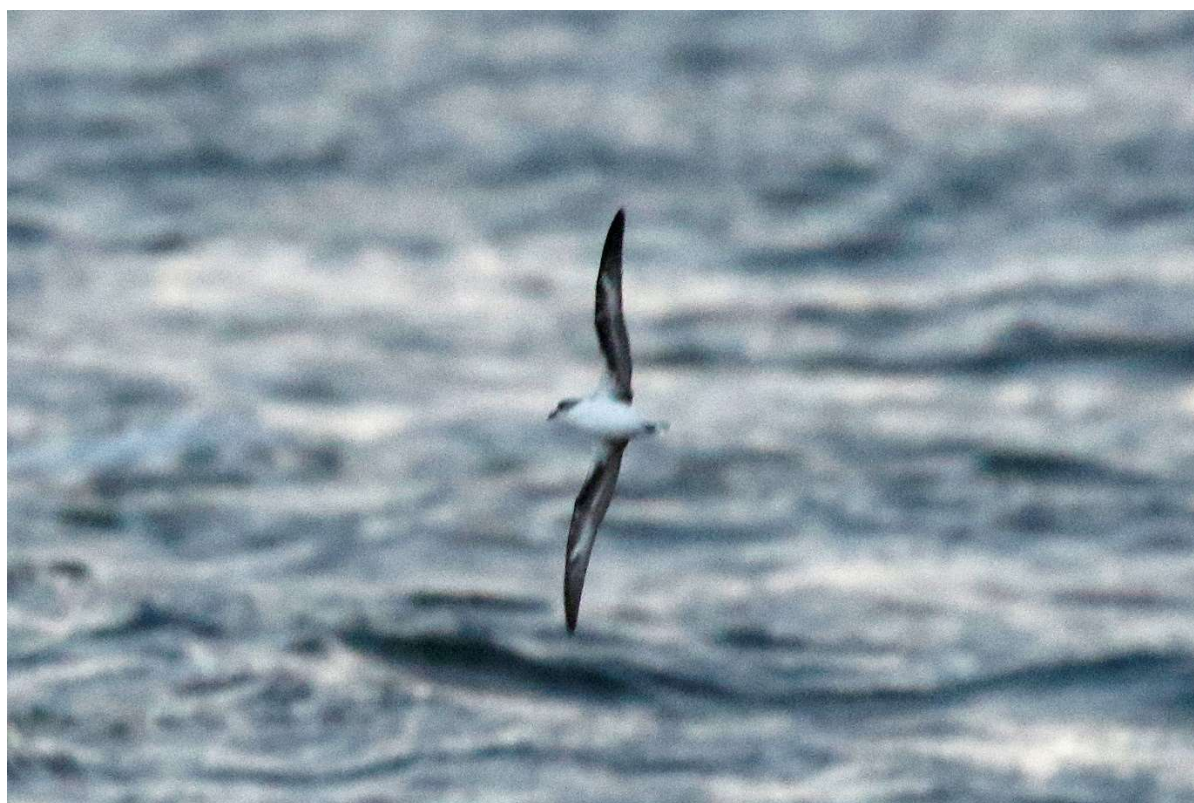


Overview of sightings from the Scilly Pelagics 2020 season, July–October

This report covers sightings made from short-range pelagic trips aboard *MV Sapphire*. The season started late with the first trip on 6 July, due to the first Covid19 lockdown, and the last trip on 22 October. Scheduled Birder Special Pelagics ran Friday to Monday inclusive throughout August, including the annual Oriole Birding weekend charter, and were mainly fully booked. Highlights of the year included a Zino's Petrel and two Humpback Whales. Notable was a good passage of Wilson's Storm-petrels July to September, with the latest ever record logged on 21 September, and an August Leach's Storm-petrel. Great Shearwater passage was good, but Cory's passage was rather light. Another 'Scopory's' Shearwater was photographed. Representation of other seabirds was typical and close views offered photographers a great opportunity to add to or to improve upon their seabird portfolio. (Photos Joe Pender unless stated otherwise.)

