

The Strumble Head Story – so far

The heath-clad headland of Strumble Head is situated at the north-west tip of the Pen Caer peninsula, some five miles west of Goodwick, in Pembrokeshire. Thus it is positioned at the southern end of the Irish Sea, where it flows into the Atlantic through St. George's Channel.

The first bird record unearthed for Strumble, concerns the second known occurrence of a Fulmar in Pembrokeshire. It was recorded by Bertram Lloyd and Charles Oldham, on the 2nd of May 1930, the previous county record being at Tenby in 1890.

The Fulmar is familiar to us today, so it is easy to forget just how rare it was here in the past. Messrs Lloyd and Oldham did not visit Strumble to look for such a rarity, seeing it was a bonus. They came as part of their study which traced the feeding flights of Manx Shearwaters all the way down the coast from Aberystwyth to the islands of Skokholm and Skomer. Considering the period, this was no mean achievement, involving trains, horse-drawn vehicles and a lot of walking. Bear in mind too, that any optical aids they may have used would have been nowhere near as effective as those available now.

Between 1965 and 1975, David Saunders and a few friends, conducted a series of seawatches at Strumble which were revealing. This was the pioneering era. They detected classic seabirds like Sooty and Balearic Shearwater and Leach's Petrel, species which previously had been associated in Pembrokeshire only with the offshore islands. They established that it was worthwhile seawatching from the mainland.

The 8th of September 1974 was memorable. They counted 45 Arctic Skuas passing in three hours, which was a momentous observation. Just how momentous, can be judged by the fact that, from 1953 up to the time of this record, the average total for the whole of Pembrokeshire was just 10 per annum. In three hours, they had turned upon its head, the perception of the Arctic Skua's status in the county. This set a precedent for reappraisals of the status of other species during following years.

Stuart Devonald was one of this early group and whereas the others went their separate ways, he continued to visit Strumble for many years to come. Jack Donovan independently seawatched at Strumble from 1973 and was the first to identify Pomarine Skua and Grey Phalarope there. He also added a new species to the county list, when he saw two Pink-footed Geese fly by. Jack also visited Strumble for many more years.

During my earliest years at Strumble, I seldom met other seawatchers but as time passed the locality gained in popularity. Most of those I met then were casual visitors but some have become much more, becoming good company and friends. The consequence of all this

attention was the emergence of Strumble Head as the most outstanding seawatching site in Wales. Establishing this though, has taken a great deal of dedication and fortitude.

Seawatching from exposed headlands imposes some physical limitations. It is difficult to keep optical equipment dry when it rains or salt spray occurs and wind chill can be numbing, if you are exposed for too long.

During the Saunders era, his group had access to Ynys Michael, so sometimes sat in the lee of the lighthouse wall. Friendly lighthouse keepers even supplied them with an old car seat and treated them to occasional cups of tea.

This access disappeared in 1980 when the light was automated, so an alternative had to be found if sustained seawatching was to be achieved. Eyes fell upon the derelict World War Two building situated near the edge of the cliffs.

Local people of a past generation have told me that the building once housed a searchlight battery. It was linked to either a radar installation or a hydrophone listening station and to a naval gun, which were sighted on Garn Fawr, the hill immediately to the south of Strumble Head. The plan was apparently, that working in unison any U-boat surfacing offshore at night to recharge its batteries, would be detected by the radar/hydrophones, illuminated by the searchlights and shelled by the gun. Further research suggests something entirely different, it was one of two identical buildings crammed with equipment used to develop air-to-sea radar systems which played a large part in winning the battle against U-boats.

Entering that building for the first time, to check its potential for sheltered seawatching, I was assailed by the reek of sheep. Sheep roamed the headland in those days. Whether they belonged to the owner of the land, Graham Lewis of Tresinwen, or he rented out the grazing, I know not but he used to check on their wellbeing by riding his horse around the area. That is how I met him and secured permission to use the building. I wrote earlier that seawatching at Strumble took dedication and fortitude, it certainly took a strong stomach to endure the reek of that building for prolonged periods.

Eventually the sheep disappeared. A stint with a shovel and a yard broom, soon cleared out the spoil and wind and rain freshened the atmosphere within. For a while this made sitting inside more pleasant but it did not last for long. Tourists visiting the headland began using the building as a lavatory, so it acquired a different stink. During wet weather periods, rain flushed it out but in prolonged dry spells it became very "ripe".

In 1987 the ownership of the headland changed hands. It had been purchased by the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority (PCNPA). This seemed like good news, the area

would be safe from unsuitable development. However, alarm set in when it transpired that the PCNPA intended demolishing the building, because they considered it to be an eyesore.

