

# The distribution and numbers of the Great Skua (*Stercorarius s. skua* Brünn.) breeding in the Faeroes in 1961

[Med dansk resumé: Storkjoven (*Stercorarius s. skua* Brünn) udbredelse og antal på Færøerne i 1961].

By

J. C. BAYES, M. J. DAWSON, A. HOLM JOENSEN and G. R. POTTS

## INTRODUCTION

The Great Skua (*Stercorarius s. skua* Brünn.) in the Faeroes has often been mentioned in the ornithological literature. The species is known to have been very numerous, breeding in large colonies in the islands in the 17.th and 18.th centuries. However at the end of the 18.th century a decrease began (SALOMONSEN 1935), when the skuas were heavily persecuted by the local people. On the breeding grounds eggs and young were taken for food, and the adult birds were killed because of the damage they were believed to cause to other sea birds and to sheep. In 1897, the total number of breeding pairs in the Faeroes was only 4, but subsequently, with protection, the species has greatly increased.

In this century ornithologists have tried to estimate the populations, and NØRREVANG (1955) has given an account of the results of various estimates. However most previous information on the distribution and the numbers is based on infrequent observations, and a complete survey has not been made since 1930 (SALOMONSEN

1935). At that time there were about 70 breeding pairs in the Faeroes. NØRREVANG (1955 p.219) estimated that about 1000 pairs were breeding in the islands. The estimates in 1960 (POTTS 1961) for Streymoy and Svinoy were based on counts late in the breeding season, when young were flying and after some adults had left the breeding areas, so these estimates did not give the true picture of the numbers.

In view of this situation the authors spent the summer of 1961 in the Faeroes with the main purpose of studying the present distribution and numbers of the Great Skua. G. R. POTTS led an expedition which included M. J. DAWSON and J. C. BAYES. These authors visited the Faeroes from 21 May to 31 July. A. HOLM JOENSEN and his wife spent June and July in the Faeroes. During this period all the large colonies were surveyed. Further information was given by many Faeroese people, and a request through the newspaper "Dimmalætting" produced some details.

## THE BREEDING GROUNDS

The distribution of the species in 1961 is shown on the map page 39, and the numbers of breeding pairs and birds seen in the breeding areas are given in table 1.

### *Svinoy*

Svinoy consists of northern hills and a southern plateau separated by a valley in which lies the village.

Svinoy was surveyed by BAYES, DAWSON and POTTS on 15.—18. June, and by A. H. JOENSEN on 19.—23. July.

South Svinoy consists of large areas of rock debris and *Rhacomitrium* heath bounded by series of hamrar. In a few places in the lower parts there are areas covered with dense grass, especially around the pools. The number of adult Great Skuas was estimated at a little less than 500 in June, when 104 nests were found. A similar estimate of 400 was obtained in July. In making these estimates the authors have taken in account the number of birds which could be expected to be away feeding. (Studies in North Streymoy indicate that at 1500 G.M.T. less than 5% of the birds are away feeding on any normal day until the chicks hatch. The comparable figure for July would be about 15%. All the birds were back in the colony before midnight.). The total number of breeding pairs on South Svinoy in 1961 was about 200.

TABEL 1.

Table 1. The breeding places of Great Skuas (*Stercorarius s. skua* Brünn.) in the Faeroes 1961. Numbers of breeding pairs and of adult birds using the colonies.

*Tabel 1. Storkjovens (Stercorarius s. skua Brünn.) ynglepladser på Færøerne i 1961. Der er angivet antallet af ynglepar og antallet af voksne fugle i kolonierne.*

Locality <i>Sted</i>	Breeding pairs <i>Yngle- par</i>	Adult birds <i>Voksne fugle</i>
Svinoy, South	circ. 200	circ. 500
Svinoy, North	3—4	8
Vidoy	14	circ. 28
Bordoy	15—18	circ. 36
Streymoy, North	circ. 232	500—520
Streymoy, South	2—3	6
Vagoy	1—2	3—4
Sandoy	10—20	circ. 40
Skúvoy	40—45	circ. 120
Stóra Dímun	2	4
Suderoy, North	2	4
Total	521—542	1249—1270
<i>Ialt</i>		

