

REVISED # 2001-199

2001-171

Common Name: Pomarine Jaeger    Scientific Name: *Stercorarius pomarinus*

Number of Individuals: 1    Sex: unknown    Age: subadult

Locality: Windsor Reservoir, Weld Co, CO

Date(s) Seen: 01 November 2001    Time: 1520-1625

Report Written: 01 November 2001

Reporting Observer: Joe Fontaine

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Other Observers: Rachel Hopper

Light Conditions: Excellent to good; we were looking S/SE the entire time with the sun in the west. There was no glare or heat waves.

Optical Equipment: Swarovski HD AT-80 20-60x scope

Distance to Bird: 100-500m

Duration of Observation: 35-40 minutes

Habitat: Drawn down reservoir with several emergent spits and extensive bare shoreline.

Details: After hearing about a Jaeger sp. sighting at Windsor Reservoir as well as other interesting sightings in the Ft Collins area I spent the afternoon of 01 November birding. Upon arriving at the north end of Windsor Reservoir I found Rachel Hopper looking at a Jaeger sitting on the water through her scope. Within a few minutes of watching the bird, it got up and began to fly around, giving us excellent views. Over the next hour the Jaeger chased and harassed many gulls at regular intervals. The remainder of the time it sat on the water about 150 meters away. The best views were had around 1600 when the bird got up and flew around the reservoir, high above the water, in circles for approximately 5 minutes.

#### Description of the Bird:

The bird in question had dark brown upperparts with the exception of the nape and lower auriculars which were pale. This gave the bird a capped or hooded appearance. The crown appeared to be slightly darker than the scapulars and upperwing coverts although it was difficult to be certain given the distance. The folded wing extended well beyond the tail, making it apparent that the bird was long-winged. When in flight, an extremely conspicuous white area was present at the base of the primaries. This white area was wide and extended from the base of the first primary to at least the base of the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> primary possibly further. The rectrices and uppertail coverts were concolorous with the mantle as well. The two central rectrices were slightly elongated relative to the other rectrices. I would estimate that they were 20% longer. I observed

these as closely as I could given the distance. As I focused on the central rectrices I could see the tips of the feathers; they appeared to be about the same width as the tips of the other rectrices. As I continued to watch the bird, it banked several times giving me clear views of the fanned tail; I felt that the two elongated rectrices were rounded in appearance and decidedly not pointed.

The underparts were generally pale. The belly and breast were both a creamy white color. I never could see if there was a yellow band across the breast. I put most of my energy into observing the underwing pattern of the bird. From the axillaries to the secondary coverts, the underside of the wing was a dark brown. At the base of the primaries there was a large pale area that gave conspicuous flashes as the bird flew or flapped its wings while sitting on the water. Harder to see consistently, but visible several times was a second pale area proximal to the first patch, most likely the secondary coverts. The more proximal pale area was much smaller in its extent and was not as white, it was more of a pale brown area. At one point the bird got up and flew laps around the reservoir well above the water. This afforded us the best views of the bird and made this character clearly and consistently visible.

The distance made it difficult to note fine details of the bare parts. The bill was not massive nor was it dainty. I would describe it as being about the same size as that of a Ring-billed Gull. The color of the bill and legs was not noted.

The behavior and flight style of this bird deserve mention as well. On multiple occasions ( $>5$ ) we watched the bird take off from the water and harass both California and Ring-billed Gulls. In all cases, the Jaeger was the same size as or slightly larger than its victims. As the Jaeger chased gulls it would occasionally down one and literally stand on it, holding it underwater or at least partially submerged. As Rachel Hopper noted, it had a lot of attitude. The flight style of the bird was falcon-like with a strong direct flight style. On several occasions I watched it easily overtake the gull it was pursuing. Lastly, the appearance of the bird was that it was very heavy bodied and barrel-chested. This was especially apparent in flight.

#### Similar Species:

The bird we observed possessed pale primary bases, a hooded appearance, and chased other gulls frequently. Based on this we knew we were looking at a predatory gull, either a Skua or a Jaeger. I know of only one interior record for any skua (I believe a South-polar Skua in North Dakota during the summer) so the likelihood of this species is extremely low. Furthermore, the pale belly of the bird we saw is inconsistent with SPSK. Thus, the three realistic possibilities include Long-tailed, Parasitic, and Pomarine Jaegers.