I wrote to the PCNPA requesting that they reconsider their intentions, because the building had a valuable part to play in the study of migrating seabirds and for observing other sea life, like cetaceans, seals, Sunfish and Basking Sharks. This petition was supported by the Dyfed Wildlife Trust and the Nature Conservancy Council. To their eternal credit, the PCNPA reconsidered the situation and decided to preserve the building. Because it would be accessible to the public, they surveyed the structure and planned how to make it safe.

It was gratifying to be consulted about the plans and refreshing that their attitude was, if the place is to be preserved for watching from, what can we do to facilitate this? Three suggestions were made: to brick up the windows on the landward side, so that the interior would be less draughty; to incorporate the plinths below the front windows into a continuous ledge, which would eliminate the gaps between which had hitherto collected litter and would also be useful to stand tripods on; construct a concrete apron on the seaward side, so that watchers could sit outside in favourable weather. The PCNPA achieved all this, also removing the partition walls of the diesel generator room and the office which created more space in the main room. They filled in the conduit channels through which electrical cables previously ran, so achieving a level floor. They also constructed wood slatted benches and a concrete table in the back room, suitable for picnicking. Finally they fixed information boards to the internal end walls, illustrating which birds were most likely to be seen and portraying other forms of sea life, like cetaceans and sharks.

When all this work had been completed and the walls painted, the PCNPA held a grand official opening of the facility, engaging Bill Oddie to do the honours, who dubbed it the "Hilton of seawatching stations".

The PCNPA has looked after the building by conducting annual structural surveys, they have installed new roof beams, resurfaced the roof and every couple of years repainted the walls. They have also upgraded the information boards, making them more durable and conveying more information.

The "Lookout", as the building has become known, has become worth its weight in gold to seawatchers. The shelter provided, and the configuration of its structure, means long watches can be conducted in weather which would be too much to bear for long if sat out on the headland. It is little wonder that it has become the focal point for those that consider themselves "Strumblers".

The building became pivotal to many who noted the interesting published records of birds seen. So for a period in the first half of the 1980's, when the weather looked favourable for

seeing good movements of seabirds, the building became overwhelmed by visiting watchers. On two notable occasions turning up at dawn was too late to gain a place inside, the building had become full of people while it was still dark. At such times many had to sit outside to leeward of the building. A total of a hundred and twenty watchers assembled on one occasion, most travelling from across the length of South Wales but some from Bristol and Swindon. The Lookout can still become crowded but not to the same degree as in those early days.

Generally, the regular watchers have maintained a friendly attitude to visiting birdwatchers. They have been encouraged to join in, to contribute by calling out when they see something. Now it's all very well calling out a sighting but how do you get the other watchers on to it? The clock system is used, that is straight out to sea at right angles to the building is 12 o'clock, so birds to the right can be at 1 or 2 o'clock and to the left at 10 or 11 o'clock. This gives an approximate bearing, just leaving the problem of distance. Various terms are used, like "close in", "midway", "far out" and "along the tide race", confusingly the regulars saying this even when the race is not running and therefore not visible.

The system has been enshrined in verse by Pembrokeshire's Ornithological Bard, Stuart Devonald:

*Bonxie, 12 o'clock and not far out
From somewhere inside comes the shout
This will cause the cynics to smile
Not far out can mean many a mile
And 12 o'clock, as you will see
Can be from 10 o'clock to half past three.*

So it's not a perfect system but generally works well.

It took a long time watching from that headland before it dawned on me that the birds I was seeing were coming from widespread places. From the north come birds like Great and Arctic Skuas out of Scotland and Iceland, from the north-east Pomarine Skuas out of Russia, from the east Black Terns and Little Gulls from northern Europe, from the south-east Mediterranean Gulls out of Belgium and France, from the south Balearic and Cory's Shearwaters, from the south-west occasional rarities like Little Shearwater and Soft-plumaged Petrel, from the west Roseate Terns from Ireland and from the north-west Sabine's Gulls from the Canadian muskeg as well as Great Shearwaters on their way to breeding grounds in the South Atlantic and Sooty Shearwaters travelling to sub Antarctic places.

What also became apparent was that the variety and volume of birds seen was weather dependent. The weather pattern that all seawatchers crave is a southerly gale blowing for a day or two, with the wind going round to between west and north before abating. Birds pushed into the Irish Sea from the South-west Approaches by the southerlies are able to regain sea room

when the wind veers and pass close in to Strumble Head, sometimes in a day long procession involving a great variety of species and thousands of birds.

It was this weather pattern that resulted in the setting of some record totals on the 3rd September 1983. Over 100 Storm Petrels, 103 Arctic Skuas, 198 Bonxies and 397 Sooty Shearwaters were logged, all against a backdrop of a dawn to dusk procession of at least 40,000 Manx Shearwaters. This was not just a day of statistics but of sheer gripping spectacle.

