

## — Short notes —

# A record of the Brown Skua *Catharacta antarctica* from Thiruvananthapuram coast, Kerala

Suresh Elamon & E. Kunhikrishnan

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Suresh Elamon, Birdwing, CIT Road, Karamana P.O., Thiruvananthapuram 695002, Kerala, India. Email: [yeselamon@gmail.com](mailto:yeselamon@gmail.com)  
E. Kunhikrishnan, Lecturer, Department of Zoology, University College, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, India. Email: [ekunhi@gmail.com](mailto:ekunhi@gmail.com)  
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**B**rown Skua *Catharacta antarctica* is a rarely reported pelagic bird from India's coasts. There have been only two previous recoveries of this species from the western coast of India, namely, a single specimen recovered from Thiruvananthapuram in 1933 and another recovered off the Ratnagiri coast in 1957 (Ali & Ripley 1984). C. Sashikumar and Dinesan Cheruvat are reported to have seen one adult one kilometre off the coast of Kannur, Kerala (Sashikumar *verbally*).

Television film producer Purushothaman saw a weak individual of a skua species on the morning of 2nd July 2007, at Shangumugam beach, Thiruvananthapuram (8°28'N 76°54'E). He thought it was an unusual bird and immediately informed Leela Latheef of People For Animals, Thiruvananthapuram. She sent the PFA ambulance and collected the bird. Though no measurements were taken, the bird was photographed on 3rd July 2007 by one of the authors (SE) and later on 6th July 2007 by EK. The bird survived well and the following quote from Mrs Leela Latheef on this individual.

'The most remarkable thing about the bird was that it had no fear either of humans or dogs. I did not want to confine the bird inside a cage and seeing that the bird was quite fearless, I let it loose in the compound along with almost a dozen dogs ranging [in size] from Pomeranians to Great Danes. It was perfectly at home with the dogs. It used to drink water from a basin and feed on raw fish. At times it used to stretch and exercise its wings but not even once did it attempt to take off. On 11th morning it got a little disturbed by one of the dogs and suddenly flapped her wings and jumped on to the compound wall. From there it jumped down to a narrow lane behind my house. My keeper, seeing all this, got out and ran towards it to get hold of it [and] then it suddenly started running with wings flapping and just took off towards the east.'

The species was tentatively identified as a Brown Skua.

Considering the complexity of skua identification, its photographs were circulated and we received expert help through OrientalBirding. Chris Kehoe and Dr Robert Furness opined that the bird looked like a Brown Skua. Dr Stephen Votier, researching skua taxonomy at Plymouth University, UK, remarked thus, after considering South Polar Skua *Stercorarius maccormicki* and Great Skua *S. skua*:

'The bill is too massive for a South Polar Skua, with a very well pronounced gonydeal angle. In addition the primary projection looks wrong for South Polar Skua—only 4 primary tips beyond the tertials and 2 primary tips beyond the tail (5 tips beyond the tertials and 3 beyond the tail in most South Polar Skua) [if this feature holds up to scrutiny]. Also I think the extensive streaking looks all wrong for South Polar Skua. The other possibility is a Great, but I think the bill is too massive for that too.'

This is the third reported recovery of Brown Skua from the western coast of India. Perhaps the bird is not uncommon in deep sea and reaches the coasts only during strong monsoon winds.

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### References

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