

THE 1996 WEST BEXINGTON SOUTH POLAR SKUA: A FIRST FOR BRITAIN

Mike Morse with Ivan Lakin

In 1983, I attended an illustrated talk by Peter Harrison promoting his seminal work, 'Seabirds'. During the talk, Peter shared his view that South Polar Skua should be regularly reaching British waters, and in citing a couple of possible sightings, suggested that they were being overlooked. Nearly four decades would pass before Peter would be proven correct.

It was bitterly cold on 27th January 1996, so cold in fact that Cliff Rogers (CR) decided to change his plans. He had intended to walk from his then home at Abbotsbury along the coastal path to West Bexington but instead, he decided to drive there. Arriving at West Bexington car park he scanned around and noticed a tame skua loitering near some fishermen on the beach. It was scavenging their bait and even took pieces of fish off their hooks. Based on its size and structure, CR eliminated the three smaller skua species and, quite understandably at the time, identified the bird as a Great Skua and shared the news.

Winter records of Great Skua in Dorset are uncommon, but not unusual enough to attract a crowd; despite its extended stay, only a few local birders travelled to see it. Ironically, its stay around the county coincided with that of a wintering Forster's Tern that was largely faithful to The Fleet but relocated to West Bexington Mere on 3rd and 4th February where birders who had travelled some distance to see the tern were also treated to a bonus 'Great Skua'. Crucially, a few photographs of it were taken by well-known local photographers, although the significance of them would not become apparent for some time.

As far as I know, there was no questioning of the Dorset skua's identification at the time, and the Dorset Bird Report for 1996 published it under Great Skua 'A single at West Bexington and Cogden Beach 27th-30th Jan and 4th Feb' (presumably the bird was present throughout). However, this benign quote belied what subsequently became a remarkable story, spanning decades of work by many individuals that ultimately contributed to revealing the true identification of this bird. It's a story destined to become part of birding folklore and deserves sharing with a wider audience.



South Polar Skua – West Bexington – January/February 1996 – Cliff Rogers



South Polar Skua – West Bexington – January/February 1996 – Cliff Rogers

Ivan Lakin (IL) takes up the story...

“...On 11th January 1996, I was attempting to conduct bird-wardening duties to protect the roosting wader flocks from disturbance in a near gale-force south-easterly on Warren Point, located near the end of Dawlish Warren NNR, Devon. A large skua was watched for a few minutes in the bay but poor conditions hampered identification. Weather the next day was still atrocious and the skua was again present but better views were possible when it landed on what is nowadays known as Finger Point. At the time I noted, “Confused us for a long time with its uniform dark grey brown plumage, dark bluey grey-based bill and odd structure...” The skua was subsequently seen by several observers as it ranged between Dawlish town seafront, inside the Exe Estuary and c.5 miles further east, offshore from Budleigh Salterton, Devon. I spoke to a few of these observers at that time and none were sure what it was, commenting on its plain greyish brown plumage and that, in flight, its structure resembled something between a large Pomarine Skua and Great Skua.

On 21st January, the mystery skua returned to Dawlish Warren where it flew around close to the shoreline and stood on the beach where it was admired for over an hour by Kevin Rylands (KRy) and myself. We described that encounter as being ‘blown-away’ by this bird and we both concluded that it appeared to have characteristics of South Polar Skua. We forwarded a description of this skua to the Devon Bird Recorder but, disappointingly, it was relegated in the Devon Bird Report 1996 as, “Unidentified skuas included one Dawlish Warren on the early date of 21 Jan...” Without photographs available at that time, we couldn’t dispute that decision and the story could have ended there...but as luck would have it, four years later...

Birders of the Exe Estuary used to regularly meet as a social group (BEER) and at one of these meetings in Jan 2000, Pete and Carole Leigh – two accomplished bird photographers – brought along their photo albums to show. Turning the pages, I happened upon two photos of a skua and I can still recall that jaw-dropping moment vividly upon immediately recognising images of what was the same skua which had caused so much confusion four years earlier at Dawlish Warren. I attracted the attention of other birders to these photos and all agreed that its identification needed pursuing. Later, flipping over the photo prints, details written on the backs described that they had been taken during Jan/Feb 1996, but at West Bexington, Dorset, located over 35 miles east along the coast further around Lyme Bay. Initially that was unexpected, but it is not unusual for individual birds to move and relocate along

the coast of Lyme Bay and to be re-sighted between Dawlish Warren and as far as Portland Bill, even on the same day.

