

# Sea Gulls and the Antarctic Skua

What kinds of birds live in Antarctica? When people hear the name of the snow-covered continent, the first bird that they think of is often the penguin. After all, these black and white flightless birds are adorable to watch as they waddle across the ice.

Many people have never heard of the skua, a common bird of Antarctica. The Antarctic skua is found along the coast of Antarctica and in southern oceans. While you probably will never see an Antarctic skua, you probably have seen a sea gull. How are sea gulls similar to skuas?

## Appearance

If you've ever been to a North American beach, you've probably seen a sea gull hopping around on the sand. There are different kinds of sea gulls, but most are more than 14 inches long. The Antarctic skua is a



*Photo from From U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Polar Sea, Antarctica crew photos (2004).*

**A skua flies in Antarctica.**

little smaller than a sea gull, but has the same basic body shape. The Antarctic skua is brown and white, while sea gulls are white, gray, and black.

## Feeding

Sea gulls and skuas both live near water, and so both eat fish and small ocean creatures. But sea gulls and skuas also eat food on land. Many beach visitors notice sea gulls looking for human food and trash. Sea gulls do sometimes eat the chicks and eggs of other birds.

Skuas do the same thing. Although there are not many humans in Antarctica, skuas can be found near research

stations, looking for trash. Like sea gulls, skuas are also known for eating penguin eggs and chicks.

### **Sea gulls, skuas, and people**

What do people think about these birds? Many years ago, sea gulls were hunted for their feathers. They became quite rare. Today, sea gulls are almost too common! Beach towns have put up signs to tell visitors not to feed the sea gulls. No one likes the unsightly mess that sea gulls leave behind. Some people use spikes and thin wires to keep sea gulls from sitting on their roofs, docks, and decks.

In Antarctica, skuas are a familiar sight to the scientists and other workers. Some skuas even wait outside of dining halls to steal a cookie from a person's hands! In Antarctica, people aren't allowed to harm or interfere with the local wildlife. While people might not like the sight of a skua carrying away a penguin egg or a fluffy chick, they can't really do anything about it.

Many people in North America will never see a skua in real life. But these birds, like sea gulls, play an important part in the food chain. Even though they are not the cutest birds, or the cleverest, or the most popular, both sea gulls and skuas deserve our respect.



**Sea gulls on a beach in Maryland.**