

Unprecedented spring passage of Long-tailed Skuas over Saltcoats during May 2006

Saltcoats harbour is regarded as the premier seawatching site in north Ayrshire. Jutting out into the Firth of Clyde, this watch point offers commanding views of Irvine Bay to the south and the narrow Arran channel in the west. All four skua species have been observed from Saltcoats (albeit in small numbers) during spring passage, but the Long-tailed Skua *Stercorarius longicaudus* has been the rarest by far. Prior to 2006, only 12 records of Long-tailed Skua had been accepted in Ayrshire (R.H. Hogg editor *Ayrshire Bird Reports* 1986–2006) only one of which was seen from Saltcoats, an adult on 13 May 1999. Impressive movements of Long-tailed Skuas occur off the Outer Hebrides in spring when low-pressure weather systems bring flocks close to headlands such as Aird an Runair. (D.L. Davenport. 1991. Spring passage of Long-tailed Skuas off North Uist in 1991. *Scottish Birds* 16: 85–89).

On the afternoon of 23 May 2006, Jason McManus observed a distant flock of what he thought were Long-tailed Skuas off Saltcoats harbour. After checking the weather forecast, T. Byars went down to the harbour at 18.00 and met J McM, Robert Lambie and Mark Maddock. Conditions looked perfect for seawatching, as a fast-moving low-pressure system was tracking northwards over the Irish Sea, bringing intense squalls with long periods of drizzle on a westerly force four. Through the heavy squalls we started to note small numbers of Arctic Skuas heading due south. At 18.10 TB noticed a very distant flock of birds flying high, just south of Irvine Bay, 7 km away. Neither observer could identify these birds though in retrospect all observers agree that these were almost certainly distant Long-tailed Skuas. At around 18.40 definite Long-tailed Skuas began appearing from the north-west. As we tracked the birds southwards, they joined a swirling “kettle” of 45 Long-tailed Skuas that had literally appeared from nowhere, circling and swooping 300 m above Saltcoats harbour like Black-headed Gulls. We watched as a maelstrom of Long-tailed Skuas wheeled with tail streamers fluttering like thin black ribbons. A harsh tern-like call drew our attention as a lone Long-tailed

