



National Coastwatch
EYES ALONG THE COAST

Gwennap Head NCI - Wildlife Report February 2017

Ploughing began in earnest to get fields, nearby, ready for potatoes and this drew in hundreds of gulls, including some rare ones. I saw 2 Iceland Gulls from Porthgwarra lane several times and hoped at least one of them would come by the watch. On 18/2, having finished their feeding frenzy (rain stopped play), they headed for the coast and conveniently filed past the lookout in a thin stream – perfect, and eventually along came one Iceland Gull, in immaculate white first winter plumage - a touch of the Arctic. They turn up every year at this time, at plough time.

As usual, this month, there was a movement into our sea area of divers, particularly Red-throated Divers, after a winter spent as far south as France and Spain. They are heading north to their breeding grounds. On 17/2, we counted 16 and they didn't seem to know which way to go; groups of up to 1 to 5 were flying both north and south. When flying against the sky, they are exceedingly streamlined, and elegant - easily recognizable, but best of all, they are a sign of winter turning to spring: so too are the large groups of auks flying past. Further up the coast on the Brisons rocks off Cape Cornwall, they are already visiting their breeding ledges. Also on the sea this month, we saw Common Scoter, Kittiwakes, a single Manx Shearwater, a Curlew and several Cormorants displaying white breeding patches on their flanks.

Apart from salt crystals on the windows, storm Doris and her northwest gale force winds didn't blow many seabirds inshore on this part of the coast, although on the north coast (Pendeen) thousands of Fulmars were heading west after being driven up the Bristol Channel.

Our Chough pair has been reported frequently near the lookout, sometimes with the other two regular visitors (yellow/red and un-ringed). Our local, white/brown, was seen by a watch-keeper to be engaged in mutual preening with the un-ringed bird, but then became aggressive with the latter becoming submissive. These are fine-tuned behaviours in birds which can easily suddenly switch from one to another. All Cornish Choughs are distantly related, but it would make no difference in their world, as we have learnt from the colour ringing scheme. They are all looking plump with a fine gloss on their feathers – a good sign prior to the breeding season. The extra pair has been seen between the Minack Theatre and Land's End and we are interested to see where they will nest. Meadow Pipits and Stonechats are the only small birds we have seen and, smaller still, we have spotted Bumblebees on sunny days.

Harbour Porpoises were reported many times, being particularly active on 17/2 chasing a fish shoal vigorously beneath Gannets. Apart from an inconclusive report of a pale dolphin, we saw no other cetaceans. Record numbers of Common Dolphins were seen off the west coast of Scotland in 2016. This may be a sign that some cetaceans as well as seabirds are shifting their range north in response to rising sea temperatures (global warming) which is influencing plankton type and abundance. As I write this report (26/2) a Humpback Whale is performing well and causing great excitement off the coast of south Devon - it must be on its way here! The highest seal count - 11 - was on 7/2.

Jean Lawman