The first confirmed South Polar Skua for Madeira

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At about 5.20pm on 13th June 2012, we were off Desertas, Madeira onboard the oceanic Rigid-hulled inflatable boat (RHIB) *Oceanodroma.* It was during a Zino's Petrel pelagic expedition organised and run by CC-F and HR of Madeira Wind Birds, and there were eight participants, including BF. The wind was blowing from the northeast and it had strengthened to 18 knots, gusting to 25 knots. There was little cloud cover and so the light conditions varied from fairly good to very poor when looking into the glare of the evening sun. The conditions overall were quite challenging.

We had drifted about 100 metres away from our floating frozen chum block, used to attract seabirds, when a large skua flew from downwind head-on toward the RHIB. It was a striking bird, with a rather pale, fairly uniform, mid-grey head, neck and underbody, which contrasted strongly with its dark brown wings and upperparts. The head appeared small relative to its body size and its bill was a tad small for one of the large skuas. In these and other respects, the skua bore only a limited resemblance to a typical Great Skua.

The skua flew quickly past the RHIB and directly towards the chum block, and soon was back-on to us. It then landed on the sea by the chum block. CC-F moved the RHIB toward the skua as quickly and carefully as possible, but the sea was choppy, making the manoeuvre difficult. The skua took off and flew away before we reached it. Even so, photographers on board managed to photograph the skua as it flew by and while it was sitting on the sea.

That the bird was a South Polar Skua was considered from the outset – its overall appearance was like an intermediate morph South Polar Skua. Experienced participants said that they would not have thought twice about the bird's identification if it had been in Antarctic waters. However, Great Skua is frequently recorded off Madeira (Romano *et al.* 2010), while South Polar Skua is rarely seen in the northeast Atlantic and there had been no confirmed record for Madeira. In addition, some tricky large skuas

Plate 1: South Polar Skua *Stercorarius maccormicki*, off Desertas, Madeira, June 2012 (*Klaus Bjerre*). Note the all dark bill and tarsi. First-cycle birds show a bicoloured bill and often show extensively pale tarsi. The bill in second-cycle birds is normally still somewhat bicoloured and the tarsi often show pale spots. The bill pattern in particular suggests that this bird could be in its third moult cycle or later. Also note, compared to Great Skua, the bird's compact look, rather lightweight bill, and relatively short tail.

Plate 2: South Polar Skua *Stercorarius maccormicki*, off Desertas, Madeira, June 2012 (*Martin Bonfield*).
Note primary moult has just begun, with P1 old (brown and faded), P2 new and growing, P3 dropped, and P4-10 old (bleached and abraded). The primary moult score is 5 (see text). The moult score/date combination is unique to an older South Polar Skua (*ie* unique in the confusion pair Great Skua versus South Polar Skua), and the age is consistent with the observations made on the bill and tarsi pattern (Plate 1). In addition, the tips to the old primaries are rounded and adult-like, not tapered and juvenile-like. Also note the pale hindneck, typical of South Polar Skua. Further, the lower mantle to rump, scapulars and lesser upperwing coverts are mostly brownish-grey with narrow, pale feather fringes. The larger upperwing-coverts are mainly plain brownish-grey, although some (particularly the median coverts) are new, much darker, and contrast with the paler, bleached feathers. Most of the secondaries are new (dark and fresh), while some of the inner secondaries are heavily worn, with the innermost ones new. The secondaries are apparently moulted before most of the primaries in South Polar Skua (Olsen & Larsson 1997).

Plate 3: South Polar Skua *Stercorarius maccormicki*, off Desertas, Madeira, June 2012 (*Klaus Bjerre*).
Note the scalloped appearance of the body feathers, typical of intermediate morph South Polar Skua.

Plate 4: South Polar Skua *Stercorarius maccormicki*, off Desertas, Madeira, June 2012 (*Martin Bonfield*). Active median covert moult is visible on both the upperwing and the underwing. Note that the axillaries (and seemingly the lesser and median underwing-coverts) show dark 'oily' brown hues and contrast strongly with the mid brownish-grey body feathers.

have occurred in the northern hemisphere over the years, some of which suggested South Polar Skua until analysis of their age and moult, which are key to the identification of South Polar Skua (Newell *et al.* 2013), showed them to be Great Skua. Therefore we adopted a cautious approach, which was particularly important given the brief views and quite challenging field conditions that made it impossible to determine the age and moult from the live bird. Digital photography is an important tool in seabird identification in such circumstances and subsequent careful analysis of the excellent photographs confirmed the identification of the Madeiran skua as South Polar, based on its age and moult, as well as its plumage and structure.

