STERCORARIUS LONGICAUDUS.

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STERCORARIUS LONGICAUDUS.

Long-tailed Skua.

? *Larus crepidatus*, Gmel. edit. Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 602.

Stercorarius longicaudus, Vieill. Cuv. Dict. d'Hist. Nat., tom. xxxii. p. 157.—Briss. Orn., tom. vi. pp. 150, 155.

Lestris parasiticus, Temm. Man. d'Orn., 2^{me} édit. tom. ii. p. 796.

——— Buffoni, Boie, Isis, 1822, p. 562.

Stercorarius cephus, Leach, Swains. Faun. Bor.-Amer., vol. ii. p. 432.

Catharacta cephus, Keys. und Blas. Wirb. Eur., p. 95.

Cataractes longicaudatus, Macgill. Man. Nat. Hist. Orn., vol. ii. p. 258.

Stercorarius cephus, Gray and Mitch. Gen. of Birds, vol. iii. p. 653, *Stercorarius*, sp. 2.

——— Buffoni, Coues, Proc. Acad. Sci. Philad., 1863, p. 136.

The Arctic Bird, Edw. Nat. Hist. of Birds, part iii. pl. 148.

Buffon's Skua of British Ornithologists.

I ADOPT the specific term *longicaudus* for this elegant bird because it is a very appropriate appellation, and there is little doubt of its being the oldest that has been applied to it, the bird being sufficiently well described as *Stercorarius longicaudus* by Brisson in 1760 (see his 'Ornithologie,' vol. vi. p. 155). It is, undoubtedly, the "Arctic Bird" of Edwards, although his figure represents the bird with yellow tarsi and black toes in lieu of the normal colouring. Adult birds with yellow tarsi are now before me, and particularly a Cornish-killed example, sent for my inspection by Mr. Rodd, an examination of which seems to prove that the part of the legs which is grey in the living birds changes to dull yellow after being mounted and exposed to light. It will be recollected that in Richardson's Skua the tarsi and toes are uniform in colour.

It will be seen, on reference, that the foregoing species (*S. parasiticus*) is strictly an inhabitant of and breeds in the British Islands. The present bird, on the other hand, has never been known to incubate on any of them, although it has been frequently shot in spring off our coasts. Five splendid adult examples were sent to Mr. Leadbeater to be preserved, early in June 1860; they had been shot out of a large flight which appeared a few days previously off the coast of Ireland, and which was probably performing its annual northward migration. The period was remarkable for violent gales of wind and rough weather, which, by compelling the birds to adopt an unusual route, may account for the occurrence of so many individuals of a rare bird at one time. They were in the finest state of plumage; and dissection proved that three were females and one at least a male. The latter was considerably smaller than the former; and it will be interesting if ornithologists, in their future investigation of this group, can give any proof that the males of the members of this genus are constantly less than the females. Besides these five birds, I have been favoured by E. H. Rodd, Esq., with a specimen which was killed in Falmouth Harbour; I have also seen a young individual in the collection of Mr. Fox at Falmouth; and Mr. Gatcombe informs me that immature examples are not uncommonly seen near Plymouth in autumn. From the foregoing remarks it will be perceived that the British Islands are beyond the limits of the area usually frequented by this species—a circumstance illustrative of the old adage that two of a trade can never agree; the Arctic and Long-tailed Skuas, having habits in common, were not, indeed, likely to breed near each other: yet their nurseries are not very far apart; for if we take a journey to the countries of Norway and Lapland, we shall find the bird breeding in abundance on many of their wild fell-lands: here, then, as well as in the extreme northern portions of America, Iceland, and Greenland, the bird finds a summer home. I take the liberty of quoting some interesting notes on this bird by Mr. Wheelwright, as seen by him in the Quickiock district of Lapland.

"Owing, as it was supposed, to the numbers of Lemmings which swarmed on these fells this summer, the Buffon's Skua was unusually numerous in this neighbourhood, and I obtained more than thirty specimens of old birds, many eggs, and a few young. But, from all I could hear, this was a very unusual occurrence, and years may elapse before they will appear again in such numbers on these fells, though a year never passes without some being seen. It appears therefore that the northern stretch of this large fell-range is the summer home of this Skua, which in winter is occasionally met with as far south as the British Channel. I cannot hear of its breeding, however, further south than 'Peleeikaism,' perhaps 100 miles south of Quickiock. The Laps appear to be well acquainted with this bird. We got our first nest on the 3rd of June, and continued to take fresh eggs until the end of the month. Except in one instance, I never saw more than two eggs in a nest. Once I found three; and as I have taken a single egg from a nest which had been sat on, it seems that they do not always lay two, though we may take that to be the general number. The nest

