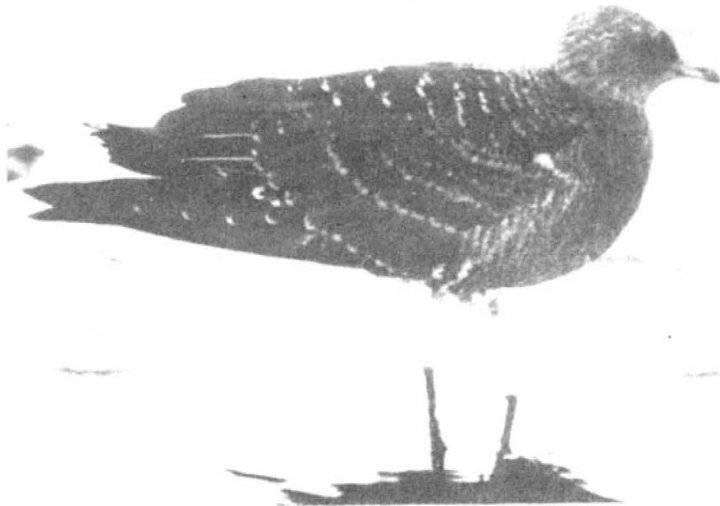


PARASITIC JAEGER IN OKLAHOMA CITY

BY JOHN G. NEWELL

In mid-September 1970, at Lake Hefner, a large impoundment in the northwestern part of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma County, central Oklahoma, at least thirteen persons observed at close range a bird that I am convinced was a Parasitic Jaeger (*Stercorarius parasiticus*). Several excellent colored slides were taken of the bird. The more diagnostic of these are filed at the University of Oklahoma Bird Range.

The puzzling bird was first seen on the evening of 7 September by J. Brooks Parkhill and his wife Thula. It was eating a fish along the southwest shore. Parkhill photographed it and carefully described it to me. I suggested that such a dark-colored, long-winged bird might be a juvenile gull of some sort.



PARASITIC JAEGER IN FIRST WINTER PLUMAGE

Photographed on 11 September 1970 at Lake Hefner, Oklahoma City, by J. Brooks Parkhill. Note tufts of natal down just back of each leg.



The following day the Parkhills found it again, along the south shore. This time they took a few feet of colored movie film.

On 9 September, at sundown, my wife Dorothy and I "discovered" the moot bird ourselves. It was feeding on a fish along the east side of the lake. Dorothy, who saw it first, thought it was a Crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*), but the hawklike way in which it stood over and tore at the fish

caught my attention at once. I backed the car toward it for a closer look. It was dark and crow-size, to be sure, but we could now see the slightly hooked beak and the pale markings on its upperparts. Because moving the car had not frightened it off, I approached it slowly afoot—to within 8 feet. It turned, threatened me with open beak and partly spread wings, turned again, and flew off a few feet, alighting in the water.

I now knew that the bird was a jaeger. Noticeably buoyant, it held its head and tail-end high, watching me closely. The barred appearance of its upperparts was due to the light tipping of the dark plumage. When it lifted its wings I saw that their under sides, especially the axillars, were strikingly barred (see picture above, a photograph taken 11 September 1970 by J. Brooks Parkhill). As it flew I noted the long, bluntly pointed middle feathers of the wedge-shaped tail, a whitish patch at the base of the primaries, the comparatively uniform gray of the breast and belly, and the checkered appearance of the under tail coverts. The bill was pale gray with blackish tip. The legs and toes were pale gray too (slightly yellowish in some of the slides, perhaps because of the afternoon light), but the webbing between the toes was blackish. The eyes were dark, and the darkness of the surrounding plumage, especially in front, gave them a deepset appearance.

Word was spread concerning the rare visitor from the far north, and a number of interested "birders" from Oklahoma City were fortunate enough to see it. On the evening of 10 September I joined the Parkhills, who had located it along the south shore. It was feeding on a large fish and was reluctant to leave. When finally it did flush, it flew up the lake a hundred yards or so, returned, and alighted on the shore nearby, waiting for us to withdraw. Its flight, though seemingly effortless, was strong and surprisingly swift. The "depth" of the spread wings—i.e., the distance between the leading edge and the following edge between the wrist and the body—seemed unusually great.

