General Notes

Photo by Alan Brady

Long-tailed Jaeger with unusually white primaries. The identification of a jaeger on August 25, 1996, at the northwest wall of Hudson Canyon, 80 miles from shore, has been the subject of some discussion. Despite the time of year, the great distance from shore, the buoyancy in flight, and the bird's behavior, some originally considered this to be a Parasitic Jaeger (*Stercorarius parasiticus*), primarily because of its extensive white wing flashes.

The bird was first sighted about 100 yards off the port side, flying close to the water, harassing storm-petrels (Hydrobatidae). It followed along with our boat, and then again, off the bow, dipped down to the surface to feed or harass other petrels. It was under observation by all aboard for almost five minutes, and a number of photographs were taken.

With the aid of some of these photographs, we have concluded that the bird was clearly a Long-tailed Jaeger (*S. longicaudus*).

Late August is a perfect time to observe Long-tailed Jaegers in these waters. Parasitics are generally later migrants and are found closer to the beach, where they habitually parasitize terns (*Sterna* spp.). Long-tailed Jaegers often harass storm-petrels, as this bird was doing, and in doing so, spread its wings fully so that a white flashing was dramatically apparent not only from below but above as well. The photographs show white at the basal half of each half-primary web, not only of the first two or three feathers, as in the accepted identification criterion, but in all primaries.

As an identification clincher, the rounded, short central rectrices seen clearly in the photographs are indicative of Long-tailed Jaeger, not Parasitic, which has pointed rectrices. This may be an often-misidentified and unusual plumage of juvenile Long-tailed Jaeger. A photograph appears in *Birding World,* Vol. 6, No. 10, pp. 403–404, of a similar bird near London, England, on September 8, 1993, found by Phil Vines.

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Possible nominate-race Red Knot at Reed's Beach, New Jersey. During the third week of May 1998, while viewing the immense shorebird concentrations at Reed's Beach, Cape May County, New Jersey, I observed a Red Knot that may have been of the nominate race, *Calidris canutus canutus*, the race that breeds in central Siberia and normally winters in Africa.

While looking at Red Knots, I came upon an individual that was much more rusty red and somewhat darker overall, particularly on the back, than the hundreds of other Red Knots present. Particularly, the bird's head, mantle, back, and undertail coverts were nearly as red as the breast, with none of the normal grayish wash present. The bird clearly stood out from the dozens of Red Knots surrounding it, so much so that it could always be easily relocated. Attempts to photograph the bird were unsuccessful. It was watched for about five minutes before the flock flushed and the bird flew off. The bird was not refound, despite some effort.

At the time, although intrigued with the bright bird, I dismissed it as probably an "alpha-alpha male,"

at the high peak of its breeding (alternate) plumage. Investigation though, led to the possibility that the bird might have been an individual of the nominate race *canutus*. This Red Knot greatly resembled illustration 187A, Plate 73, in Hayman et al. 1986, although it actually appeared even redder above than the bird in the illustration.

According to Hayman et. al. 1986, the *canutus* race is characterized by deep reddish/chestnut underparts, little white on the lower belly, and mantle fringes that are dark chestnut. *C. c. rufa*, the breeding race of central Canada, is more extensively pale on the scapulars and tertials. Especially, *rufa* shows reduced black feather centers above, with broader gray and white feather fringes, which impart an overall paler, grayer tone above.

The Siberian race should appear much darker and deeper red all over, and the May 1998 bird fit the description well. Of the many thousands of Red Knots I have viewed over the past 25 years, this bird was unique, standing out of the crowd of knots on the beach and in my memory. This note is not, obviously, meant as an exhaustive discussion of Red Knot races, nor is it a claim that the nominate race definitively occurred on the beaches of the Delaware Bay. A sight record, particularly one without photographs, could never prove the occurrence of *C. c. canutus* on the Atlantic Coast. It does, though, offer an intriguing possibility: If a Mongolian Plover can make it to Cape May County, as one did on July 13, 1990, so too, possibly, could a "Siberian" Red Knot.

Mainly, this note and sight record report should serve to alert birders to the possibility that a nominate Red Knot might have occurred at Reed's Beach and to remind us of the exciting and yet-to-be understood mysteries of shorebird migration and distribution.

References

Hayman, P., J. Marchant, and T. Prater. 1986. Shorebirds: an identification guide. Houghton Mifflin, Boston, MA.