In the last 15 years Great Skuas have been held responsible for a decrease of Puffins (*Fratercula arctica*) on South Svinoy. Similarly the Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*), which formerly had large colonies on the plateau, has nearly disappeared. Because of this predation the inhabitants of Svinoy wanted the Great Skuas reduced in number: they were taking away one of their staple foods, the Puffin, and in the years 1957—1960 over a hundred adults were shot, and many eggs and chicks were taken. Formerly the Great Skuas were only breeding in a rather limited area but after shooting began, the pairs spread to almost every part of the plateau (J. NICKLASSEN and K. JUSTINUSSEN, pers. comm.). As far as is known the Great Skuas were not disturbed on the island in 1961.

Previous records: In 1949 the number of breeding pairs was estimated to be about 500 (PETERSEN 1950). This would represent an increase of about 50% each year since the estimate of 80—100 in 1946 (FERDINAND 1947). In early August 1960 (after much shooting) Potts (1961) estimated that 250 adults were using the island. This is now considered to be an under-estimate. Similarly it is thought that the 1949 estimate by Petersen was an over-estimate. Williamson (1954) visited some of the area in 1953 and came to a similar conclusion.

The Great Skua was found breeding in two places on North Svinoy (A. H. JOENSEN); in the north-east at 300 metres above sea level 2 pairs were breeding, and at the most northerly point of the island there were 1—2 pairs. Previous records: According to PETERSEN (1950) the Great Skuas began breeding on North Svinoy in 1949, when 3 pairs were found.

#### Vidoy

Information from the island has been given by Mr. H. J. MATRAS, Mr. J. HEINSEN, and Mr. J. LASSABERG (all Vidareidi).

The total number of breeding pairs was 14 in 1961 (and 1962). They all bred in areas near Viðvík, 8 pairs in Vidareidi hauge, and 6 pairs in Hvannasund hauge. Previous records: 1942 4—5 pairs (WILLIAMSON 1945), 1946 1 pair (FERDINAND 1947).

#### *Bordoy*

According to mr. ROBERT JOENSEN, Klakksvík, in 1961 the species was breeding in the following places: Bordoyarnes (southern part) 1 pair; Gásafelli-area 4 small colonies with 13—15 pairs; Gjóardalur 1—2 pairs. Total number for Bordoy 15—18 breeding pairs. Previous records: 1942 4—5 pairs (WILLIAMSON 1945), 1949 4 pairs (PETERSEN 1950).

#### *North Streymoy*

North Streymoy was surveyed by J. C. Bayes, M. J. Dawson and G. R. Potts in the period between 25 May and 27 July. All nests found were marked on maps and visited throughout our stay. Further counts of adults were obtained over 24 hours on days in May, June and July. Nests abandoned and which had lost eggs before the authors' arrival may slightly increase the estimate, but this error is small because 6 cattle, which were the main cause of clutch loss later in the season, were not feeding in the area before our arrival.

Based on this survey the number of breeding pairs was 232 (see Table 2). In addition 8 pairs occupied nesting territories, but did not lay eggs. 40 birds (8%) were not paired.

Mr. O. J. MAGNUSSEN, Saksun, has told us that the number of breeding pairs in Svinaskora has only slightly increased in the last years. The birds have, however, spread into the more outlying areas of North Streymoy.

Previous records: 1930 about 50 pairs (SALOMONSEN 1935), 1942 60—80 pairs (WILLIAMSON 1945), 1946 75—100 pairs (FERDINAND 1947). In 1960 POTTS

TABEL 2.

Table 2. The distribution of breeding pairs in North Streymoy.

Table 2. *Fordelingen af yngleparrene på Nordstreymoy.*

	Pairs Per
Skúgvafleti-Heljardalsá valey	5
Gellingará plateau	5
Corrie west of Melin	14
Nordaridalur	2
Sjendirdal	12
Ridge between Svinaskora and Nordaridalur	14
Svinaskora dalen	180
<hr/>	
Total	232
<i>Ialt</i>	

(1961) estimated that there was less than 240 adult birds in the area at the end of July, but he did not cover the whole area, and observations in 1961 showed that some birds had left the colony by the date of the visit in 1960.

