

Sea-watching – Some Reflections on Birding the Waves

Nick Whitehouse

Few of us can claim to be full-blown sea-watching aficionados, those experienced experts, who are to be found several times a week, almost every week of the year, in all weathers, perched on various headlands around Britain, looking out to sea, observing and monitoring the movements of sea birds around our coastline.

Most of us dabble periodically in this rather specialised form of birding, most probably when late summer and autumn storms move through the South-West Approaches, improving the chances of seeing the scarcer shearwaters and petrels, and again in the narrow windows of spring when skuas power their way around the British Isles north to the Arctic. We might take a pelagic boat trip off the Isles of Scilly and then focus on enjoying the rest of the migration season seeing a great range of other visitors including waders and passerines from Europe, Asia, and America. There is after all only so much we can each fit into the time we have.



Find a good spot, get comfortable...

Inevitably though, a more limited seasonal or ad hoc approach to sea-watching means we must refresh and renew our skills from time to time to achieve that inner feeling of confidence that we are making the correct identifications in what can be a tricky pursuit, with pitfalls a plenty for the unwary. What might be a useful approach to take to achieving and maintaining a good standard of sea-watching?

A good start to developing and honing your skills is to adopt a slightly more year-round approach, which you can do locally, especially so here in Dorset with its wonderful coastline. The first step is to appreciate that sea-watching isn't just about shearwaters, petrels and skuas – fabulous though these top end prizes are for British birders. The whole calendar also produces movements of divers, grebes, wildfowl, waders, gulls, terns, Gannets, Fulmars and auks, with some of these present year-round or for months at a time.

You needn't go straight in at the deep end, seated amongst the 'avids' on a windblown promontory in autumn. A more incremental approach, building confidence and knowledge steadily can help. Regular walks around the harbour, along the beach or along the cliff tops often produces good views of our commoner seabirds. Try watching these birds at close range, then following them as they go out to sea. How far out it is before identification at species level becomes difficult? At more distant ranges, you'll have to rely as much on the 'jizz' of the bird, before just that bit further out identification to species level is unsafe and you must leave it at "large gull sp" or "auk sp" for example. Try it the other way round; pick out a bird far out to sea and see how near it has to

approach for you to narrow down its identification. Useful exercises to help gauge your personal range. In any sea-watch, a proportion of the birds moving offshore will be these more local and familiar species and your earlier practice session will mean you can then factor them in or out more efficiently - maybe either counting them for monitoring purposes if you have the capacity or if it's not possible to keep abreast of everything on the move, temporarily putting them to one side as you focus more on your true 'quest' species.



Razorbill-Guillemot-Gannet, passing Portland Bill

Try writing a few descriptions of familiar flying sea birds in varying conditions. See how many of the features described in the field guide or which you know should be there, you can truly see with certainty on a bird. It's not easy, especially if the target moves in and out of view, between the wave troughs, in the brief time it takes to fly past and is gone. Time a few fly pasts; you don't get long. If you're lucky you may get some extra time if a bird settles or remains 'blogging' offshore. The combination of structure (comparative size and shape) and behaviour (e.g., flight mode) are always important, but even normal 'jizz' can change, for example in strong winds, when less characteristic 'shearing' becomes more frequent for many species. Plumage tones can alter significantly in different light conditions. Awareness of these factors and adapting accordingly comes with experience, as does being prudent by quietly and patiently getting your 'eye-in' early in a sea-watch.

The use of modern-day cameras can help capture images, sometimes just 'record shots' but useful in supporting your identification. This may not be straightforward of course, especially in gusty conditions, when it can be difficult to hold your binoculars, scope or camera still.

Spend time focusing on similar or closely related species, especially the most abundant of these which you can use as a mental marker from which to compare something that is similar but subtly different. A sound knowledge of Manx Shearwater, Arctic Skua and Kittiwake are just three examples. An appreciation of their variability (ages, phases, behaviour etc) will provide useful benchmarks from which you can discern differences from scarcer kindred species. Frequency of encounter is important. Whilst it's wonderful to have seen 5,000 Sooty Shearwaters off California once ten years ago, the more enduring learning arguably comes from noting much smaller numbers every year for ten consecutive years somewhere off the British coastline.

Practicing regularly, in all weathers, through the year, will help improve your game and help you get match fit. Remember too that it's not possible to identify every bird. Just as with raptor watching or 'vis-mig' sessions, on some occasions a bird is best left as unidentified. Acknowledging that each of us has an 'error rate' (in everything we do, we're human!) also helps – don't be afraid of making mistakes. Learning from these ultimately produces a much better sea-watcher, in terms of accuracy, experience and integrity.

Visit the best sea-watching sites in the county. Don't be afraid to ask the regulars sitting close-by what 'that bird' was or what's happening in terms of the profile of birds on the move. Most will be happy to assist and can be great mentors. Sharing the learning experience is better and ultimately more fun. The banter at a group sea-watch can be very educational and entertaining, light relief for the sometimes intense sessions. You'll pick up on helpful tips such as how best to scan, using natural or man-made markers, scope widths and 'the clock face' to locate a bird. You'll begin to find the flight lines for key species, their shearing heights and distances, the best altitude to get the best angle on the moving birds, the effects of the tide on the scale of movement and proximity of birds passing offshore and many other factors which can vary and affect the quality of your observations. Follow the weather charts to predict when birds might be on the move – it doesn't always work but certainly helps. Read about the seasonal movements of our great ocean-going birds. Understanding what species will be on the move from the South Atlantic northwards and vice versa, or in and out of the Mediterranean, or to and from the Arctic (either side of the Atlantic) will widen your awareness of what could be coming our way and when. County Reports provide summarised accounts of the annual highlights for each species whilst books such as George Green's "The Birds of Dorset" examine many years' worth of data. Having got the bug, you may want to delve further into the sea-watching literature, perhaps including works by Ashley Fisher and Bob Flood and there's even a new Seabirds identification book on the horizon to whet our appetites, by Harrison, Perrow and Larsson. Day to day live-time information appears on birding social media - useful if you want that level of immediacy and to alert others further along the coast if there's something special offshore.

Becoming more and more hooked on sea-watching can happen, and if you get the chance, try to visit other great sea-watching locations around Britain, Europe and more globally. Having done the prep work, you'll then feel much more confident out on the headland with the regulars – you might even become one yourself. Perhaps you'll discover your own sheltered spot and begin building a patch list and some useful long-term data. Most days will be routine inevitably. But memorable days will come; a fantastic passage of terns, shearwaters or skuas perhaps or the fly-past of a much sought-after personal ambition bird. New horizons await every day, so above all, simply enjoy the magical spectacle of sea-watching.

I'm no expert sea-watcher myself, but I keep trying and practising. It's a great leveller. I tell myself all I've said here and then assure myself its good for the spirit too.