Long-tailed Jaeger *Stercorarius longicaudus* from the western coast of India: Identification in retrospect

Dipu Karuthedathu

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Dipu Karuthedathu, #301, Jaya Emerald, Maruthinagar, Bengaluru 560075, Karnataka, India. Email: *dipu_k@yahoo.com*
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Pelagic birding is a recent trend in the Indian birding scene. The interest generated from the loosely coordinated surveys conducted from 2010 (Karuthedathu *et al.* 2013; Praveen 2013a) onwards, off the coasts of Kerala and Karnataka, have triggered a great interest in the genre, resulting in more off-shore boat trips from Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra (Gnanaskandan 2012; Muthunarayanan 2012; Manivannan 2013; Shivkar 2013).

The trips conducted during winter have always resulted in sightings of the small skuas, also known as Jaegers (Stercorariidae). The overall distribution trend of these birds, based on positive identifications from the western coast of India, can be summarised as follows: Parasitic Jaegers *Stercorarius parasiticus* are the commonly met species, which start to appear from August onwards, followed by Pomarine Jaegers *S. pomarinus*, which have been sighted from October onwards. Trips from November to February have produced more Pomarine than Parasitic Jaegers, while towards the end of the migratory season (April), this trend is again reversed (Prince 2011; Praveen 2013a, b). Long-tailed Jaegers had not been recorded with positive identifications till now in any of these trips (Prince 2011; Gnanaskandan 2012; Muthunarayanan 2012; Karuthedathu *et al.* 2013; Manivannan 2013; Praveen 2013a; Shivkar 2013).

The only published record of Long-tailed Jaeger from the Indian region is a sighting of three birds off Lakshadweep by D. M. Simpson (Bourne 1989), but the recent field guides (Grimmett *et al.* 2011; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012) still treat this species as a vagrant/possible species. Praveen *et al.* (2013) have proposed that the Long-tailed Jaeger be excluded from the Indian checklist due to lack of well-confirmed sightings, though it was noted that it could potentially occur in the region.

In this note, I discuss the features of a confusing jaeger from Kochi, and subsequent re-identification of two birds photographed during a pelagic trip from Mangalore, as one definite, and one likely, Long-tailed Jaeger. These birds were initially dismissed as possibly Parasitic/Pomarine Jaegers, but a re-visit of the archived photographs, with a fresh perspective, brought to light the key features that were missed during the earlier identification process. The main reasons for this oversight are:

- Plumage characters of the observed birds did not match the typical plumage illustrated in popular field guides (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Grimmett *et al.* 2011; Maling Olsen & Svensson 1997). Jaegers exhibit a high degree of plumage variations resulting in identification challenges. There is a considerable inter-specific overlap between their plumage characters, the multiple stages of immature plumages, and the great deal of individual variations (Howell 2007)
- In jaegers along the Indian coast, moult from breeding plumage to winter plumage, and back, within a few months, result in a large number of birds with intermediate characters. In many instances, immediate identification may not be possible and chances of misidentification are quite high.
- Indian observers are not well versed with structural and plumage differences of jaegers, as opportunities to study them in the field are scarce. The process of building up expertise in pelagic birds is also slow as only a few pelagic trips are conducted annually, and participation opportunities are relatively low.
- A bias formed due to rarity status of this species is probably a major reason. Since the species was not reported in the recent past (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012) and existing records were under scrutiny (Praveen *et al.* 2013), it was presumed that probability of encountering a Long-tailed Jaeger is very less.

The challenges in pelagic bird identification implied that some birds (or many in some trips!) might not have been positively identified, or were misidentified. Hence, it was a norm to collect all photographs from the participating photographers to create a single repository of pelagic bird pictures. Most photographers readily shared all their images, irrespective of the quality, sharpness, or resolution, without any copyright concerns. This repository, with its large collection of pictures, enabled viewing of multiple images of the same bird from different angles and positions, thus facilitating the identification process. So, on the brighter side, this re-identification process has become possible just because of the creation of a digital archive of pelagic bird photographs at a single location.

Confusing jaeger from Kochi

During email exchanges with experts (Klaus Malling Olsen, and Daniel López-Velasco: *pers. comm*., emails of 12 November 2013; John Martin, Martin Elliott, and Ian Broadbent through Mike Prince: *pers. comm*., emails of 13 December 2013) regarding a jaeger [**75-78**] photographed off Kochi, Kerala, there were suggestions that the bird showed a few characters of a Long-tailed Jaeger in some views, while it matched a Parasitic Jaeger in others. The main characters that were further discussed are summarised below:

Characters favouring a Long-tailed Jaeger: Small round head with large eyes, and attenuated rear, typical of Long-tailed Jaegers. Legs look pale in a few images, which may favour a Long-tailed Jaeger, as other two species would have shown dark patches on, or fully dark, tarsi— assuming this bird is an adult/near-adult (aged based on the darker underwing coverts).

Characters favouring a Parasitic Jaeger: Overall lack of contrast

between the fresh coverts and primaries is a point against Long-tailed Jaeger. Being a possible adult/sub-adult, the amount of white at the base of primaries is much larger than that expected for a Long-tailed Jaeger (note that the primaries appear bleached). Also, the bird shows pale shafts to all five outer primaries.

The beak looks short and stout in some views, while it appears longer in some other views.

