

# STERCORARIUS CATARRHACTES.

## Great Skua.

- Larus Catarrhactes*, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 226.  
— *fuscus*, Briss. Orn., tom. vi. p. 165.  
*Lestris catharractes*, Ill. Prod. Syst. Mamm. et Av., p. 273.  
*Catharacta Skua*, Brünn. Orn. Bor., no. 125.  
*Cataractes vulgaris*, Flem. Edinb. Phil. Journ., vol. i. p. 97.  
*Catarractes skua*, Steph. Cont. Shaw's Gen. Zool. vol. xiii. p. 215.  
*Catarractes noster*, Sibb. Scot. Illust., vol. ii. p. 20, pl. 14. fig. 1.  
*Stercorarius catarrhactes*, Gray and Mitch. Gen. of Birds, vol. iii. p. 653, *Stercorarius*, sp. 5.  
*Lestris antarctica*, Less. Traité d'Orn., p. 616.  
*Megalestris catarractes*, Bonap. Consp. Av. 1856, p. 206.

THIS is the largest species of a group of sea-birds distinguished for many peculiarities in their habits and economy, and to which the generic terms *Stercorarius*, *Coprotheres*, and *Lestris* have been applied, either to the species collectively or to the three divisions into which they have been separated; but, for myself, I prefer to keep them under one appellation.

The Great Skua is the solitary wanderer which visits the seas on both sides of the Line—the great brown bird seen by all voyagers who round the Capes of Good Hope and Horn—the Cape-Hen of the sealers, the Port-Egmont Hen of Hawksbury's and Cook's Voyages. I have stated that this bird is found on both sides of the Equator; at the same time I am aware that the birds of this form frequenting the southern hemisphere have been considered and characterized as distinct, under the name of *Stercorarius antarcticus*; but my own opinion is, that the birds of both hemispheres are referable to one and the same species.

The Great Skua is unknown in Greenland, but, according to Mr. Alfred Newton, is pretty common along the coasts of Iceland, and occasionally breeds some distance inland. Faber says it is resident, and names four breeding-places in the south—an island in the Ælfusá, a sandy plain opposite the Vestmanneyjar, and the dunes of Skeisarásanör and Breisamerkr. Dr. Krüper saw it in the north in summer-time; so that it probably breeds there also. In Scandinavia it is accounted rare, and it is very doubtful if it breeds in any part of the country. Mr. Newton does not recollect seeing the bird more than once during three voyages along the coast of Norway. It is not found in Spitzbergen; and though Von Baer includes it in his list of the birds of Nova Zembla, I am disposed to think the information is erroneous. It is utterly unknown on the coast of Siberia. Strange to say, Professor Baird's 'List of American Birds' gives the western or Californian coast only as the habitat of the bird in that country. In all the situations above-mentioned, whether the bird be at sea or on the grass-covered bleak hills of the islands upon which it breeds, its presence is soon made known by its daring spirit. During the breeding-season, it is said that every animal is savagely attacked that approaches too near its nest, and that the Eagle and the Great Gull speedily scurry away out of distance, should they have ventured within its precincts.

"The Skua," says Macgillivray, "has much of the aquiline character, although it is not known to pounce on its prey and carry it off in its claws. On the other hand, it bears a great resemblance to the Gulls both in form and habits, keeping its body horizontal when standing, walking, and running with quick steps, and having a light and buoyant flight, more rapid and direct, however, than that of the Gulls. Its voice is sharp and shrill, and it is from the resemblance of its cry to that of the word *skua* or *skui* that it obtains its popular name. Dr. Edmonston informs me that 'the Skua has now become rare in Shetland, in consequence of proprietors permitting rapacious bird-collectors to shoot them indiscriminately during the breeding-season. In Unst there is only one locality frequented by them, and in all the country there are not more than four or five. In the one alluded to, the colony had been reduced to a single pair some years ago; since then it has been efficiently protected, and now it reckons more than ten pairs. This is, I suppose, the most northern preserve in Great Britain, and as such, perhaps, deserves to be recorded. The Skua is hardy and easily tamed. In captivity he is gentle and affectionate, and will feed on almost anything. When offended, he raises his wings and yelps in the manner of the Eagle; but his bearing is much more dignified and magnanimous. The bird remains with us during summer.'"

The Rev. Mr. Low gives the following account of the Skua as seen on the island of Foula, to the westward of the Shetland Isles:—"As I approached the summits of the high mountains, I came near the Skua's quarters, which are affixed on the very peaks. I no sooner drew near than I was attacked with such great fury, that every one who was with me, as well as myself, were obliged to do him obeisance at every