

Two Wilson's Storm Petrels off Gwennap Head, Porthgwarra on 1 Aug 2009

Location

Gwennap Head, Porthgwarra, Cornwall

Date and time of observations

Sat 1 Aug 2009 from 0652-0945 hrs

Distance and optics

1-2 km throughout; 10x Leica bins; 30x Swaro scope.

Weather

Wind NW4 to W2; light rain clearing to sunny spells as front cleared; visibility 12-15 km then 15 km+; sea state 2-3; cloud cover 100% decreasing to 70%; glare 0% increasing to 20%.

Finder and identifier

Dr Russell B Wynn (SeaWatch SW co-ordinator)

Other observers

John Swann (SeaWatch SW assistant co-ordinator)

Alice Jones (SeaWatch SW PhD student)

Description

On 1 Aug 2009 I was attending the SeaWatch SW watchpoint at Gwennap Head, Porthgwarra, for my final morning before departure. I had been covering the watchpoint continuously for the previous 17 days (since 15 July), and it was time for a well-earned rest! During my fortnight I had been lucky enough to see *the* Black-browed Albatross, and at least 250 Balearic Shearwaters. Importantly, I had also seen European Storm Petrels on a regular basis at various ranges and in a wide variety of weather conditions.

At 0652 hrs I picked up a storm petrel feeding over a slick in the water about 1.5 km to the SW. I was immediately alerted to the possibility of Wilson's Storm Petrel by the distinctive feeding action, with the bird apparently 'dancing' over the water as if suspended from a string. I observed the bird until 0700 hrs, but the long range and poor light (due to persistent rain) prevented me from getting any plumage details, and I had mentally classified it as just a 'probable'. At 0721 hrs I relocated the bird in the same area, and this time had it in view for four minutes before it again moved away westwards. I was now encouraged by the fact that I had seen it alongside a European Storm-petrel, and was able to discern some of the key differences in size, structure and flight action. However, I was still struggling to get any plumage detail.

Fortunately, the bird reappeared shortly after, and it became clear that it was feeding while moving steadily west into the wind, before rapidly relocating east to the start of the slick and repeating the circuit. From 0800 hrs onwards the rain stopped and the cloud began to thin, enabling me to get a bit more detail on plumage as the light improved. By this time, I was confident I had enough to make a firm claim of Wilson's Storm Petrel. The bird occasionally came to within about 1 km, but also drifted out to about 2 km range. Then, at 0837 hrs, while the bird was feeding with at least three European Storm Petrels, I realised there was not one, but two Wilson's Storm Petrels! Both birds continued to feed together offshore so, while keeping them in the scope, I got my

student (Alice Jones) to nip up the clifftop and send a text out to John Swann, the SeaWatch SW assistant co-ordinator.

Fortunately, John was already on his way down, and after a few tense minutes he arrived and was able to get scope views of one, and probably both birds. By 0945 hrs the sun had come out and it was becoming increasingly hard to see the birds against the dark blue sea, especially as my eyes were protesting at two hours of continuous scoping! I eventually lost them to the west, and a couple of other visiting birders were unable to relocate them in the following hour. However, after I had left, John briefly picked up a Wilson's Storm Petrel moving west at 1250 hrs about 1.5 km to the south, which was presumed to have been one of the earlier birds.

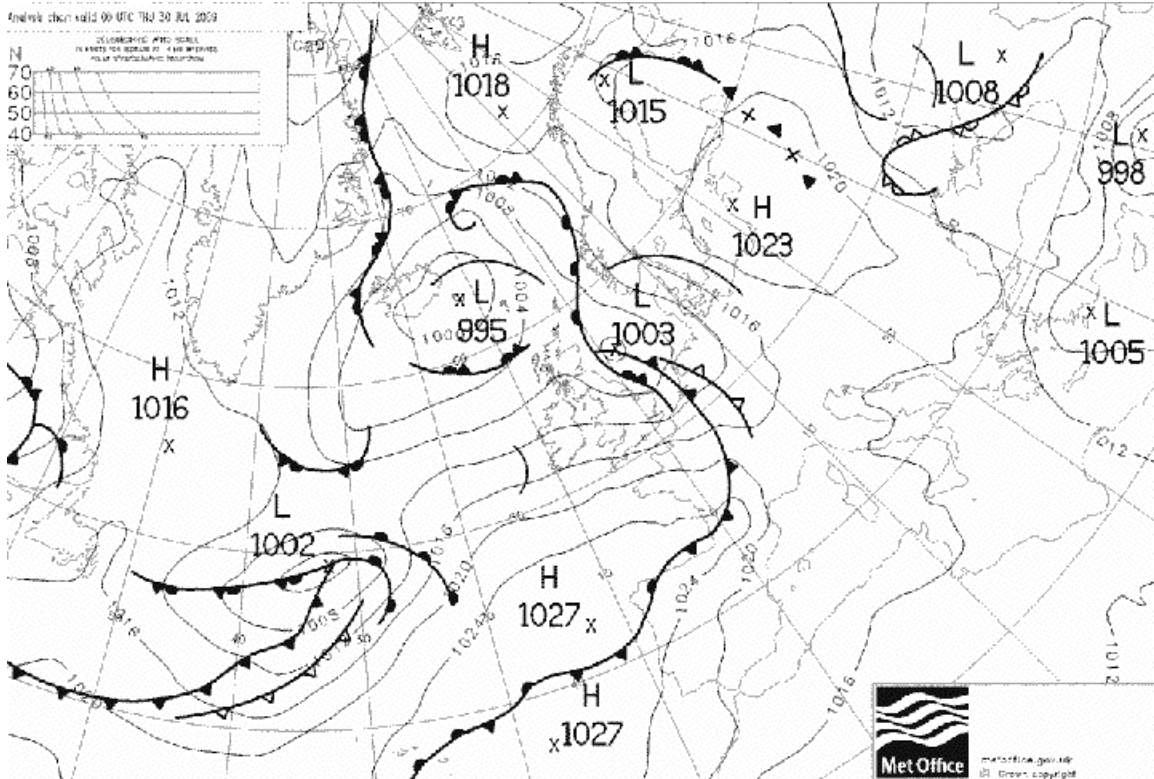
The following notes are reproduced from those made at the time, which were hastily scribbled on SeaWatch SW recording forms.