On the evening of 11 September the Parkhills and "camera-fan" friends of theirs, Frank Beaver and his wife Marie, found the jaeger resting on short grass

along the southwest shore near the canal inlet. It tolerated very close approach. Finally it rose sleepily to its feet and flew off. The several photographs that Beaver took show excellent detail, but the lowness of the sun unfortunately gave a reddish cast to the browns and a purplish cast to the grays.

About mid-morning on 12 September I found the jaeger ranging along the east side of the lake. Several times it turned quickly, scattering flocks of small sandpipers, but these it did not pursue. Its only food, so far as I could see, was fish, all of which it found dead, washed up on the shore. Some of these probably had been discarded by fishermen. A cigarette butt that it picked up idly, it flicked aside.

At noon that day I showed the jaeger to Nelson Hall. Late that afternoon Brad Carlton saw it—still along the east shore. Here I saw it again on 13 September, but that day it spent considerable time floating well out in the lake. Herb Chezem saw it on 14 September. No one saw it, so far as I know, from 15 to 18 September, during which period I looked for it several times. On the morning of 19 September Vic Vacin and I were pleased to find it again, floating well out. Blown shoreward, it finally came close enough for scrutiny and careful identification. Vacin, who like the rest of us had never before seen a jaeger, estimated that it was "at least as large as a crow." Others, including myself, were of the opinion that it was slightly smaller than a crow.

On Sunday, 20 September, Jack Roberts and I visited the lake, he in hopes of photographing the jaeger with new camera equipment, I to enjoy the bird. We found it along the east shore patiently "keeping company" with an unconcerned fisherman whose box of shrimp bait and occasionally-tossed-aside dead minnows probably attracted the jaeger. We obtained a fair idea of the bird's length (13¾ inches) by measuring the distance between a pebble at its breast and another pebble at its tail-tip. Roberts obtained several close photographs, one of which shows the bird with wings fully spread—just as it was taking off.

No one reported seeing the jaeger after 20 September. It probably left when the weather turned stormy a day or so later.

Identification of this jaeger as *S. parasiticus* may be questioned. Admittedly *S. parasiticus* and *S. longicaudus* (Long-tailed Jaeger) are much alike when in first winter feather. Careful study of all slides and movies taken, of literature pertaining to jaeger plumages, and of skins at the University of Oklahoma Bird Range convinced me, however, that the bird we had been seeing was indeed *parasiticus*. It seemed too large and too dark for *longicaudus*. The white patch at the base of the primaries was noticeable—a feature discernible in a specimen of *S. parasiticus* (UOMZ 2710) at hand, but not in any specimen of *S. longicaudus* in the Sutton collection. Its bill, which shows well in several slides, was far too slender for that of *S. pomarinus* (Pomarine Jaeger).



PARASITIC JAEGER IN FIRST WINTER PLUMAGE

Photographed on 20 September 1970 at Lake Hefner, Oklahoma City, by Jack S. Roberts. Note white patch on each wing at base of primary feathers.

Judging from its naiveté, and especially from what appeared to be tufts of natal down on the forehead and near each leg, the bird was very young. Pleske (1928, *Birds of the Eurasian tundra*, Mem. Boston Soc. Nat. Hist., 6: 188) states that the fledging period of *S. parasiticus* is 27 days. Observers agree that young jaegers do not retain remnants of natal down long after learning to fly. The bird that we observed may well have been little more than a month old. Its presence so far from the ocean may have been a direct result of late hatching, late fledging, and late departure from the breeding ground—all in consequence of failure of the first clutch of eggs.

The above reported-in-detail record is the second Parasitic Jaeger record for the state; the first was of four birds seen by Seth H. Low and Wendell Taber along the west shore of the main reservoir at the Salt Plains National Wildlife Refuge in Alfalfa County, north-central Oklahoma, on 8 September 1941; one of the four birds, a cripple, was collected (Sutton, 1967, *Oklahoma birds*, p. 212).

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