

First record of Long-tailed Skua *Stercorarius longicaudus* in Iraq

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Between March and July 2008, the Royal Navy was in command of a coalition of naval vessels patrolling Iraqi territorial waters in the Gulf. I was on board the flagship HMS Chatham, which was stationed for most of the four months in the waters immediately around the Khawr al Amaya oil terminal—located ten miles due south of the Shatt al Arab waterway. I am an experienced sea birder and co-founded the Biscay Dolphin Research Programme (now the charity Marinelife) which conducts monthly line transect surveys of the English channel and bay of Biscay recording cetaceans, elasmobranchs and birds.

I identified and photographed (Plates 1–3) a Long-tailed Skua *Stercorarius longicaudus* on 12 May 2008 in Iraqi territorial waters (29° 47.00' N, 048° 48.02' E). This is apparently the first record for the country and has been accepted by the Nature Iraq bird records committee (Salim *et al* 2012).

The bird was sighted at 20.10 h local time, on the starboard beam of HMS Chatham, which was steaming due north at 10 knots, 3000 m due east of the Khawr al Amaya oil terminal. I was not bird watching at the time the bird passed, but was fortunate to get three photos using a Canon Ixus 75 through the back of hand-held 10x magnification binoculars from the fo'c'sle. There was a lot of dust in the atmosphere, consequently a low and diffuse light. The bird passed the ship c100 m off and was seen also by Commander John Wheele. I was immediately aware of the bird's long tail feathers, and classic pale form skua appearance, with a dark upper surface with contrasting pale cheeks and black cap on the head—an obvious Long-tailed Skua although at the time I did not know the significance of the record. I had been endeavouring to photograph all the bird



Plates 1–3. A Long-tailed Skua *Stercorarius longicaudus* on 12 May 2008 in Iraqi territorial waters (see text), photographed through 10x binoculars from HMS Chatham. © R Williams

species I was seeing on and around the oil platform (which totalled 75) so I immediately went for the camera. The bird was moving with the ship but seemed to be 'on a mission' so I knew I had little time to get a photo before it became too distant. There were a number of Slender-billed Gulls *Chroicocephalus genei* in the area.

Earlier during the deployment I had watched Arctic Skuas *Stercorarius parasiticus* harassing gulls and terns, spotted mainly from the ship and I recall at least one observation from the east side of the oil platform. When at sea, I was seldom on the upper deck, but I saw them on at least three occasions with some days in between and so assumed they were always out there and did not log them in my notebook. I think all the sightings were in April. They were all pale phase birds, which I have seldom seen, and this is why I took particular pleasure in watching their aerial pursuits. I recall that they were all seen in the same area as the Long-tailed Skua. I expected the 12 May skua to be another Arctic, and this is why the long tail plumes immediately struck me as different.

Long-tailed Skua is a vagrant to Iran (Roselaar & Aliabadian 2009) and Kuwait (three records of singles, Al-Sirhan 2011). There are ten records for the United Arab Emirates (Pedersen & Aspinall 2010).

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