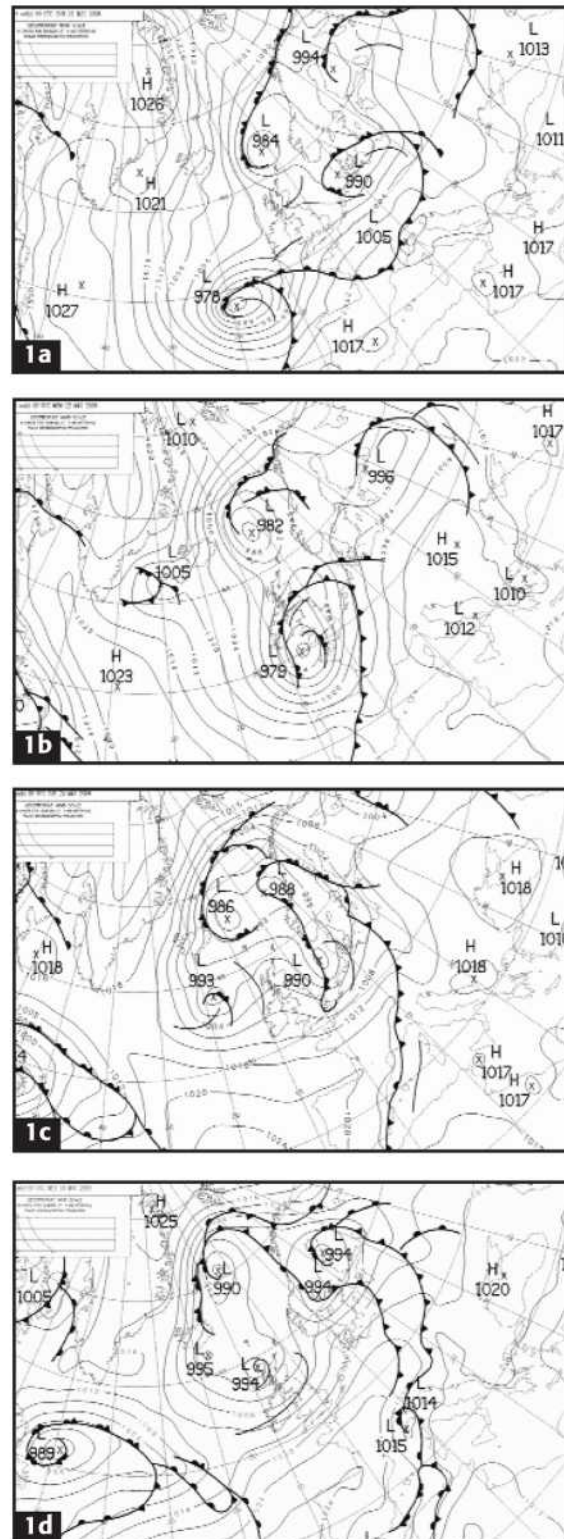


Figure 1. Synoptic charts for (a) 21 May 2006 00hrs, (b) 22 May 2006 00hrs, (c) 23 May 2006 00hrs and (d) 24 May 2006 00hrs. The charts are derived from information supplied by the Met Office.



Plate 93. Long-tailed Skuas, Saltcoats Harbour, Ayrshire, May 2006 © Keith Hoey.

Skua sailed just 10 m above our heads and joined the swirling flock which had now gained height to 400 m. Another two stragglers appeared from the north and also joined the main group of 51 birds, which then dropped rapidly down to sea level and headed northwards in single file just above the waves past Outer Nebock rocks. As the trough weakened, the weather improved quite rapidly and a patch of clear blue sky appeared. The flock of 53 birds ascended and headed purposely inland, climbing all the time, until they were lost to view at about 1000+ m heading high in a north-easterly direction over Meikle Busbie Wood 5 km inland. This “towering” behaviour of Long-tailed Skuas has been documented before in spring off North Uist (D.L. Davenport, *Scottish Birds* 16: 85–89). Although “overlanding” in skua species has been recorded in Ayrshire before, this is the first documented observation of Long-tailed Skuas heading inland from west to east in Ayrshire.

J. McManus went back to the harbour on the following morning: a total of 173 Long-tailed Skuas were logged on 24 May, including separate flocks of 80 and 42, all heading east, inland, through the morning into mid-afternoon. The wind direction by now had become westerly as the low-pressure system had moved into the North Sea. In all 226 Long-tailed Skuas were recorded over the two days.

We thank Angus Hogg for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper and Keith Hoey for providing the only photographic evidence that Long-tailed Skuas were not a figment of anyone’s imagination during May 2006!

Tom Byars, 81 Sharphill Rd, Saltcoats, Ayrshire KA21 5QU.
Email: tombyars@btinternet.com

Jason McManus, 58 Sharphill Rd, Saltcoats, Ayrshire KA21 5QT.

Robert Lambie, 5 St Columba Place, Stevenston, Ayrshire KA20 4JN.

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Norman Elkins commented: “The likely scenario for this large passage stems from the probable accumulation of Long-tailed Skuas in the North Atlantic west of Ireland. This may have arisen due to an abnormal frequency of north to north-east winds during the previous fortnight linked to the passage of depressions being further south than normal. This is borne out by a large passage of skuas off the Isle of Lewis on the 22nd, in a fresh north-west wind.”

“Overnight on 22nd/23rd, a transient ridge of high pressure over the area in question moved away as a small active depression tracked towards north-west Scotland. This brought bands of squally showers into the Firth of Clyde in the afternoon of the 23rd associated with a trough. Skuas may have been swept east to the south of the depression, subsequently moving overland in the clearing weather behind the trough, rather than re-tracing their route to move up the west coast. Further movement occurred on the 24th in a similar airmass. Overland passage of skuas is common over large landmasses, usually high enough to remain undetected.”