STERCORARIUS POMATORHINUS.

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Pomatorhine Skua.

- ? *Stercorarius striatus*, Briss. Orn., tom. vi. p. 152, pl. 13. fig. 2.
Lestris pomarinus, Temm. Man. d'Orn., 1st edition, p. 514.
Catarractes parasita, var. *camschatica*, Pall. Zoogr. Ross.-Asiat., tom. ii. p. 312.
Catarractes pomarina, Steph. Cont. of Shaw's Gen. Zool., vol. xiii. p. 216, pl. 24.
——— *Pomarinus*, Selby, Ill. Brit. Orn., vol. ii. p. 517.
Lestris striatus, Eyton, Rare Brit. Birds, p. 53.
——— *sphæriuros*, Brehm, Handb. der Naturg. Vög. Deutschl., p. 718.
Stercorarius pomarinus, Gray and Mitch. Gen. of Birds, vol. iii. p. 653, *Stercorarius*, sp. 3.
Coprotheres pomarinus, Reich. Syst. Av., tab. 32. figs. 328, 329.
Lestris pomatorhinus, Sclater, Ibis, 1862, p. 297.
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THE species of Skua above named, and represented on the opposite Plate, was first clearly distinguished from others of the group by the late Professor Temminck, who described it unequivocally in the original edition of his 'Manuel d'Ornithologie'—a work which, with all its imperfections, was then far in advance of any other of the kind, and which gave an enormous impetus to our knowledge of the birds of this quarter of the globe. Temminck called his new species *Lestris pomarinus*, the derivation of which appellation was long a matter of uncertainty. Some naturalists conceived it was intended to refer to the country of Pomerania; but the truth of the matter remained unsuspected until, in 1860, M. Preyer, in the narrative of his travels in Iceland, set it at rest by suggesting that Temminck intended to refer to the peculiar lid-like formation of the nostrils, and coined his name from two well-known Greek terms having that signification. That distinguished naturalist, however, being better acquainted with birds than with the classics, made a mistake in the composition of his new word, and it thus became necessary, as Dr. Sclater subsequently showed, to modify the spelling from *pomarinus* into *pomatorhinus*, the form which I accordingly here adopt.

Like all the other species of the genus, the Pomatorhine Skua is an inhabitant of the colder parts of the world. Its limits northward may be said to extend as far as our geographical knowledge goes. Speaking of the regions on the other side of the Atlantic, Sir John Richardson says, "It is not uncommon in the Arctic Seas and northern outlets of Hudson's Bay, where it subsists on putrid fish and other animal substances thrown up by the sea, and also on the matters which the Gulls disgorge when pursued by it. It retires from the north in the winter, and makes its first appearance at Hudson's Bay in May, coming in from seaward. The Indians abhor it, considering it to be a companion of the Esquimaux, and to partake of their evil qualities."

Captain Holbøll, who was for many years Governor of the Danish possessions in Greenland, states that it is the commonest species of Skua found in the northern part of that country, which it visits from May to September, breeding always in society. He adds that it can fish well enough for itself when it likes, but prefers living by plunder, pursuing the Sea-Gulls, and compelling them to drop their booty, which it at once appropriates.

Dr. von Middendorff, the intrepid traveller who has added so largely to our knowledge of the natural history of the most northern portions of Asia, says that this bird breeds in especial abundance on the barren grounds or "*tundras*" adjoining the River Taimyr; but thence to the Boganida only a single example was procured. He first saw the bird on the 6th of June, and on the 7th July found (in lat. N. 74°) the first eggs lying on the moor without any nest. Northward of 74½° he did not meet with it.

Mr. Alfred Newton, writing in the 'Proceedings of the Zoological Society' for 1861 (p. 401), says, "In June 1855, Mr. Simpson and myself observed off Berlevaag, a promontory east of North Cape, large flocks of this species. On our return a few weeks afterwards with Mr. Wolley, we again saw them. In 1857 that gentleman sought diligently, but unsuccessfully, for their breeding-places in this district. He was led to believe that in the years when the Lemmings swarm in the mountains they usually breed far in the interior of the country; for this, as well as the allied species of *Stercorarius*, preys much on these little rodents. It is perhaps worthy of remark, that in the full-plumaged Pomatorhine Skua the middle tail-feathers have a kind of twist in their shafts, which brings the lower surfaces to meet together towards their extremities in a vertical direction; and this peculiarity gives the bird, when on the wing, a very singular appearance." At the same meeting of the Zoological Society at which Mr. Alfred Newton made the above remarks respecting this species, he exhibited an egg of the bird, for which he stated he was indebted to Dr. Baldamus, to whom it had been sent by Dr. von Middendorff. This egg is figured in the 'Proceedings of the Zoological Society' for 1861. It is represented as of rich brownish olive, largely

