

# Observations of south polar skuas at dome C

BEATRICE AXELROD

*c/o Field Biology Program  
Bell Museum of Natural History  
University of Minnesota  
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455*

While working at the dome C camp in December 1978, I was surprised to observe as many as five south polar skuas at that location, which is 1,000 kilometers beyond the species' customary range.

Abundant on the Antarctic Peninsula, as well as elsewhere along the continent's coastline, the south polar skua (*Catharacta maccormicki*) breeds in colonies dispersed along the mountainous portions of the coast. Ranging northward as far as the Arctic during much of the year (Parmelee, Fraser, and Neilson, 1977), south polar skuas spend the austral summer in the general vicinity of their breeding colonies.

Although they do move extensively along the coast (Eklund, 1961), individual vagrants occasionally venture far inland (Watson, 1975). For example, Rugh (1974) reported seeing the tracks of a single skua on 28 De-



One of five south polar skuas observed at dome C in 1978. The French cold lab trailer appears in the background at far left.

ember 1973 at a location 10 kilometers from a campsite in Marie Byrd Land, about 340 kilometers from the nearest mountains and 740 kilometers from the nearest coast. During the summer of 1977-78, according to R. L. Cameron (pers. comm.), a single south polar skua appeared at Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station, where it was observed for a few hours. Other sightings at inland locations have also been reported, but nevertheless they are rare and not often mentioned in the literature.

The dome C camp, at 74°30'S/123°10'E, lies on the polar plateau at an elevation of over 3,300 meters and is used primarily for glaciological and geophysical research. At least one skua had been seen at dome C during a summer prior to 1977-78, but no record had been kept of the sighting (F. Gillet and C. Rado, pers. comm.).

On 14 December 1978, a single, seemingly tired south polar skua appeared at the camp. On 18 December, two more, less skittish than the first, arrived. By 21 December, five south polar skuas were frequenting the garbage piles near the camp. They roosted singly or in pairs near either the taxiway or the dump. As many as four of them were seen at one time feeding on food scraps tossed out near the galley Jamesway. Occasionally two skuas showed aggressive behavior over the food. As the birds would not let themselves be fed by hand, it seemed likely that they were unaccustomed to human beings. All five birds were unbanded.

The five skuas left on 26 December within a few hours of the first C-130 flight since their arrival. It is conceivable that skuas follow airplane contrails. The first skua arrived four days after the arrival of a plane and there were no flights until the day the skuas left, although no contrails could be seen at that time.

The author made the above south polar skua observations at dome C while employed as a cook by Holmes and Narver, Inc., and would like to thank David F. Parmelee, Diane Berube, and Rose Mary Schaefer, all of the University of Minnesota, for their assistance in the preparation of this manuscript.

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