

Jaeger Overview

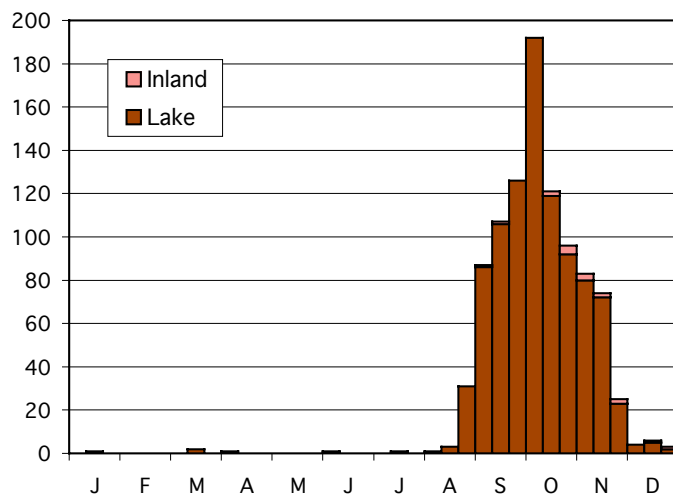
Each autumn a number of jaegers, upon departing their Arctic breeding grounds, migrate overland across the North American continent. A fortuitous confluence of Lake Michigan geometry and the proximity to the northern breeding areas concentrates these sparse migrants along the Indiana lakefront. Raymond Grow, a former dedicated lake watcher, discovered the regular occurrence of jaegers along Lake Michigan's southern shores in the 1950s. A footnote by C.T. Clark in Ford (1956) provided the first published acknowledgment that autumn jaegers occur regularly along the Indiana lakefront.

Jaegers, especially immature birds, are notoriously difficult to identify and many of those seen in Indiana have simply been called "jaegers." Consequently, an assessment of all jaeger records (of both identified and unidentified birds) provides a broader perspective of these pelagic wanderers.

Historical Information

Based on a Pomarine Jaeger report in Brayton (1879), Butler (1898) suggested that *S. pomarinus* was a winter resident on Lake Michigan. At that time the other two jaeger species were considered hypothetical in Indiana. More than a quarter-century later, Ford et al. (1934) reported Indiana specimens of the other two jaegers and proposed that Long-tailed Jaegers were the most abundant jaeger on Lake Michigan. Subsequently, Ford (1956) published a number of Parasitic Jaeger records firmly establishing that species as the dominant form on Lake Michigan.

Contemporary observations have confirmed that the Parasitic Jaeger is indeed the dominant species. About 81 percent of the identified jaegers are Parasitic, 13 percent are Pomarine, and six percent are Long-tailed. However, only about a quarter of the observed birds were actually identified (Brock 1997). Additionally, there is evidence that the jaeger mix occurring at inland sites differs significantly from that recorded on Lake Michigan (see Pomarine account).



Status

Current Status

The composite data reveal that jaegers are Fairly Common (5) in fall, Rare (7) in winter, and Accidental (10) in other seasons.

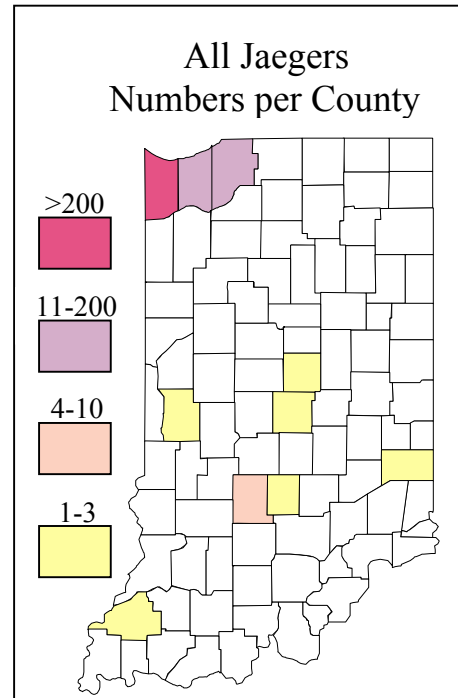
| STATUS TABLE | | | | |
|-------------------------|-----|-----|-----|------|
| 20-Year Abundance Table | | | | |
| | Win | Spr | Sum | Fall |
| Northern Tier | 7 | n | 10 | 5 |
| Central Tier | n | n | n | n |
| Southern Tier | 10 | 10 | n | 10 |
| Entire State | 7 | n | 10 | 5 |

