



National Coastwatch
EYES ALONG THE COAST

Gwennap Head NCI - Wildlife Report January/February 2018

Wildlife watching in January and February was curtailed by bad weather and pathogens. However, January did start off on a good note with an interesting bird turning up on 8/1. We are used to seeing flights of Common Scoter (sea duck) off the headland, they are regular and relatively common particularly in autumn and winter, but as every birder knows you should check them because there are other species occasionally seen here that are rare. They were flying close offshore, one obviously larger than the other two which were brown female Common Scoter. This one was black all over, sporting large white wing patches. It was a male Velvet Scoter, a northern species breeding in the Baltic Sea area and one which we seldom see in Cornwall (the last time for me was many years ago when four passed this headland).

The same day, a Pomarine Skua was observed harassing the Kittiwakes, forcing them to drop their newly caught fish - a little drama offshore. Small numbers skirt the Cornish coast during their southbound autumn migration down to the West African coast but they are rarely seen in winter and are much less common than Arctic and Great Skuas. The Pomarine is a northern species breeding on Arctic tundra, further east than the other two.

Two days later, a single Manx Shearwater was loitering out at sea, another unexpected sighting since most are off the coast of Brazil right now. Although thousands were gathering and feeding here last summer, it is of interest to see this one out of season. It may have been a juvenile that fledged very late last year.

We continued to see over-wintering divers flying one way or the other and, in mid-February, a rare White-billed Diver turned up in Mounts Bay getting birders excited and there was always the possibility that we would see it fly past the headland, but no luck so far. This diver is striking; it is a large, curvy bird with a bill like a ripe banana!

By all accounts there have been plenty of seabirds around, often driven inshore by the winds like the thousands of auks and Kittiwakes heading west on 6/1. Feeding flocks, usually Gannets have been reported in more settled conditions - a sign of an abundance of fish. On 20/2, a huge flock of Kittiwakes was spread over half a mile feeding south of Carn Base buoy. Not, surprisingly, Common Dolphins have been reported around the Penwithian coast too and pods were seen from the lookout by watch-keepers on 5/2 and on 25/2, on both occasions near to the Runnelstone.

Very few seals have been hauled out on the rocks since December, probably due to the rough weather and the exposed nature of the rocks. There was very high mortality among seal pups last year, not just in Cornwall but in other parts of western Britain because of severe weather.

On 20/2, close behind the haul-out, there were excellent views of 4 Harbour Porpoises feeding, one a baby sticking close to its mother. Gannets plunged in above them and it seemed a miracle that they didn't collide.

Our local Choughs have been seen several times both in flight and on the ground; thanks to watch-keepers who have been adept reading the colour rings.

Jean Lawman