

South Polar Skua or Hybrid Skua *Catharacta sp.* from Sri Lanka?

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In their paper on Skuas A.A.D.A.Udayakumara, D.M.S.S.Karunaratna, A.A.T.Amarasinghe and E.M.K.B.Ekanayake (2007) state that a bird collected by them in May 2003 is the first “confirmed” record of a South Polar Skua from (the Western Province of) Sri Lanka. Although not mentioned in their paper, the bird was first reported in the literature by Warakagoda (2003) who commented, **“It was measured and photographed. A few figures in the measurements seemed to be somewhat outside the ranges for the South Polar”** [Skua]. [Emphasis added by me, RIDeS]. Nevertheless, the measurements were not published, nor were the discrepant features identified. However, Udayakumara *et al.* 2007 concluded that the bird was the “First confirmed record of this species in the region (D. Warakagoda verbally 2003)”. In the absence of measurements, it was not possible to either defend or disprove identification of the bird as a South Polar Skua. Therefore on 18th February 2008, Chinthaka Kaluthota and the writer examined the specimen, which is currently in the National Museum, Colombo. The bird was not recorded in the Museum’s specimen register nor had it been assigned a registration number. According to Udayakumara *et al.* (2007) the bird was a female; however this information is absent from the specimen label which reads “1st record from Sri Lanka”. The specimen is not prepared in the standard manner viz. as a study “skin” but has been mounted for exhibition and, as shown in plate 1, is fitted with glass eyes having yellow irides. (Note: Harrison, 1985 shows that all *Catharacta* skuas have brown irides). Measurements of the bird as obtained by Kaluthota and the writer appear below.

Bill from skull:	60mm
Bill from feathers:	49mm
Tarsus:	70.2mm

(Note: as the specimen was not prepared in the standard manner, there is a small degree of uncertainty

EDITOR’S NOTE Rex De Silva’s article entitled “South Polar Skua or Hybrid Skua *Catharacta sp.* from Sri Lanka?” is a direct response, commentary, correction and updating of an article by four authors which appeared in “Birding Asia 8” page 77. Rex’s article was submitted to “Birding Asia” but publication was refused. We publish his article (with some amendments) as we consider it to be an important addition to the literature on Skuas in Sri Lanka.

regarding the precise tarsus measurement).

Many of the wing and tail feathers are damaged thereby shortening them (plates 2 and 3). For this reason we did not measure the tail. Measurements of the shortened wings (*i.e.* from bend of wing to damaged point of the feathers) are 313mm (L) and 325mm (R); much too short for any *Catharacta* species (plate 1). An illustration of the live bird (by Gihan de Silva Wijeratne) which appears in www.orientalbirdimages.org shows wingtips which extend beyond the tail. Udayakumara *et al.* (2007) state that “Post mortem examination revealed damaged primary feathers”. Nonetheless the bird is clearly a *Catharacta* skua. Its bill and tarsus measurements are compatible with biometrics of both Brown and South Polar Skuas as given by Furness (1987). However, these measurements (bill and tarsus) are equally compatible with measurements of two hybrids of South Polar x Chilean Skua (*C. chilensis*) as well as two hybrids of Chilean x Brown (Falkland) Skua, described by Votier *et al.* (2004). Furthermore the bill/tarsus ratio (b/t) of the bird (0.70) is compatible with b/t ratios of Brown Skuas (0.60-0.74), as well as South Polar Skuas (0.66-0.80) as given by Votier *et al.* (2004). For reasons explained above, we were able to only obtain bill and tarsus measurements, hence, Warakagoda’s statement (2003), wherein he considers that some (unspecified) measurements are incompatible with the (corresponding) measurements of South Polar Skuas, is of critical importance in assessing identity of the bird. Nevertheless, Warakagoda (2003) states that the bird was identified positively as a South Polar Skua, on the basis of photographs. Given the findings of Votier *et al.* (2004),



Plate 1. The Specimen of South Polar Skua in the Colombo Museum. Note yellow eye and damaged feathers.

and especially considering Warakagoda's comments on the disparate measurements, the possibility exists that the bird could actually be a hybrid: conceivably a cross between the South Polar and Brown Skua or South Polar Skua and another *Catharacta* species, or between two other *Catharacta* species as described by Votier *et. al.* (2004). This possibility was alluded to in an earlier paper on South Polar Skuas (De Silva, 2005).

For reasons stated below the specimen raises more questions than it answers.

1. The damaged state of the wings and tail and the fact that the specimen is not prepared in accordance with standard practice for reference skins makes measurements (excluding the bill) somewhat uncertain. This also invalidates the specimen as a voucher for further studies (Prof. S.W. Kotagama pers. comm.). Furthermore, the reservation expressed by Warakagoda (2003), arising from the (unspecified and

unidentified) disparate measurements, as well as the issues raised by the findings of Votier *et. al.* 2007 give reasonable grounds to question identification of the specimen as a South Polar Skua.

2. Given the rather confusing plumage characteristics of skuas, it is not realistic to identify the bird as a South Polar Skua purely on the basis of photographs, when (complete) measurements might suggest other alternatives.

For reasons stated above, the claim that the specimen is the first "confirmed" record of a South Polar Skua from Sri Lanka is untenable. Hence, the first verifiable record of a South Polar Skua from Sri Lanka, confirmed by a valid specimen, probably still remains to be collected. Until such time, the sightings of the species in 1988 by three members of the "Seabird Watch" (De Silva, 1989) and those of Capt. D. M. Simpson (1990) probably remain the only records of this species from Sri Lanka.

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ast. Ceylon Bird Club Notes. Page 94. May 2003. (Note: The header of page 94 incorrectly gives the date of the CBCN as May 2002).



Plate 3.
Damaged feathers
in detail

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Plate 2. Damaged feathers