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Long-tailed Jaegers in Western Nebraska

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The Long-tailed Jaeger is an accidental migrant in Nebraska with just one accepted record through the mid-1990s. Based on records from adjacent states, especially Colorado (Andrews and Righter 1992) and Wyoming (Faulkner 2010), the species is probably more frequent than these records indicate, and its status is further complicated by possible confusion with Pomarine and Parasitic jaegers. In this article I report details of four records of Long-tailed Jaegers in western Nebraska and comment on the species' identification and status in the state.

On 3 October 1998 I observed a juvenile Long-tailed Jaeger walking along the shoreline at Martin Bay along the north shore of Lake McConaughy in Keith County. I watched this bird for almost half an hour as it foraged for insects well away from the water's edge. It did not associate with other birds, nor did it show any interest in harassing the hundreds of Franklin's and Ring-billed Gulls feeding on the main lake. On 11 September 2000 I found and photographed another juvenile Long-tailed Jaeger, this time at Lake Minatare in Scotts Bluff County. I studied this bird for nearly 3 hours, during which time it slowly circled the main eastern portion of the lake, occasionally dropping to the water to pick at something on the surface (I assumed it was after small fish). Other than a brief (<30 seconds) chase of a Franklin's Gull, the bird showed no interest in the many gulls and terns that were present. On 19 September 2001 I was stunned to see an adult light morph Long-tailed Jaeger flying east along the north shore of Lake McConaughy at Sand Point. The bird was very close (<100 m away) and its long tail streamers were fluttering in

the wind. Its passage spooked hundreds of Franklin's Gulls off the point, but it never harassed them. The bird quickly disappeared as it flew towards the dam and I was unable to relocate it in more than an hour of searching. Finally, on 9 June 2008 I observed and photographed an adult Long-tailed Jaeger at the eastern end of Lake McConaughy. I initially saw the bird flying east from Theis Bay on the north side of the lake, and later found it sitting on the water north of Ogallala Beach. The bird seemed uninterested in the many Franklin's and Ring-billed Gulls that were present. Instead, it made several short flights, each of which ended when the bird dropped to the water and swam in wide circles, picking at the water's surface much like a phalarope. Each of these birds was present for a single day and was not, to my knowledge, later seen by other birders.

The identification of any jaeger requires careful scrutiny, especially those that appear at unexpected inland locales. Features such as size, structure, coloration, shape of the rectrices, and wing pattern easily identified each of the above birds as a jaeger. Identification of the adult birds as Long-tailed Jaegers was relatively easy as both showed a neat black cap that was widest below the eye, a short, stubby, black bill that was less than half the length of the head, a pale neck, nape, chin, throat, and breast fading from dull yellow on the nape to white on the lower breast, elongated central rectrices that extended well beyond (≥ 6 in) the tips of the remaining rectrices, and a two-toned upperwing (pale gray-brown coverts contrasting with black remiges) with white shafts to the outer two primaries and uniformly dark underwings lacking any white at the base of the primaries. Identification of the juvenile birds required greater caution and was based on a combination of a very short, thin, dark-colored bill with a pale base, the blunt-tipped elongated central rectrices that extended at least one inch beyond the remaining rectrices, the generally cold, gray/brown overall coloration with unbarred underparts and contrasting paler undertail coverts with prominent darker barring, and the uniform dark gray/brown upperwings showing white color along the basal half of the outer two primaries and white edges to the primary and secondary coverts that gave the coverts a scalloped look. On the basis of plumage coloration I concluded that the 3 October 1998 bird was a light morph individual while the 11 September 2000 bird was an intermediate morph individual.

These represent the second through fifth reports of Long-tailed Jaegers in Nebraska. The state's only previous record is also the only report from the eastern two thirds of the state: a juvenile collected 1 September 1952 at Salt Lake, Lancaster County (Baumgarten and Rapp 1953). On the basis of these reports, Long-tailed Jaeger may be a more common migrant in western Nebraska than previously thought. Three of the four records were in a relatively narrow time period in September and early October that fits this species' pattern of occurrence elsewhere in the Great Plains. Summer records are more unusual, but not without precedent, and often involve adults.

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