



National Coastwatch
EYES ALONG THE COAST

Gwennap Head NCI - Wildlife Report March 2016

In the last twelve months, Humpback Whales have been seen infrequently around the coast of Cornwall, and it was only a matter of time before we saw them from the lookout. On 29/2, just as that month's report was being placed on the board, we had the first of many sightings. A watch-keeper saw a fishing boat stop while the crew gathered on the bow pointing at the water. We could see a big disturbance and knew we were on to something. That something was a Humpback Whale identified during that brief sighting by the bushy blow, the fin shape and the raised hump before the dive. During the next week we saw the whale, or whales (there were sometimes two), on five days out of seven in the sea area between the Longships, Wolf Rock and Mounts Bay, at a distance of half a mile to roughly seven miles offshore. There were more sightings of one whale on 23/3. As well as general surfacing with frequent 10ft bushy blows and the typical hump-backed dives, occasionally with the tail raised, we saw breaching and lob-tailing, some of it spectacularly demonstrating the size of the animal (40-50ft) and the incredible power tail thrust. The purpose of this behaviour is not understood, but communication and the stunning of fish are theories (maybe they are just enjoying themselves! The whales were not always active and could be quite elusive. One day we tracked them from the Runnelstone Buoy across Mounts Bay almost as far as the moored cargo vessels.

The eastern Atlantic population of Humpback Whales migrate to feeding grounds off Norway and Russia in the summer and then return to breed off the Cape Verde Islands and West Africa in winter. These whales may have been on migration or they may be immature animals that roam before they reach breeding age at about ten years old. Their populations have increased since they were decimated by whaling and this may be why we are seeing more of them. There is no doubt, as evidenced by the numbers of dolphins and seabirds around during this time that they came into our area because of an abundance of fish.

How rare are these whales? In 24 years of cetacean monitoring, I have had two other encounters with them in Cornish waters, both in the late 1990's and both short-lived.

In the early morning of 7/3, many hundreds, possibly a thousand Common Dolphins were spread out across the sea, travelling rapidly to the west beyond Carn Base buoy where there were large numbers of diving gannets, and probably the whales were there too because they came inshore later on. Another large, unidentified whale was observed that day which may have been a Sei Whale, but identification of this species is difficult. Good numbers of porpoises have been reported throughout the month.

Shockingly, so far this year, 61 dolphins and porpoises have been washed ashore on the Cornish coast after being drowned in fishing nets.

The whale sightings were brilliant but they didn't necessarily eclipse other wildlife happenings. Best of all was our first swallow winging its way in on 25/3, tiny compared with a mighty whale but very welcome after the winter we have just experienced. The northward Manx Shearwater migration was underway by mid-March, Puffins had appeared among the auk flocks by on 23/3, but large numbers were coming through by the end of the month. The first Sandwich Terns passed on 27/3 and the first Wheatear arrived on the cliffs here on 17/3.

The local Choughs are nesting in the same place, but extra individuals have been seen, so please report any unusual ring colour combinations.



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Seal numbers seem to be picking up again now with a maximum of 16 on 11/3, but just recently, storm Katie washed them all off the rocks for a while.

The first Spring Squill flowers have been reported.

Jean Lawman