Identification

Age & moult As the accompanying photographs show, the bird is in primary moult and the left wing has P1 old (brown and faded), P2 new and growing, P3 dropped, and P4–10 old (bleached and abraded). This gives a moult score of 5 (old=0, dropped=1, fresh=5, progressive growth=2–4). Score 5 in mid June is a moult score/date combination unique to a second cycle or older South Polar Skua, *ie* unique for the confusion pair Great Skua versus South Polar Skua (Newell *et al.* 2013). Plumage of the Madeiran skua eliminates other southern forms of large skua.

Ageing criteria also indicate that the bird is second cycle or older. The tips to the outer

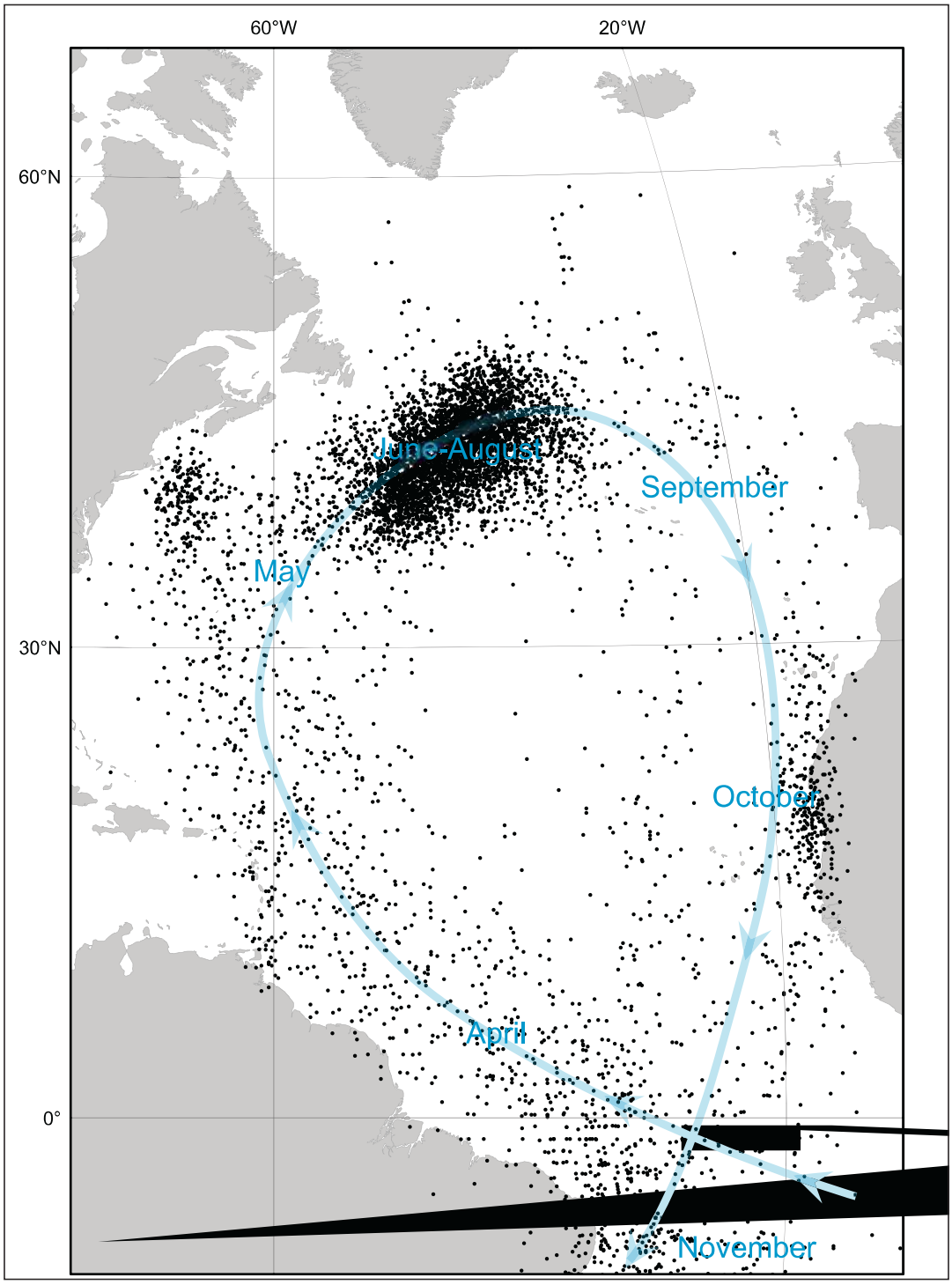

Figure 1. Adult South Polar Skuas in the northern and central Atlantic Ocean. The black dots show the individual recorded non-breeding season positions of 27 adult South Polar Skuas fitted with data-loggers at their breeding grounds on the South Shetland Islands. Leaving their breeding grounds in about April, they performed a figure of eight flight path (clockwise from north-eastern South America to west Africa) and returned for the next breeding season in about November (Kopp *et al.* 2011). The added blue line shows the approximate circulation timing. The Madeiran bird was in June and was following a different migration timing perhaps because it was not a breeding adult.

primaries not yet moulted are adult-shaped (rounded) rather than juvenile-shaped (tapered), so this bird must be in its second moult cycle or later. The bill of a first-cycle South Polar Skua is bicoloured (pale blue at the base), and the tarsi are usually pale blue; the bill of a second-cycle South Polar Skua is normally still somewhat bicoloured, and the tarsi often show pale spots (Olsen & Larsson 1997). The Madeiran South Polar Skua has an all-dark bill and all-dark tarsi. The bill pattern in particular suggests that this bird is likely to be third cycle or older.

Ageing criteria also eliminate Great Skua. The Madeiran skua has the fairly uniform plumage typical of South Polar Skua (*ie* without yellow toned streaks and blotches). A uniform plumage can be shown by Great Skua, but only in its first cycle and the Madeiran skua is in its second cycle or older. In addition, first-cycle Great Skua plumage is generally warm brown, not cold mid grey like the Madeiran skua. Furthermore, primary moult of first-cycle Great Skua begins with the innermost primary about March and is completed by about early June. This is wrong for the Madeiran skua that is at the beginning of its primary moult in early June and has adult-like outer primaries. Equally, it is not a retarded first-cycle Great Skua because of the adult-like outer primaries. In summary, age and moult analysis identify the bird as a South Polar Skua in its second cycle or older.

