

Short Notes

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Two early records of Eurasian Jays in Caithness

Until about a quarter of a century ago the Scottish breeding range of the Eurasian Jay *Garrulus glandarius* extended only as far north as central Argyll, Perthshire and southern Aberdeenshire, and even with the recent northward extension in range it has only reached southern Lochaber, southern Inverness-shire and Moray & Nairn (Forrester *et al.* 2007, *The Birds of Scotland*, SOC Aberlady). It is generally a sedentary species, which occasionally undertakes long-distance, irruptive movements when its food supply fails. Occurrences in the north of Scotland have been very few. Prior to 1980 there just three records in Shetland, one of which is doubtful (Pennington *et al.* 2004, *The Birds of Shetland*, Christopher Helm, London), one in Orkney (Booth *et al.* 1984, *The Birds of Orkney*, The Orkney Press, Stromness), two in Sutherland (Vittery 1997, *The Birds of Sutherland*, Colin Baxter photography, Grantown-on-Spey), and five in Moray and Nairn (Cook 1992, *The Birds of Moray and Nairn*, The Mercat Press, Edinburgh). In Caithness there are only a couple of unreliable 19th century records (Manson Sam 2002, *A History of Caithness Islands 1769 to 2001*, Privately published). The purpose of this note is to draw attention to two early occurrences in the latter area that have recently come to light.

The records are contained in the 'stuffing books' of Lewis Dunbar, the Thurso taxidermist. They read as follows:

"Jay, Mr McNicol, Sandside (female)" - the entry is dated 2 October 1899, and:

"Jay (2), to be set up, Mr McEwen, Berriedale" - entry dated 9 December 1899.

The 'Mr McNicol' referred to in the first of these is almost certainly Nicol M'Nicol (this is the surname style the family preferred), gamekeeper on the Pilkington family's estate at Sandside, Reay, Caithness. His name crops up fairly regularly in Dunbar's stuffing books, as do several other members of his family, and apart from the gamebirds and birds of prey which might be expected from a gamekeeper there are a number of minor rarities including Great Northern Diver *Gavia immer*, Iceland Gull *Larus glaucooides* (2),

Pallas's Sandgrouse *Syrhaptes paradoxus*, European Nightjar *Caprimulgus europaeus* and Common Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra*. He also submitted a number of notes to *The Field* about birds he had taken. He appears to have had a reasonably sound knowledge of birds.

The 'Mr McEwen' referred to in the second record is probably Archibald McEwan (note spelling of surname), the Head Stalker on the Duke of Portland's Langwell Estate at Berriedale, Caithness, but may perhaps be his younger brother James who was the Head Keeper on the Duke's adjoining estate at Braemore, near Dunbeath, Caithness. Both occasionally sent specimens to Dunbar for preservation, mostly birds of prey, but including a European Turtle Dove *Streptopelia turtur* from A McEwan and a Little Auk *Alle alle* from J McEwan. It seems reasonable to conclude that whichever of them sent in the Jays had some familiarity with birds.

No information concerning the circumstances under which these birds were taken has survived, but in all likelihood they had been shot or trapped. That three birds should be obtained within two months of one another at sites only 45 km apart suggests that these might have been part of an eruption. It is unlikely that these were cage birds, or birds imported from outside Caithness, though such possibilities are difficult to discount completely. Dunbar seems to have been honest and straightforward in his dealings with bird specimens and there is no suggestion that he ever tried to pass off material from elsewhere as locally obtained, as some taxidermists at the time did.

Dunbar was in the habit of publishing details of the more interesting birds that passed through his hands in the annual report on Scottish Ornithology published in the *Annals of Scottish Ornithology*, and there remains the question of why he did not send in these records. Dunbar was primarily interested in birds of prey and may not have appreciated the significance of what he had been sent. Alternatively it may be that he wished to keep

their existence confidential to protect the finders from any repercussions from their employers, particularly if the intention had been to sell them on at a profit.

I am indebted to the National Museum of Scotland, Edinburgh for permission to consult Harvie-Brown's papers, stuffing books which includes Dunbar's and to museum staff,

particularly the Curator, Dr Bob McGowan, for help in getting to grips with the wealth of material available

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Red-breasted Merganser catching and eating a Common Frog

On the afternoon of 9 March 2008, while watching ducks on the Loch of Hundland, West Mainland, Orkney, I noticed two female Red-breasted Mergansers *Mergus serrator* diving in a small inlet off the main loch.

