

SPECIES OF THE MONTH

LONG-TAILED JAEGER

SEPTEMBER 2024

All 3 species of jaeger are casual visitors to Arizona, and most reports are from the lower Colorado River valley. The second most often reported, and the smallest, is Long-tailed Jaeger (*Stercorarius longicaudus*), for which there are 21 records. The most recent was of 3 at Roosevelt Lake (Maricopa and Gila counties) in September-October 2021. Two years earlier an adult and immature were at Lake Pleasant (Maricopa and Yavapai counties).

The Long-tailed Jaeger nests in the Arctic tundra of North America and Eurasia, where it is the most widely distributed and abundant jaeger. It breeds farther north than any jaeger, and probably as far north as any bird. It migrates mostly at sea but occasionally is blown or wanders over land. It winters in southern temperate oceans. Successful reproduction is usually contingent on availability of lemmings or voles on its nesting territory. Like other jaegers, it is known to pursue gulls and terns to force them to drop food.

Jaegers in general, and the 2 smaller species—Long-tailed and Parasitic (*Stercorarius parasiticus*)—in particular, are difficult to separate. The challenges of identification in the field result from similar plumages and from age-related differences and a spectrum of plumage variation from dark to light. The adult Long-tailed has no dark form like other jaeger species. It has a neat dark cap, extending to gape and below eye, and a short stout bill. Neck, throat, breast, and anterior belly are white. Two central rectrices are greatly elongated and flexible, although missing on the adult shown here. Typically, the outermost 2 primaries have creamy white shafts for most of their length. The coverts are paler than the secondaries, which is not the case in the Parasitic Jaeger. The light juvenile has a distinct whitish head and overall grayish tone. A useful distinction for dark juveniles is the absence of any reddish-brown coloration.



Adult at Lake Pleasant, 18 October 2019. Photo by Mary McSparen



Light and dark immature at Roosevelt Lake, 10 September 2021. Photos by Carol Hippenmeyer