

(Chris Talkington)



## Stercorariidae the JAEGERS and SKUAS

There are a total of seven species of jaegers and skuas that inhabit both the Northern and Southern Hemispheres. Five of these have been confirmed in North Carolina and three in South Carolina. Surprisingly, three species of these highly pelagic birds have been documented wandering inland into the Central Carolinas. Jaegers are a group of powerful, predatory seabirds that look like large, dark, heavy-bodied gulls with long pointed wings. The term “jaeger” is derived from the German word for hunter. Many of these birds spend all or most of each year at sea.

All members of this family are “kleptoparasites”—birds that steal their meals from other birds. A story by Ralph Hoffman, carried in *The Charlotte Observer* in May 1905, provides a good explanation of the piratical feeding activities of jaegers:

Sometimes when one is watching a flock of terns that are fishing off the beach, a larger bird appears, dark, long-winged and almost hawklike in aspect, and pursues swiftly some tern that has just made a successful plunge. The tern is off at once but the larger bird sticks closely to him, and to and fro, doubling and turning, the two hurry in and out over the water, the larger bird never relenting in its pursuit until the tern gives up the fish, which the robber then seizes and devours. ...On the few occasions when I have observed jaegers pursuing terns I have seen the latter forced only to drop the food which they were carrying in their bills. Good observers, however, state that the victim is frequently forced to disgorge food that it has already swallowed. The jaeger does not seem actually to strike the bird that it pursues, though I have seen the vicious looking claws darted out in a very threatening fashion.