

SHORT NOTE

Unusual hunting strategy by a subantarctic skua at Heard Island

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Subantarctic skuas (*Catharacta lönnbergi*) are usually known as scavengers but also hunt a variety of prey (see Brooke 1985). For example, skuas on subantarctic islands not only scavenge seal carcasses but predate eggs and chicks of penguins and burrowing petrels (Reinhardt *et al.* 2000). During the austral summer, they defend foraging territories in penguin colonies against conspecifics and other aerial predators, such as giant petrels (*Macronectes* spp.). Trivelpiece *et al.* (1980) showed that skuas with feeding territories in adélie penguin (*Pygoscelis adeliae*) colonies bred more successfully than birds without such an abundant supply of prey. On Marion Island, skuas were the major predators of king penguins (*Aptenodytes patagonicus*) in summer (Hunter 1991).

Hunting by subantarctic skuas is often cooperative. Their strategies range from actively distracting incubating birds off their nests (Schulz 2004) to passively waiting at lookouts for opportunities to predate nests in a penguin colony. Occasionally, skuas may over-fly a colony, surveying the potential to obtain prey. As soon as an egg or chick appears poorly guarded, usually because the attending parent is pre-occupied with a neighbourly dispute, one member of the pair swoops into the colony to seize the prey (*pers. obs.*).

On an expedition to Heard Island (53°05'S, 73°30'E), a pair of subantarctic skuas was observed from mid-Dec 2003 until the end of Jan 2004. This pair defended a king penguin colony at Spit Bay that comprised approximately 1800 penguin pairs. Other skuas and even passing giant petrels attempting to enter the colony were immediately chased away.

On 16 Jan 2004, I observed a king penguin pair near the periphery of the colony boundary that was in the process of changing over their egg. A lump of tussock (*Poa* sp.) separated this pair from the other incubating king penguins; the nearest neighbours to them had previously failed and their former territory was now unattended. Thus, this penguin pair was more exposed than pairs elsewhere in the colony. While one skua was chasing away a giant petrel, the other partner flew into the penguin colony and positioned itself in front of the king penguin pair.

It landed close to the penguin carrying the egg. It opened its wings and called for a few seconds. Then it flapped its wings and became airborne about half a meter above ground. The skua then pushed both feet into the penguin's chest and dropped to the ground. This procedure was repeated four times. The king penguin without the egg moved away from its partner, while the penguin holding the egg tried to peck the skua. On the 4th attack the penguin dropped the egg while taking a step backwards. The skua immediately grabbed the egg and flew to its chicks 30 m from the colony.

Such aggressive stealing of eggs was observed twice more in the same area of the colony and only ceased when the vacated penguin territories were re-occupied by new penguin pairs. This suggests that the skua's technique of directly challenging a penguin could only be successful when it could not be attacked by nearby penguins. Although this hunting technique was observed only a few times, my observations highlight the adaptability of Subantarctic Skuas in exploiting a potential opportunity to hunt.

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