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Photo by Clay Sutton

Black-headed Grosbeak in Goshen, Cape May County, New Jersey. On February 6, 1999, in preparation for a winter field trip, we were having early-morning coffee with Ward Dasey while overlooking our garden and bird feeders in our Goshen, New Jersey, backyard. We were watching the feeders, in part, because a Dickcissel (*Spiza americana*) had been present since February 1.

We did not see the bird fly in, but we suddenly realized a Black-headed Grosbeak (*Pheucticus melanocephalus*) was sitting on the ground below the feeders. We watched the bird, an immature male, for about two minutes before it flew off. Because of work obligations, we had little opportunity to monitor the feeder for the next week, but the bird was seen early in the morning on February 9 and late in the afternoon on February 13.

We thought the Black-headed Grosbeak had moved on, but it reappeared on February 24 and was subsequently seen almost daily until March 6, albeit only once or twice a day, during feeder visits that lasted only one or two minutes. The bird was quite wary, possibly due to the daily presence of several Sharp-shinned Hawks (*Accipiter striatus*). The grosbeak was photographed on several dates. The Dickcissel was also last seen on March 6.

On April 15, we learned that a Black-headed Grosbeak was present at another feeder in Goshen, about two miles from our home. It had been present at this second site for several weeks, according

to the homeowner. We viewed the bird on April 16 and determined that it was almost certainly the same individual. It had begun to molt into alternate plumage and appeared considerably more striking than it had in February.

This was the eighth published record for Cape May County. The previous records include five in fall, one in May, and one in December (Sibley 1997). There have been approximately 40 records of Black-headed Grosbeak in New Jersey. Accordingly, our bird was not a major rarity but it certainly brightened and enlivened our winter backyard. Clay will never forget, nor probably will Ward Dasey, gagging on his coffee and pointing, speechless, when he first spotted it under the bird feeder.

References

Sibley, D. 1997. Birds of Cape May. 2nd ed. New Jersey Audubon Soc., Cape May Point.

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Unusual behavior of a Common Grackle. On June 16, 1999, in the Tinicum area of Delaware County, I observed a female Common Grackle (*Quiscalus quiscula*) killing a small snake and flying off with it in its bill. The snake appeared to be a common garter snake (*Thamnophis sirtalis*). A.C. Bent's 1958 account of the Common Grackle does not mention this behavior. I have seen Common Grackles kill House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) at my bird feeder in Prospect Park, Pennsylvania.

Grackles nest in late April and should have young out of the nest before mid-June, so I surmised that this bird was feeding itself with the snake.

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Gull nesting mortality due to the heat wave in 1999. On July 9, 1999, Doris McGovern, Sam Orr, and I visited the Laughing (*Larus atricilla*) and Herring (*L. argentatus*) gull nesting colonies in the salt marshes west of Stone Harbor, New Jersey, on my annual trip to band young gulls. I observed the effects of the prolonged heat wave on the gull nestlings. Daily high temperatures had been in excess of 90 degrees for a week. Upon stepping onto the island, we were met with the odor of rotting flesh. Dead birds in all stages of development were scattered about. In the Herring Gull colony, I estimated 75% of the young were dead. The area of the island in which the Herring Gulls prefer to nest provides little cover for the hatchlings. Shallow ponds where young birds usually bathe were dried and cracked from the intense heat.

In contrast, Laughing Gull losses were lower. Laughing Gulls nest in salt-marsh spartina (*Spartina* spp.) grass, where the young find shade and are cooled by the ebb and flow of the tides. I estimated a 25% loss for the young Laughing Gulls.

The herons, egrets, and night-herons of Absecon Bay fared much better. On my banding trip of July 16, 1999, I observed only a few dead birds on the different islands where I have banded annually since 1956. The herons and egrets nest in and under bayberry (*Myrica* spp.) bushes and among the different grasses on the islands. In these protected nesting conditions, the mortality rate from the heat was only about 10%.

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A *Turdus migratorius* day. On November 7, 1999, a huge number of American Robins (*Turdus migratorius*) were migrating through Cape May Point, New Jersey. In 50 years of watching birds, this is the largest migration of robins I have ever observed. This flight began at first light and continued through late afternoon. Counters at the Cape May Bird Observatory's hawk watch estimated that 1.25 million robins passed the hawk-watch area. Higbee Beach saw similar movement. Experienced field observers birding throughout the Cape May area estimated that more than 2 million robins moved through the area that day.

