

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.

POMARINE SKUA *Stercorarius pomarinus*

Uncommon Arctic migrant

48 cm (+ projecting tail feathers), 600 g. Similar range of plumages and pattern of plumage changes with age as Arctic Skua, but larger, *more heavily built and broader-winged; underwing dark with two pale patches at base of primaries*; upperwing shows 3-4 pale shafts on primaries. Breeding adult has twisted pair of tail feathers with *broad blunt ends* projecting 10 cm beyond rest of tail. Juvenile and immature have *rump paler than the neck*. Flight similar to Arctic Skua but less dashing as twisting and turning after distinctly smaller White-fronted Terns and Red-billed Gulls; direct flight with slower steadier wingbeats.

Habitat: Breeds Arctic. Winters in tropics and southern oceans, especially off W Africa and eastern Australia. Regularly summer and autumn visitor to NZ coast, especially open coasts, e.g. Manawatu coast, Farewell Spit; rarely in harbours. [Sp 231]



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.

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.

231. POMARINE SKUA *Stercorarius pomarinus*

Plate 52

Size: 48 cm, excluding central tail feathers; 600 g

ocean beaches such as Farewell Spit and the Manawatu coast, rather than in sheltered waters, and quite often fly over land near the sea.

Distribution: Breed in the arctic and subarctic of North America, Greenland, Iceland, Scandinavia and Russia. They migrate south in September and pass through the tropics to winter at sea in the Southern Hemisphere. A common visitor to eastern and southeastern coasts of Australia, but an uncommon though regular visitor to New Zealand waters from Northland to Foveaux Strait and east to the Chathams in December–April. They are mainly pelagic but occasionally join Arctic Skuas inshore to harass White-fronted Terns, and sometimes also chase Red-billed, Black-billed and Black-backed Gulls. On the New Zealand coast, they tend to be seen off sandy

Behaviour: Pomarine Skuas are conspicuous as they rather clumsily chase White-fronted Terns or gulls and harry them until they are forced to drop their fish or to regurgitate. Between chases, they usually fly low and purposefully between feeding flocks of terns or settle on the water with a characteristic posture of high head and high tail. They often feed solitarily but sometimes join small flocks of Arctic Skuas working a flock of terns and gulls. An exceptional gathering of 38 birds was reported in the Tasman Sea, 100 km off the Waikato coast.