

Early spring influx of adult Long-tailed Skuas *Stercorarius longicaudus* in northwestern Europe in March 2021

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Introduction

The Long-tailed Skua *Stercorarius longicaudus* is a trans-equatorial migratory seabird that migrates between wintering areas off southern Africa and South-America to circumpolar, (sub) Arctic breeding grounds (Gilg *et al.* 2013; van Bemmelen *et al.* 2017). Long-tailed Skuas usually migrate far from land (Wynne-Edwards 1935; Pollock *et al.* 2000) and the species is therefore usually only seen in small numbers in northwestern Europe. In some autumns, influxes of exceptional numbers of Long-tailed Skuas occur along European coasts (van der Ham 1989; Dunn & Hirschfeld 1991; Vanloo 1996). Numbers seen during spring migration in Scotland fluctuate greatly depending on westerly and northwesterly winds, with up to three-figure daily counts in some springs (Wynn *et al.* 2014). However, influxes away from Scotland and in early spring have not been documented before.

In March 2021, a small but remarkably early influx occurred in western Europe, with adult Long-tailed Skuas turning up in France, the United Kingdom and The Netherlands (but not in other northwestern European countries). Here, I describe the spatial and temporal pattern in these records.

Methods

Records between 1 January 2021 and 15 April 2021 were collected from national (faune-france.org, waarneming.nl, waarnemingen.be, dofbasen.dk, artportalen.se, artsobservasjoner.no) and international (trektellen.nl, observation.org, ebird.org) online sightings portals, from rarebirdalert.co.uk and birdguides.com, and via a request for sightings on Twitter. The identification and plumage of each bird was verified from photographic evidence — if available — or written descriptions.

Results

In total, 13 records, presumably referring to 11 individuals were found for France (N = 1), the United Kingdom (N = 7, nine sightings), and The Netherlands (N = 3), but none for Belgium, Germany, Denmark, Sweden and Norway (Figure 1). Photographic evidence was available for all 11 records except one fly-by record in the United Kingdom (Chesil Cove, Dorset) and the single French record, but for both a detailed description was available.

Eight birds (one in France, six in the UK, one in The Netherlands) were seen at inland sites, with six records at distances of 8–23 km and two at ca. 70 and 80 km from the sea. The single

French bird was seen on 15 March. In the United Kingdom, five birds were initially found on 11–12 March, followed by a single bird found on 14 March and finally one in Northern Ireland on 24 March. In The Netherlands, the influx started with a bird found dead on 14 March, followed by sightings on 15 (on the beach) and 19 March (ca. 30 km inland). All individuals were alive and apparently healthy, except the first Dutch bird. Furthermore, all were adults and the majority in full breeding plumage, with the exception of the French record, two British records and the last Dutch record, which still had some elements of non-breeding plumage.

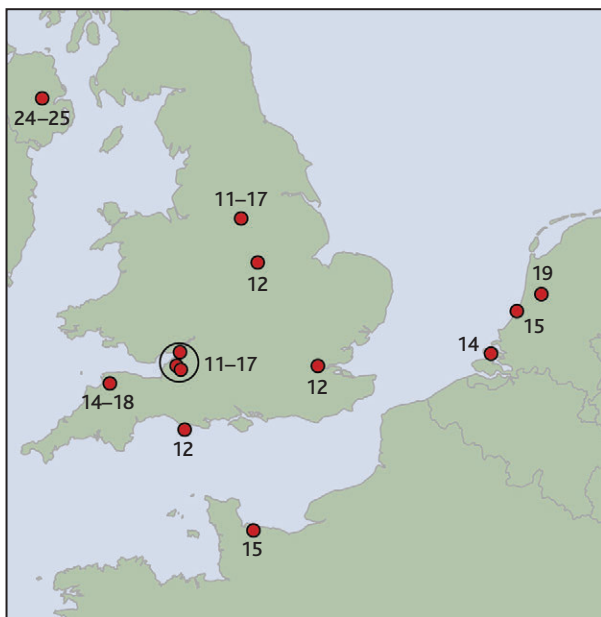
Discussion

Influxes of Long-tailed Skuas along the coasts of northwestern Europe have occurred previously, but all documented influxes were in autumn (van der Ham 1989; Dunn & Hirschfeld 1991; Vanloo 1996). Hence, the Long-tailed Skua

records in March 2021 were exceptional as it concerned an influx in spring. The influx was also exceptionally early compared to the usual seasonal occurrence of the species in northwestern Europe. The Dutch records were about a month earlier than the earliest record ever in the migration count database of *trektellen.nl* (accessed 16 April 2021), which was on 13 April 2008 at Westkapelle, Zeeland. The 41 Dutch spring records of Long-tailed Skuas on *trektellen.nl* for 1985–2020 show a seasonal peak around early May, with a maximum of six individuals in a single year. Whereas Long-tailed Skuas are also scarce in spring in southern and eastern United Kingdom, they are much more numerous in Scotland (Wynn *et al.* 2014), which is close to the usual migration route running in a roughly northeastern direction between Iceland and Scotland (Gilg *et al.* 2013; van Bemmelen *et al.* 2017). In Scotland, migration peaks in the second half of May (Wynn *et al.* 2014). The earliest British record on *trektellen.nl* was on 21 April 2015 at Spurn, Humberside, and there may have been other early records, such as an adult photographed near Lundy, Devon, on 16 April 2013 (lundybirds.blogspot.com/2013/04). Hence, the March 2021 records were also extremely early for the United Kingdom.

The lack of records of immatures in the early influx in 2021 seems no surprise: third calendar-year birds are regularly observed at the breeding grounds

Figure 1. Distribution of Long-tailed Skua *Stercorarius longicaudus* records in the United Kingdom and The Netherlands during March 2021. Numbers next to records indicate the date in March. The three records around Bristol that presumably refer to the same bird are circled.



(de Korte 1984; van Bemmelen 2010), but their arrival around mid-June is three to four weeks later than that of adults. However, whether immatures migrate into the North Atlantic substantially later than adults is not known.

Although land-based records clearly indicate the influx in March 2021 was exceptionally early, the occurrence of Long-tailed Skuas in March in western or northwestern European waters may not seem surprising considering the timing of spring arrival in the North Atlantic. Among Long-tailed Skuas breeding in northern Sweden and fitted with geolocators, birds arrived in the North Atlantic from late February onward, before staging there until early or mid May (van Bemmelen *et al.* 2017), earlier than birds from Greenland and Svalbard (Gilg *et al.* 2013). Staging Long-tailed Skuas concentrate in two large areas in the North Atlantic around 50°N: one stretching from ca. 50°W to 30°W and the other from 20°W to 10°W (Gilg *et al.* 2013; van Bemmelen *et al.* 2017). Conceivably, the Long-tailed Skuas in March 2021 may have been displaced from the latter spring staging area during heavy southwesterly storms that started around 10 March. What is perhaps surprising, is that influxes of Long-tailed Skuas in early spring have been unknown until now. Why did early spring storms never result in influxes before? This perhaps suggests that there was an alternative or additional driver for the displacement of Long-tailed Skuas in March 2021.

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