

about the names, the groupings of the different populations, their affinities and their relationship to other gull-like birds. Some of these problems are now being confronted using both classical techniques (plumage, body form, dimensions) and molecular biology, and skuas are proving a more interesting group than even the most pessimistic observers recognised. The recent paper by 16 biologists, evolutionary and population geneticists, parasitologists, and molecular biologists has raised more problems than it solved (Cohen *et al.* 1997). It concludes with an unusual reference by Conan Doyle: "It has been said that...when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however, improbable, must be the truth! and with the despairing "Further work on the evolution of the Stercorariidae is desirable".

All of this is a bit unfortunate for current guides attempting to place the skuas in some sort of order. Especially one that wants to provide certainty in identification of birds seen at sea, during migration, as vagrants, or one like this one that wants to gain acceptance for its nomenclature. A guide that can do all this is still some years into the future.

What this book should give for readers is assured recognition of a range of skua taxa identifiable with a breeding locality - whatever they are later to be called. At present the only certainty for great skuas is association with breeding place. For example, the skuas breeding on the Chatham Islands are pretty safely recognised as - "the big brown skua (great skua) that breeds on the Chatham Islands". But what this skua should be called, and how it is related to other Southern Hemisphere brown skuas that occupy all the islands of the Southern Ocean, is currently a matter of taste, and uncertainty.

This book is a guide to the skuas, to their identification, as an aid to sorting out the problems of juvenile, immature and adult plumages, and for the jaegers especially, recognition of several colour morphs. The first section, about a third of the book, is an introductory account, an overview of the taxonomy and breeding, and includes a section of skuas and man. All of this is of interest and is very current, bringing up to date in summary form Bob Furness' account (Furness 1987). But as noted above, the taxonomic section needs to be received cautiously, although in fairness to the authors they have very fairly outlined the difficulties that exist here and are clearly very familiar with and appreciate the recent genetical studies bearing on the taxonomy. The second section comprises a specie-by-species account including valuable documentation of geographical variation and clear maps of breeding, migratory and vagrant ranges. This is the first comprehensive account of the species ranges, and considerably extends the information available to Furness.

The coloured illustrations by Hans Larsson are quite exceptionally good, capturing not only the colouring and plumage patten of the various forms, but also the general appearance. He has portrayed the bored, short-neck posture of a sleepy skua perfectly. there are 13 of these plates, and they are one of the great attractions of the work. It is worth buying the book for these alone.

So how good, how useful, how successful? As a modern account of the skuas, this is an excellent buy. It is up to date, informative and accurate. As a guide to

helping identify birds in the hand - excellent. As a guide to identifying birds at sea, I have some reservations. I would have liked a more comparative approach, especially more on relative size, even in relation to other common species in each area - say, to some of the gulls, and in the illustrations, comment and labelling of critical features of identity. Jaegers away from the breeding ground with loss of breeding plumage are always going to be a challenge. Especially seen at a distance in poor light.

LITERATURE CITED

- COHEN, B.L. *et al.* 1997. Enigmatic phylogeny of skuas (Aves: Stercorariidae) Proc. R. Soc. Lond. B 264: 181-190.
- FURNESS, R.W. 1987. The skuas. Poyser, Calton.

Euan Young

