STERCORARIUS PARASITICUS.

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Arctic Skua.

- Larus parasiticus*, Linn. Syst. Nat., ed. 12, tom. i. p. 226.
Cattaractes parasita, Pall. Zoogr. Ross.-Asiat., tom. ii. p. 310.
Lestris parasiticus, Ill. Prod. Syst. Mamm. et Av., p. 273.
Stercorarius parasiticus, Gray and Mitch. Gen. of Birds, vol. iii. p. 653, *Stercorarius*, sp. 1.
Lestris Richardsonii, Swains. Faun. Bor.-Amer., vol. ii. p. 433.
Stercorarius richardsonii, Coues, Proc. Acad. Sci. Philad. 1863, pp. 121, 135.
Lestris thuliaca, Preyer, Reise nach Island, p. 418.
Richardson's Skua of British Ornithologists.
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No species of the genus is subject to greater changes of plumage than the present bird, and none exhibits a greater diversity in its colouring. The uniformly-coloured figure in the 'Fauna Boreali-Americana' represents the bird in a somewhat abnormal dress; for, although dark varieties occasionally occur among the specimens shot in the British Islands, few are so uniform in their colouring. Swainson, not being aware of the variations to which the bird is subject, regarded the specimens under his notice as pertaining to a distinct species, and under this impression named them *Lestris Richardsonii*, in honour of Dr. Richardson; but, as we now know he was in error in so doing, we are compelled by the law of priority to deprive the bird of the honour of bearing the name of that distinguished traveller and scientific naturalist.

Although the seas of the northern hemisphere are inhabited by every species of this form, I have but little doubt of the present bird being the one most generally distributed, the regions of the Arctic circle in both the Old and the New World being tenanted by it. From these parts of the northern hemisphere its range extends over Europe and America, the British islands being perhaps the most southern country in which it breeds. It is abundant in Baffin's Bay, Greenland, Iceland, and Norway, and a few years ago was scarcely less numerous in the Shetland, the Orkney, and Faroe Islands; in the former they annually bred, but they are now far less numerous than formerly. During tempestuous weather and seasons of extreme cold, it proceeds to the southward; and the young, wandering further than the adults, occasionally resort to the coasts of Portugal, Spain, and the Mediterranean. Still it is strictly a bird of the north, the greater number remaining in those countries during the months of summer, ever chasing the Gull and the Sea-Swallow, and tyrannizing over all the other birds they can master.

"In autumn," says Macgillivray, "when the fry of the coal-fish swarm along the shores, and shoals of the sand-eel sport in the waters, vast numbers of Gulls, Sea-Mews, and Terns frequent the sandy coast. Here on this beach let us seat ourselves, and take note of the occurrences, the time being the end of August. The wavelets chase each other in undulating lines, the sunbeams glitter on the smooth surface of the sea, and the gentle breeze tempers the heat of noontide. The sea-birds are on wing, wheeling and hovering all around, vociferous in their enjoyment,—their screams mingling into one harsh noise. Every now and then a Tern dips into the water, and emerges with a little fish in its bill, which it swallows without alighting. In the midst of all this bustle and merriment, there comes gliding from afar, with swift and steady motion, a dark and resolute-looking bird, which, as it cleaves a path for itself among the White Terns, seems a messenger of death. A few minutes ago he was but a dim speck on the horizon, or at least some miles away; and now he is in the very midst of them, has singled out his victim, and is pursuing it. The latter, light and agile, attempts to evade the aggressor, mounts, descends, sweeps aside, glides off in a curve, turns, doubles, and shoots away, screaming incessantly the while. The Sea-Hawk follows the frightened bird in all its motions, which its superior agility enables it to do with apparent ease. At length the Tern, finding escape hopeless, and perhaps terrified by the imminence of its danger, disgorges part of the contents of its gullet, probably with a view of lightening itself. The pursuer, with all his seeming ferocity, had no designs upon the life of the poor Tern; and now his object is evident, for he plunges after the falling fish, catches it in its descent, and presently flies off to attack another bird. In this way the marauder makes his rounds, exacting tribute from all who he thinks are capable of paying it, and not sturdy enough to resist oppression. The teaser never fishes for himself on such occasions, although his organization seems to fit him for aquatic rapine even more than that of the Tern or Gull. When satisfied with food, he retires to the distant bosom of the deep, or to some inlet or unfrequented part of the sand; but his awakening appetite soon forces him to return, and, for hours together, he may be seen on wing, singling out a bird here and there, and pursuing it, or gliding swiftly, as if on urgent business, from one group to another. The pirate sweeps rapidly along on extended wings, which are considerably curved like those of the Gulls and Terns, the latter of which it resembles in its mode of flight, although it moves more directly, with

