

Northern Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis* successfully drives off a Great Skua *Stercorarius skua*

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While seabird monitoring at Sumburgh Head, Shetland on 18 June 2008, I noticed a particularly bulky Northern Fulmar *Fulmarus glacialis* (hereafter 'Fulmar') on the sea, feeding on a dead Atlantic Puffin *Fratercula arctica* (hereafter 'Puffin'). What caught my attention was the apparent size of the Fulmar, appearing almost twice normal! While tugging at the Puffin, it held its wings constantly half arched in a very intimidating posture, unlike anything I have seen before. The reason for this soon became evident when a nearby Great Skua *Stercorarius skua* flew in to try and steal the corpse, though the skua was almost certainly the original killer of the Puffin.



Figure 1. Great Skua *Stercorarius skua*, Bressay, Shetland, July 2008. © Hugh Harrop

The Fulmar responded to the skua's approach, exaggerating its frightening appearance by simultaneously cocking and fully fanning its tail, as well as raising its neck hackles. It then paddled rapidly on the water with its head aimed at the skua. Curiously, it kept its bill closed, with no spitting of oil as might be expected from this species. This procedure was repeated several times over a period of about 15 minutes. The skua tried a variety of tactics to try and snatch the Puffin, which involved flying in from different directions and trying to catch the Fulmar unawares. Eventually the skua lost interest and flew off.

The Fulmar (or perhaps the skua, it would have been interesting to have witnessed the initial encounter between the two birds) had eaten most of the Puffin's breast muscle by the time I first saw it, and during the period of observation it managed to turn the corpse over and devour the mantle and back of neck. I left the Fulmar feeding on the remnants of its, or most likely, the skua's prey.

The only reference to such behaviour on the part of the Fulmar in Cramp & Simmons (1977) is limited to 'at carcasses, etc., often aggressive to each other, and to competing species such as gulls (*Laridae*), uttering a variety of harsh grunting sounds.' However, the behaviour I saw is described well by Enquist *et al.* (1985) during intra-specific competition over food items, who used the terms 'wing-raising', 'bend' (pointing the head and bill towards the water), 'tail-movement', and 'rushing' (across the water), for the actions I successively saw.

References

- Cramp, S. & Simmons, K. E. L. (eds.) 1977. *The Birds of the Western Palearctic*. Vol. 1. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Enquist, M., Plane, E. & Røed, J. 1985. Aggressive communication in Fulmars (*Fulmarus glacialis*) competing for food. *Animal Behaviour* 33: 1007–1020.