blotched with brown of two tints, the paler having the appearance of being beneath the surface of the shell. The same gentleman has likewise communicated to me the following note:—"Since I was in Lapland in 1855, I have three or four times renewed my acquaintance with the Pomatorhine Skua. In Iceland, although it has been observed by several travellers, I believe it is not common, and I only saw the species once. In October 1862, while lying weather-bound in Torbay, a party of about thirty of these birds were for two days in close attendance on our ship, and about as many more round each of two other vessels anchored near us. They were very tame, coming close alongside the quarter-deck in quest of food; and dire was the strife and loud the contention as one lucky bird after another seized on some choice morsel and conveyed it far astern to devour it at leisure. Scarcely any two of these birds were alike in plumage. There was every gradation, from the sombre whole-coloured suit of sooty-brown to the varied dress with an under surface of pure white, adults in the extreme of each habit appearing, as their long disk-bearing tails testified. On my return from Spitsbergen in August 1864, about midway between Bear Island and the coast of Norway, we saw many of these birds, generally in waiting on the flocks of Kittiwakes which we encountered. In Spitsbergen itself, only one was recognized by our party."

The Pastor Sommerfelt, in his account of the birds of East Finmark, mentions its yearly occurrence, in spring and autumn, in the Varanger Fjord, and states that he has obtained its eggs from Gamvik, where it has been observed all through the summer. From this and the information given by Mr. Newton, I should conclude that it breeds on the high fells east of the North Cape, which look forth towards the Arctic Ocean.

In the British Islands it only occurs as a straggler, but in that character it is certainly not rare. It sometimes is met with in large bands, and occasionally wanders far from the sea into the inland counties. The first record of its occurrence as a British bird is, I believe, to be found in the sale Catalogue of Bullock's celebrated Museum, in 1819. Two specimens are therein mentioned, one of which is stated to have been killed at Brighton. This was secured by Dr. Leach for the National Collection, where it may now be seen; but Mr. G. R. Gray, in his 'Catalogue of Birds in the British Museum,' attaches to it the locality "North Britain," which is probably an error.

In proof that it is frequently met with on our coasts, I may mention that on the 19th of October, 1857, I saw in Leadenhall Market five Great Skuas, seven Pomatorhine Skuas (one adult and six young of the year), and one young Arctic Skua, all of which were from Yarmouth, and, it was believed, had been killed near the Light-ship after a gale.

The weight of the old Pomatorhine Skua was 1 lb. 6 oz., that of the young 1 lb. 8 oz. The colouring of the legs of the latter was very beautiful,—the thighs, knees, and half an inch of the tarsus beneath, and the joint immediately above the interdigital membranes, being beautiful cobalt-blue; the front of the middle part of the tarsi pale greenish blue; the interdigital membranes dark chocolate-black, resembling india-rubber in appearance; under surface of the foot reddish flesh-colour; irides brownish black; bill brownish slate-colour, tips black. The feet and tarsi of the old bird were uniform dark chocolate-brown; under mandible fleshy, becoming black at the tip; basal portion of the upper mandible sickly yellow, the tip black; irides very dark.

The changes of plumage to which this species is subject are most perplexing, and I feel assured that much yet remains to be learnt respecting them. See what I have said on this subject in my account of *Stercorarius longicaudus*.

A most perfect and singularly coloured British-killed specimen is contained in the collection of our native birds belonging to Viscount Hill, at Hawkstone. This individual is remarkable for its large size, for the length of its middle tail-feathers, and for the uniformity in the colouring of its entire plumage, which may be characterized as of the deepest chocolate, inclining to black; the tarsi appear to have been black, and the beak also, with the exception of the culmen, which is olive. This specimen has no appearance of immaturity; the two middle tail-feathers are of uniform breadth from the base to the tip, and are much longer than usual. Total length 22 inches; bill 2; wing $13\frac{3}{4}$; tarsi $2\frac{1}{2}$; middle toe and nail 2.

The Plate represents an adult and young bird, rather less than the natural size.

Gould, John. 1873. "Pomatorhine Skua, Stercorarius pomatorhinus [Pl. 79]." *The birds of Great Britain* 5, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324123>.

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