



National Coastwatch
EYES ALONG THE COAST

Gwennap Head NCI - Wildlife Report January 2020

New Year's Day was calm with a soft grey light on the sea and the Isles of Scilly visible as misty grey undulations on the western horizon; it boded well, and so it turned out. A feeding flock of several hundred Gannets, Kittiwakes and auks were gathered east of the Runnelstone, and below them a pod of 12-15 very active Common Dolphins with 3 Harbour Porpoises taking part in the feeding frenzy but keeping their distance. 2 Great Skuas were giving the Kittiwakes a hard time – dark, menacing and extremely powerful fliers they relentlessly pursued the smaller birds trying to steal their fish. Another small pod of common Dolphins came in from the south. Lots of action before dispersal westwards, then suddenly a large Minke Whale surfaced at least seven times in that same area.

A good start, but then wet and windy weather returned for a long period until a high-pressure system positioned itself over Britain on 18/1 bringing calm seas and sunshine for 3 days before the inevitable anti-cyclonic gloom set in. On 19/1, a Harbour Porpoise was feeding off Gannel Rock in the company of a few gannets, 2 adult Mediterranean Gulls and a Black-headed Gull. That same day, visitors reported to the watch-keeper on duty a single Pilot Whale off the headland at around 3.20pm. The following day the same watch-keeper was told by some other people at Porthcurno that they too had seen the whale at roughly 3pm. These reports are always difficult to confirm when the persons are unknown and with cetaceans being notoriously difficult to identify down to species even for experienced observers. The fact that Pilot Whales are rare in these waters is another factor. After some research it transpired that a school of Pilot Whales were reported off St. Mary's, Isles of Scilly later that afternoon. So, a Pilot Whale (a straggler from the group) must have had crept past unseen! Although we didn't see the whale, it was a satisfying link up of sightings.

On the mornings of 24/1 and 25/1, a pod of 15-20 Bottlenose Dolphins gave a spectacular show off the headland for extended periods, including breaching (sometimes landing on their backs) and tail-slapping. Also, on 24/10, a pod of about 10 Common Dolphins and a good number of Harbour Porpoises were present. Most of the cetacean sightings have been on calm days when it's so much easier to see them even though they are surely around in rough weather too.

Continuing on the mammal theme, a Fox was seen on 6/1 emerging from Ashcan Gully, probably the same individual as the one seen last month. This is unusual; what is it doing down there? Maybe it is a safe retreat.

Birds take second place this month. Divers, both Great Northern and Red-throated, continued to be seen in ones and two's, there were many sightings of Mediterranean Gulls and, on some days, very large numbers of auks headed out west. 2 Curlew flew by on 9/1. A juvenile Peregrine on Carn Guthensbras gave excellent views on 25/1. The Black Redstart was seen on 1/1, but not since. 2 Stonechat (male and female) were here on 1/1, and Robin, Meadow and Rock Pipits were reported. One White Stork is still in the area and our choughs are alive and well.

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