



Gwennap Head NCI - Wildlife Report March 2018

On 1/3, the lookout was snowbound and it must have looked beautiful on the headland but nobody was there to see it except for the previous day when the snow began and the watch-keeper went into survival mode and left quickly - he survived. Three miles away inland as the crow flies I was witnessing an event we would certainly have seen a part of up there. Vast numbers of Lapwing were heading west, flying high and straight, fleeing the snow. Penwith was covered. Some birds came down looking for somewhere to feed (most fields are heavily sprayed and don't sustain invertebrate life anyway), some continued to Scilly, others probably tried to cross to Ireland which was about to receive the snow. In the next few days, eye-witnesses reported hundreds standing around in the fields locally, much weakened, probably many died. It was a remarkable sight, but very sad and something this declining species certainly doesn't need. This cold weather movement was spread across much of Britain, probably involving British and continental birds. Golden Plover were moving too and some days after that I flushed one from the heather in a weakened state.

On a brighter note we have been seeing a lot of our local Chough pair and on 5/3 and 16/3 we were visited by a flock of 15. On the latter date they came down on the turf for just enough time to establish that 2 were un-ringed and to read the colour rings of one more before a dog walker came and off they went in acrobatic and jubilant (it seemed) flight. As well as these, a group of 3 were seen twice that day which were probably a trio consisting of 2 siblings and a male (a 'menage a trois') that have been frequenting the Land's End area. Since then, they have been joined by another, hopefully a male - otherwise it might have been interesting!

The spring puffin passage began on 16/3 with 4 heading west (last year the date was 13/3). Manx Shearwaters first appeared on 8/3 with 4 feeding offshore with Kittiwakes, and from then on there was a steady stream on many days with a heavy passage on 30/3. We continued to see divers, mostly Red-throated (some in stunning summer plumage) and on 30/3 a Great Skua passed. On 5/3, among a flock of gulls flying by, were 2 Glaucous Gulls, larger even than the Greater Black backs accompanying them; one the books describe as biscuit coloured (shortbread maybe?) and the other was whiter than white. These Arctic Gulls fade to white in the spring - one going about it a bit late.

The only small birds we have seen have been Rock Pipits (just twice) and a Pied Wagtail on 30/3. Down by the gate on 30/3 there was a pair of Bullfinches and a Green Woodpecker on the heath the same day. Spring migration has been very slow, almost non-existent, due to the weather but birders have reported a few Wheatears and a White Wagtail locally. A Hoopoe turned up 2 miles away inland and raised the spirits of many. It seemed wildly optimistic to think of looking out for early Sand Martins and Swallows in the cold, windy and wet weather, something which we would usually be doing in March. On the few occasions when conditions have been right here it has been bad across the Channel so the birds would not have left. Hope arrived on 28/3 in the form of 5 Sandwich Terns (probably migrants, although nowadays some over-winter further along the south coast). 4 Canada Geese were seen on 24/3. Penwith now hosts many of these introduced geese but we seldom see them here.

Small numbers of Harbour Porpoises have been reported as usual, often feeding off the seal haul-out, while there were 3 sightings of Common Dolphins. A Humpback Whale was apparently spotted off Land's End but we received the report too late to catch up with that one.

Seal numbers have been very low, often nil, apart from a count of 15 on 20/3.

Flower-wise, Danish Scurvy-grass is out in some places on the cliff and on the hedge-banks.