

NOTEBOOK

First confirmed record of South Polar Skua *Catharacta maccormicki* from Western Province, Sri Lanka

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On 30 May 2003, at about 11h10, a large gull-like bird was brought and handed over to AADAU by some local fishermen in the Wadduwa area (6°39'N 79°55'E), in Kaluthara District of Western Province, Sri Lanka. The bird was alive but in a critical condition. It had been collected around 08h20 while it was lying exhausted on the beach and being continuously mobbed by a flock of House Crows *Corvus splendens*. The bird was identified as a mature female light morph South Polar Skua *Catharacta maccormicki*. The following description was made: head mostly pale greyish-white, fore-nape and neck-sides with variable amounts of golden streaks, upperparts uniform brownish-black with only a few scattered pale tips, underparts pale pinkish-brown, upper and lower wings uniform brownish-black with shafts and bases of all primaries white, forming a wing-flash, tail blackish. The identification was subsequently confirmed by authorities listed in the acknowledgements.

AADAU kept the bird in captivity at his home, feeding and fostering it until it died on 20 August 2003. To begin with it could not straighten its head even though there was no outward sign of injury. It was alert and responsive, but uncoordinated in its movements, and showed signs of starvation, with watery faecal matter. During its period of captivity it was well fed with Oil Sardine *Sardinella gibbosa* and by the time of its death it had developed a good appetite. Most of its day was spent playing in water in a basin and then in preening. Its lack of coordination persisted for about a month and then improved till it was able to walk and run (Plate 1). It started fluttering its wings from about 1½ months but it was never able to fly. Post-mortem examination revealed damaged primary feathers, no subcutaneous fat and subcutaneous tissues dry, dried and sunken eyes, no food along the digestive tract, deposits of uric acid on visceral surfaces and scanty breast muscles with breast-bone prominent. Cause of death may have been dehydration resulting from the oppressive temperature and stress.

This is the first confirmed record of this species in the region (D. Warakagoda verbally 2003), as there had been several records before which were not properly documented or accompanied by

photographs or a specimen. The Meteorological Department of the Wadduwa area reported that the wind speed had gradually increased to a relatively high value during the last week of May, and we believe that the strong gales had blown the bird ashore. Rare birds such as this may be overlooked due to the lack of proper knowledge of local fishermen and inhabitants.

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Plate 1. South Polar Skua *Catharacta maccormicki* in captivity, Sri Lanka, June 2003.