The first step in identifying any gull is to properly age the bird in question. We observed that the bird had a pale belly, hooded appearance, and slightly elongated central rectrices. Additionally, the mantle and underwing were an even dark brown and were NOT mottled. The lack of mottling led us to conclude that the bird was at least in its second year of life. Thus the Jaeger was either a subadult or molting adult since the central rectrices were present but not completely grown out. Based on the pale belly and nape we concluded that the bird was a light morph. At this point we knew we were looking at a light morph sub-adult/adult basic Jaeger sp.

Long-tailed Jaeger possesses the smallest amount of white at the base of the primaries with just the shafts of P1-P2 being white on the upperwing and a very small

patch of white on the underwing. The massive extent of white on both the upperwing and underwing seem to eliminate this species out of hand. Additionally, the size of the bird we saw relative to the gulls it attacked is inconsistent for Long-tailed Jaeger. A final consideration is the date. All Long-tailed Jaeger records in the Great Plains are from August through early October. It would be truly extraordinary for a Long-tailed Jaeger to be seen on 01 November, let alone a sub-adult/adult.

Given the extensive white on both surfaces of the wing, the size of the bird, and the date we are left with two species: Parasitic and Pomarine Jaeger. Several characteristics allowed us to eliminate Parasitic Jaeger. First, the overall behavior and appearance of the bird was suggestive of Pomarine. The strong, direct flight style and heavy looking body as well as its frequent attacks on smaller Ring-billed gulls were very suggestive. As it attacked birds it frequently stood on top of them, this is something I have seen and heard of Pomarine Jaegers doing. The head appeared very proportional to the body. In my limited experience with Parasitic Jaegers, I expect them to look rather small-headed and small billed; the bird we saw had both a medium to large sized head and a medium sized bill. Additionally, the central retrices were rounded at the tip which is consistent with Pomarine as well, Parasitic would have sharp-tipped central retrices. Finally (but not the least important!), the pale areas on both surfaces of the wing were critical in identifying this bird. Pomarine Jaegers have the most white in the wing of the three species of Jaeger. The extensive white on the upperside of the wings was certainly consistent with Pomarine. It was the underside of the wing that clinched the identification for us however. As we watched it fly high over the water, the main pale area at the base of the primaries was quite visible on the underwing. Also visible was a smaller pale area towards the base of the wing. The presence of a large white area and a second pale area is diagnostic for Pomarine Jaeger (to the best of my knowledge). A final note is that the date, to my knowledge, is somewhat better for adult/subadult Pomarine Jaeger. By November most, if not all, Parasitic Jaegers in the great plains should be juvenile birds.

In summary, the combination of two pale areas on the underside of the wing, rounded central retrices, medium to large-sized head, and overall flight style, proportions, and behavior led us to conclude that we were looking at an sub-adult/adult Pomarine Jaeger.

#### **Tape Recordings/Photos?**

None

**Reference:** The Sibley Guide to North American Birds (Sibley, 2000) as well as Skuas and Jaegers (Olsen and Larsson, 1997) were used while observing the bird. I did not consult any field guides after the observation and before writing my description of the bird.

**Description from:** Notes made at the time and memory (all descriptions of the bird in this documentation were made on 01 Nov).

**Experience with Species:** I have not personally seen many Jaegers however I have had the opportunity to see and study several Pomarine and Parasitic Jaegers well in the last year. In September 2000 I saw two juvenile Pomarine Jaegers on a boat trip at Lake McConaughy and saw an adult Pomarine at Jackson Reservoir. Both sightings were excellent and gave me great opportunities to study this species, especially the adult at Jackson where I stood within 20m of the bird for >1 hour. Most recently, I saw two Parasitic Jaegers (one adult and one juvenile) at Lake McConaughy in September 2001.

