

FEATURED PHOTO

ATTEMPTED KLEPTOPARASITISM BY A SOUTH POLAR SKUA ON A LAYSAN ALBATROSS

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As a group, the skuas and jaegers are well known as kleptoparasites, i.e., species that pirate food from other species. In general, the victimized species are smaller than the kleptoparasites, but sometimes victims are larger, the best-known instance of this being the Northern Gannet (*Morus bassanus*) relative to the Great Skua (*Catharacta skua*) (Furness 1987, Spear et al. 1999). Attacks by skuas on albatrosses have been reported on only a few occasions, but such attacks are rarely successful, and those noted to date have involved the relatively large Brown (or Subantarctic) Skua (*C. antarctica*) (Spear et al. 1999).

At 12:50 on 30 September 2007, during an organized pelagic trip to Cordell Bank National Marine Sanctuary, we were watching birds flying at the stern of the boat when Howell noted an apparent South Polar Skua (*C. maccormicki*) approaching the wake. (The specific identity of skuas off California remains uncertain, although most appear to be the South Polar; Howell 2005.) Birds in the wake of the boat included numerous Western Gulls (*Larus occidentalis*) and California Gulls (*L. californicus*), a few Pink-footed Shearwaters (*Puffinus creatopus*) and Black-footed Albatrosses (*Phoebastria nigripes*), and a single juvenile (aged by its uniformly fresh plumage and lack of smoky-gray auriculars) Laysan Albatross (*P. immutabilis*). We had already seen several skuas that day, some of which had made attacks on gulls and Pink-footed Shearwaters, the skua's two commonest targets off central California in fall (pers. obs.).

The skua approached the boat while flying steadily at about 20 m above the sea; the Laysan Albatross was wheeling along at 1 to 5 m above the sea behind the boat. On nearing the mass of birds behind the boat the skua picked up speed and stooped at about a 45° angle directly toward the albatross. The skua pulled in close behind and slightly above the albatross, as seen in the photo featured on this issue's back cover, causing the latter to change direction and begin flapping rather than sailing flight. The skua then pulled up over the albatross and dropped its legs as if to strike the albatross (Figure 1), which stalled and dropped to the water. The skua then pulled up and away, leaving the albatross and the other birds, and flew off from the boat. The skua was completing its primary molt, indicating that it was more than one year old but probably not an adult (Howell 2004). We had not seen the Laysan Albatross feeding recently, and were surprised that the skua chose it over the numerous other seemingly suitable targets following the boat.

The average mass of the South Polar Skua (various samples) is 1155–1421 g for breeding birds, with females averaging heavier (Ainley et al. 1985, Higgins and Davies 1996), and 1250 g for ten nonbreeding birds collected at sea (Spear and Ainley 1993). The average mass of nesting Laysan Albatrosses is 2990 g for females and 3310 g for males (Tickell 2000). Although the Laysan is a relatively small albatross, the South Polar is a relatively small skua; the albatross is potentially 2.33–2.86 times heavier than the skua, which is around or above the threshold of the ratio (2.4:1) for skua and jaeger victims other than albatrosses (Spear et al. 1999).

Once off central California in the late 1990s we also observed attempted kleptoparasitism (unsuccessful) by a presumed South Polar Skua on a Black-footed Albatross. Such attacks appear to be rare, however, and given the relative abundance of

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Figure 1. South Polar Skua causing juvenile Laysan Albatross to stall just prior to alighting on the sea. Near Cordell Bank, Marin County, California, 30 September 2007.

Photo by Steve N. G. Howell

albatrosses and skuas off California, they may simply be opportunistic or learning forays by inexperienced immature skuas, as suggested by Spear et al. (1999).

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