

Preliminary comments on skua *Stercorarius* reports from Armenia

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This paper examines reports of skuas *Stercorarius* from Armenia, following the review by Arkhipov & Blair (2007) of the occurrence of stercorariids in the OSME region, which includes the Caucasus. In the *Handbook of the Birds of Armenia* (Adamian & Klem 1999), produced by the Birds of Armenia (BOA) Project, the authors listed all existing *Stercorarius* claims from Armenia and accepted them as valid, with five records of Pomarine *Stercorarius pomarinus*, four of Arctic *S. parasiticus* and one record of Long-tailed Skua *S. longicaudus*. There has been no record of Great Skua *S. skua*. No additional details were provided to support the claims (Table 1), except for measurements of two specimens. The claims covered the period 1958–1989 and had been originally reported in Ayrumian *et al* (1968), Adamian *et al* (1969), Ayrumian *et al* (1975) and Melikian (1996).

Inspection of the original publications and the skua measurement data in the BOA Project archives ('skua datasheets'), led me to reanalyze the reports listed by Adamian & Klem (1999). These claims are numbered 1–10 in Table 1.

THE PUBLISHED REPORTS

Claim 1 Pomarine Skua. Ayrumian *et al* (1968) mentioned 1966 as the first occurrence of Pomarine Skua in Armenia, strangely overlooking the male specimen collected in 1958 by one of the coauthors. The skua datasheets (Table 2) showed that the 1958 specimen was initially misidentified (possibly as Arctic Skua, see below), and was reidentified as Pomarine Skua by M Scott in 1995. Adamian & Klem (1999) do not mention the specimen label correction, and referred to Gambarian & Adamian (1960) which presumably contains the specimen details. I was unable to locate the latter publication, but if it contains adequate information about the Pomarine Skua of 1958, surely this would not have been omitted by Ayrumian *et al* (1968). The measurements of wing, bill and tarsus of this specimen (Table 2) fall short of the lowest values for Pomarine Skua in Cramp & Simmons (1983) and are not dissimilar to those of Arctic and Long-tailed Skua in the latter reference.

An Arctic Skua claim, not mentioned in Adamian & Klem (1999), is found in Adamian *et al* (1969) and Ayrumian *et al* (1975), and is presented as collection of a specimen on 14

Table 1. Skua *Stercorarius* records from Armenia (Adamian & Klem 1999).

Claims	Species	Date	Location	Number of birds	Specimen available
1	Pomarine Skua	14 Sep 1958	Lake Sevan	1 collected	Yes
2	Pomarine Skua	20 Nov 1965	Lake Sevan	1 collected	No ¹
3	Pomarine Skua	17 Aug 1966	Lake Sevan	1 observed	No
4	Pomarine Skua	early Oct, probably 1966	Lake Sevan	1 shot by a fisherman	No
5	Pomarine Skua	11 Oct 1966	Lake Sevan	2 observed with 1 collected	No ¹
6	Arctic Skua	7 Apr 1989	Arماش Fish Farm	1 collected	Yes
7	Arctic Skua	12 May 1989	Arماش Fish Farm	2 observed	No
8 & 9	Arctic Skua	27 Jan 1967	Lake Sevan	2 observed 50 km apart during boat census	No
10	Long-tailed Skua	7 May 1968	Lake Sevan	1 adult observed	No

¹ In fact, specimen exists.

Table 2. Measurements of skua *Stercorarius* specimens, held at the Institute of Zoology, Yerevan. Reproduced from BOA Project datasheets¹.

Species (Claim)	Date	Location	Age	Sex	Wing ² (mm)	Tail ³ (mm)	Bill ⁴ (mm)	Tarsus (mm)	Specimen label author(s)
Pomarine Skua (1)	14 Sep 1958	Lake Sevan	ad	male	316	199	31.0	44.0	Adamian & Scott
Pomarine Skua (2)	20 Nov 1965	Lake Sevan	ad	?	348	143	38.0	55.0	Adamian
Pomarine Skua (5)	11 Oct 1966	Lake Sevan	juv	female	366	156	37.0	54.0	Adamian
Arctic Skua (6)	7 Apr 1989	Armash Fish Farm	ad	male	320	170	30.0	45.0	Melikian & Adamian

¹ Body length, wingspan and/or weight were available for some specimens, but are omitted here.

² Maximum length, ³ Total length and ⁴ Exposed culmen.

September 1968 near Martuni at Lake Sevan. Date and location of collection (including nearest town) are identical to the data for the 1958 Pomarine Skua specimen (Claim 1). It is quite possible that the year of collection was misprinted in the 1969 paper and the error remained in the 1975 paper.

