

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.

**ARCTIC SKUA** *Stercorarius parasiticus*

Common Arctic migrant

43 cm (+ projecting tail feathers), 400 g. Small elegant skua with highly variable plumages: two main phases (about 80% dark in NZ), intermediates and a wide range of juvenile and immature plumages. Difficult to distinguish from larger Pomarine Skua unless in mixed groups 'working' a flock of terns. Bill black; legs and feet black in adults, or grey-blue tipped black in juveniles. Dark phase breeding adult is blackish brown with slightly paler yellowish nape and ear coverts; pale phase has black cap, white cheeks, yellowish nape and ear coverts; brown back, wings and tail, white underparts with variable dark breast band and dark undertail. Continuous variation between; all adults have dark underwing with single pale patch at base of primaries, upperparts uniformly dark except for 3-4 pale shafts at base of primaries, and pointed central tail feathers project 10 cm beyond rest of tail. Non-breeding similar but lacks tail projection; dark phase can have white flecks on rump; pale phase has less distinct cap, underparts and flanks barred and washed brown, undertail streaked, pale flecks on rump and uppertail. Juvenile highly variable, but all have barred underwings with single pale patch and upperwings as in adults; most have rusty-brown body, mottled and barred darker, and paler streaked neck. Immatures acquire adult plumage over several years; mostly like non-breeding adult, but pale phase more heavily barred and washed brown on underparts and face, and rump and undertail lightly barred; rump is darker than the neck. **Habitat:** Breeds Arctic and subarctic. Migrates to southern oceans. Commonest skua seen off NZ coast and in harbours, especially Jan-Apr, when often seen harrying slightly smaller White-fronted Terns or Red-billed Gulls. Sometimes roosts on beaches. [Sp 230]



**SKUAS**

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.

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.

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

**Stercorariidae**

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

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.

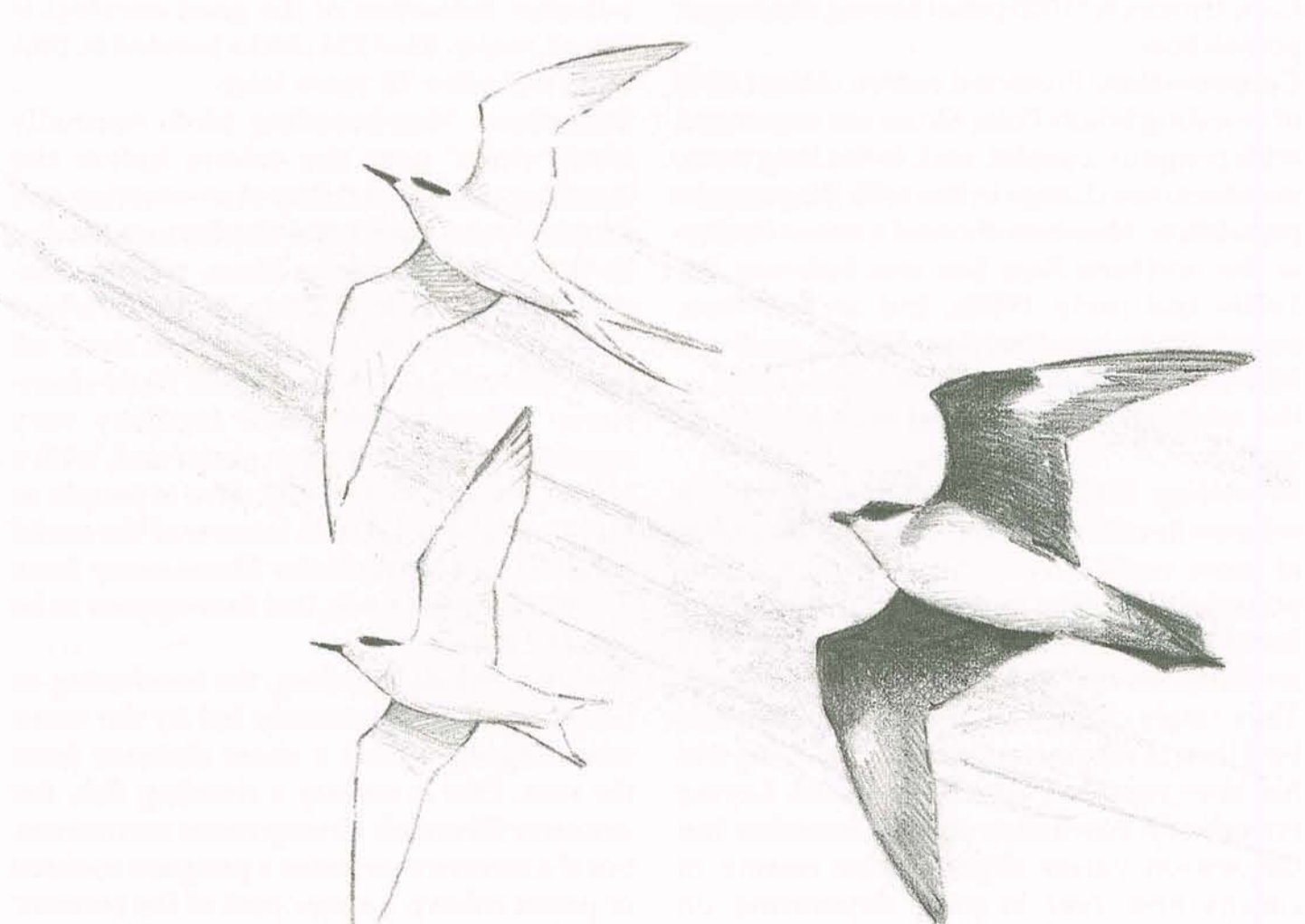
**Reading:** Furness, R.W. 1987. *The Skuas*. Calton: Poyser. Harrison, P. 1983. *Seabirds: An Identification Guide*. Beckenham: Croom Helm. Serventy, D.L. et al. 1971. *The Handbook of Australian Seabirds*. Sydney: A.H. & A.W. Reed. Young, E.C. 1994. *Skua and Penguin: Predator and Prey*. Cambridge: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

**230. ARCTIC SKUA** *Stercorarius parasiticus*

Plate 52

**Size:** 43 cm excluding central tail feathers; 400 g  
**Distribution:** Breed on the arctic and subarctic tundra 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 New Zealand waters in November-May, and are easily the most numerous skua seen off the coasts of the



mainland and the Chatham Islands. A few immatures remain over the winter. They are often seen in coastal waters and in large sheltered harbours and sounds, but are seldom seen over land, except that they sometimes join roosting flocks of terns or gulls.

**Behaviour:** Arctic Skuas are conspicuous as they aerobically chase White-fronted Terns or small 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 usually feed solitarily, but sometimes small flocks of four or five birds work a flock of terns. Gatherings of up to 50 birds have been reported off the northern North Island.

**In the hand:** Non-breeding Arctic Skua and Long-tailed Skua can be hard to separate even in the hand; see under 'Long-tailed Skua'.

**Reading:** O'Donald, P. 1983. *The Arctic Skua: A Study of the Ecology and Evolution of a Seabird*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ Press.