

THE 1970 PENNINGTON FLASH LONG-TAILED SKUA

A LOST RECORD FINALLY GAINS RECOGNITION

by Ian McKerchar

Nature Notes

A pomarine skua has been observed in the district, only the second conclusive sighting in Greter Manchester.

Mr. Roy Rhodes, lecturer and North West Water Country Ranger, watched the bird on a cold, squally day recently at Jumbles Reservoir, near Bolton.

Roy, who lives at Belmont, says he has now seen all four British skuas at the flashes or reservoirs of South Lancashire. Many years ago he listed the long-tailed skua among the birds observed in the Varanger Fjord, north of Lapland, by the Arctic Ocean.

Skuas are dark, gull-like, aggressive birds, rarely coming ashore except to nest. They usually come inland after gales or high winds and in the last 20 years there have been eight sightings of great skuas and



The long-tailed skua photographed at Pennington Flash by Charlie Owen.

three of Arctic skuas on Scotman's and Pennington Flashes.

There is only one record of the rarer — more graceful long-tailed skua: this stayed on Pennington Flash for six days in October, 1970 and

was photographed by Leigh Ornithological Society member Charlie Owen.

The pomarine skua nests in widely scattered colonies in the tundra region of North Russia.

GEOFFREY BROWN

Above: Although this article, taken from a local newspaper, is referring in the main to a Pomerine Skua record at Jumbles Reservoir, the accompanying photograph (and second to last paragraph in the article) are of the Pennington Flash Long-tailed Skua- and what a beauty it is! (Photo by Charlie Owen)

In the very early 80's, visitors to Pennington Flash will remember there being a visitor centre in the shape of a portacabin filled with the history of the site, photographs and stuffed birds. As barely a teenager then, but already a flash regular, I remember vividly staring in wonder at a photograph, nestling amongst black and white scenic images of the flash scarcely recognisable by today's standards, of a Long-tailed Skua apparently taken there. This was no blurred image of a distant skua in rainy, windblown conditions, no, instead it was a full frame adult, complete with tail streamers, an extraordinary image of what was then a real rarity and even today, especially inland, an outstanding sighting.

It wasn't until I took over the position as Assistant County Recorder for rarities that the vivid memory of that photograph took on a whole new significance, when it occurred to me that the species wasn't even on the county list! A chance meeting and reminisce with ex-county recorder and Pennington Flash 'guru' Dave Wilson in early 2006 prompted my recollection of the photo and to question its validity, as I recalled the original photo bore no details of the sighting. Dave reassured me the photo was entirely valid and was taken by long time flash regular Charlie Owen. Dave then tempted me with his recollections of the bird and thoroughly captivated I set out to find more.

I contacted the photographer of the bird Charlie Owen (who happened to be a member of the county rarities committee at the time) and he confirmed that the photo I had not seen for nearly 20 years was indeed of a Long-tailed Skua and was taken at Pennington Flash in October 1970, although not on the 'spit' as I had always assumed. I was then treated to a compelling account of the bird's occurrence and promised a copy of the photograph, so the record could be circulated around the rarities committee and gain the full recognition it so deserved.

In December 2006, good to his word, Charlie supplied the photograph and I eagerly circulated around the county rarities committee. Unsurprisingly, the record was accepted and became the first and currently only record of Long-tailed Skua in Greater Manchester.

I would like to thank Charlie Owen for providing me with that wonderfully evocative photograph and to both Charlie and David Wilson for taking the time to recount and share with me their full, detailed and frankly remarkable stories of such a marvellous bird.



Above: What a cracker and a true county blocker to boot! How long will it be before another graces us?
(Photo by Charlie Owen)

Ian McKerchar, December 2006

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