After several dives one of these birds surfaced with a small Common Frog *Rana temporaria*, about 30mm in length, which it held in its bill for a few seconds before swallowing it. The Red-breasted Mergansers continued diving for another five minutes but as far as I could be see nothing else was caught. They then moved back to the main loch and swam away.

Frogs do not appear to be a regular prey item of the Red-breasted Merganser and the only mention I can find is from a Russian study where one was found in the stomach of a Red-breasted Merganser (Cramp S & Simmons KEL 1977. *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Vol 1: 677. Oxford University Press, Oxford).

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Waxwing killed by Jackdaw

On the morning of Sunday 15 February 2009 I saw a Bohemian Waxwing *Bombycilla garrulus* land on a Rowan *Sorbus aucuparia* approximately 50m from my kitchen window. A second Waxwing joined it but then flew off. No sooner had it gone than a Eurasian Jackdaw *Corvus monedula* appeared and started to peck at the first Waxwing which retaliated. The Jackdaw's attack was unrelenting and it was joined by a second Jackdaw. A third jackdaw arrived squawking but not pecking. The Waxwing eventually toppled upside down still clinging to the branch. The pecking continued until it fell lifeless to the ground into deep snow. The Jackdaws flew a little distance away, then after five minutes flew off completely. I have not been able to find any similar accounts in the literature.

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Plate 92. Bohemian Waxwing © Harry Scott.

Unprecedented spring passage of Long-tailed Skuas over Saltcoats during May 2006

Saltcoats harbour is regarded as the premier seawatching site in north Ayrshire. Jutting out into the Firth of Clyde, this watch point offers commanding views of Irvine Bay to the south and the narrow Arran channel in the west. All four skua species have been observed from Saltcoats (albeit in small numbers) during spring passage, but the Long-tailed Skua *Stercorarius longicaudus* has been the rarest by far. Prior to 2006, only 12 records of Long-tailed Skua had been accepted in Ayrshire (R.H. Hogg editor *Ayrshire Bird Reports* 1986–2006) only one of which was seen from Saltcoats, an adult on 13 May 1999. Impressive movements of Long-tailed Skuas occur off the Outer Hebrides in spring when low-pressure weather systems bring flocks close to headlands such as Aird an Runair. (D.L. Davenport. 1991. Spring passage of Long-tailed Skuas off North Uist in 1991. *Scottish Birds* 16: 85–89).

On the afternoon of 23 May 2006, Jason McManus observed a distant flock of what he thought were Long-tailed Skuas off Saltcoats harbour. After checking the weather forecast, T. Byars went down to the harbour at 18.00 and met J McM, Robert Lambie and Mark Maddock. Conditions looked perfect for seawatching, as a fast-moving low-pressure system was tracking northwards over the Irish Sea, bringing intense squalls with long periods of drizzle on a westerly force four. Through the heavy squalls we started to note small numbers of Arctic Skuas heading due south. At 18.10 TB noticed a very distant flock of birds flying high, just south of Irvine Bay, 7 km away. Neither observer could identify these birds though in retrospect all observers agree that these were almost certainly distant Long-tailed Skuas. At around 18.40 definite Long-tailed Skuas began appearing from the north-west. As we tracked the birds southwards, they joined a swirling “kettle” of 45 Long-tailed Skuas that had literally appeared from nowhere, circling and swooping 300 m above Saltcoats harbour like Black-headed Gulls. We watched as a maelstrom of Long-tailed Skuas wheeled with tail streamers fluttering like thin black ribbons. A harsh tern-like call drew our attention as a lone Long-tailed

