



National Coastwatch
EYES ALONG THE COAST

Gwennap Head NCI - Wildlife Report September 2018

Seabirds dominated the wildlife again this month with vast numbers of Manx Shearwaters moving around feeding or settling on the sea in huge rafts. A more unusual event occurred on 9/9, featuring Storm Petrels - those tiny oceanic birds that somehow eke a living out there in the roughest of seas. Very early that day, birders reported up to 1000 heading west past the Runnelstone; fortunately for us they stalled and began to feed up and down the tide race, fluttering over the surface, feet dangling, picking off tiny food particles. They formed clusters of 10-20 which often settled on the sea and gradually headed west.

Sooty Shearwaters were frequent among the Manx along with the occasional Great Shearwater (a heavy passage of the latter was reported by birders on 21/9). Balearic Shearwaters at last turned up in good numbers (they were late this year), and on 19/9, we recorded 80 flying west in 2 hours close inshore. They are particularly attractive in their variable plumages, dark and dusky or half dusky with others similar to the Manx. Skuas, terns and Common Scoter were also seen along with Razorbills and Guillemots returning after their moult at sea.

Other notable incidents were the number of Bluefin tuna breaching, sometimes several times during a morning. These huge fish would leap clear of the water 2 or 3 times in succession - maybe chasing fish or possibly exhibiting a behavioural trait. Many local boats reported them. They can be confused with breaching Common Dolphins, but with a good view, the vertically held tail, two dorsal fins, general shape and side markings are diagnostic. Also, dolphins will sooner or later show up on the surface. There are 2 stocks of Bluefin in the Atlantic - east and west, and ours in the west spawn in the Mediterranean. Numerous in the 1950's, they suddenly went into massive decline in 1963 for reasons not clear. There must be plenty of food for them - mackerel, pilchards, herring, sprats all feature in their diet.

Common Dolphins and porpoises were not reported as much as last month and a stranding of 9 live individuals occurred on the coast near St Ives on 17/9, 3 of which died.

We witnessed the departure of many swallows and martins this month with groups gathering and circling around the lookout with much excited twittering before heading out to sea. The Swifts were gone before we knew it. Hints of a general southerly migration began in the last week of the month, and in the early hours on 26/9 there was a significant overhead migration of Chaffinches and Skylarks with a sprinkling of Siskins - most identified by their calls. Several times early in the month when it was clear and calm we heard the sweet flute-like call of a Ringed Plover. Wheatears, Whinchats, Meadow Pipits and alba wagtails featured among the migrants which lingered, and local birders found Wrynecks, Common Rosefinches and Rose-coloured starlings. The local Choughs were reported many times looking healthy and happy.

An influx of Red Admirals occurred at the end of the month and many were noticed along the lanes feeding on Ivy flowers. Wall Brown butterflies were still flying - most likely 3rd brood individuals.

Seal numbers were high with a maximum of 20.

Jean Lawman