After some persuasion, I was lent the photos, made copies and posted one to Klaus Olsen - an author of 'Skuas and Jaegers' (1997) - in Denmark and after some weeks, I followed up with a call for comments. Klaus' initial impression of the photo was that it appeared to be of a South Polar Skua but before going public he wished to conduct more research about dark-morph immature Great Skua and of plumage variations in the Brown Skua.

In late-Apr/early-May 2000, 'Mush' Ahmad (MHA) called me from Tring having looked at South Polar Skua skins and so I invited him to cross the country to Exeter to look at the skua photos by Carole Leigh. As a reminder, personalised and household information technology was not anywhere near as advanced back then as it is today. MHA examined photos of the mystery skua and agreed that overall plumage tones were very similar to those of South Polar Skua skins and were different from Great Skua skins that he had looked at the previous day. This was promising news and, although tenuous, warranted reaching out to more experts.

It also emerged then that others had photographed this bird during its stay in Dorset and I obtained some by Pete Coe via Graham Walbridge. By late-June 2000, Tony Marr and Paul Harvey had seen all available shots and had responded with the positive opinion about the bird's resemblance to South Polar Skua.

MHA and I both visited Tring Museum on 10th July 2000. However, my overall impressions were that although a useful trip, the exercise raised more questions than answers due to some issues with skin preservation, setting, some suspected cases of mislabelling and limited sets of relevant specimens of what is a complex group.

Nonetheless, since in possession of various photographs, still vivid memories of the bird in Devon, some contemporaneous field notes, verbal accounts of sightings from other birders in Devon and Dorset, and having better understanding about plumage variations, moult timings, bare parts colouration, structure etc gleaned from experts, papers and skin examinations, I collated information about the Dawlish Warren sightings and submitted a 12-page description to BBRC in August 2000...."



South Polar Skua – West Bexington – January/February 1996 – Carole Leigh

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This activity and IL's submission stimulated a resurgence of interest in the bird, triggering articles such as:

"South Polar Skua in Devon and Dorset: the first British record" in Birdwatch 99 (Sep 2000): 60, which asked, "What would it be like to discover you'd found a first for Britain - four years after you saw the bird? Ivan Lakin tells Birdwatch exclusively..."

This was followed up by a more circumspect: 'An interesting skua in Dorset' (Millington, 2000). The sighting was also published in *The Birds of Dawlish Warren* (Lakin & Rylands, 2000).

The description then circulated BBRC and there were positive signs, for instance, rumours were that one of the committee members, as a well-intended ruse, slipped in an additional photograph of a different South Polar Skua taken within its normal range, to see if anyone could see the difference. Given the challenging identification and magnitude of this bird as a potential first for Britain, the assessment process was unsurprisingly lengthy. Reports on Rare Birds in Great Britain in 2000, 2001 and 2002, published in *British Birds* Vols. 94 (2001), 95 (2002) and 96 (2003), listed it in its records remaining under consideration:

"1996 South Polar Skua Catharacta maccormicki Dawlish Warren, Devon, January, February; presumed same, West Bexington, Dorset, January, February".

Further complicating the assessment were the sightings of two more cryptic 'southern skuas' that had provoked considerable debate - one discovered on St Agnes, Isles of Scilly in October 2001, the other at Aberavon, Glamorgan in February 2002. Both individuals were unwell and taken into care, allowing feather samples to be collected from which DNA was extracted.

An article was then published in 2004 (Votier *et al.*) that claimed that the resulting DNA analysis at the University of Glasgow appeared to show conclusively that the lineages of both individuals was within the Brown Skua group *Catharacta antarctica antarctica/hamiltoni/lonnbergi*. Furthermore, measurements of the Glamorgan bird suggested that it might, in fact, be a 'Falkland Skua' *C. a. antarctica*. No measurements were obtained from the Scilly bird.