Claim 2 Pomarine Skua. Measurements are present in the skua datasheets (Table 2), but were not included in Adamian & Klem (1999). This specimen was apparently available to Ayrumian *et al* (1968), but is not mentioned there. Perhaps the bird had remained unidentified or its identity was determined as other than Pomarine Skua. The measurements of its bill and tarsus suggest it to be a Pomarine, rather than any other *Stercorarius* species (Cramp & Simmons 1983).

Claim 3 Pomarine Skua. This observation by V Hakobyan is listed in Ayrumian *et al* (1968) as the first Pomarine Skua encounter in Armenia, but it lacks supporting details. Apart from the date and location of observation, they mentioned it was immature and among perched Armenian Gulls *Larus armenicus*.

Claim 4 Pomarine Skua. Adamian & Klem (1999) were uncertain about the specific date and year for this report, but it was cited as 'early October of 1966' by Ayrumian *et al* (1968), 'September of 1966' by Ayrumian *et al* (1975), while Adamian *et al* (1969) gave 29 September 1966 for this location (Noratoos village, Lake Sevan) and presumably this occurrence. The bird was shot by fishermen and was given to staff of Sevan Hydro-Biological Station (Ayrumian *et al* 1968). None of the sources present adequate descriptive details for this bird, except that it was an immature with predominantly brownish and ashy-grey plumage with buff feather edging. No measurements or specimen are apparently available, and it is unclear whether the authors examined the bird themselves, or that the published details were verbally reported to them by the hydro-biological station staff.

Claim 5 Pomarine Skua. The birds were observed in a flock with Armenian Gulls. The immature female specimen, collected by R Rafaelyan (Ayrumian *et al* 1968), is held in the Institute of Zoology collections, Yerevan, and was re-measured during the production of Adamian & Klem (1999), but these data were omitted from the latter publication and the collector's name was omitted from the skua datasheets. Measurements of its bill and tarsus suggest it to be a Pomarine, rather than any other *Stercorarius* species (Cramp & Simmons 1983), even though all values in the skua datasheets for this individual (Table 2) are different from those of the original publication (Ayrumian *et al* 1968). The second bird from this date was mentioned by Ayrumian *et al* (1968) as being an immature without further details, but was presumably considered to be a Pomarine Skua as the collected bird was identified as such.

Claim 6 Arctic Skua. Originally published in Melikian (1996), although this work was not mentioned in Adamian & Klem (1999). All of the available measurements of this bird overlap with adult male Long-tailed Skua measurements in Cramp & Simmons (1983), except for the wing, 2mm longer than the maximum value for Long-tailed, a difference possibly due to measurement error or technique.

Claim 7 Arctic Skua. The original source (Melikian 1996) did not present number of birds observed, but Adamian & Klem (1999) mentioned “two seen”. No further details of the occurrence were presented and no proof was provided that the claimed birds were Arctic Skuas.

Claims 8 & 9 Arctic Skua. These two were seen on the same day but 50 km apart, and were listed without reference to publication or observers, although “boat census” mentioned for this event probably refers to the Armenian Institute of Zoology surveys in the mid 1960s. No descriptive details were provided to prove species identity or to eliminate the slight chance of a double-counted individual.

Claim 10 Long-tailed Skua. The only report of Long-tailed Skua from Armenia, a sighting, is presented in Adamian *et al* (1969) and Ayrumian *et al* (1975), but without details on the bird’s age, plumage or circumstances of observation. Adamian & Klem (1999) specified the bird’s age as adult, citing Ayrumian *et al* (1975).

DISCUSSION

It is well known that field identification of skuas is far from straightforward, a difficulty compounded by size variation and plumage morphs (Beaman & Madge 1998, Arkhipov & Blair 2007). Indeed, immature skuas lack absolute diagnostic field marks and require a lot of practice for positive field identification (Mullarney *et al* 1999). These circumstances appear to be underestimated in the Armenian skua claims, and initial misidentification of at least two of the four collected specimens combined with inaccurate specimen labeling, casts reasonable doubt on the field observations described above. Reports without substantiating details should not be discarded but be treated with appropriate caution. Expert examination of the four available Armenian skua specimens seems essential.

The only other skua report from Armenia refers to the observation of a pale juvenile Pomarine Skua on 7 September 2002 by Roy Beddard, Pascal Wink and VA near Lichk village on the SE shore of Lake Sevan. On that day the bird was seen quite close (approached and flew overhead) and in good light, which allowed RB and PW to identify it easily and immediately. Both of them are well familiar with all skuas, so there were no doubts and it didn’t enter our heads to write a detailed description (with hindsight, a missed opportunity indeed).

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