A similar weather system occurred on the 1st September 1985 resulting in a similar but not quite so lavish, a spectacle. This time there were 72 Arctic Skuas, 70 Bonxies and 230 Sooty Shearwaters but not a single petrel in sight.

However, what a contrary lot we birdwatchers are, for amid all these riches we speculated, what happens if the longed for weather system occurs later in the season? We were to find out.

For instance on the 24th October 1984, there was a day long movement of mixed Razorbills and Guillemots totalling some 35,000 birds. This figure was arrived at by making sample 10 minute counts every hour and extrapolating the results over the duration of the watch. Putting it like that hardly reflects the aura of urgency that long lines of birds rapidly beating their way out to sea conveyed. It was exciting and compulsive viewing.

Those auks were at it again when a repeat weather system occurred on the 17th October 1991. This was a day when a variety of wildfowl also passed, most notably a total of 94 White-fronted Geese. There were also Skuas, including four Long-tailed but additionally an impressive 97 Pomarines. By the following day the north-west wind had only gone round as far as north and had not moderated. Birds continued to stream by, including Pomarine Skuas, a total of 130 by the end of the day. 227 Pomarines in two days was an event that has yet to be rivalled.

Seawatchers gathered in curiosity in mid November 1987 when the same kind of weather system arrived. What effect would the lateness of the date have?

Well, the auks streamed past again, there were a few shearwaters and Skuas and an impressive passage of Kittiwakes, which were accompanied by 76 Little Gulls. A few wildfowl were seen, including Scaup and Brent Geese and flying in line astern of a drake Common Scoter were four drake Surf Scoters, perhaps fresh from America.

The SW going NW weather pattern occurred on many occasions during the 1980's but rarely in the 1990's, it remains to be seen what the future brings in this respect.

It would be an error of judgement if attendance at Strumble Head was confined to only the weather that produces lots of birds. Birds have to migrate whatever the weather and interesting things can be seen under all kinds of conditions.

Sabine's Gulls have for many years been associated with SW gales pushing them up into the Irish Sea from the Western Approaches. Yet in more recent years it has been gales from the north, blowing down the west coast of Scotland and through the length of the Irish Sea, which have pushed them close in to Strumble Head. These conditions have also been favourable for seeing Leach's Petrels, sometimes in fair numbers, like 122 logged on the 16th September 2001.

If there is one thing that seawatchers here on the west coast dislike, it is east winds. There is no way that these will laterally drift birds travelling down the Irish Sea into Cardigan Bay and hence past Strumble Head, like the westerlies do. However there are some redeeming features. If the wind goes to the south-east in late August or early September, impressive numbers of Common, Arctic and Black Terns fly in from the north-west. They seem to prefer travelling into the wind, perhaps it aids aerial stability.

The most spectacular of these events occurred on the 31st August this year, when over 800 Common or arctic and an unprecedented 530 Black Terns passed. When they approached the shore the C & A's randomly turned east or west but party after party of the Black Terns bunched and climbed almost vertically, to disappear into the low clouds. If they then continued to travel into the wind, they would have passed over Pembrokeshire completely undetected from the ground.

Strong winds from due east have produced interesting movements of skuas, like the 40 Bonxies that passed in just two hours on the 29th September 1991. The most likely explanation for this occurrence seemed to be that the birds used the airflow to make a rapid passage overland from the North Sea. The logic of this appeared to be confirmed when over 200 Arctic Skuas passed in the autumn of 2003 which was dominated by strong east winds.

Seawatching in calm weather can also have its moments. Cliff Benson and I were experiencing a day at the beginning of August 1999 when it was so calm the surface of the sea was like a mirror. Not expecting to see a great deal, we were content with watching the Porpoises and attendant Gannets. It was baking hot in the sunshine that day but we were sitting comfortably in shade. Perspiring and uncomfortable looking visitors that passed through from time to time, assured us it was a glorious day. We were not convinced and stayed put. The thought of lugging our gear up the slope to a car that no doubt felt like the inside of an oven reinforced our indolence.

Sometime after lunch a tern was noticed at the 2 o'clock position, flying towards us. It was making very slow progress, a characteristic of Black Tern. If this is what it turned out to be, it would be the first of the autumn but when it reached the 12 o'clock position it was revealed as a White-winged Black Tern, a national rarity and just the 6th record for Pembrokeshire.

One day in September 1997 a light southerly wind was hardly rippling the surface of the sea. It seemed that only muggins considered it worth visiting Strumble in these conditions. The inner tide race was showing, which takes the form of a series of whirlpools, or plates as they are also called. Dip-feeding across these were three first year gulls of three different sizes. The largest was a Common Gull, the middle sized one a Black-headed and the smallest a Bonaparte's Gull from the North Americas. This national rarity was only the second to be recorded in Pembrokeshire, the previous one being shot at Solva in 1888.