Occurrence

Jaegers are primarily, but not exclusively, birds of Lake Michigan; fewer than two percent of the individuals are reported away from the lake. In fact jaegers have been recorded in seven inland counties.

Migration

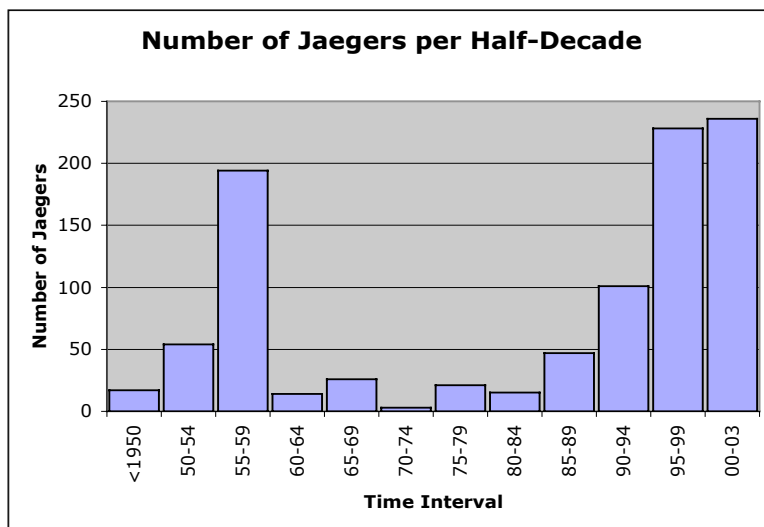
Jaegers are most often observed on stormy days associated with autumn cold fronts. They are almost never seen outside the August-December time period. Migration envelope data suggest that on average adults migrate earlier (23 September peak) than juveniles (14 October peak). Far more jaegers are seen along the Indiana lakefront than on the Chicago and Berrien County, Michigan lakefronts combined. To explain the dearth of sightings off Chicago (despite intense observer effort) Landing (1966) hypothesized that jaegers migrated down the eastern shore of Lake Michigan. Recent observations in Berrien County, however, indicate that very few jaegers are seen from those shores (Kip Miller pers. comm.), suggesting that a majority of the birds actually fly down central portions of the lake.