Structure Compared to a typical adult Great Skua, the Madeiran skua has a more compact look, a relatively small head, a slightly narrower bill, and a slightly shorter tail. The structure of the Madeiran skua supports its identification as a South Polar Skua.

Plumage Adult South Polar Skua comes in dark, intermediate and pale morphs. Polymorphism begins to become apparent in the second cycle (Newell *et al.* 2013). Juvenile South Polar Skua has a grey-toned head and underbody that contrast with a darker upperside, rather like an intermediate morph South Polar Skua. The overall plumage of the Madeiran skua is like that of a juvenile/intermediate morph South Polar Skua, but we have established that the bird is second cycle or older, so it can be considered to be an intermediate morph.

The head of the Madeiran skua is brownish-grey, with the forehead and crown paler. The body is cold, mid grey, with the hindneck notably paler. The resulting contrast between the head, body and hindneck gives a slightly dark hooded appearance. First-cycle Great Skua has a dark hood, but it is much darker than the hood of the Madeiran skua and, in any case, the Madeiran skua is second cycle or older. Older Great Skuas tend to have a dark cap (rather than a dark hood) containing yellow toned markings, and yellow toned streaks on the nape, mantle, and much of the underside, and these were not present in the Madeiran skua. Adult South Polar Skua can show yellow toned streaks on the hindneck, but no such markings were present on the Madeiran skua.

The body feathers of the Madeiran skua are mid-grey and lightly scalloped with pale feather edgings, as expected with intermediate morph South Polar Skua. It does not show a textbook pale frontal blaze (contrasting pale feathers around the base of the bill), but this is not uncommon in South Polar Skua; the reason in this case is that the frontal blaze merges with an equally pale forehead. The axillaries and lesser and median underwing-coverts, as far as can be seen, are dark 'oily' brown. Field guides typically state that these feathers are blackish in South Polar Skua. This is true of adults, but not necessarily true of immatures (Newell *et al.* 2013). The plumage is quite typical of an intermediate morph South Polar Skua.

Summary

Analysis of the age, moult, structure and plumage identify the Madeiran skua as a second cycle or older intermediate morph South Polar Skua.

Unconfirmed records off Madeira

There have been previous sightings of possible South Polar Skuas off Madeira, but most were distant and none were backed up with detailed photographs confirming their identification.

References

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