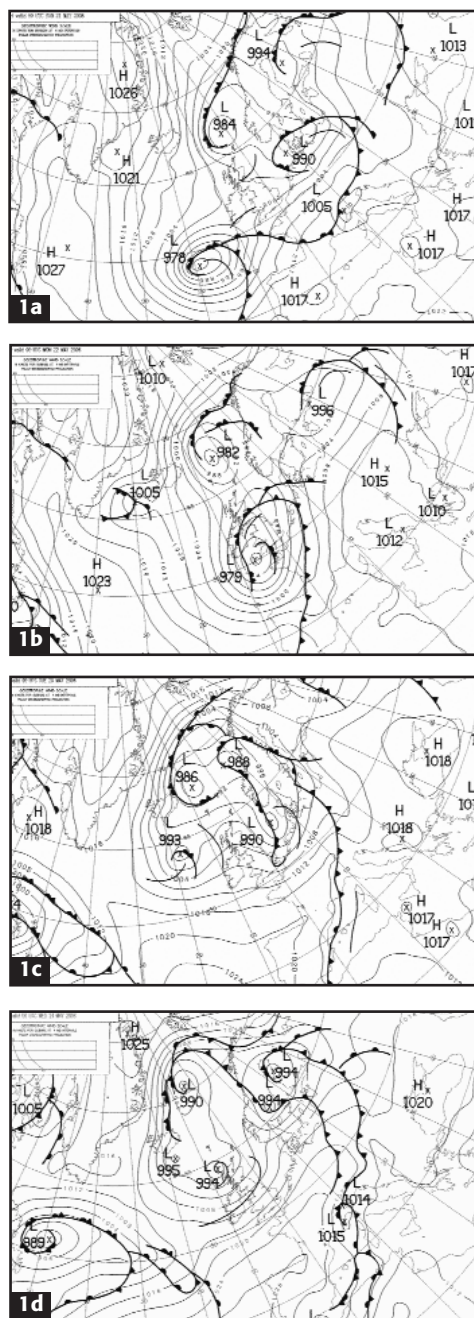


Figure 1. Synoptic charts for (a) 21 May 2009 00hrs, (b) 22 May 2009 00hrs, (c) 23 May 2009 00hrs and (d) 24 May 2009 00hrs. The charts are derived from information supplied by the Met Office.



Plate 93. Long-tailed Skuas, Saltcoats Harbour, Ayrshire, May 2006 © Keith Hoey.

Skua sailed just 10 m above our heads and joined the swirling flock which had now gained height to 400 m. Another two stragglers appeared from the north and also joined the main group of 51 birds, which then dropped rapidly down to sea level and headed northwards in single file just above the waves past Outer Nebock rocks. As the trough weakened, the weather improved quite rapidly and a patch of clear blue sky appeared. The flock of 53 birds ascended and headed purposely inland, climbing all the time, until they were lost to view at about 1000+ m heading high in a north-easterly direction over Meikle Busbie Wood 5 km inland. This “towering” behaviour of Long-tailed Skuas has been documented before in spring off North Uist (D.L. Davenport, *Scottish Birds* 16: 85–89). Although “overlanding” in skua species has been recorded in Ayrshire before, this is the first documented observation of Long-tailed Skuas heading inland from west to east in Ayrshire.

J. McManus went back to the harbour on the following morning: a total of 173 Long-tailed Skuas were logged on 24 May, including separate flocks of 80 and 42, all heading east, inland, through the morning into mid-afternoon. The wind direction by now had become westerly as the low-pressure system had moved into the North Sea. In all 226 Long-tailed Skuas were recorded over the two days.

We thank Angus Hogg for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper and Keith Hoey for providing the only photographic evidence that Long-tailed Skuas were not a figment of anyone’s imagination during May 2006!

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Norman Elkins commented: “The likely scenario for this large passage stems from the probable accumulation of Long-tailed Skuas in the North Atlantic west of Ireland. This may have arisen due to an abnormal frequency of north to north-east winds during the previous fortnight linked to the passage of depressions being further south than normal. This is borne out by a large passage of skuas off the Isle of Lewis on the 22nd, in a fresh north-west wind.”

“Overnight on 22nd/23rd, a transient ridge of high pressure over the area in question moved away as a small active depression tracked towards north-west Scotland. This brought bands of squally showers into the Firth of Clyde in the afternoon of the 23rd associated with a trough. Skuas may have been swept east to the south of the depression, subsequently moving overland in the clearing weather behind the trough, rather than re-tracing their route to move up the west coast. Further movement occurred on the 24th in a similar airmass. Overland passage of skuas is common over large landmasses, usually high enough to remain undetected.”