Size and structure: At long range was seen to be slightly larger, more attenuated and longer-winged than ESP. The wing was held straighter than ESP, with a straight leading edge. In direct comparison, ESP was clearly a more compact bird. The foot projection beyond the tail tip of WSP was not visible due to long range, but may have contributed to the overall more attenuated appearance than accompanying ESP's.

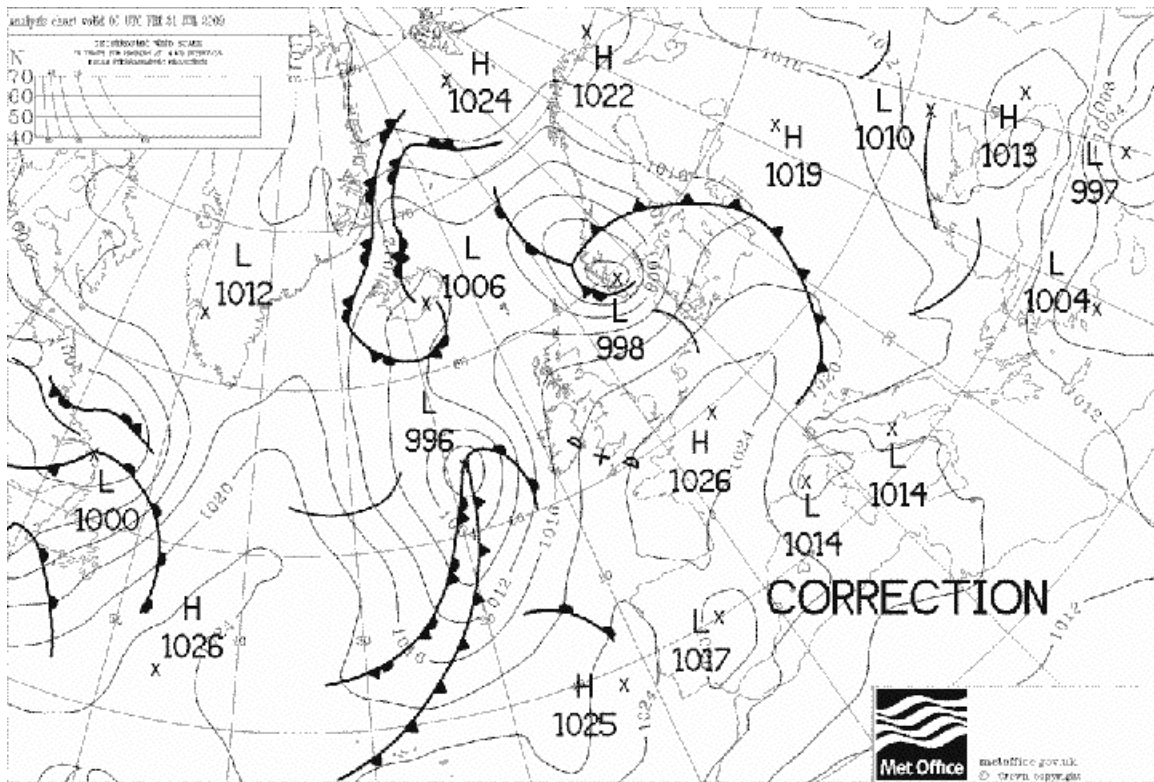
Plumage: Initial views were hindered by poor light, so the only real feature I could pick out was the broad white rump contrasting with the dark blackish-brown body and tail. As the light improved this feature was continuously visible, and the white was seen to extend onto the rump sides. The pale upperwing panel was looked for, but during much of the observation the distance and light rendered this feature invisible. As the light improved I could clearly discern that the upperwing was overall paler than ESP, but I was still not able to clearly pick out an actual panel due to the distance involved. The underwing always appeared dark.

