

SeaWatch SW Annual Report 2007



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MARINE life

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Executive summary

SeaWatch SW is a new volunteer-based project, designed to collect important baseline data for key migratory marine species in UK waters from 2007 onwards. The priority is the **critically endangered Balearic Shearwater**, but other migratory seabirds as well as **Basking Sharks, Ocean Sunfish and cetaceans** are also the focus of effort-based monitoring off southwest England.

A total of **834 Balearic Shearwater records** were reported to SeaWatch SW and/or *Birdguides* from the UK and Ireland in 2007, relating to a maximum of **5153** birds. However, this figure includes significant duplication, as some birds remained in one area for several days or were recorded passing multiple watchpoints, but it does provide a useful index that can be compared with future years.

Small numbers of Balearic Shearwaters lingered off southwest England in January, then very few were reported until late May when the first returning birds were noted. Numbers then built up through June and July as birds pushed northwards, before **peaking in August and September**. There was a major exodus from UK waters in late September, and almost all reports from October onwards were again from southwest England.

About two-thirds of Balearic Shearwater records in 2007 came from southwest England, but a few penetrated north to Scotland and a couple of records were even received from Orkney. During June and July an important gathering of moulting birds remained in the **Portland Bill** area for several weeks, peaking at **117** on 8 July. These birds began to disperse westwards in late July and early August, with the peak count away from Portland being **123** passing Gwennap Head, Cornwall on 3-4 Aug.



Balearic Shearwater off the Needles, Isle of Wight (Kris Gillam)

Effort-based monitoring of Balearic Shearwaters (and other target species) was undertaken at **Gwennap Head** between **15 July and 15 Oct 2007**. Over 40 volunteer observers helped man the watchpoint for **93** consecutive days, with 'dawn-to-dusk' observations totaling almost **1000** hours.

Balearic Shearwaters were seen every day off Gwennap Head during the survey period, with a total of **1361** birds recorded. Most (94%) were seen on **direct westwards passage**, with two-thirds seen during the morning session prior to 1200 hrs. Peak movements all coincided with **low pressure systems** lying over, or to the

west of southern England, highlighting the importance of weather conditions on this species' inshore movements.

Totals of other shearwater species seen during the Gwennap Head survey included **16,000 Manx Shearwaters, 530 Sooty Shearwaters, 40 Cory's Shearwaters and 10 Great Shearwaters**, with nearly all birds flying west. The appearance of Sooty Shearwaters in particular was closely related to low-pressure conditions, with strong southwest winds and poor visibility.

Arctic Skuas, Great Skuas and Kittiwakes showed a clear pattern of occurrence during the survey period, with small numbers seen from mid-July to mid-September, then **a marked peak of westwards passage in late September**. In October, all three species were noted lingering offshore for several days, with the skuas regularly stealing food from the Kittiwakes. Up to 20 Arctic Skuas (many in active wing moult), were apparently **roosting overnight** to the east of Gwennap Head, with birds moving west after dawn and returning east in the evening.

Guillemots and Razorbills also showed similar overall trends, with small numbers of local breeding in birds present in late July, then few sightings until southwards passage began in late September and early October. It was notable that **Razorbills were ten times more abundant than Guillemots**. A total of **104 Puffins** were also seen, mostly in July, with several records of birds feeding off Gwennap Head.

Gannets and Fulmars were too numerous to count systematically, while other seabird totals included 612 Common Scoters, 766 European Storm-petrels, 255 Sandwich Terns and 346 Common/Arctic Terns. Scarcer seabird species included up to **nine Grey Phalaropes, 20 Pomarine Skuas, two Little Gulls, 16 Mediterranean Gulls, a Black Tern and two Roseate Terns**.

The **Runnelstone reef** was shown to be an important feature off Gwennap Head, often attracting large congregations of feeding gulls, Basking Sharks and cetaceans. Up to **1000 Herring Gulls** were regularly gathered along the reef line, with local fishermen in July reporting that large numbers of **pipefish** were gathered at the surface in this area. However, pipefish are not a particularly attractive prey item for many seabird species, which may explain why only small numbers of shearwaters, auks and other seabirds were attracted to these feeding congregations.

Notable migrant land birds seen by SeaWatch SW observers in the Gwennap Head and Porthgwarra area included Little Egret, Osprey, Hobby, Water Rail, Dotterel, Long-eared Owl, Short-eared Owl, Black Redstart, Dartford Warbler, Yellow-browed Warbler, **Dusky Warbler** and Lapland Bunting. Peregrines and Ravens were regularly recorded, and a **Peregrine was even seen chasing European Storm-petrels** offshore on two occasions.

One of the highlights of the survey was the near-continuous presence of **a pair of Choughs** around the watchpoint from 28 Sept to 15 Oct. These birds often fed within a few metres of the observers, and colour ring observations revealed that they were both offspring of breeding pairs in west Cornwall.