#### *South Streymoy*

A. Holm Joensen visited the area on 26 July 1961. One chick was found on the plateau about 2 kilometres north of Kirkjubø near Likkadal. Mr. S. PATTURSSON, Kirkjubø, said that 2—3 pairs bred in the area in 1960 and 1961, and that the Great Skua bred here for the first time in 1958. No previous records.

#### *Vágoy*

One or two pairs probably still breed in the areas near Fjallavatn, according to Mr. MAGNUSSEN, Torshavn. Previous records: 1948 1 pair (NØRREVANG 1950), 1951 6—7 pairs (NØRREVANG 1955).

#### *Sandoy*

J. C. Bayes and M. J. Dawson were on this island in the period 24.—28. June, and G. R. Potts 15.—16. July.

10 nests were found on the plateau near Endin, Eiriks fjall and Bollurfjall. Local Faeroese said that there were a few pairs south of Knúkur, but these were not seen.

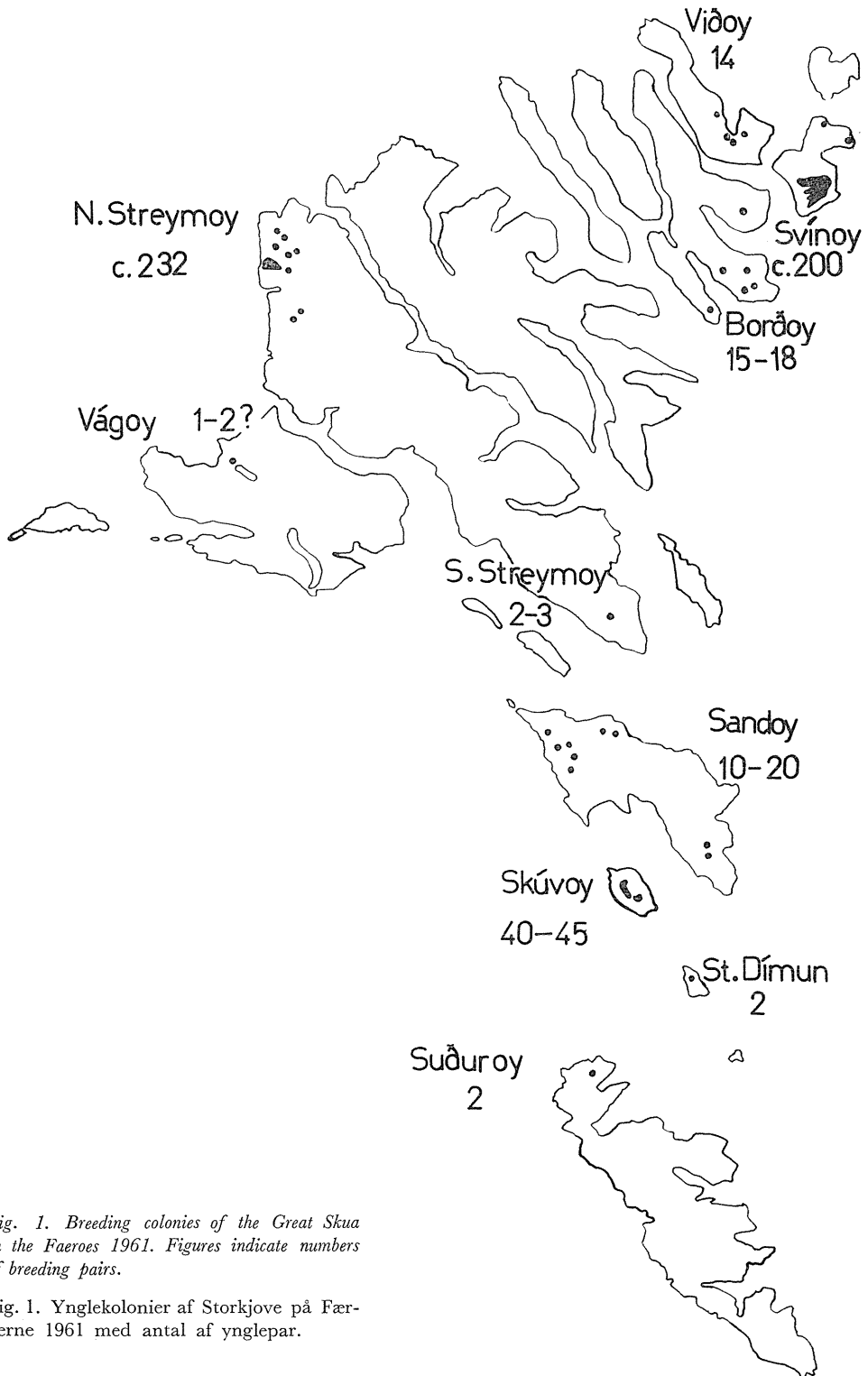


Fig. 1. Breeding colonies of the Great Skua in the Faeroes 1961. Figures indicate numbers of breeding pairs.

Fig. 1. Ynglekolonier af Storkjove på Færøerne 1961 med antal af ynglepar.

G. R. Potts saw 2 adults on Skúvoyarfjall in South Sandoy, and A. DAL CHRISTIANSEN found 3 pairs nesting in this region in June 1960. The total number of breeding pairs on Sandoy is certainly less than 20. Previous records: 1942 3 pairs (WILLIAMSON 1945).

#### *Skúvoy*

A. Holm Joensen spent two and a half weeks in June on this island. The detailed distribution of the Great Skua on Skúvoy has been described elsewhere (JOENSEN 1963). 40—45 pairs bred on the island in 1961, and in addition about 30 non-breeders occupied nesting territories, but did not

lay eggs. Previous records: 1930 10 pairs (SALOMONSEN 1935), 1946 about 20 pairs (FERDINAND 1947).

#### *Stóra Dímun*

Mr. JANUS JENSEN, Stóra Dímun, says that 2 pairs bred on the highest parts of the island in 1961 (and 1962). Before 1960 only 1 pair bred here. Previous records: 1942 2 pairs (WILLIAMSON 1945).

