

From: Birds Queensland Rarities Appraisal Committee (BQ RAC)

Date: 19 April 2018

Submission No 193: Brown Skua, *Stercorarius antarcticus lonnbergi*, Submitted by Paul Walbridge

This submission related to a Brown Skua, *Stercorarius antarcticus lonnbergi*, seen during an organised trip off Mooloolaba, southeastern Queensland. This skua was observed on the slope waters, approximately 32 nautical miles east of Mooloolaba, at 26° 44' 11"S; 153° 44' 24"E on the 30 July 2017. All observers on-board the boat agreed with the identification. The submission was supported by a number of quality photographs and a detailed description of the bird.

The skua was described as being dark brown with the mantle, scapulars, tertials feathers and some of the uppertail coverts, dark brown with buff edges. The lower tail coverts were brown and the tail was blackish. The primary feathers were blackish except for the primary bases which are white, broadest in the outer primaries, becoming narrower toward the inner primaries. The underwing was mainly dark brown except for the base of the primaries which were extensively white. There was a fair degree of reflectance in the secondaries and adjacent coverts.

The skua was separated from other similar species including the dark phase South Polar Skua, *S. maccormicki*, by the underparts even on the darkest birds are generally a bit paler than in Brown Skua and the upperparts a colder grey brown with finer streaking on the nape and tips of the coverts. South Polar Skua also possesses the white wing flashes of Brown Skua but generally more blockish in shape. The underwing is generally darker overall in South Polar Skua, lacking the reflective feathering in the secondaries and adjacent coverts, making the white bases to the primaries stand out more like white 'windows'. Although there is some overlap in the extreme ends of the measurements of the legs of both species, generally the shorter tarsi of South Polar Skua show the toes falling a good deal shorter of the central retrices, than in Brown Skua. Another species of skua that potentially that could be confused with the Brown Skua is the Chilean Skua *S. chilensis*, occurring on the west coast of South America, could remotely turn up off the east coast of Australia but has a highly distinctive gingery colouration to the sides of the neck and underwing and a dark capped appearance.

Although there was no hesitation in unanimously accepting the skua as Brown Skua, *S. antarcticus*, there was some discussion around whether the bird could be confidently identified as a *C. a. lonnbergi*, (the subspecies that breeds closest to mainland Australia and visits eastern Australia most regularly during winter months) due to the inherent difficulties associated with eliminating all other possible subspecies of Brown Skua by sight. The observer noted that all three races of Brown Skua could occur in Australian waters. Higgins and Davies (1996) indicate that plumages are of little use in separating the various subspecies because "there is much complex variation within taxa compared with between taxa" (pp409-410) and so emphasise the need to use measurements to separate subspecies. However, even this requires caution.

It is worth noting that Higgins and Davies (1996) do not list Providence Petrel among the list of prey items for this skua species (appearing as *Catharactua skua* in this publication). It would, therefore, be worthwhile encouraging the observer to submit a short note about this predation event to *The Sunbird* or another suitable journal to document the record. Readers would find it most interesting.

Reference

Higgins, P.J. and Davies, S.J.J.F. (Eds.) 1996. *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds. Volume 3: Snipe to Pigeons.* Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

Unanimously accepted

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