

## **Long-tailed Skua *Stercorarius longicaudus*: first record for Uganda**

The Long-tailed Skua *Stercorarius longicaudus*, like its congeners, is a highly pelagic species, breeding on tundra around the Arctic Circle and wintering mainly in the subantarctic waters of the Southern Hemisphere (Furness 1996). It is an extremely rare vagrant to the coasts and inland lakes of eastern Africa with only four confirmed reports (from Kenya and Tanzania) since 1961 (D. Turner, pers. comm.).

During the afternoon of 5 December 2014 we were bird watching at Lake Munyanyange, a large low-lying lake in open countryside near the village of Katwe, bordering the Queen Elizabeth National Park in western Uganda (0°08'S, 29°53'E). We were accompanied by Kasasa Hannington and a local guide and ornithologist, Ouma Richardson. At one point PH noticed a bird flying close to the lakeshore which he thought was a skua, although nothing more came of it since the bird quickly disappeared from view.

Fortunately, several minutes later, he noticed the bird again as it flew in isolation, high and distantly over the lake, moving apparently in the wake of a large group of departing Lesser Black-backed Gulls *Larus fuscus*. He shouted to DT who managed to locate the bird in his camera and take several photographs. Although rather far away the bird could be clearly picked out as it moved slowly southwards, making large sweeping circular glides in the manner of a migrating raptor. It appeared to be the same size or smaller than the departing gulls and the overall impression was that it

was (for a skua) rather light and slender, lacking any notable heaviness or bulk. The head in particular seemed rather small. The bird was in view for some 90 s before it was lost in the distance. After it had disappeared the feeling was that it had been 'either an Arctic [*S. parasiticus*] or a Long-tailed'. However, neither of us was very experienced in seabird watching, so no firm conclusions on the bird's identity could be drawn.

About a week later we returned to our respective countries and sought the opinions of friends who had more experience of seabirds and a better knowledge of skua identification. Because of the bird's overall size and jizz, in particular its wing shape (with narrow arms similar in depth to the hand), identification was concentrated on Arctic vs Long-tailed Skua (Pomarine *S. pomarinus* was eliminated). Based on the photographic evidence our 'third parties' concluded (independently) that the bird was a Long-tailed Skua (Fig. 1). The barred axillaries and short blunt (juvenile) projections to the central tail feathers indicated that it was a bird in its first winter.



**Figure 1.** Photographs of Long-tailed Skua in Uganda showing the light build, narrow wings and slim bill. (L-R) Upperwing, short rounded tail projections, jizz, and underwing barring (photos D. Thorns).

Arctic Skua was eliminated by the following suite of characters:

- the narrow 'arms', similar in 'depth' to the 'hand' (the arm appears broader in Arctic)
- the white primary shafts, present only on P10 and P9
- the broad blunt projections to the central tail feathers
- the overall small appearance with a small head
- the suggestion of heavily barred undertail coverts
- the white belly – typical for juvenile Long-tailed, but extremely unusual for juvenile Arctic.

The observation was submitted to the East African Rarities Committee who have accepted it as the first documented record for Uganda.

#### Acknowledgements

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