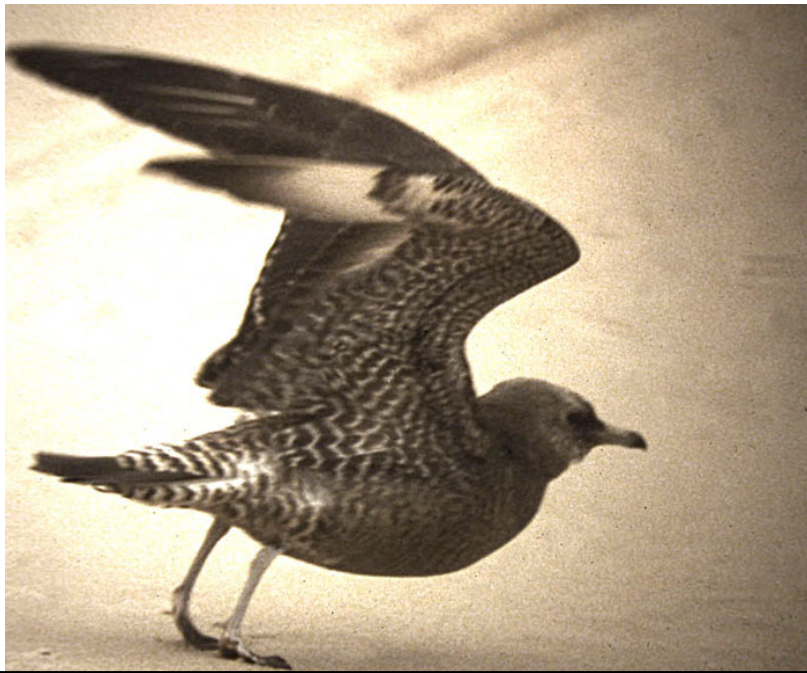


Annual Numbers

In the mid-1950s Raymond Grow recorded astronomical jaeger counts on the Indiana lakefront (see maximum count table). For years it was believed that those incredible flights were unique to that era. In recent years, however, considerably greater effort, especially by J.J. McCoy and B.J.

Grube, has been spent lake watching. As a result the number of jaegers reported has increased significantly, even surpassing some of the mid-century maxima (see graph). Jaegers have now been reported annually since 1982, and an average of thirty-three birds per year has been recorded over the past two decades. One hundred and three jaegers were logged in 1999 and one hundred and two in 2003.





Juvenile Pomarine Jaeger taking flight at Miller Beach 10 November 1987. Note the second white crescent on the under-wing, the heavily barred upper and under tail coverts, and the strongly barred under-wing coverts (rendering under-wing paler than belly). Other visible characters of this species include heavy two-tone bill and large blocky head, with crown and nape of similar darkness. Photo by K.J. Brock.

Jaeger Identification

Significant advancements in the field identification of juvenile jaegers have occurred over the last two decades. Information, primarily from Europe (e.g., Olsen and Larsson 1997) has led to the identification of a higher percentage of the jaegers observed on Lake Michigan; however, many still remain unidentified. Examples of recently discovered field marks are provided in captions of the adjacent photographs.

Winter Records

Virtually all winter reports consist of birds, primarily Pomarines, that linger into December. The winter tally sheet includes roughly a dozen December records and one January report.



Juvenile Parasitic Jaeger resting on Washington Park beach at Michigan City Harbor 29 September 1984. Note the streaked nape, pale primary tips, and thin bill. Photo by K.J. Brock.

Spring Records

The three spring records all involve single unidentified birds. They include one seen by three observers between West Beach and Dune Acres 17 March 1923 (Mumford files), one observed perched on the beach near Dunes State Park by Virginia Reuter-skiold 11 March 1953 (Reuter-skiold notes), and one seen by D.R. Whitehead on Lake Monroe 4 April 2000 (Buskirk 2001).

Summer Records

The two summer records include a 1 June 1946, inland Pomarine (see that species) and a probable Long-tailed observed by S.R. Bagby at Michigan City Harbor 16 July 1992 (Jackson 1993). In reviewing the latter report the Indiana Bird Records Committee concluded that, based on the documentation, this record should be termed a jaeger of undetermined species, “showing several Long-tailed Jaeger characteristics” (Bruner 1997).

Maximum Counts

Raymond Grow’s remarkable tallies dominate the large count table. However, a recently discovered correspondence from Grow indicated that he made no effort to distinguish between multiple appearances of the same individual; he simply counted a jaeger every time one was seen. In recent years, observers have made a concerted effort to avoid recounting the same bird. This is accomplished by employing the following procedures:

- 1) During Miller Beach lake watches, migrating birds usually first approach from the east. Once a jaeger has been observed, only new birds approaching from the east are counted, unless individuals can be distinguished by plumage characters (see “2” below). As this site marks the southern-most point on Lake Michigan, migrating jaegers often tarry offshore throughout much of the day. These lingering birds, which occasionally approach the beach, are not recounted.
- 2) Efforts are made to evaluate age and plumage characteristics of each passing bird, in a further attempt to eliminate duplicate counts of the same individual.