There were also impressive numbers of southbound Canada (*Branta canadensis*) and Snow (*Chen caerulescens*) geese moving all day. Land birds in unusually large numbers that day included American Woodcock (*Scolopax minor*), Hermit Thrush (*Catharus guttatus*), Eastern Bluebird (*Sialia sialis*), American Pipit (*Anthus rubescens*), Yellow-rumped Warbler (*Dendroica coronata*), and Palm Warbler (*Dendroica palmarum*), as well as Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*), Rusty Blackbird (*Euphagus carolinus*), Purple Finch (*Carpodacus purpureus*), Pine Siskin (*Carduelis pinus*), and American Goldfinch (*C. tristis*). Dark-eyed Juncos (*Junco hyemalis*) and White-throated (*Zonotrichia albicollis*), Swamp (*Melospiza georgiana*), and Song (*M. melodia*) sparrows were migrating by the thousands. In addition, large numbers of raptors passed through the area. Marlene Miller, Sam Orr, and I witnessed this flight of birds. The winds were out of the northwest, the sky was clear, and the temperature was cool.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The flight actually began the night of Saturday, November 6. Augmenting John's numbers are the following from Paul Lehman, as posted to njbirds list: "Weather shifted from a warm day Saturday with SW winds, to much cooler and moderate to fairly strong NW winds by early Sunday. High counts: 1,250,000 American Robins, 75,000 American Goldfinches, 2,000 Rusty Blackbirds, 1,500 Eastern Bluebirds, thousands of sparrows (especially juncos). Rarities: 35+ Cave Swallows (around Cape May area), Franklin's Gull (adult at Avalon seawatch), Ross's Goose (fly-by at Avalon seawatch in flock of Snows), White-winged Crossbill; also about 20 Red Crossbills, Clay-colored Sparrow, 6 Lapland Longspurs, 2 Common Redpolls. Late lingering birds: 1 Ruby-throated Hummingbird, 1 Bank Swallow, 1 Rough-winged Swallow, 1–2 Barn Swallows; weekend total of 12 species of warblers, including 2 Black-throated Green and Northern Waterthrush. Also: about 10 Northern Goshawks, 3 Golden Eagles, and an overall excellent hawk flight."

Sharp-shinned Hawk feeding on an American Robin (*Turdus migratorius*). On the afternoon of December 6, 1999, I saw a clump of feathers on the ground in the woods behind our Media, Delaware Co., PA, home.

To my surprise a female Sharp-shinned Hawk (*Accipiter striatus*) was on the ground with her kill, tearing away at the flesh with short little nibbles. I was more startled than she, and as I retreated into the house, she continued her meal. After 20 minutes she flew to a tree and began slowly wiping her bill. A few ruffles of her feathers, a little side to side shimmy of her tail, and she took off into the woods. I rushed to identify the kill.

It was an American Robin, without its head, one wing, and half its innards. I decided not to leave the meaty carcass for a raccoon or skunk to take in the night, so I hung it on a snag of a nearby tree, thinking that in the morning I would put it back on the ground in the pile of feathers and see if the Sharpie would return to finish it.

The next day, at 7:44 a.m., I looked out to see if the robin was still on the snag, when I noticed the Sharpie already on the ground with the carcass. She not only came back to finish it, but when the carcass wasn't where she left it, she found where I had hung it, retrieved it and took it back to the original

feeding spot.

At 12:30 p.m. the hawk was still on the ground, tugging at the flesh, unable to get that remaining wing off. I counted more than 75 tugs as she tried to remove it.

While she sat on the ground, Mourning Doves (*Zenaida macroura*) came in to their usual feeding spot. Carolina Chickadees (*Poecile carolinensis*) and Tufted Titmice (*Baeolophus bicolor*) scolded, but could not resist a visit to a feeder less than 20 feet from her, in spite of the fact that there were numerous other feeders available. Could their lack of fear of the Sharpie have been fostered by a view of her bulging crop?

Finally, at 1:30 p.m., after more than five hours on the ground, she flew to the same tree for more bill-wiping, and remained at the edge of the deck where I wanted to hang clothes. I opened the back door , and the Sharpie remained perched less than 20 feet away. I hung laundry, getting bolder as I worked, snapping the shirts, waving the white underwear like flags … and still she sat.

I've read that proteins are broken down while a bird is at rest. She seemed to be in a kind of torpor, quietly digesting her meal. She had a five-hour meal on the ground, and she needed a nap. At 4:24 p.m., nine hours after I rediscovered her, she flew off, and I never saw her again.

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Small Common Loon at Van Sciver Lake, December 23, 1999.

