

Illinois' First Confirmed Long-tailed Jaeger (*Stercorarius longicaudus*)

by Dan Kassebaum

On Wednesday 22 September, 1999 I made a special after-school trip to Carlyle Lake in Clinton County to scout for the upcoming IOS field trip that weekend. Within minutes of setting up my scope I located a jaeger over the lake. Luckily the bird flew in and fed very near my position and I soon realized I was looking at a juvenile pale-phased Long-tailed Jaeger (*Stercorarius longicaudus*), Illinois' first accepted record (Stotz 2001). Luckily I came prepared and had several good field guides as reference. My initial clue as to the identification of the bird was its peculiar habit of feeding. Unlike the aggressive fish-stealing behavior of the larger jaegers, this bird passively hovered barely over the surface of the water feeding on the tremendous swarms of midges that had amassed over the lake. The bird continued in this manner for another 15 minutes maintaining its position near the pavilion at Eldon Hazlet State Park Sailboat Marina. Only after being harassed by a group of Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) did the jaeger change its behavior and continue south toward the dam. With the parking lot so near the pavilion, I was able to access my reference material and examine the bird with books in hand.

Everything matched: the overall grayish tones, the breast-band, the nearly diagnostic belly patch, the darker flight feathers and lack of any obvious flash of white in the wings as the bird banked. After carefully studying the bird and making annotated illustrations I phoned Albert Seppi hoping he could rush to the lake with his camera equipment. I returned to the dam to watch the bird until it got too dark to observe. No papers would be graded that evening; instead there would be long distance phone calls to Chillicothe and Decatur.

Confusion

This story really begins on Saturday 18 September 1999. I had birded Carlyle all day and spent a good deal of time scoping the lake with hopes of finding a Sabine's Gull (*Xema sabini*). I had no luck with the gull and worse yet, when I got home, I learned from Jim and Charlene Malone that they had observed a distant jaeger from the very location I had been at earlier in the day. The next morning, I met Keith McMullen and Myrna



This photo shows the Lake Carlyle Long-tailed Jaeger in flight over the pontoon boat during an Illinois Ornithological Society "pelagic" field trip. The strongly barred underwings indicate the bird is a juvenile. The white upper belly and lower breast area seen here as unmarked white strongly point to Long-tailed Jaeger. Photo taken by Rhonda Monroe 25 September 1999.

Deaton, and we had little trouble locating the jaeger. Leroy Harrison also happened to be at the lake and with a corps of four solid birders we tentatively identified the bird to be a Parasitic Jaeger (*S. parasiticus*).

With my encounter on 22 September, it did not occur to me that I was probably looking at the same bird I had seen that weekend. It behaved so differently that I assumed it to be another jaeger. The bird I observed Sunday, 19 September, acted like a jaeger. As expected it chased gulls and surprisingly even an Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*). The bird I observed Wednesday, 22 September, acted more like a nighthawk, slowly gliding over the water's surface snapping at insects. When I hot-lined the bird that evening I reported it to be different from the jaeger seen that weekend and so planted the seed that would lead to so much confusion by the 25 September field trip.

Thursday, 23 September, brought in a group of eager birders hoping to add a new bird to their state lists. Those who got to Carlyle early found the bird precisely at the same spot it had been seen the previous evening. Even so, opinions differed as to which bird