



National Coastwatch
EYES ALONG THE COAST

Gwennap Head NCI - Wildlife Report October 2016

10/10 was a morning to remember with no less than 5 species of cetacean seen from the lookout. It started with 8-10 Bottlenose dolphins lingering by the Runnelstone and a small number of Harbour Porpoises surfacing quietly behind at a safe distance (recently a porpoise was observed being tossed into the air by one such dolphin). Then, a group of Common Dolphins appeared coming in from the south and headed southwest. Later on, 4 miles out west, a Minke Whale surfaced under diving gannets. As if that wasn't enough, 5 Risso's Dolphins appeared - in their usual furtive way coming from nowhere and staying just long enough to be identified before disappearing just as mysteriously. All in a couple of hours! A Minke Whale (30ft at least) surfaced 4 times on 28/10 in a flat calm sea with a group of Common Dolphins behind and 20-30 porpoise spread around. There were more sightings of Common Dolphins and porpoises throughout the month.

Following last months Chough saga, we have found by the colour rings that the bird attacked on 21/9 by the local pair was a last years male raised in a Cot Valley nest. One of our watch-keepers took a photograph of it on 20/9, the day before the fight, showing injuries on its head even then, so it had been attacked before - probably by those same birds but we don't know for sure. Hopefully it will be seen again or else we will wonder at the outcome of this episode. Two watch-keepers reported 12 Choughs 'a chuffin' on 21/10; they were part of a gang of youngsters, totaling 15, that had been seen at Land's End. They like a bit of a social fling before getting down to the serious business of breeding. Other Choughs were reported, including an un-ringed bird, and often there has been squabbling among them. The feeding is good – lots of fat and juicy Crane-fly larvae (leatherjackets). It's good to write about Choughs because they are doing well and there is little positive news about bird populations today.

A steady migration of small migrant birds occurred during the first 3 weeks in the prevalent easterly winds. It was a trickle rather the rush we usually get in between spells of unsettled weather, except for a heavy passage of Skylarks and Chaffinches on 29/10 and 31/10. Most migrants are from elsewhere in Britain, the near continent, Eastern Europe, Scandinavia or Russia making use of light or moderate tail winds. It was wonderful to see large flocks of Skylarks lingering high in the sky, half twittering, half singing, and pausing a while before they set off out to sea going who knows where. Most migrants were finches, larks or pipits but with them, identified by their flight calls, were a Lapland Bunting and a rare Richards Pipit. Not many grounded apart from pipits but a few Black Redstarts stayed around on the cliff-top flaunting their rust red tails.

A watch-keeper saw a flock of Brent Geese on 7/10 which tied up nicely with a report from Marazion Marsh, and possibly involved the same birds. Out at sea, 2 Arctic Skuas were seen persistently chasing a Kestrel, which definitely was not going to disgorge a fish as its normal target, a Kittiwake, would do. Some Kestrels migrate which may explain its presence out there. Also out of place were 2 Great-spotted Woodpeckers perched, sentinel-like, on each side of a tall granite boulder by the lookout - young birds dispersing.

An American Red-eyed Vireo (probably a hurricane victim) triggered a 'twitch' in the valley, whilst other rarities included Yellow-browed and Pallas's Warblers. One of our staff came up with a photograph taken on the balcony in November 2015 – it was a rarity and, by general consensus, probably a Desert Wheatear.

Jean Lawman