

## First record of Arctic Skua from Rameswaram Island, southeastern coast of India

This is the first documented record of the Arctic Skua *Stercorarius parasiticus* (IUCN Red List status Least Concern) from Rameswaram Island, Tamil Nadu in southern India. Since it has never been observed in the Gulf of Mannar Biosphere Reserve, this observation from the southeastern coast area is noteworthy. This seabird belongs to the Stercorariidae family of skuas. The bird is also known as Arctic Jaeger, Parasitic Jaeger, or Parasitic Skua. The word 'Jaeger' is derived from a related German word that means hunter.

Arctic Skuas are carnivores. All jaegers chase other birds like terns and puffins and steal their food (kleptoparasitism). Hence, they are also called pirates of the sea. They supplement their diet with lemmings and small birds during the breeding season and also visit boats to scavenge discarded waste.

The Arctic Skua looks like a slender gull-like seabird having a long bill breeding adults have a long-pointed tail. Arctic Skua



Arctic Skua. © Sakthi Kumar.

species breed in the north of Eurasia and North America, with significant populations as far south as northern Scotland. They will then migrate to spend the winter along the southern tip of South America, parts of Africa, and along the coast of Australia and New Zealand. It nests on dry tundra, higher fells, and islands, laying up to four olive-brown eggs. It is usually silent except for mewing and wailing notes while on the breeding grounds. In the British Isles, they breed in Shetland and Orkney, the Outer Hebrides, Sutherland, Caithness, and some islands in Argyll (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).

Among the five Skuas seen in India, namely Brown Skua, Long-tailed Skua, Pomarine Skua, South Polar Skua, and Arctic Skua, the Arctic Skua is mostly found on the western coast of India (Karuthedathu 2019), frequently during pelagic birding. The only other sighting records of Arctic Skua is from Alleppey Beach on the west coast as we are not considering the pelagic bird sighting records (Kerala Bird Watch 2017).

Both the authors while on their routine bird monitoring and research programme in the Gulf of Mannar on 16 June 2022, documented the bird on

the Dhanush Kodi lagoon (9.164 N, 79.436 E) in the Rameswaram island of the Gulf of Mannar Biosphere Reserve.

Juvenile Skua identification can be challenging, but in this case, because it was clearly visible and photographed, the identification of the bird as an Arctic Skua juvenile was confirmed mainly to its small fine bill, small head, streaked neck, and upper parts with a rufescent tinge. For identification, Olsen & Larsson (1997) were used as the primary reference, supplemented by other sources like Howell (2007); Grimmett et al. (2011); Rasmussen & Anderton (2012). No previous records of sightings exist other than the e bird records accessed based on the east coast of India from Hare Island, Thoothukudi in October 2017 and from Pulicat Lake (Tamil Nadu part) in June 2022 (ebird 2022). So, this is the first record from the Gulf of Mannar Biosphere Reserve area and the third from the eastern coast of Tamil Nadu.

Arctic Skuas spend most of their time far from land in pelagic or offshore areas. Birds occasionally approach the coast. Rarely, you can spot them resting on sandbars. Off the west coast of India, the Arctic Skua is the skua species that winters there most frequently. The first flocks of birds arrive in late August, and their numbers increase in September and October. While some may migrate further south, others may spend the winter in Indian waters. The general population of parasitic jaegers appears to be lower on the eastern coast when compared to the west coast based on the number of observations based on the pelagic birding records reviewed based on E bird recorded sightings from identical journeys (Karuthedathu 2019).

As a result, in addition to pelagic birding, coastal birding is also highlighting some unusual and incredible bird sightings of pelagic birds. This find also sheds light on bird migration away from well-known and established routes and sites.

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