

## SHORT NOTE

## First record of South Polar skua (*Catharacta maccormicki*) from New Zealand – Auckland Islands, March 1904

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A specimen of South Polar skua (*Catharacta maccormicki*) collected at the Auckland Islands in March 1904 remains in the collection of the University Museum of Zoology, Cambridge (UMZC), United Kingdom. This record pre-dates the previously recognised first New Zealand records for South Polar skua by 36 years.

Robert Falcon Scott's first Antarctic expedition (1901–04) became known as the *Discovery* expedition, after the expedition's main ship. After 25 months based in the Ross Sea, the expedition visited the Auckland Islands for 2 weeks in March 1904, en route to Lyttelton, New Zealand (Miskelly & Taylor 2020 – Chapter 1 in this book). Edward Wilson was the assistant surgeon, naturalist, and artist for the *Discovery* expedition, and 8 years later was a member of Scott's ill-fated team that reached the South Pole but failed to return. Wilson's *Discovery* diary (including the 1904 visit to the Auckland Islands) was published 54 years after his death (Wilson 1966), and includes mention of a skua shot in Port Ross, Auckland

Islands, on 28 Mar 1904: 'Went on shore after lunch. Shot a skua and a pipit and got some plants and ferns.'

Two skua specimens collected at the Auckland Islands in March 1904 remain in the collection of the UMZC (Figs 1, 2). The specimen labels and register do not identify who collected the birds, which were donated by the expedition's geologist Hartley Ferrar. One is a typical subantarctic skua (*Catharacta antarctica lonnbergi*), collected at Port Ross c. 19 Mar 1904 (UMZC 16/Ste/1/a/1), while the second is a smaller and paler bird, collected at Laurie Harbour, Port Ross, on 28 Mar 1904, that was registered as a South Polar skua (*C. maccormicki*) in May 1905 (UMZC 16/Ste/1/a/3). Based on the collection date, this bird is assumed to be the specimen that Wilson mentioned in his diary. According to records on their index cards, both specimens were viewed and their identifications confirmed in 1966 by the Australian ornithologist Dom Serventy (Michael Brooke, *pers. comm.*, 9 Jul 2019).

UMZC 16/Ste/1/a/3 is identifiable as a South Polar skua by its overall small size, its pale head and nape, and particularly its relatively small, delicate bill (Figs 1, 2).

Wilson's accounts of the skuas encountered at the Auckland Islands are contradictory. While he referred to shooting a skua on 28 Mar 1904 (Wilson 1966), his official report of the birds of the expedition stated that no specimens of subantarctic skua were obtained at the Auckland Islands (indicating that he was unaware of the second bird donated to UMZC by Ferrar), and he did not mention the South Polar skua specimen in his account of the species (Wilson 1907). His lack of awareness of the subantarctic skua specimen could be explained by the expedition having more than one vessel (and more than one person collecting bird specimens) in Port Ross in March 1904. Wilson was certainly aware of the differences between the two species (Wilson 1907, p. 63), and his failure to explicitly refer to the South Polar skua specimen collected on 28 Mar 1904 in the official report of the expedition no doubt explains why the record has been overlooked till now.

The identity of the specimen and its provenance (Auckland Islands) were accepted by the Birds New Zealand Records Appraisal Committee (UBR 2019/052), making this the earliest accepted record of South Polar skua for New Zealand. The previous earliest accepted records were a bird found dead on Rangitikei Beach, Manawatū, on 2 Jan 1940, and one found dead on Muriwai Beach, Auckland, on 21 Apr 1940 (Falla 1940). There are three subsequent sight records of South Polar skuas from the Auckland Islands (Miskelly *et al.* 2020 – Chapter 2 in this book).

## Acknowledgements

I thank Alan Tennyson (Te Papa) for alerting me to the possible existence of the South Polar skua specimen, and Michael Brooke (University Museum of Zoology, Cambridge) for providing images of the two skua specimens in his care collected at the Auckland Islands in 1904, and details of their collection history. Jean-Claude Stahl (Te Papa) prepared the images for publication, and Paul Sagar kindly provided scans of relevant

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**FIGURE 1.** Dorsal aspect of two skua specimens collected at the Auckland Islands in March 1904. **Top** = UMZC 16/Ste/1/a/3, *Catharacta maccormicki*, Laurie Harbour, Auckland Islands, 28 March 1904. **Bottom** = UMZC 16/Ste/1/a/1, *Catharacta antarctica lonnbergi*, Port Ross, Auckland Islands, c. 19 March 1904. Image ©UMZC.

pages of Wilson's diary. This note was improved by comments received from Michael Brooke, Paul Sagar, and members of the Birds New Zealand Records Appraisal Committee.

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**KEYWORDS:** South Polar skua, *Catharacta maccormicki*, *Stercorarius maccormicki*, Auckland Islands, first record, vagrant, New Zealand



**FIGURE 2.** Heads of two skua specimens collected at the Auckland Islands in March 1904. **Top** = UMZC 16/Ste/1/a/3, *Catharacta maccormicki*, Laurie Harbour, Auckland Islands, 28 March 1904. **Bottom** = UMZC 16/Ste/1/a/1, *Catharacta antarctica lonnbergi*, Port Ross, Auckland Islands, c. 19 March 1904. Image ©UMZC.