

A Long-tailed Jaeger in Yolo County

Daniel Stoebel, Department of Ecology and Evolution, State University of New York, Stony Brook, NY 11794-5245 (dstoebel@life.bio.sunysb.edu)

At 1230 on 9 June 2000 I drove into the City of Davis Wetlands, about 5 mi. ENE of Davis, Yolo County, at the end of Road 28H, stopping occasionally to observe birds in the newly flooded rice fields on the north side of the entrance road. Stopping at one cell, I noticed a gull-shaped bird with a gray back and black cap. Raising my binoculars expecting to find a Caspian Tern (*Sterna caspia*), I was shocked to see instead an adult Long-tailed Jaeger (*Stercorarius longicaudus*). I took notes about the bird for about 30 minutes, and rapidly left before the entrance gate was locked at 1300. With the help of Joan Humphrey, I got word out to local birders, and many people were able to see the bird during its four-day stay. I went back to watch the bird several more times during its stay and took further notes, upon which the following description is based:

Overall size approximately that of a Caspian Tern, though not as bulky. The bird had a prominent and complete black cap. Below the cap was a buffy yellow wash, which was confined to the cheek. The breast and belly were white, though with some brown smudges, presumably from the muddy ground it rested in. A small amount of white separated the black cap from the back, which was sooty gray. The primaries, which seemed to be in good shape, were darker than the back and coverts. The wing tips crossed behind the body, and even when on the ground, it was possible to see a pale shaft to at least the outer primary. Several of the tertials seemed to have a brownish cast. This bird had two long tail streamers, which were more than twice the length of the wing extension past the body. When on the ground, the streamers were separated, giving the bird a fork-tailed appearance. The vent and sides of this bird were a similar color gray as the back and coverts. The bill was solid black, shorter than the head, and seemed to be of essentially uniform thickness. There was a slight bulge on the upper mandible near the tip, and this mandible showed a slight hook. The lower mandible appeared to be completely straight. The eyes were dark, as were the legs. I saw the bird in extended flight (about 30 seconds) on 12 June, and noted it had thin, pointed wings, giving it a tern-like appearance. The tail streamers did not show a fork when in flight. There were no obvious signs of molt (such as missing or partially grown feathers) seen when the bird was in flight.

For most of the time the bird was observed in a newly flooded rice field with a small amount of emergent vegetation. It spent its time alone, occasionally being harassed by Red-winged Blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus*). It seemed to be

feeding actively on some type of invertebrate for much of the time I observed it. Other times it rested (sitting down) on the small levees of these rice fields. I never heard it vocalize. The bird was typically quite close (less than 30m) to the road, and seemed generally unconcerned with the people watching it. I observed it under clear skies at a variety of times of day, with Zeiss 10x40 binoculars and several different models of spotting scope.

This is the first record of Long-tailed Jaeger for Yolo County, the seventh for the Central Valley, and differs from other Central Valley records in some important respects. The six previous records were all from the San Joaquin Valley, occurred in the fall, and were of sub-adult birds. The first Central Valley record was in 1987, when a juvenile was at the Modesto Sewage Ponds on 28-29 August (Campbell et al., 1988). 1990 provided three more records. The first was of a juvenile seen at the Twissleman Ponds (adjacent to I-5), Kern County, 26-31 August, and the second of a juvenile seen at Tulare Lake Drainage District (TLDD) ponds, Kern County, 31 August-2 September (the former incorrectly reported as occurring at the TLDD ponds by McCaskie [1991]; John Wilson, pers. comm.). These two Kern County records pertain to different birds, as the observers noted differences in plumage between the two. The third record from 1990 was of a sub-adult bird (perhaps in second autumn plumage) seen in Kings County at the TLDD South Evaporation Basin on 9 September (Rob Hansen, *vide* Luke Cole, pers. comm.). Another juvenile was seen on the Kings/Kern county line 6 September 1993 (McCaskie, 1994). Finally, a sub-adult bird was seen on 22 August 1999 at the TLDD Hacienda Evaporation Basin, Kern County (Rob Hansen, *vide* Luke Cole, pers. comm.). Subsequent to the sighting reported here for Yolo County, a juvenile was seen in a flooded rice field near the intersections of Sankey Road and Natomas Road in Sutter County on 8 August 2000 (John Sterling, pers. comm.), and a second juvenile was seen on the Kings/Kern county line at TLDD on 10 September 2000 (R. Hansen *vide* L. Cole, pers. comm.).

The pattern seen in the Central Valley is similar to that of other inland areas in California. For example, of at least 15 Long-tailed Jaegers seen at the Salton Sea, most have been juveniles, and all but one (a spring record of a full-tailed adult) were seen in the fall (Guy McCaskie, pers. comm.). Similarly, all six Mono Lake area records are for fall (Gaines, 1992; Scott Terrill, pers. comm.).

The date of the Yolo County record raises the question of the bird's direction of travel at the time it wandered inland. This species typically migrates offshore of California between mid-April and early June, and does not reappear southbound until mid-July (Stallcup, 1990). The Yolo County bird might have been an unsuccessful breeder headed south, though this seems unlikely to me. In order for such a bird to arrive in California by June 9, nest failure would need to occur at the very beginning of June. Furthermore, while nonbreeding birds are known to fly south as far as Hudson Bay in June to hunt, these birds are thought to fly northward again to join the main (coastal) migration routes in late July and August (Wiley and Lee, 1998). While the true history of this individual will never be known, I believe that a late northbound individual is the more likely of the two possibilities.

While ultimate cause of the appearance of Long-tailed Jaegers inland is quite unclear, two hypotheses seem plausible. First, birds migrating off the California coast may be blown into the Central Valley by heavy onshore winds. Alternatively, they may wander inland under their own power. If onshore winds are responsible, then they should affect all Long-tailed Jaegers migrating off the coast with equal likelihood, without regard to age. Accordingly, I would expect the age distribution of onshore records to be the same as the age distribution offshore, reflecting random sampling from the whole population. If Long-tailed Jaegers arrive in the Central Valley on their own, then I would expect most records to be of young of the year, making their way south for the first time. Clearly, what few records we have seem to be skewed towards young birds flying south, suggesting vagrants may be arriving here under their own power. Most likely however, some combination of both self-powered wandering and weather is responsible for the seven Central Valley records.

Untangling these two effects will be difficult. First, with only nine records, any quantitative analysis is statistically tenuous. But as records accumulate, a more thorough study of the phenomenon may be possible. In such an attempt, the source of weather data is critical. The weather at the location of records is likely to be quite variable: heavy west winds blew for two consecutive days prior to the appearance of the Yolo County bird (pers. obs.), though there was essentially no wind at the time of any of the Kern County records (John Wilson, pers. comm.). More importantly, the critical weather patterns may be offshore, and perhaps well to the north of locations where birds appear. Determining the area offshore to be considered is a critical first step in evaluating the role of weather. While this work cannot be done today, we may be able to do so in the future with more data. In doing so, we may come to a better understanding of how a sea-faring migrant could wind up in a Central Valley rice field.

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