#### *North Suderoy*

Mr. JACOB OLSEN, Sandvík, says that 2 pairs bred north of Sandvík in 1960 and 1961. In previous years only one pair has frequented the area. No previous records.

## CONCLUSION

Fig. 1 shows the breeding distribution of the Great Skua in the Faeroes 1961, and table 1 gives a list of the breeding places, giving the numbers of breeding pairs and the numbers of adult birds present in the colonies.

The population of Great Skuas in the Faeroes has increased continuously since the species was protected by legislation in

1897. At that time only four pairs were known to breed in the islands. In 1930 about 71 pairs bred, in 1946 about 200 pairs. Finally the figure for 1961 is about 530 pairs. Two small colonies have been established in areas where Great Skuas have never before been known to breed (South Streymoy and North Suderoy).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to thank the British Trust for Ornithology, the Durham University Exploration Society, Japetus Steenstrup's Legat and Dansk Naturhistorisk Forening for providing financial assistance.

We wish to thank the many Faeroese people who helped us, many of whom are mentioned in the text, and Dr. J. C. COULSON, Durham University, for much assistance.

## REFERENCES

- FERDINAND, L. 1947: Studier af fuglelivet på Færøerne. Dansk Ornith. Foren. Tidsskr. **41**: 1—37.
- JOENSEN, A. H. 1963: Ynglefuglene på Skúvoy, Færøerne, deres udbredelse og antal. Dansk Ornith. Foren. Tidsskr. **57**: 1—18.
- NØRREVANG, A. 1950: Nogle ornithologiske iagttagelser fra Færøerne. Dansk Ornith. Foren. Tidsskr. **44**: 192—199.
- 1955: Forandringer i den færøske fugleverden i relation til klimaændringen i det nordatlantiske område. Dansk Ornith. Foren. Tidsskr. **49**: 206—229.
- PETERSEN, E. 1950: Nogle ornithologiske notitser