Six cetacean species were recorded off Gwennap Head during the effort-based survey, with a single **Fin Whale** on 20 Aug being the obvious highlight. In addition, up to two **Minke Whales** were seen on 19 dates and pods of up to eight Risso's and 20 Bottlenose Dolphins were recorded. Of the commoner species, **peak day counts of Common Dolphins and Harbour Porpoises reached 400 and 20**, respectively.

Minke Whales, Common Dolphins and Harbour Porpoises were regularly recorded throughout the three-month survey period, while Risso's and Bottlenose Dolphins were only present sporadically from late August onwards. There was some evidence for **aggregations of several cetacean species** for short periods off Gwennap Head, with peak day counts of all the above species occurring between 31 Aug and 6 Sept.

A regular **Grey Seal** haul-out was located just to the west of Gwennap Head, with regular counts of up to ten animals and peaks of 21 on 26 Aug and 17 on 10 Oct. Odd individuals were seen hunting up to 1.5 km offshore.

Basking Sharks were recorded almost daily off Gwennap Head between 17 July and 2 Oct. The total number of sharks reported was **656**, but this will include significant duplication as some distinctive animals lingered for several days. Peak numbers were seen between mid-August and early September, with a maximum of **72** on 5 Sept corresponding with **an unprecedented count of 460** on the same date nearby off Land's End.

The distribution and timing of Basking Shark surface sightings off Gwennap Head appears to be controlled by a combination of **tide, weather and seafloor topography**. Interesting behavioural observations included ten records of **breaching** and several instances of **apparent courtship behaviour**, including ring-circling and nose-to-tail following.

A probable **Blue Shark** was seen chasing Mackerel at the surface on 21 July. A total of **35 Ocean Sunfish** were seen, with two-thirds of records falling between 15 July and 18 Aug. About 40% of records related to sunfish being **pecked at by Herring Gulls**, presumably to aid in parasite removal. Breaching was noted on two occasions.

Two students successfully completed **Masters projects on Basking Sharks** during 2007, using data from SeaWatch SW, MCS and CWT. Their results provided insights into Basking Shark distribution and behaviour in southwest waters during 2007, and include a useful comparison of national sightings data collected by MCS, regional data from CWT, and local effort-based data collected from Gwennap Head.

The **unusual weather conditions** in 2007 had a major effect on Basking Shark surface sightings off southwest England. The warm settled April lead to an **earlier arrival** of sharks in coastal surface waters, but subsequent **failure of the spring plankton bloom** led to few surface sightings in May and June. However, numbers built up again from late July, with **a later than normal peak** in early September.

A number of incidents of **human (boat-based) disturbance** were observed off Gwennap Head during the survey period, mostly involving **recreational activities**. In particular, **continued and prolonged harassment of Basking Sharks** was a major issue, and at least two 'near misses' were also observed. SeaWatch SW is liaising with local Police in an attempt to reduce such incidents in the future. It should be noted that local commercial fishing activities appeared to have little effect on monitored species off the watchpoint.

It was a poor year for migrant butterflies, moths and other insects due to the inclement weather conditions during late spring and summer. However, the effort-based survey at Gwennap Head did record small numbers of migrants, including a Hummingbird Hawk-moth. Colonies of **Small Pearl-bordered Fritillary** and the **nationally scarce Thrift Clearwing** were also located at the watchpoint.

Additional effort-based observations between 15 July and 15 Oct were carried out at **Berry Head** in Devon (71.25 hours) and **Strumble Head** in Pembrokeshire, (354.5 hours). These data helped to put Gwennap Head sightings into a regional context. An important result was that Balearic Shearwaters were seen passing Berry Head and Gwennap Head at roughly the **same hourly rate** when simultaneous observations were made. This indicates that birds were moving at a **regional level** along the coast of southwest England, and were not just circulating off Gwennap Head.

At Strumble Head, the peak day count of 37 Balearic Shearwaters, and the overall hourly rate of 0.7 birds per hour, was the **second highest** since detailed recording began there in 1984, only being beaten by the 2006 figures. Other data from the two 'sister sites' provided useful insights into the **migration routes and timings** of other migratory seabirds.

Boat-based surveys in the western English Channel, co-ordinated by Marinelife, were undertaken between June and September 2007. These surveys involved 25 trips covering **850 line-km of the offshore area between Devon and the Isle of Wight**. A notable feature of these surveys was the ability to get exceptionally close views and photographs of many of the target species.

The boat-based surveys located **80 Balearic Shearwaters** offshore, almost all being **moulting adults**. The peak count was 41 in the Portland Bill area on 8 July, associating with large numbers of Manx Shearwaters. The results confirm the importance of the Portland Bill and Lyme Bay area as a **mid-summer moulting area** for Balearic Shearwaters. Most other offshore records referred to single birds in direct flight or scavenging discards around fishing boats.