Though the identification of the above bird was inconclusive, the detailed review of identification features triggered a relook into the existing images in the "Pelagic archive". This resulted in re-evaluation of identification of two jaegers from the Mangalore coast and four jaegers from Odisha (Ukil & Karuthedathu 2013; see elsewhere in this issue), and all these turned up as Long-tailed Jaegers.

Long-tailed Jaeger from Mangalore

Both the birds described below were photographed during a two-day pelagic trip organised by the S. A. Husain Memorial Trust, Mangalore, on 03–04 March 2012.

Bird 1

The characters that support its identification as Long-tailed Jaeger are: relatively small build and narrower wings, short and stout beak, absence of white at the base of primaries, white shaft prominent on the growing P9, very subdued pale shaft for other inner primaries, pin-like central tail feathers, and the dual tone upper wing with darker secondaries and paler coverts [**79-80**]. The plumage looks quite different from field guide illustrations, with a brown hood and warm brown barring on the flanks and under tail coverts. The bird is identified as an adult based on uniformly dark underwing coverts; besides, several experts have also confirmed the identification as this species (Robert Flood, *pers. comm.*, email of 30 November 2013; Rob van Bemmelen, *pers. comm.*, email of 11 December 2013; Dick Newell, *pers. comm.*, email of 05 January 2014; Klaus Malling Olsen, *pers. comm.*, email of 19 January 2014).

75. Confusing Jaeger, Kochi, Kerala.

76. Confusing Jaeger, Kochi, Kerala.

Photo: Biju P. B.

77. Confusing Jaeger, Kochi, Kerala.

78. Confusing Jaeger, Kochi, Kerala.

Photos: J. Kuriakose

Photo: M. Mohan

79. Long-tailed Jaeger (Bird 2), Mangalore, Karnataka.

Photos: J. Kuriakose

80. Long-tailed Jaeger (Bird 2), Mangalore, Karnataka.

81. Possible long-tailed Jaeger (Bird 3), Mangalore, Karnataka.

82. Possible long-tailed Jaeger (Bird 3), Mangalore, Karnataka.

Photos: S. Shankar

83. Possible long-tailed Jaeger (Bird 3), Mangalore, Karnataka.

Bird 2

This bird was seen at a distance, and flew past quickly. Observers noted its faster flight, lighter body, and overall grey tones in the field. The images [**81-83**] show that the bird is lighter in build with narrower wings and long 'arms', has overall paler upper wings with contrasting secondaries, shows white shafts to only two outer primaries (vs. greater than three primaries with white shafts in other jaegers), and uniform dark under wings without any obvious white at the base of primaries [**82**]. Though the above-mentioned features are diagnostic with respect to other jaegers, the identification of this bird as a Long-tailed Jaeger is left provisional, as the images are not sharp and clear.

Conclusion

Amongst the three jaegers discussed, the first bird from Mangalore is confirmed as Long-tailed Jaeger and is the first record from India's western coast, while the second bird appears to be a

Long-tailed Jaeger. Opinions on the bird from Kochi were divided and hence further detailed opinions are invited from experts.

The effort of getting multiple photographers to scan their archives, coordinating with them to pick the relevant images, processing them, and collating all these images is a herculean task! As indicated above, this whole process of retrospective identification was possible because photographs from multiple photographers (providing multiple angles and resolutions) were available for browsing at a single place.

This discussion highlights the importance of building up an archive of photographs to solve identification challenges for difficult groups like pelagic birds. It is recommended that in future pelagic trips the coordinators should transfer all photographs from participants, then and there, without worrying about content, quality, or size of the transferred images.

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Lesser Noddy *Anous tenuirostris* from Kanyakumari coast, Tamil Nadu

Praveen Manivannan, Murugan Mohan, Dipu Karuthedathu & Muthunarayanan K.

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Praveen Manivannan, 55 Poes Garden, Chennai 600086, Tamil Nadu, India. Email: *praveenmkumar@yahoo.com* [PM]

Murugan Mohan, 18/d, 11th Street, Nandanam Extension, Chennai 600035, Tamil Nadu, India. Email: *themuruganmohan@gmail.com* [MM]

Dipu Karuthedathu, #301, Jaya Emerald, Maruthinagar, Bengaluru 560075, Karnataka, India. Email: *dipu_k@yahoo.com* [DK]

Muthunarayanan K., 117H, Palayamkottai Road (W), Sankar Colony, III Mile, Thoothukudi 628008, Tamil Nadu, India. Email: *narayanan.muthu@gmail.com* [MK]

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Pelagic bird watching trips have been conducted regularly since September 2010 off the western coast of India (Karuthedathu *et al.* 2013). However, on the eastern coast, they started only from September 2012. The fourth such trip was organized by the Pearl City Nature Society, on 07 September 2013 from off the Kanyakumari coast (08°05'N, 77°33'E). The Southwest Monsoon was not active over this part of the country at this time and reports from fishermen about bird sightings encouraged us to make this trip. At around 0900 hrs, approximately 5 kms from the harbor, we sighted, close to a catamaran, a Noddy, along with Sooty- *Onychoprion fuscatus* and Common *Sterna hirundo* Terns. At first sight, the Noddy appeared smaller than a Brown Noddy *Anous stolidus*, which we had sighted on previous trips, including one from Tuticorin, *c.* 100 kms from Kanyakumari. Its flight was faster than a Brown Noddy and somewhat fluttery. When we approached closer, it moved