is nothing more than a few pieces of dried hay, laid in a hole scratched in the ground, always in the vicinity of water. I never saw one on a real snow-fell. Although the bird lives in colonies, you do not find the nests close together. None breed close to Quickiock; but on the fells about thirty miles westward they do in great numbers. No birds are more tame or fearless during the time they have eggs; for they come sailing close over your head when searching for the nest, performing the most beautiful aerial gyrations, during which their long sharp wings and pointed tail give them a singular and pretty appearance. Their cry is a loud dismal shriek, 'i-i-i-ah, je-ah, je-oh, je-oh,' and may be heard day and night over their breeding-place. As soon as the young are hatched off, their nature seems to be entirely changed; they never approach within gunshot, and wisely do not betray the proximity of the young (who always manage to hide themselves very cleverly) by any gestures of anxiety. Of all the specimens I have examined, in one alone did I ever find the remains of a Fell Lemming, and in only one other the remains of a mouse. Their principal food appears to be the common crowberry (*Empetrum nigrum*), a large beetle, and small crustacea. I never found anything, except crowberries, in the stomachs of the young ones. The Laps have an idea that they will kill and eat the young Ptarmigan. I have certainly seen this Skua chase an old Ptarmigan; but this seemed to be from mere wantonness rather than anything else. I could scarcely distinguish the male from the female by the plumage. In one example the long middle tail-feathers measured 13 inches, and extended 9 inches beyond the rest. Much confusion has existed respecting the different members of this genus. Few birds are subject to so many changes of plumage, owing to age and the different shades which appear at the same season of the year.

"The young much resemble the young of the Common Skua (*Stercorarius parasiticus*); the tail is perfectly even, no one feather being longer than the others. On carefully comparing the eggs of Buffon's Skua with those of Richardson's Skua, I could see no very apparent difference in the size. The former may perhaps be a trifle smaller than the latter, but they vary in this respect; for I have seen them quite as large, while from one nest I took two eggs which were at least one-third smaller than any I had before seen. I noticed also that the egg of Buffon's Skua is thicker and blunter at the larger end than the other. The colour is much the same in both, and is subject to the same variations."

It is not to be supposed that the inland wastes, above referred to, are frequented at any other time than the breeding-season. The important duty of incubation accomplished, the bird in a few hours, if so disposed, can fly to the neighbouring seas in search of victims, from whose labours it may obtain its chief if not its only subsistence: not always industrious enough to fish for itself, the Long-tailed Skua gives chase to Gulls, Terns, or any other bird that may have been successful in fishing; these it buffets and persecutes until, in order to lighten themselves, and by flying faster gain the chance of escaping, they disgorge the contents of their stomach, which is immediately and adroitly seized before it reaches the water or land as the case may be; this end attained, the parasite ceases the persecution until the craving of hunger again prompts him to single out another victim and do the like. Scenes like these may frequently be witnessed in all the seas from Iceland to the Mediterranean; for wherever Gulls and Terns abound, there also will their tormentor be found.

The young of the year are blackish brown, each feather of the back being bordered with yellowish, more or less tinged with brown; abdomen brown, streaked with dull white; lower tail-coverts streaked with brown and ochre; wings and tail blackish brown; base of the bill ochreous; tarsi, hind toes and claws, and the base of the interdigital membranes dull yellowish; feathers of the tail rounded, the middle ones not projecting.

The figures in the accompanying Plate were taken from two specimens killed, on the 10th and 12th of June respectively, on their breeding-fells at Quickiock in Norway. I, for one, and most other ornithologists have believed that the style of plumage there represented, when once assumed, is retained ever after; but I have now some reason to think otherwise—that, as is the case with the Divers and other water-birds, it is merely a summer dress, and that after the birds have done breeding they are rayed with brown and white after the manner of, but more conspicuously than in the immature state. Besides other examples I have seen, Mr. Bond has a Cornish-killed specimen bearing out these remarks. It remains to be proved whether or not my opinion be correct; if so, the same law will govern other species of the genus. I may further remark that I have reason to believe that our islands are occasionally visited by another bird of this form, rather larger than the *S. parasiticus*, which has not yet been described, although perhaps it is the one noticed by Mr. Coues in his investigation of the genus in the 'Proceedings of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia' for 1863.

Gould, John. 1873. "Long-tailed Skua, *Stercorarius longicaudus* [Pl. 81]." *The birds of Great Britain* 5, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324125>.

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