**Birders who independently saw the bird:** (who I am aware of) Nick Komar (who found the bird on 31 Oct) and Beth Dillon

## COLORADO FIELD ORNITHOLOGISTS - SIGHT RECORD FORM

CFO-ORC FILE # 2001-171NEW STATE RECORD        UNUSUAL RECORD XREVISED # 2001-199**Species:** Pomarine Jaeger (*Stercorarius pomarinus*)**Date:** 2 November 2001 **Number seen:** one **Sex:** ? **Plumage:** Alternate II (?)**Locality:** Windsor Res. **Elevation:** about 5350'**Nearest town:** Windsor **County:** Weld**Time observed:** ~07:35 - 08:01 MST**Duration of observation:** off and on for a total of about 15 minutes

**Description:** Chris Wood, Doug Faulkner, and I chased after the Pomarine Jaeger that Nick Komar had found two days earlier. We arrived at about 07:05 and spent some time looking for the beast. Finally, Doug found it flying at the north end of the reservoir. We watched it for quite a while until we just had to leave to get to work. The bird divided its time of our observation about equally between flying around/chasing gulls and swimming serenely, but attentively, among the Mallards, which were slightly larger than it in length.

This bird, obviously a large, bulky, powerful jaeger, was a light-morph that appeared about as large as the Ring-billed Gulls it often chased and definitely smaller than the California Gulls it subjected to harassment. At least twice, we watched it stand on a Ring-billed Gull in the water attempting to get the Ringer to give it some tasty morsel. The bird was almost entirely a medium brown above, however with a blackish cap and darker brown rectrices. The wide, blunt, squared-off central rectrices extended beyond the others a distance of about 2/3 the length of those other rect. The wingtips of the swimming bird fell just a skooch (which is a very small amount) beyond the central rect. The black of the cap came well below the eyes and past the gape. However, the face and neck were only partially adult-like and it had some barred, juvenile-type feathers below the gape, so the black possibly did not continue around and below the bill, as it would on an adult.

There was a small, pale patch at the base of the primaries, above, that was visible at most times when the bird was flying. From underneath, there was fairly extensive white at the bases of the primaries and the dark-tipped primary coverts were extensively white-based -- thus forming a very obvious (the most obvious I believe that I have ever seen) white comma proximal to the large, white primary flash. The underwing secondary coverts were mostly solid-colored, adult-type feathers, but there were at least a few barred, juvenile-type feathers. The remiges were entirely adult-like. The underparts were mostly pale, but the neck had some thin, dark barring. The sides were extensively barred with blackish and the undertail coverts and vent area was dark. There was a wide, dark pectoral band cutting completely across the chest. The eyes were dark as was the bill, however the distance precluded certainty of the bill color. The legs, also, were dark, but again, I could not be certain whether this was due to them being dark or just looking dark.

The bird flew with strong, deep wingbeats when chasing gulls, unlike the more Peregrine-like, snappy wingbeats of Parasitic Jaeger. In flight, I could see that the wings were very wide-based, with the bases of the wings being more than half the length of the bird from bill tip to tail tip (excluding the R1s).

**Similar species eliminated:** The other two jaegers are easily eliminated by tail shape, wing pattern, head pattern, size, and, flight style. Additionally, Long-tailed is ruled out by the distinct chest band.

**Describe the bird's song and call, if given, including method of delivery (i.e. from perch, in flight, duration):** No vocalizations heard.

**What is your prior experience with this and similarly-appearing species?** I have seen 100s of Pomarines, >75 Parasitics, and >45 Long-tails.

**Light conditions:** sun to my left and slightly behind me

**Optical equipment used:** Leica 32x and Swarovski 8.5x42

**Distance, and how estimated:** most of the time, the bird was ~300m away, but came as close as about 225m

**Other observers who saw the bird with you:** Chris Wood, Doug Faulkner

**Other observers who saw the bird independently:** Nick Komar (finder), Joe Fontaine, and Rachel Hopper

**If photographed, type of equipment and film:** did not photograph, though Chris Wood did

**List books, illustrations, recordings, other birders, etc. consulted and how this influenced your identification:**

**a) at time of observation:** none

**b) after observation:** none

**Reporting observer:** Tony Leukering

**Signature:**



**Address:** Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory, 14500 Lark Bunting Lane, Brighton, CO 80601

**Date report was written:** Written on 2 November 2001 from memory