Photo by Rick Mellon

Small Common Loon in Pennsylvania. On December 18, 1999, at 7:50 a.m., during the Southern Bucks County Christmas Bird Count, Michael Andrews, Al Bilheimer, Carrie Ferrie, Steve Hopkins, Don Jones, John Leslie, Rick Mellon, Chris Mellon, and Bob Toth observed two loons near the northwest shore of Van Sciver Lake at a distance of approximately 1,300 yards. Observational conditions were excellent: The sun was behind us; there was no wind and no fog. The temperature was approximately 40° Fahrenheit, and there were no heat waves. Three telescopes were in use: a Kowa TSN-2 equipped with a 20–60-power zoom eyepiece, a 20-power wide-angle Nikon, and a 40-power Nikon ED.

One loon appeared to be a typical winter-plumaged Common Loon *(Gavia immer)*. The other bird appeared to be approximately 20 percent to 30 percent smaller, had a smaller bill, and, during a very small percentage of observational time, showed a quite wide, white band along the flanks, just above the waterline and ending in a white oval on the posterior portion of the flanks. The smaller bird did not have a pronounced upturned bill, so Red-throated Loon *(G. stellata)* and Yellow-billed Loon *(G. adamsii)* were unlikely possibilities. Unfortunately, due to the great distance, we were not able to determine whether the bird was an Arctic Loon *(G. arctica)*, a Pacific Loon *(G. pacifica)*, or a small Common Loon. Later that day, a number of us had additional but still distant (300–400+ yards) looks at the loon, confirming that the bird had a blocky, flat-topped head shape similar to Common Loon; however, we were again unable to make a positive identification.

On Tuesday, December 23, 1999, Don Jones, Bob Mercer, and Rick Mellon relocated the small bird, along with a typical first-winter–plumaged Common Loon on the north side of Van Sciver Lake and eventually were able to observe the birds at very close range (30–40 yards). The smaller loon was approximately 20 percent smaller than the typical Common Loon and had a shorter, thinner bill, with a perfectly straight culmen. This gave the loon a smaller, somewhat upturned bill appearance. The plumage was essentially identical to the typical Common Loon with which the bird was swimming. Both birds appeared to be first-year birds, since they both exhibited pale feather edgings on the back. The top of the

head, the back of the neck, and the back were all uniformly dark, except for the pale feather edgings on the back. There was no evidence of the darker neck stripe that is found on the Pacific Loon. What was apparent was that the contrast between the dark and white of the neck formed a white indentation just above the shoulder. (Note that this mark is not always visible, depending on the neck posture of the bird being observed.) Overall, the dark of the hindneck gradually blended into the white of the foreneck along a very jagged line. Based on conversations with Barry Sauppe of El Granada, CA, and Michael O'Brien of Cape May, NJ, this mark is important for distinguishing Common Loon from Arctic and Pacific loons in winter plumage: In the latter two, the line between the dark of the hindneck and the white of the foreneck is clearly delineated along a straight line, and the meeting line itself is usually darker than the hindneck. At close range, it was apparent that there was no chin strap on either bird; however, a faint chin strap did appear to be visible when viewed at a great distance, possibly due to shadow. The apparent white flank patches occasionally observed when the bird was first seen were infrequently noted on both the small loon and on the larger typical Common Loon at close range. White appeared both as an oval on the flanks and as a white band immediately above the waterline, when it was visible, although it was visible <10 percent of the time that we watched the bird. It is apparent that the wide, white horizontal band at the waterline and flank patch seen on December 18 were the result of the bird rolling to one side, the rolling itself being unnoticed due to the great distance.

This report is being presented to provide a cautionary note for observers of loons. The bird we observed was distinctly smaller than a Common Loon, had a small bill with a perfectly straight culmen, giving it a slight upturned appearance; occasionally showed distinct white sides and flank patches; and appeared to exhibit a faint chin strap, which was probably shadow. At a greater distance or under poorer meteorological conditions, this bird might easily have been misidentified as either Arctic or Pacific loon. The size and bill shape were especially interesting. Harrison (1983) lists bill size for the Common Loon as ranging from 61 to 91 cm, while the Arctic and Pacific loons, which he considered conspecifics, range from 58 to 73 cm. The straight culmen on this loon may have been atypical or possibly due to a lack of complete development in this apparent first-year loon.

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References

Harrison, P. 1983. Seabirds: an identification guide. Houghton Mifflin Co. Boston, Mass. Pp. 34, 209–210.