 40: 189–203. Young, E.C. 1963. *Ibis* 105: 203–233. Young, E.C. 1963. *Ibis* 105: 301–318. Young, E.C. 1994. *Skua and Penguin: Predator and Prey*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ Press.

In the hand: Females are 10% heavier than males