There was the intention to submit both records to BBRC but, in 2007, the DNA work that had previously identified both individuals as Brown Skua was retracted. In simple terms, it seemed that DNA samples from the 'southern skua' group used to compare against DNA of the 2001 and 2002 skuas had excluded the South Polar Skua population that breed on the Antarctic Peninsula. After new mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) sequence data from these skuas were obtained, it was discovered that discrimination between Brown, Chilean and South Polar Skuas was no longer possible and therefore identification by this method was unreliable, except to differentiate them from their northern counterpart - the Great Skua.

Oddly, in the same year, the Report on Rare Birds in Great Britain in *British Birds* (Vol. 100, Dec 2007) in its list of records not accepted included:

"1996 Brown Skua Stercorarius antarcticus [sic] Dawlish Warren, Devon"

The skua at Dawlish Warren had not been re-submitted and IL had not indicated that it was anything other than South Polar Skua, despite the Brown Skua claims, so it was rather incongruous for a bird to be submitted as one species to then be rejected as another. There was also no mention of the West Bexington sighting. Whatever the reason, identification of the skuas seen in Dawlish/Dorset in 1996, Scilly in 2001 and Glamorgan in 2002 appeared to have been thwarted.

Time passed and knowledge of skuas made further advances. Several published papers, including one by Newell, Howell and López-Velasco (2013) explained differences in the timings of moult strategies with age and in differences between 'southern skuas' and Great Skua. Also, more records of South Polar Skua became accepted within the northern hemisphere, including birds tracked via data-loggers, giving rise to better awareness that, of the 'southern skuas', the South Polar Skua is the only regular trans-equatorial migrant that reaches the Pacific and northwest Atlantic. Also, and of particular relevance to British records, the species has a range that can extend across into the eastern Atlantic. All this has been aided by technological advances in taking digital images that offer improvements in

representing subtle identification features, such as moult, plumage tones and structure.

Given these advances in knowledge, in the early-2010s, the BBRC reviewed all four records as four individual South Polar Skuas. This review concluded the Dawlish bird to be 'Not Proven', disadvantaged as it was by lacking photographs of it there, nor having a DNA sample obtained and tested. The remaining three records were accepted however and since the West Bexington bird was the earliest record, this became the first record for Britain.

As the formal British first, the West Bexington record went to the BOURC (British Ornithologists' Union Records Committee) for ratification. In *Ibis* (October 2013), the BOURC's 42nd Report included " 'Southern skua' *Stercorarius maccormicki* or *S. antarcticus*. One, West Bexington, Dorset, 27 January - 4 February 1996 (sight record, photographed), would pre-date the currently accepted first record of this species group". Then, eight years later in its 53rd Report (Dec 2021), BOURC formerly admitted South Polar Skua *Stercorarius maccormicki* to 'Category A' of the British list on the basis of - "One, second-calendar year, West Bexington, Dorset, 27 January to 4 February 1996".

The article explained that this was a long-predicted vagrant to British waters, particularly since data-loggers have shown that significant numbers migrate annually to the Northern Hemisphere with regular sightings both sides of the North Atlantic, including off the coast of Ireland. During the breeding season, it is widespread in the Southern Oceans where it nests on the Antarctic continent, dispersing large distances during the non-breeding season.

The status as an accepted vagrant to Britain has been problematic and protracted over 25 years. This is largely due to the challenging taxonomy and identification of the large skua group. Indeed, mtDNA cannot be reliably used to distinguish between Brown Skua and South Polar Skua.

Ultimately, acceptance of the record of this individual during its nine-day stay at West Bexington was aided by photographs taken by several observers of an obliging bird, approachable at close range as it stood on the shingle beach. Images of sufficient details about moult, plumage and bare part colouration were obtained to result in its formal identification, 25 years later.

Postscript

The same second-calendar-year bird is still considered by many to have roamed Devon from the 11th to at least 21st January, before being found on 27th January 1996 at West Bexington. The 2000 submission by IL for Dawlish Warren was reviewed again by BBRC in June 2020 and again was concluded to be 'Not Proven'. Although the BBRC were unconvinced, it seems reasonable from descriptions, locations and timings to assume that it was the same bird. Indeed, without Ivan's conviction that the sightings were of the same bird and his submission covering both sites, the Dorset South Polar Skua might never have been recognised for what it was.

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