

## The Status of the Long-tailed Jaeger *Stercorarius longicaudus* in Australian Waters

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### Summary

This paper discusses observations of the Long-tailed Jaeger *Stercorarius longicaudus* collected during a series of pelagic excursions from Wollongong between 1984 and 1987. Other observations from both the literature and through personal communications with other observers have been collected where possible to develop a better picture of the movements of this species in Australian waters. All observations for this species have been recorded between September and April with a peak around December and January. The absence of observations during other months and the consistency of summer observations from year to year indicates that this species is a regular migrant in eastern Australian waters, not a vagrant.

### Introduction

Between November 1984 and September 1987 ornithologists sailed from Wollongong, New South Wales (34°25'S, 150°54'E) to the continental shelf to observe pelagic birds. The vessel, named the *Sandra K*, was once a 13 m fishing trawler but has now been fitted-out to carry commercial passengers. Excursions left the harbour at 0600 h, usually returning by 1600 h. At least one day of observations per month was made by sailing out about 70 kilometres, depending on weather conditions. Upon leaving the harbour all bird species and their estimated numbers were recorded. Only the Long-tailed Jaeger *Stercorarius longicaudus* is discussed in this paper. Other species of Stercorariidae observed during this period have been discussed by Wood (1989).

### Methods

The study area was covered using an east-west transect from Wollongong to a point about 70 kilometres from the coast. The continental shelf is reached at about 35 kilometres. The vessel cruised at approximately 7-10 knots, weather permitting. This passage gave 10 hours of observation time per day and over the course of the study yielded 580 hours of data.

Birds approaching the stern of the boat were recorded throughout the day. The numbers arrived at should not be considered as absolute but as an estimate. This is because data are given as totals per day and it may have been that some individuals were counted twice. The dimorphic plumages and the low numbers would have reduced the possibility of this error but it must still be considered. If there was any doubt as to whether a bird had been counted twice the data were discarded.

### Results

Long-tailed Jaegers were observed regularly during the summer months of the study (Figure 1). In 1985 the highest numbers were recorded with 15 to 20 individuals per day. Long-tailed Jaeger numbers decreased over the following two years to between 5 and 10 birds per day. Generally Long-tailed Jaegers appeared in October (spring), reached their highest densities in January and departed during April-May.

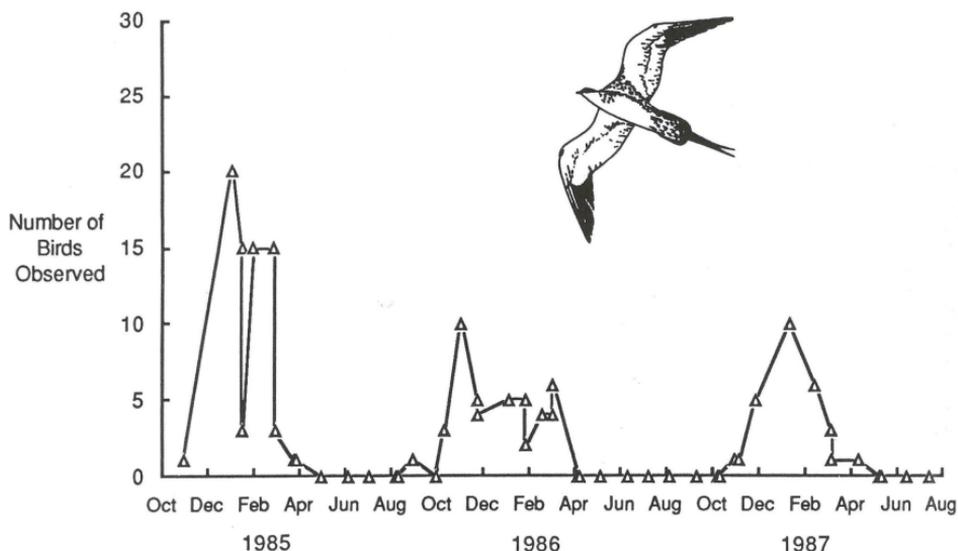


Figure 1. Observed numbers of Long-tailed Jaeger *Stercorarius longicaudus* per day for the three-year period between 1984 and 1987 off Wollongong, New South Wales.