Flight action: Distinctive, especially when feeding. Hovered a few cm over slick as if suspended from a string, with legs dangling and wings held horizontal or slightly raised. Direct flight noted to be less hurried than ESP, with slightly slower and looser wingbeats. Also had a more twisting and bouncing flight than ESP, veering from side-to-side over the wave crests. Remained within a metre of the sea surface, but would occasionally veer up before dropping onto a food item. Crucially, on longer flights, both WSP's would glide for up to 4-5 seconds at a time, on straight or slightly bowed wings. ESP showed a more direct 'hurried' flight without gliding, and the feeding action was clearly different with brief hovering and alighting on water before moving on rapidly.

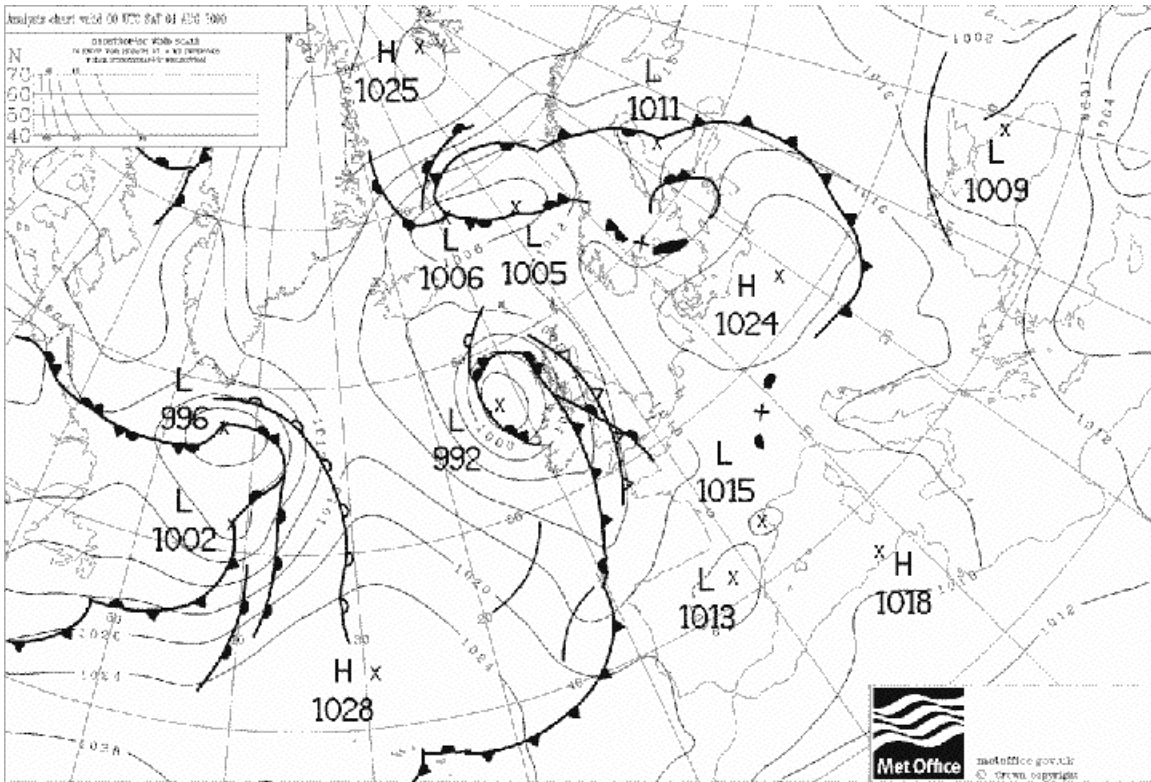
I later discovered that these two birds were part of an unprecedented one-day influx involving at least 60 birds on 1 Aug, with seven seen on two pelagic trips off north Cornwall, up to nine during a pelagic northeast of Scilly, one passing Strumble Head (Pembrokeshire), 15 passing Brandon Point (Kerry) and an incredible 27 passing Bridges of Ross (Clare). Interestingly, the weather on 1 Aug was not especially promising for a Porthgwarra seawatch. An incoming low-pressure system had pulled a series of fronts across southwest UK during the preceding night, but on the morning itself the wind had already veered into the NW sector and few other notable seabirds were seen. The pressure charts for the period from 30 July to 1 Aug are copied below:



Pressure chart for 00 hrs on 30 July 2009; the low-pressure system responsible for 'carrying' the Wilson's Storm Petrels is still in the central North Atlantic



Pressure chart for 00 hrs on 31 July 2009; the low-pressure system is now just west of Ireland, drawing a strong S/SW airflow across its leading edge.



Pressure chart for 00 hrs on 1 Aug 2009; the cold front located just west of Cornwall at midnight had cleared by late morning, with winds in the W/NW sector.

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