



Gwennap Head NCI - Wildlife Report August 2017

On 7/8, a mile out towards Wolf Rock on a calm, grey, brightly reflective sea was a spectacle that I don't recall seeing before. There appeared to be a long breaking wave – a splashing, curling mass of white water beneath a darker area. It looked alive and it was. Large fish were breaking the surface – tuna. Over this area of disturbed sea was a dense moving cloud of shearwaters, probably after smaller fish mixed up in the shoal – Manx, Sooty and Great Shearwaters. There were Common Dolphins and 3 Minke Whales there too on the edge of the shoal, and adding colour and yet more drama to the scene was a procession of Fastnet yachts with tall, colourful sails, almost becalmed and close inshore.

On 13/8 there was more excitement when a large whale blew near Wolf Rock, followed by the emergence of a vast black back exposing a tiny dorsal fin towards the end - too big for the largest Minke Whale. It was a Fin Whale. 2 more blows were seen, 15-20ft, white against sea and sky, lingering for 10 seconds or so. There were two smaller blows and then a dive with a glimpse of a black bifurcate tail (unusual - in my experience they rarely thrust up their tails when diving). This sequence was seen again 20 minutes later and then nothing. The shipping accompaniment this time was two old style sailing vessels. Then it got even better. On 15/8, 3 Fin Whales were feeding out in the bay to our east, blowing frequently and rolling over as before. Once, a head, triangular in shape, with two massive gaping jaws was thrust up out of the water – I have never seen that before. What a fantastic sight– they are, after, all the second largest animals on earth!

It wasn't over yet. On 19/8 the biggest feeding flock of seabirds I have ever seen off the headland built up as the tide began to rise and strong currents streamed against a westerly wind. They were spread either side of the Runnelstone reef and stretched inshore to the cliffs. Gannets plunged around the rocky pinnacles on the reef while thousands of Manx Shearwaters were shallow diving and picking food off the surface in a state of great excitement - like we would be if offered a ten course meal. There were excellent close views of the charismatic Great Shearwater, whose North Atlantic wintering population faced starvation problems a while ago on the eastern Atlantic coast with dead and emaciated birds washing ashore. These, though, were taking advantage of the fish bonanza we have experienced in our sea area. The feeding frenzy lasted for less than an hour.

3 or 4 Minke Whales were seen on many days and Common Dolphins and Harbour Porpoises were present throughout. Large feeding flocks were almost a daily event. Last, but not least, a Pilot Whale headed west on 30/8, a very rare sighting here.

These events dominated the wildlife of August but there were others of note. Skuas, Storm Petrels, rare Wilson's Petrels, terns, Mediterranean Gulls and scoter were also seen. Visible wader migration included Whimbrel, Curlew, Bar-tailed Godwit and Oystercatcher. We witnessed the departure of many Swallows too. Wheatears started to arrive and unusually large numbers of Tree Pipits were in the area. Our local Choughs were seen making a fuss around a juvenile Peregrine perched in a rocky crevice and looking not very streetwise. An Amur Falcon (from the Far East!) which was found at Polgigga in July (which I forgot to mention last month) hasn't been seen since it was re-found at St. Buryan on 17/7. It was a second year female, the second record for Britain.

Among several common butterfly species we saw the pale form 'helice' of the Clouded Yellow on 28/8, a small immigration of Red Admirals and Small Tortoiseshells was evident during the warm days at the end of the month and I was delighted to watch the courtship display of a pair of Grayling on my downstairs window



National Coastwatch

EYES ALONG THE COAST

sill - the male faces the female and draws her antennae through his closed forewings as he releases an aphrodisiac – whatever turns you on!

The highest seal count was 20 on 12.8.

Jean Lawman