



National Coastwatch
EYES ALONG THE COAST

Gwennap Head NCI - Wildlife Report July 2016

The start of the month was very quiet on the sea for wildlife, but during that time we were treated with occasional sightings of the newly fledged Chough family, 2 adults and 4 young. By 6/7, there were 23 fledged young Choughs in total round the coast of Cornwall. Hopefully, over-winter survival will be good this year.

The large rafts of Manx Shearwaters we were seeing in June dispersed or moved elsewhere in the first half of this month - following food probably, because during that time we saw no dolphins and few fishing boats. However, things picked up later when good numbers of Common Dolphins appeared on 20/7; they were reported from the lookout around the Marine Discovery yacht, and varying numbers were seen again from here on 21/7, 24/7 and 28/7.

It is always a wonderful experience to be surrounded by dolphins in a boat, but there are advantages in watching them from a high vantage point too - you can track their movements, note their rapid arrival, watch interesting behavior and see interaction with other groups, other species and seabirds. On several occasions recently a single dolphin appeared at a particular spot and exhibited some frenzied behavior, making exceptionally high and long leaps that created very large splashes. It is possible that this is a way of communicating to others in the area; maybe they have located fish or are saying "Where are you?" or "Here I am!" Often they are joined quickly by other dolphins. Harbour Porpoises often seen to clear away when dolphins arrive, presumably seeing them as a threat.

There was an unusual sighting on 22/7 of a sizeable shark - most likely a Thresher Shark judging by the very long upper tail fin which appeared on the surface. This was a similar episode to one seen here a few years ago when a very large Thresher Shark thrust its back end and tail right up out of the water. A gathering of gannets circling above drew my attention to the spot and the eventual, but brief appearance of this enigmatic animal. A porpoise appeared on the surface shortly afterwards, but as these particular sharks feed on squid and small bony fish, it is unlikely that it was being attacked.

Many seals used the haul-out this month; a maximum of 18 was reported on 24/7 and 17 were counted on several other days by watch-keepers. Numbers are building up to the September peak.

The most noticeable event bird-wise was a big influx of immature gannets in the middle of the month which happens to a greater or lesser extent every year. Raised last summer, they look very different to adults with brown upper wings, back and tail. It is four years before they acquire full adult plumage. We saw our first Cory's Shearwater on 21/7, and then on 28/7, after an extended period of fog and rain, we noted many tiny Storm Petrels fluttering over the sea surface and generally heading westwards.

Other indications of the dispersal and return migration of breeding birds (finished or failed breeders) were reports of Sandwich Terns, Whimbrel, Common Scoter, Grey Herons, Swallows and Sand Martins heading south, while on the headland itself we began to see juvenile alba (Pied or White) wagtails.

Twenty foot away from the building to the east and on the edge of some exposed granite, an alien invader has turned up in the form of a plant originating in Asia. By 26/7 it produced a showy, bright pink flower. It is *Rosa rugosa* or Hedgehog Rose (so named because of its prickly nature) or it is sometimes called Japanese Rose. Maybe a gull brought in a piece of stem, perhaps it seeded itself from a garden below or did somebody think we need to brighten the place up! It bears a bright red, fleshy fruit with high vitamin C content. If you suffer from scurvy, do try it.

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