Zino's Petrel *Pterodroma madeira*

The undoubted highlight of the season was a Zino's Petrel on 30 July, observed for 40 seconds during the late evening steam back to St Mary's quay, not far from Bishop Rock. If accepted, it will be the first record for Scilly and for Britain (photo Danni & Zac Hinchcliffe). For the full story of the sighting search Google for the 'Zino's Petrel, Finders in the field'.



Wilson's Storm-petrel *Oceanites oceanicus*

Birds were observed on the majority of trips throughout the core season, July–August. The first record was on 7 July and the last two records, on 14 and 21 September, were the latest ever records off Scilly. The early records involved relatively large birds, perhaps northern representatives from this clinal taxon. To start with, fresh juveniles and moulting 2c+ birds were seen, but by the end of August adults had largely completed moult, while 2c birds were

just commencing moult. **In July**, Wilson's was found on five out of eight trips, with a total of 15 birds mostly made up by 4 on 27 July and 6 on 30 July. **In August**, Wilson's was found on 19 out of about 26 trips, involving at least 77 birds, averaging about three birds a trip. The bulk of the birds were seen between 14 and 24 August with the total tally of 58 birds. **In September**, one on the 14 beat the latest Scilly record by 5 days, but this was superseded by an extremely late bird on the 21.



Leach's Storm-petrel *Hydrobates leucorhoa*

On 22 August, a bird moulting its outer primaries joined the chum slick for about 5 minutes, and was observed foraging amongst 4 Wilson's and over 50 European Storm-petrels. It probably was undertaking its second prebasic moult, given progress in primary moult on this date. Leach's is scarce to rare off Scilly and extremely rare in August (photos Lee Gregory).



European Storm-petrel *Hydrobates pelagicus*

A standard feature of all pelagic trips is the tiny 24 g European Storm-petrel. As the vernacular name suggests, most birds are seen during stormy weather, and our highest counts were on the leeward side of the islands, only a few miles out, during south-westerly gales, keeping clear of the roughest seas. In such conditions, over 500 birds were counted over chum very close to MV *Sapphire* on both 21 and 22 August. Other large counts included c 150 birds on 27 July, c 350 birds on 30 July, c 300 on 6 August, c 200 on 10 August, c 100 on 18 August, c 150 on 23 August, c 100 on 24 August, c 250 on 27 August, and c 150 on 29 August. Numbers began to drop off to a handful of 10s per trip at the very end of August, down to less than 15 per trip from 12 September to 7 October, and single digit numbers after 14 September, with the last sighting on 14 September.



Cory's Shearwater

Observations were spread across 27 July to 27 August, with 45 birds counted on 10 trips. The only double figure count was 16 birds on 27 August, which included a 'Scopory's' Shearwater (Cory's/Scopoli's). This represents a rather quiet year for the species.



Great Shearwater

Observations were spread across 27 July to 22 October, with 798 birds counted on 22 trips. There were two large counts, 344 birds to the south on 18 August and 140 birds to the southwest on 22 October (with 130 Sooty Shearwaters), the latter were the first birds seen since 14 September and were a genuine surprise. A research vessel south of Scilly found a similar number the next day. Other counts of over 10 were all in August, a month in which birds were found on 17 days.



Sooty Shearwater

Observations were spread across 9 July to 22 October, with 310 birds counted on 26 trips, so the most frequently seen of the larger shearwaters. Typically, numbers per day were between

one and four until late August when passage increased mainly to between seven and nine per day. Heavier passage on 13 and 14 September respectively yielded 60 and 50 birds. Subsequently, three or four were seen on 29 September, 1 October, and 7 October. A surprising 130 birds were found on 22 October (with 140 Great Shearwaters).



Manx Shearwater

Twenty or so were seen on many trips but numbers increased post fledging as birds moved southwest through Scillonian waters, with 250 birds on 7 September and 12 September, 350 birds on 13 September, and 250 birds on 14 September. Small numbers were seen thereafter with the last of the year being three birds on 22 October.

Balearic Shearwater

A typical showing of this Critically Endangered shearwater. Post breeding, most birds in our region head to the coastal waters of south Devon and south Cornwall, but a small number visit Scillonian waters. Seen on five days involving seven birds: one on 16 August, two on 18 August, two on 23 August, one on 29 September, one on 1 October.