Other wildlife observed during the offshore survey included over **400 European Storm-petrels and 90 Great Skuas** (mostly around fishing boats), as well as scarcer species such as Sooty Shearwater, Grey Phalarope, Pomarine Skua and Puffin. In addition, Harbour Porpoises, Basking Sharks and Ocean Sunfish were regularly recorded, but perhaps the most surprising discovery was the presence of up to **19 White-beaked Dolphins** (a mostly cold-water species) in western Lyme Bay on several dates in August and September.

SeaWatch SW and SAHFOS co-ordinated the first **SouthWest Marine Ecosystems (SWME)** meeting, held in Plymouth on 10 Dec 2007. The meeting attracted over 40 invited representatives from both science and conservation organisations in the southwest region. The presentations provided a useful overview of how **climate change is impacting marine life in southwest coastal waters**, with a particular focus on distribution changes and new arrivals. It is hoped that this will become an annual meeting.

SeaWatch SW data are already contributing to various **conservation initiatives**, particularly relating to **RSPB and Birdlife International** monitoring of the **critically endangered Balearic Shearwater** at a pan-European level. At a local level, SeaWatch SW data will be contributing to initial planning workshops for **Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)** in the southwest region.

The SeaWatch SW website had over **12,000** individual hits in 2007, while news items on Balearic Shearwaters appeared in national and regional media, including the **Daily Telegraph**. In addition, the initial results of the project were featured on the **BBC News website** and in several regional newspapers and radio reports.

Three scientific papers on Balearic Shearwaters were published in 2007 by the SeaWatch SW team. Two papers by Wynn et al., in *Biology Letters* and *British Birds*, documented the changing status of the species in northeast Atlantic waters, while a paper by Yésou et al. in *Alauda* highlighted the importance of future monitoring of the species in French waters.

SeaWatch SW will be continuing in 2008, with public sightings and effort-based data on Balearic Shearwaters again being collected at a national and local level. Effort-based surveys will again be carried out at Gwennap Head, the sister sites of Berry Head and Strumble Head, and offshore in the western English Channel. A new **NERC-funded PhD student** will begin work on the project data, supported by a small number of Masters and undergraduate students.

Finally, if you feel inspired after reading this report, and would like to contribute to SeaWatch SW 2008, please visit the project website and/or contact the project co-ordinator for details of how to get involved. The project would simply not be possible without a dedicated team of volunteer observers, and we particularly need a few more experienced seabird observers (familiar with Balearic Shearwaters and other target species), to come forward and volunteer their time to the Gwennap Head survey. Most slots have now been filled, but we still have six days free in early August and 18 days free in late August/early September. Complimentary 'bed and brunch' is provided to core seabird observers at Ardensawah Farm B&B near Porthgwarra; this is a very comfortable place to stay and is only a short distance from the watchpoint. We also welcome keen observers of any experience level to act as marine wildlife observers and supporting observers at the watchpoint. The project website address is shown below. Many thanks again to all those who contributed to SeaWatch SW 2007, and also those who have already pledged to support us in 2008.

<http://www.seawatch-sw.org>



Choughs over Gwennap Head (Marcus Ward)

Acknowledgements

SeaWatch SW is primarily a volunteer-based project, and is assisted by a large number of organisations and individuals. First of all, a big thankyou to everyone who submitted Balearic Shearwater records to SeaWatch SW and/or *Birdguides* during 2007. These records are helping inform current and future conservation policy for this critically endangered species. In addition, at least 40 volunteer observers were responsible for data collection at Gwennap Head during the project survey between mid-July and mid-October, as follows:

Core seabird observers: Nick Adams, Kevin Bainbridge, Jeremy Barker, Pete Berry, Simon Hartill, Simon Ingram, Graham Jones, Tom McKinney, Marc Moody, Tim Parminter, Kevin Peace, Ken Shaw and Russell Wynn.

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We are extremely grateful to all of the above, as without their efforts the data collection would simply not have been possible. We would also like to thank local observers Jean Lawman and John Swann, who contributed a significant amount of their time and expertise to the Gwennap Head survey during 2007. Vikki Gunn assisted with logistics in Cornwall and built and maintained the SeaWatch SW website (<http://www.seawatch-sw.org>). Janet and Michael Semmens at Ardensawah Farm B&B had the important job of keeping the core seabird observers fed and rested, which they performed admirably.

Additional observations were carried out by observers at two sister sites during the SeaWatch SW survey. These data were collated and supplied by Mark Darlaston and Mike Langman (Berry Head) and Graham Rees, Ray Wilkinson and Steve Berry (Strumble Head). Weather data for the SeaWatch SW survey period were supplied by John Chappell (Land's End) and Tim Smyth (Plymouth Marine Laboratory).

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Southwest Optics

The Seabird Group



Seabird observers at the SeaWatch SW watchpoint at Gwennap Head (Russell Wynn)

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SeaWatch SW co-ordinator, Russell Wynn, recording seabirds at Gwennap Head