To show that these were not just events of Strumble past, on the 23rd August this year, Adrian Rogers and I were sitting in a light southerly wind gathering valuable negative evidence, in other words by ten o'clock we had seen only two Common Scoters and four Sandwich Terns, when out of the blue, angling inshore, appeared an adult Sooty Tern. This was not only a national rarity but a first for Pembrokeshire.

Seawatching at Strumble Head has a larger dimension than seabirds. There are interesting passages of waders sometimes. For instance the majority of Knots recorded in Pembrokeshire in recent years were not on the estuaries but logged passing Strumble Head. Ringing recoveries have shown that Knots migrate out of the North Americas and cross to this side of the Atlantic before travelling on to Africa. Those that are seen at Strumble have probably recently departed from west coast staging areas like the Dee Estuary and they probably do not stop again until they reach the Bay of Biscay or further.

Other waders frequently seen passing are Dunlin, Oystercatcher, Bar-tailed Godwit and Whimbrel, all of which are probably non-stop within the county. Sometimes these movements occur suddenly and are quickly over. For instance, in an afternoon period of about an hour and a half on the 5th August 1998 several large groups of Whimbrels went by, totalling 370 birds. Nowhere else in Pembrokeshire have totals of this order been seen at this season, most large concentrations having been recorded in spring.

Many other species are seen visibly migrating, among them the Common Scoter, *the seawatcher's best friend*, for in periods when nothing much else is passing they can usually be relied on to put in an appearance. Besides being something to look at their habit of bunching up then stringing out means they can be difficult to count, leading to a fair amount of banter among the watchers when numbers are compared.

The total numbers involved far surpasses the small Icelandic and British breeding populations, so the majority are undoubtedly from the Finnish-Russian region. Few Common Scoters have been ringed so recoveries are rare but one ringed in Finland in October was recovered in the Irish Sea in December and another rescued from the Sea Empress oiling disaster, cleaned up and released in March of the following year, was recovered in Russia in July two years later.

The population dynamics of this species are complex, resulting in them passing Strumble over the prolonged period of June to November. Adult males join females on the breeding grounds but normally play no part in bringing up young, instead having mated drift back to winter quarters. When the females fledge their young they travel in company to their winter area, passing here in late October and early November.

So far so good but it is more complicated than that. Common Scoters do not breed until they are two or three years old, so there are always non breeders of both sexes moving around, hence young females being seen passing during the breeding season. Overlying our understanding of this scenario is the realisation that Scoters migrate at night as well as by day and interpretation of what we see becomes more complicated. So far there seems to be little correlation between movements in North Wales and in our area, although it probably occurs to some degree. Instead could it be that most that we see passing Strumble have migrated at night at height overland from the North Sea, dropping down to sea level with the coming of daylight? This may be why the majority passing Strumble are seen in the early mornings. It seems there is much still to learn about the Common Scoter-----***the seawatcher's best friend.***

In the 1980's there were very large passages of Chaffinches and Starlings but fewer pass now. Swallows and House Martins continue to pass in undiminished numbers and Skylarks, pipits and winter thrushes in variable volume.

A few raptors have been recorded migrating in off the sea and because they are only occasional add a bit of spice for the watchers. Honey Buzzards, Hen and Marsh Harriers have been recorded, also Ospreys have been occurring with increasing frequency in recent years. Deciding whether falcons seen are migrating is problematical. Surely Kestrels which are sighted far out to sea which steadily fly ashore are migrating but when it comes to Merlins and Peregrines it is far from certain, for both will sally out over the water to hunt passage birds. Indeed the Peregrines make a habit of it, taking prey ranging from small passerines through terns and waders to Kittiwakes and even Razorbills and Guillemots. Two years ago a Peregrine took advantage of a strong passage of Leach's Petrels to bag at least four in less than two hours.

Grounded night migrants are also a feature of Strumble Head, be it in the adjacent fields or the scrub filled valleys immediately east and west, both forming lead lines to the gardens at Tresinwen. Rare birds encountered have included Pembrokeshire's 1st Dusky Warbler, 1st Hume's Leaf Warbler, 1st Pallid Swift and 1st Alpine Accentor, as well as scarce birds like Rose-coloured Starling, Serin, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Ortolan Bunting and Short-toed Lark.

Truly Strumble Head has much to offer to those prepared to put some time and effort in, so if you have not tried it why not give it a go? Be warned though, you might just become hooked on watching migrating birds, maybe in detecting the various cetaceans that occur or become

fascinated by tropical Sunfish and there is always the danger of succumbing to the magic of the total Strumble Head experience.

Graham Rees

Talk given to Pembrokeshire Birdwatchers' Conference 2005