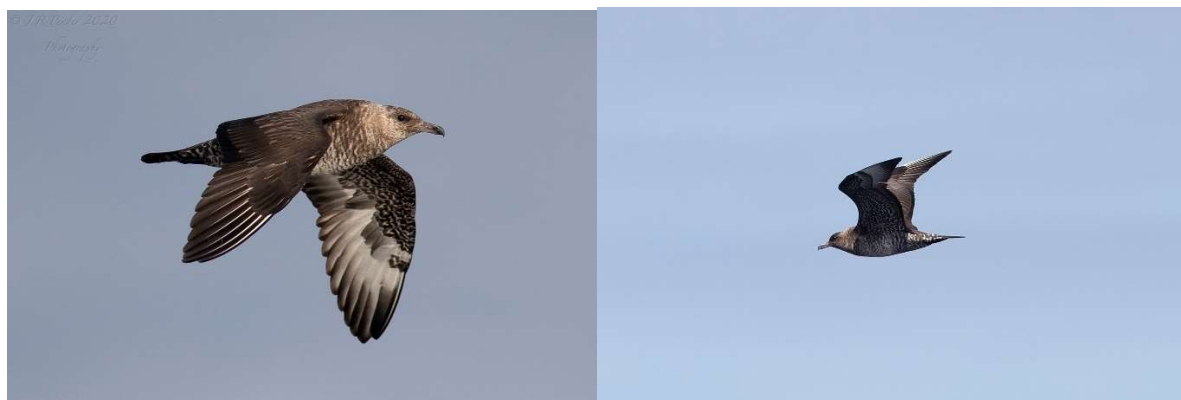
Great Skua

As usual, birds were present in small numbers throughout most of the pelagic season. Age groups changed with the progression of months and broadly speaking involved second-cycle birds July into August, adults from mid-August, and juveniles from late September. One on 9 July surprisingly was the only record that month. Seen most trips in August with counts from one to four, except six on 14 August and nine on 23 August. A similar story in September and October, though no more than five were seen on any one trip, except 11 on 22 October.



Pomarine Skua

Scilly rarely witnesses large passage of the smaller skuas, also known as jaegers, but most are seen very well. This year, birds were seen on five days involving six birds: a first-summer type on 14 August, two fully spooned adults on 18 August, a first summer type on 23 August, one on 29 September and one on 1 October.



Arctic Skua

Similar to Pomarine, with sightings on seven days involving nine birds: singles on 11 August, 23 August, 24 August, 29 August, 31 August; two each day on 7 September and 22 October.



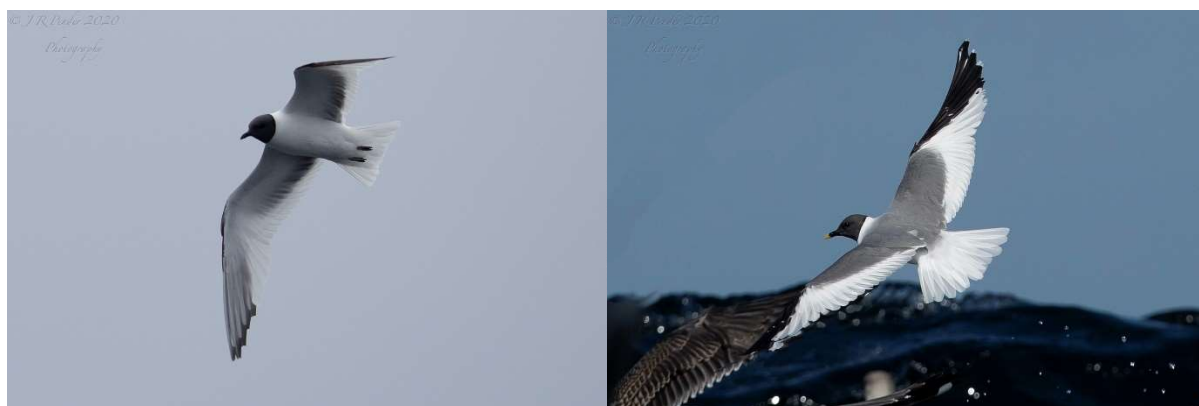
Long-tailed Skua

Considered a rarity prior to the operation of short-range pelagic trips, but now considered uncommon to scarce, comprising mainly immature birds. Sightings on four days involved seven birds: first-summer type on 16 July, adult on 21 August, three juveniles and a first-summer type on 23 August, a juvenile on 30 August.