- fra Færøerne. Dansk Ornith. Foren. Tidsskr. **44**: 121—126.
- POTTS, G. R. 1961: Observations on birds of the Faeroes, 1960. Dansk Ornith. Foren. Tidsskr. **55**: 152—160.
- SALOMONSEN, F. 1955: Aves. The Zoology of the Faeroes. 3, part 2. — Copenhagen.
- WILLIAMSON, K. 1945: Some new and scarce breeding species in the Faeroe Islands. — The Ibis **87**: 550—558.
- 1954: Beretning om nogle færøske ynglefugle. Dansk Ornith. Foren. Tidsskr. **48**: 139—149.

### Storkjovens (*Stercorarius s. skua* Brünn) udbredelse og antal på Færøerne i 1961.

Storkjoven som ynglefugl på Færøerne har ofte været omtalt i den ornithologiske litteratur. I det 17. og 18. århundrede yngede arten talrigt i store kolonier. Imidlertid blev Storkjovene efterstræbt af befolkningen; arten blev betragtet som en skadelig fugl, som dræbte lam og ødelagde andre søfugles kolonier, og ungerne blev indsamlet for kødets skyld. Allerede i slutningen af det 18. århundrede var det gået meget tilbage for Storkjovene, og tilbagegangen fortsatte indtil 1897, da man konstaterede, at der kun var 4 ynglepar tilbage på øerne. Derefter blev arten totalfredet, og denne fredning har man opretholdt lige siden. Som følge deraf er Storkjovene atter tiltaget i antal på Færøerne. Ornithologer på rejse på Færøerne har ofte besøgt kolonierne og foretaget optællinger (FERDINAND, NØRREVANG, PETERSEN, SALOMONSEN, WILLIAMSON), men den sidste optælling, som omfattede alle kolonier, blev foretaget i 1930 (SALOMONSEN 1935). Forfatterne mente derfor, at det måtte være af interesse at få forholdene undersøgt ganske nøje, og forfatterne rejste på Færøerne i sommeren 1961. I tiden fra slutningen af maj til slutningen af juli blev alle større og de fleste mindre storkjovekolonier besøgt og optalt. Desuden indhentede forfatterne mange værdifulde oplysninger hos lokalkendte færinger. En opfordring gennem dagbladet »Dimmalætting« bragte ny viden frem. Forfatterne retter

her en tak til de mange færinger som har bidraget til undersøgelsesernes gennemførelse; de fleste er nævnt i den engelske tekst.

Undersøgelserne i 1961 viste tydeligt, at Storkjoven er en fugl i stadig fremgang på Færøerne. I 1930 talte bestanden omkring 71 par (SALOMONSEN 1935). I 1946 var der omkring 200 par (FERDINAND 1947). Undersøgelserne i 1961 viste en yderligere fremgang til omkring 530 par (521-542 par). I artiklen er alle ynglelokaliteter gennemgået hver for sig, og resultatet af undersøgelserne er sammenfattet i tabel 1, der viser antallet af ynglepar og antallet af voksne fugle i yngleområderne. Kortet, fig. 1, viser koloniernes beliggenhed i øgruppen. Tabel 2 viser den detaljerede fordeling af yngleparrene på Nord Streymoy.

De tre største ynglekolonier fandtes på Nord Streymoy (ca. 232 par), Svinoy (ca. 200 par) og Skúvoy (40—45 par). I disse tre kolonier er bestanden blevet fordoblet i løbet af de sidste 15—20 år (siden 1942 og 1946, da de sidste optællinger fandt sted). I tre mellemstore kolonier (Bordoy, Vidoy og Sandoy) er bestanden i samme tidsrum blevet mere end tredoblet. Desuden fandtes i 1961 to små kolonier (Syd Streymoy og Nord Suderoy), som ikke tidligere har været kendt som yngleplads for Storkjover.

Modtaget 26. marts 1963.

A. HOLM JOENSEN, Drejøgade 39, København Ø

J. C. BAYES, M. J. DAWSON, and G. R. POTTS, Department of Zoology,  
University of Durham, Durham, England