

First fossil record of the Great Skua

by Tommy Tyrberg & Francisco Hernandez Carrasquilla

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The Great Skua *Catharacta skua* is very closely related to southern hemisphere *Catharacta*, particularly *C. antarctica* and *C. loennbergi*, with which it has often been considered conspecific (e.g. Cramp *et al.* 1983). The genus *Catharacta* is predominantly southern and the Great Skua is presumably a recent coloniser in the North Atlantic.

Unfortunately direct evidence for this colonisation is virtually non-existent. No fossils of the Great Skua have been reported and we are only aware of a single sub-fossil record from Dollsteinhola cave on Sandsøya (Sunnmøre) in Norway (Lie 1989). The age of this record may be Mid-Holocene (c. 5000 BP) but the presence of *Rattus* in the same layer indicates admixture with more recent material. There is apparently no written evidence that definitely indicates the presence of the Great Skua in the North Atlantic before 1605 (Furness 1987).

A tarsometatarsus assigned to *Catharacta* sp. has been found in Neogene (probably Early Pliocene) deposits in North Carolina (Olson 1985, Becker 1987), but the absence of younger records makes it doubtful whether *Catharacta* has been continually present in the North Atlantic since the Tertiary. It may be noted that while fossil skuas are certainly quite rare, there are several Pleistocene records of all three species of *Stercorarius* from the West Palearctic.

Recently one of us (FHC) has identified remains of a large individual, probably a female, of *Catharacta skua* in an epipalaeolithic layer in Cueva de Nerja near Malaga in southern Spain (Hernandez in prep.). The age of this layer is bracketed by C14 dates of 8770 ± 140 BP and $13,330 \pm 270$ BP (uncalibrated), and the remains are therefore either of latest Pleistocene or early Holocene age. Seabirds are unusually common in the Nerja deposits. In the epipalaeolithic layer *Calonectris diomedea*, *Puffinus griseus*, *Morus bassanus*, *Phalacrocorax aristotelis*, *Pinguinus impennis* and *Uria aalge* occur in addition to the Great Skua.

The main interest of this record is that it provides a *terminus ante quem* for the colonisation of the North Atlantic by *Catharacta*. It is of course conceivable that the Nerja record might be from a vagrant antarctic bird, but the probability that such a vagrant should both penetrate into the Mediterranean and be preserved as a fossil must be exceedingly small. It would therefore seem that the Great Skua has been in the North Atlantic at least since the Early Holocene. This is consistent with the degree of differentiation of *Catharacta skua* and its closest congeners. Other bird populations that have been isolated since the end of the Pleistocene are either subspecies or barely separated at species level (Tyrberg 1991). It may be noted that the other Antarctic coloniser in the Northern Hemisphere, the Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis*, which is strongly differentiated from the Antarctic Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialoides*, also has a rather longer fossil record. The oldest fossil of

Fulmarus glacialis is from Skjonghelleren cave (Sunnmøre) in Norway and is dated to c. 30,000 BP (Larsen *et al.* 1987).

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On the status of *Ara tricolor* Bechstein

by Michael Walters

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The Cuban Macaw *Ara tricolor* formerly occurred on Cuba and the Isle of Pines. It has been extinct since around 1855 and about fifteen specimens survive in museums in Europe and North America. It was not unlike the Scarlet Macaw *Ara macao*, but was smaller and had a yellowish crown and yellow hindneck. The upper back was red, with green edges to the feathers, the lesser and median wing coverts darker red or maroon, the wings purplish blue, the tail red below and blue above with red bases to the feathers.

Wetherbee (1985, 1986) transferred the name *Ara tricolor* Bechstein (1811) from the extinct Cuban Macaw to an also extinct form from Hispaniola, and renamed the former *Ara cubensis*. His arguments have gained acceptance by the American Ornithologists' Union Committee (A.O.U. 1989).

The basis of Wetherbee's argument is that Cuba was ornithologically unknown until 1822, so that any species described before that date could not have come from Cuba. This is the only argument he puts forward to suggest that *A. tricolor* did not come from there, but it would only be valid if it could be shown that no species had been described from Cuba prior to that date. This is, however, not the case. A search of Bond (1956) reveals at least 4 species described from Cuba in the 18th century: *Amazona leucocephala* (Linnaeus 1758), *Zenaida*



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