scarcely perceptible undulations. When approaching a bird at full speed, it flies directly forward with frequent flaps; in pursuit it turns, ascends, falls, and glides with the most elegant motions. The pirate can neither dive nor plunge; but it swims with ease, and sits lightly on the water. It seldom fails in catching the fish that has been dropped; yet this sometimes happens, and I have seen it pick it up after it had fallen on the water, although at other times it did not attempt to obtain it, possibly because it had sunk beyond its depth. The pirate cannot be said to live without labour; for the trouble of compelling its unwilling vassals to disgorge is apparently greater than what would abundantly supply it with honestly obtained food."

The late Mr. Dunn, speaking of the bird as seen by him in Orkney and Shetland, about 1832, states that it appears there regularly in May, and leaves in August. The place where he "found it most numerous in the former country was the Holm of Eddy; and in the latter, on the island of Noss, near Lerwick. It constructs its nest on low, wet, mossy heaths in exposed situations. The female lays two eggs, and has recourse to the same stratagem that the Plover employs to decoy you from the nest, but, when a person approaches the place where the nest is deposited, becomes bold and fierce, and strikes severely with the feet and bill. A dog I had with me on my first visit had been so repeatedly and severely struck by this bird, that when he heard one cry he would instantly come behind me for protection; and all my efforts to make him hunt again were ineffectual until we had got some distance from the place. Another dog, possessing more courage than the former, after feeling the effects of their bills once or twice, and appearing much astonished at such a foe, would watch the bird pouncing at him, and spring from the ground to meet the attack, and by this means escaped many severe blows."

In some notes recently transmitted to me by Mr. J. H. Dunn, he says, "There is only one place in Orkney where the bird now breeds; and that is the island of Hoy. The proprietor allows no one to land with a gun. I have been there myself; but I found only a small number, and in a few years there will probably be none on any of our other islands. The hills on Pomona, or the mainland of Orkney, are now all divided; so that every man knows his own, and where he can make improvements and bring the ground under cultivation—a process which is gradually proceeding, and which, of course, tends to diminish the numbers of such birds as the Arctic Skua."

Mr. Newton informs us that in Iceland this bird is "common enough throughout the island; for it occasionally occurs, and even breeds, on the moors far inland. According to Faber, it arrives about the 25th of April, and remains until the middle of September."

We learn from Mr. Hewitson, that in Norway the Arctic Skuas breed mostly apart from each other, each pair taking possession of a separate island, upon the highest point of nearly all of which they are constantly to be seen perched, and upon it they usually lay their eggs, sometimes, however, choosing the lower grounds. Here also they are the persecutors of the other species of sea-birds, even sucking the eggs of those who may have left them uncovered.

The nest is usually made of dry grasses and mosses, and placed upon a slight but dry eminence. The eggs are commonly two in number, of an olive-brown, spotted with dark brown, and are about two inches and eight lines in length by one inch and eight lines in breadth. But Macgillivray states that they "differ greatly in size, form, and colours, the ground-colour being brownish green, olivaceous, umber-brown, light yellowish brown, pale yellowish grey, or light greyish green, spotted and patched with umber or blackish brown and purplish grey.

The normal plumage of the Arctic Skua is doubtless that represented by the hinder figure in the accompanying Plate, in which, as will be seen, the under surface is white. The common variety is that shown by the figure in which the plumage is of uniform tint, except the ear-coverts and the lengthened feathers on the sides of the neck, which are buff. In the young state, or the plumage of the first autumn, the under part of the body is rayed with markings of white and brown, and on the upper the feathers are margined with buff. At this age the tarsi are bluish, and the toes are dark. The nestling-plumage, again, differs; for the chick is clothed in a hairy down of a uniform sooty black, and has the bill very light bluish horn-colour, darkest on the culmen from the nostril to the point; irides bluish black; legs and toes light slaty blue, tinged with purple, which is darkest at the joints; web slight stone-colour, with a tinge of blue near the toes.

The figures are of the natural size.

Gould, John. 1873. "Arctic Skua, *Stercorarius parasiticus* [Pl. 80]." *The birds of Great Britain* 5, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324124>.

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