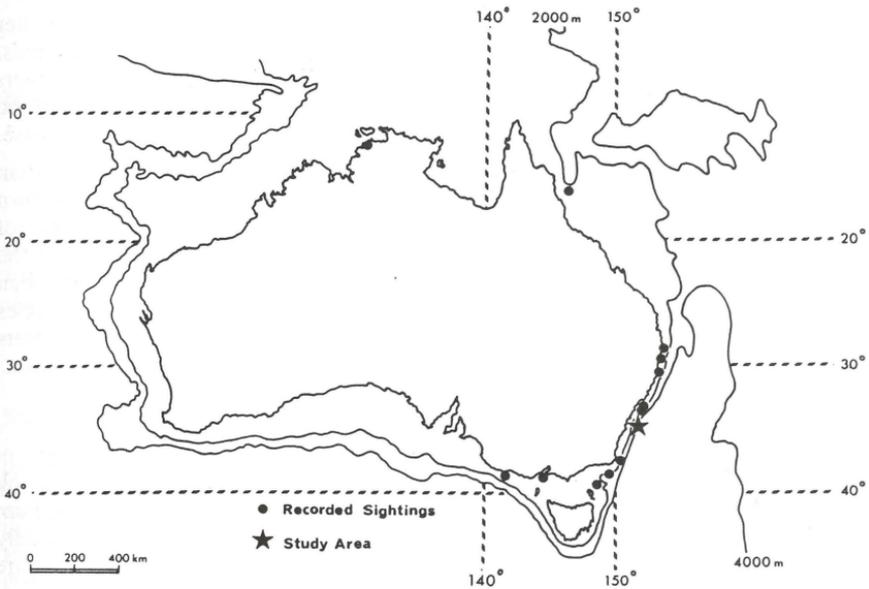
## Discussion

The pattern of visitation shown by my data for this species leads to the conclusion that the Long-tailed Jaeger is a regular migratory visitor. The seasonal peaks followed by periods of total absence are indicative of such a habit. The lesser peaks contained within the overall seasonal abundance peaks are probably attributable to the daily fluxes of small migratory groups. The formation of groups during migration has been noted by Wynne-Edwards (1935) and Wetmore (1926) for the Long-tailed Jaeger.

Long-tailed Jaegers were usually observed halfway to the edge of and over the continental shelf; only a few sightings were made closer to shore and these were more than 5 km out. This corresponds to Cramp (1983) who indicated (from other offshore records) that while migrating, this species becomes the most oceanic of the Stercorariidae.

Most birds freely approached the vessel but there was no consistency in the time they spent near it. A few individuals robbed Silver Gulls *Larus novaehollandiae* (occasionally this species was present at the same time as Long-tailed Jaegers) by remaining about 200 m behind in the wake of the boat, while others took fat directly from the water as we threw it out.

Over the three years of observation most of the birds encountered were pale or intermediate morphs. There were on a few rare occasions darker birds. On 23 March 1985 one completely dark individual was seen. This bird was chocolate brown all over and from Cramp's (1983) description was probably from the race occurring in Greenland. No attempts were made to assess the racial origins of other birds observed, owing to the difficulties in separating *S. l. longicaudus* and *S. l. palescens* during winter plumage (Cramp 1983). Other rather dark birds were seen during observations but it was decided that these were different phases of immature plumage and were not racial distinctions (Cramp 1983).



**Figure 2.** Map showing locations of recorded observations of Long-tailed Jaegers within Australian waters (●). ★ denotes the study site. The 2000 m and 4000 m depth contours are marked by solid, labelled lines.

A common feature of discussions of Long-tailed Jaeger distribution is that their wintering areas are virtually unknown (Cramp 1983). Published observations concerning Long-tailed Jaegers in Australian waters are scattered and few. The first Australian record for this species was in 1930 by T. Iredale and published by Hindwood & McGill (1958) in a provisional list of *The Birds of Sydney*. The second record was from Port Phillip Bay by Carter (1966). Blakers et al. (1984) have records of this species from eight 1° blocks along the eastern Australian coast between 1951 and 1981. A few other published records (Serventy et al. 1971, Barton 1978, 1982) and other unpublished accounts (M. Carter pers. comm.) also exist. These sightings range from a latitude of 27° in southern Queensland down to 38° in Victoria. The Long-tailed Jaeger has also been recorded in Darwin (Northern Territory) and Michaelmas Reef (north Queensland) (J. McKean pers. comm.), south of Tasmania and across the Tasman sea (M. Carter pers. comm.).

The Long-tailed Jaeger has been recorded a number of times in New Zealand (Sibson 1967; Powlesland 1983, 1985; Melville 1985). From these and other Australasian (Greensmith 1975) and Asian (Anon. 1974, Melville 1977, Engbring & Owen 1981) records it might be conjectured that this apparently pelagic migrant moves in a southeasterly direction and follows a course from breeding grounds in eastern Russia and Alaska south into the western Pacific, eventually reaching Australian waters off the eastern coast (Figure 2). At this point the continental shelf sweeps close to the coast allowing deeper oceanic water, the migratory habitat of this species, to occur close offshore. The individual found at Michaelmas Cay in northern Queensland also fits into this hypothesis because in this area a deeper tongue of ocean reaches into the region. A Long-tailed Jaeger in Darwin was probably the result of cyclonic conditions

pushing across from the Pacific. This bird was in very poor condition and died later in captivity. The Long-tailed Jaeger may be more pelagic because of its feeding habits, but I have no data to confirm this hypothesis. The occurrence of Long-tailed Jaegers at latitudes as far south as 50° in Santa Cruz, Argentina (Brown et al. 1975) has occurred so the presence of this species at similar Australian latitudes should not be a surprise.

The Long-tailed Jaeger is listed by Blakers et al. (1984) as a vagrant in Australian waters. Carruthers (1986) states, 'a species that occurs at a location within its known range and normal habitat should not be classed as a vagrant'. In the past the lack of data, possibly related to a lack of experienced observers in pelagic waters off the Australian coast, has led to a misconception concerning its status within Australian waters. On the basis of data presented in this paper and other recent records, this species of jaeger should not be considered as a vagrant because it appears that Australian waters are within its normal migratory range.

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