



Gwennap Head NCI - Wildlife Report May/June 2017

The biggest event in May was the influx of Red Kites which we have come to expect each year – a heart warming reminder that at least some (if not many, and certainly not enough) of our British breeding birds are doing well, even increasing. These wandering non breeders were doing something many immature birds of varying species do and this is how they colonize new areas. One of our watch-keepers walking in Porthgwarra on 27/5 saw 15 in flight - what a splendid sight that must have been. Up to 50 were reported by birders elsewhere in Penwith. Earlier, on 5/5, a Black Kite (a scarce vagrant from the continent) was spotted in the area.

Swallows and martins continued to arrive and we were delighted to see our first Swifts on 4/5 - just think they were flying around at the time of the dinosaurs! On 17/5, a party of 22 were wheeling and screaming around the cliffs. They are scarce breeders here and these were probably not local birds. Swifts don't breed until they are 2 or 3 years old so we may be seeing wandering non breeders or birds from elsewhere – Swifts can travel hundreds of kilometres on feeding forays.

On the sea in early May, Red-throated Divers were still heading north and the Whimbrel migration was on-going with a flock of 70 seen on 30/4 which is the largest flock I have seen off here - they just missed the April report!

As ever at this time of year there are thousands of Manx Shearwaters either forming rafts or flying around randomly. Over 300.000 pairs breed on the Welsh Islands so these kinds of numbers are not surprising. On 12/6, we saw 2 Balearic Shearwaters and on 24/6, one Sooty Shearwater.

We do not have good news of the Choughs. On 17/5, the ringing party found an empty nest instead of well grown chicks. It's unclear what happened, if indeed anything did, though there were signs were that breeding was underway. Predation is a possibility of course. Generally the Choughs have not done so well in Cornwall this year, but we must expect good and bad years.

28/6 was a good day for viewing Risso's Dolphins. They were tracked from 10.00 to 13.15 from a point east of the Runnelstone nearly to Land's End. 2 very large fins emerged from a seemingly lifeless, dead calm sea (such moments make it all worth while!). The pale colour and snub nose profile made identification easy. These two kept together and travelled slowly west where they were joined by others making a total of 10-12. Porpoise sightings were lower than normal and the only other dolphins seen were following a charter boat on 4/6. The highest Grey Seal count was 15 on 27/5.

On 21/6, a white plastic bag floating by turned out on inspection to be a sunfish lying belly-up soliciting gulls to pick off the parasites (at least that is the current theory). When the gulls got bored with it, it turned over and moved away in typical fashion with the dorsal fin flopping down on the sea.

The turf around us is spotted with the colours of summer flowering plants – Wild Thyme, Bell Heather, Lady's Slipper, Western Clover, Cat's ear and English Stonecrop the most obvious - mostly pinks and yellows - with late Thrift and Sea Campion. Over on the heath, there is a good show of Heath-spotted Orchids.

Butterflies and dragonflies were flying during hot sunny weather in May and June. Wall Browns (a species in trouble in Britain) were frequent in early May. They are resident, preferring dry, open rocky places. 4 Large Whites were seen on 8/5. On this south facing headland with France across the channel, we know that some butterflies and dragonflies here may be migrants (e.g. Large Whites, but it is still a little early).



National Coastwatch

EYES ALONG THE COAST

Painted Ladies and Red Admirals can be early immigrants and both were reported, albeit in small numbers. Usually we get only a fleeting glimpse making identification impossible and so it was with 2 dragonflies on 21/6, one probably a Common Darter and other a large Emperor type, possibly rare - this is very frustrating sometimes! Common Blue butterflies were flitting over the flowery turf in mid-late June.

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