As a result of these efforts current daily totals are invariably fewer than the actual number of birds observed.

Composite Jaeger Data

| Summary of Jaeger Numbers | | | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-------------|
| | Winter | Spring | Summer | Fall |
| Lakefront | 14 | 3 | 1 | 946 |
| Inland | 2 | 1 | 1 | 15 |
| Total | 16 | 4 | 2 | 961 |

| Maximum Single Party Counts | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|------|--|--|
| All Jaegers | | | | | | |
| Number | Date | Location | Observer | Ref. | | |
| 61 | 06-Oct-1957 | Miller Beach | Raymond Grow | RGr | | |
| 34 | 07-Oct-1956 | Miller Beach | Raymond Grow | RGr | | |
| 32 | 08-Oct-1955 | Lakefront | Raymond Grow | RGr | | |
| 23 | 14-Nov-1999 | Miller Beach | J.J. McCoy | JMc | | |
| 22 | 04-Sep-2003 | Miller Beach | K.J. Brock | KJB | | |
| 16 | 12-Sep-1953 | Baileytown | Raymond Grow | VRS | | |

| Migration Envelopes | | | | | | |
|----------------------|-------------|--------|--------|--------|-------------|---------|
| Spring- entire state | | | | | | |
| | Earliest | Arrive | Peak | Depart | Latest | Records |
| All | 11-Mar-1953 | --- | --- | --- | 1-Jun-1946 | 4 |
| Fall- entire state | | | | | | |
| | Earliest | Arrive | Peak | Depart | Latest | Records |
| Adult | 8-Aug-1981 | 28-Aug | 23-Sep | 2-Nov | 16-Nov-1977 | 51 |
| Juv/Imm | 28-Aug-2000 | 2-Sep | 14-Oct | 18-Nov | 24-Dec-1990 | 93 |
| All | 16-Jul-1992 | 7-Sep | 8-Oct | 10-Nov | 31-Dec-1997 | 391 |

References Cited

- Brayton, A.W. (1879) A Catalogue of the Birds of Indiana, *Transactions of the Indiana Horticultural Society*, pp. 144-146.
- Brock, K.J. (1997) *Birds of the Indiana Dunes*, revised edition, Shirley Heinze Environmental Fund, 251 pp.
- Bruner, A. W. (1997) Report of the Indiana Bird Records Committee—1996, *Indiana Audubon Quarterly*, 75:136-148.
- Buskirk, R.F. (2001) Field Notes Spring 2000 *Indiana Audubon Quarterly*, 79:11-17.
- Butler, A. W. (1898) The Birds of Indiana, Indiana Department of Geology and Natural Resources Annual Report, 22:575-1187.
- Ford, E. R. (1956) *Birds of the Chicago Region*, Special Publ. No. 12, The Chicago Academy of Sciences, 117 pp.
- Ford, E. R., C.C. Sanborn, and C.B. Coursen (1934). *Birds of the Chicago Region*, The Chicago Academy of Sciences, Chicago, 80pp.
- Jackson, S.F. (1993) Field Notes Summer 1992, *Indiana Audubon Quarterly*, 71:125-138.
- Landing, J.E. (1966) Jaeger Migration in Northwestern Indiana, *Indiana Audubon Quarterly*, 44:32-37.
- Mumford files: An extensive accumulation of Indiana bird data on 5x7 file cards compiled by Professor R.E. Mumford of Purdue University, West Lafayette.

Olsen, K.M. and Hans Larsson (1997) *Skuas and Jaegers, a Guide to the Skuas and Jaegers of the World*, Pica Press, Sussex, 190 pp.

Reuter-skiold notes, the personal field observations of Dr. V. Reuter-skiold, which are now archived at Indiana University Northwest in Gary.