Sabine's Gull

A reasonable showing this year with a variety of plumage types emphasising the difficulty of ageing birds based on the current literature, other than juveniles and fully summer plumaged adults. Sightings on seven days involved 16 birds: singles on 11 August, 13 August, 15 August; six on 21 August, one on 22 August, five on 23 August, and one on 28 August.

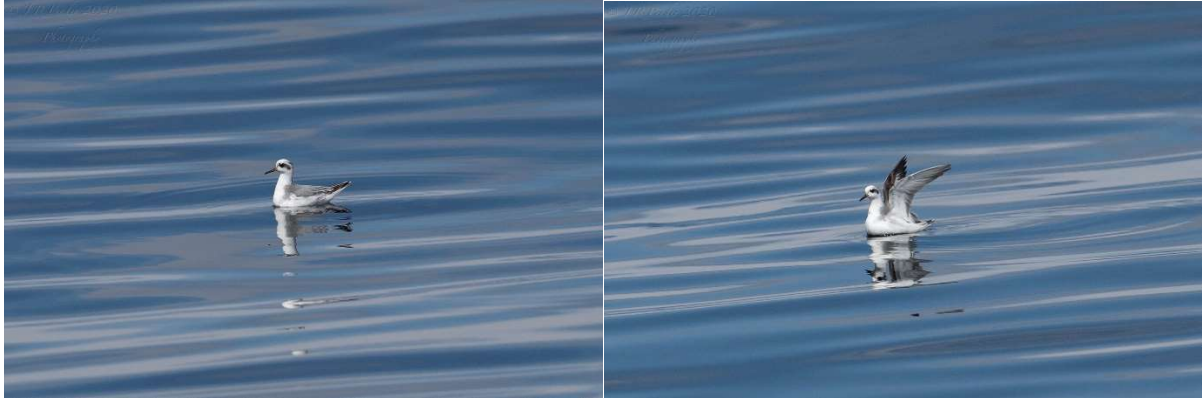


Black Tern

A difficult species to add to your Scilly list and pelagic trips in August promise by far the best opportunity to connect with one. This year singles were seen on three days: 15 August, 28 August, 31 August.

Grey Phalarope

Sightings involved the usual small numbers early to mid-autumn with no large number late autumn, even after several events of promising stormy weather. Sightings on six days involved 10 birds: singles on 15 August, 30 August, 5 September, 12 September, 13 September, and five on 1 October.



Humpback Whale

The very last of the scheduled Birder Special Pelagics on 31 August came up trumps with what was presumably a mother and a calf. Humpbacks are extremely rare in Scillonian waters and so the sighting was greeted with much excitement.



Minke Whale

Somewhat disappointing was just one record this year, on 22 October, though there was some compensation because the whale showed very well for over 10 minutes.



Bottlenose Dolphin

A very showy pod of at least 14 animals was seen on 13 September, feeding with much tail slapping.

Common Dolphin

During the first Covid19 lockdown there were hundreds south of St Mary's in April and May, but they had dispersed by the time pelagic trips commenced on 6 July. Indeed, none were seen at sea in July, but thereafter sightings were regular and typical for Scillonian waters. Sightings ranged from 13 August up to and including the last trip of the year on 22 October. Seen on 12 days, numbers mostly between 10 and 50, but 100s were seen on 15 August, 80–100 on 7 September, and 120 on 13 September.

Harbour Porpoise

Regularly seen between and around the islands, especially on departure and return of pelagic trips.

Atlantic Bluefin Tuna

Sightings have been scarcer and numbers fewer following the 'bumper years' of 2017 and 2018. Two were recorded on 6 August, six on 17 August, a more impressive 40 on 18 August, six on both 5 and 13 September, and 20+ on 22 October, the latter associated with 140 Great Shearwaters and 130 Cory's Shearwaters.



Shark tagging

Mainly in August and September, many participants witnessed the 'catch, tag and release' of Blue Sharks, with a couple of Porbeagle Sharks.

Other

Other fascinating sea creatures were seen, including Ocean Sunfish and various jellyfish.