

SANDWICH BAY BIRD OBSERVATORY HOLIDAYS

THE ISLES OF SCILLY

APRIL 27TH TO MAY 5TH 2018



Tresco from Halangy Down

Friday April 27th : The journey down and the crossing on 'The Scillonian'

Most of the group had assembled at the Bird Observatory the previous evening for the overnight coach journey down to Penzance, picking Erica Wells up at Hatton Cross *en route* and with a couple of comfort stops at service stations on the way. Most people got at least *some* sleep on the journey. The weather was not very good, with relentless rain all night, which only eased after dawn as we arrived in Penzance. We had also received news that the ferry crossing was going to be delayed due to the strong winds forecast for around the Land's End area and the state of the tide. So, we had to kill time in Penzance for a few hours before embarking at 10.45 and sailing at about 12 noon. A nice male **Common Eider** in the Penzance inner harbour was a pleasant sight, as always. It is a solitary bird which seems completely lost and has been resident around the harbour for several years now.

The group was made up to its full complement as Peter Roberts joined us on the quayside, having made his own way down to Penzance from his home on Islay in Scotland. The two and a half hour crossing to Hugh Town on St. Mary's was forecasted as going to be rough, with a steady south-east wind swinging round to the north-east during the journey. Members of the group took their various medical precautions and chose where to set themselves up for the

trip, some opting to stay below in the warm but about half of the group stayed up on deck and were able to begin the group's bird-list with sighting of many **Manx Shearwaters**, **Northern Gannets** and **Northern Fulmars**. A small group of **Common Guillemots** were also seen and a few **Sandwich Terns** were in Penzance Bay, plus a juvenile **Shag**. Four **Whimbrel**, calling well, flew over 'The Scillonian' as we left the harbour.

The crossing was not too bad as it turned out, probably as we were largely 'running with the wind' for much of the time. On arrival at Hugh Town it was just a short walk to a good welcome at our hotel and an efficiently-run check-in, followed by a very much-appreciated late lunch of soup and sandwiches. Later, we went for a short familiarisation walk down through Hugh Town, along Porthcressa Beach and back by way of Town Beach. Porthcressa Bay had a fine winter-plumaged **Great Northern Diver** feeding offshore, along with a couple of **Atlantic Grey Seals**. All along the length of Town Beach many racing gigs were beginning to be lined up on their trailers, ready for the races which are such a feature of the summer season on the Scillies, with the first events due to start in about a week's time.

Back at the hotel we had a decent evening meal before an early night for most, to catch up on some sleep.

Saturday April 28th: Tresco

A good night's sleep was had by all, I think, and everyone partook of a varied breakfast on a day which promised well in terms of weather. The wind had dropped, though still cool from the north-east, but it was bright and sunny and warm when we were walking in sheltered spots.

Our destination to-day was Tresco, so we made our way to the quay, along with what seemed like a lot of other people, for the 20-minute run in 'The Sapphire' across to the jetty at Carn Near on the southern side of the island. From here we walked across an area of maritime heath with some interesting plants in flower, including a single specimen of the uncommon **Lousewort** and the abundant **Three-cornered Garlic**. **Kaffir Fig** was in flower in places and large areas were covered in *Fascicularia bicolor*, unfortunately not showing its spectacular bright blue and yellow flowers at this time of year. The curious shrubby **Wire Plant** (*Muehlenbeckia complexa*) was found on the roadside. It is a plant from New Zealand which only grows in the wild on the Scillies and a few places in Cornwall. Here too were specimens of the **Wood Spurge** (*Euphorbia amygdaloides*) which, unlike the suggestion from its name, grows out in the open on heathland on the Scillies. The **Gorse** which covers patches of these heaths is the **Western Gorse**, (*Ulex gallii*). There were only a few birds on the heathland - a male **Stonechat** was seen and several **Meadow Pipits** and, on the grassy area of the former helicopter landing field, there were several rather distant **Northern Wheatears**. They looked large and were probably of the Greenland race, of which we saw some definite examples later in the day.

At the Abbey Castle Gardens the group dispersed somewhat, with some people going into the Gardens straight away, some to the café for coffee and nice cake and others to continue their

walk, using the helpful maps supplied by the Tresco Estate. Those of us who went into the café gardens were rewarded by the arrival at the same time of a male **Golden Pheasant** and a **Red Squirrel**, which proceeded to feed around our feet, taking an especial interest in Erica's polenta cake crumbs. The **Squirrel** even jumped up on to the table, to avoid the competition from the **Pheasant** (which was, by the way, looking in a poor way with plucked neck and a broken tail feather – presumably from some territorial dispute in which it had come off much the worse). Several other **Golden Pheasants** were reported by members of the group on their walks near the Abbey. A **Common Buzzard** and a **Chiffchaff** were also seen from the café garden while we there and several of the very tame and confiding **Song Thrushes** which are such a feature of the Scillies.

Back on the walk again, the Abbey Pool held a male **Pochard** and a male **Gadwall**, with more **Gadwall** reported from the Great Pool as well. The end of the Great Pool added several rather fine **Black-tailed Godwits** in summer plumage and a pair of **Eurasian Wigeon**. By the roadside all around the islands we found lots of the yellow **Bermuda Buttercup**, which is not a buttercup and which doesn't come from Bermuda. It is a member of the *oxalis* family and originates from South Africa! On many of the granite walls, there was another yellow-flowered plant called **Fleshy Yellow Sorrel**.

Most of us took lunch in the very warm, sheltered garden of the New Inn at New Grimsby before spending our remaining time on the island by taking a walk up a typical Scillies lane lined with wild flowers and then up onto Castle Down. This is an exposed area of maritime heath with expansive views across many of the northern islands and rocks of the Scillies, northwards out to the Irish Sea and, in the other direction, south across Bryher and away out towards the Western Approaches of the English Channel. There were a number of **Wheatears** up here on this bleak, tundra-like landscape – rather appropriate because these were certainly **Wheatears** of the Greenland race, much larger than our own British race, almost looking thrush-sized. They migrate through Britain on their way to their breeding grounds in Greenland a month or more later than the British race, to allow time for the ice and snow to have started melting on their Arctic breeding grounds. Also migrating through were a number of **Barn Swallows** and the occasional **House Martin**, but the best single bird was a **Short-eared Owl**, seen briefly near to Cromwell's Castle.

On the boat journey back to St. Mary's the odd **Cormorant** and **Shag** were seen perched up on rocks and a couple of **Razorbills** were found. Several **Whimbrel** flew over. Unfortunately sightings of a **Puffin** proved to be a hoax – it is apparently a ceramic one which someone has put out there in the channel!

Sunday 29th April: On St. Mary's – Town Beach – Porthmellon - Porthloo – Juliet's Garden – Porthloo Lane – Carreg Dhu Gardens – Lower Moors Nature Reserve – Old Town Café, Bay and Churchyard – Peninnis Track – Peninnis Head – Porthcressa – Porthcressa Beach – Hugh Town.

Another day of bright sunshine with the north-easterly breeze keeping things a bit cooler in some more exposed places that we visited - but, overall, it was good weather to be out walking.

We set off along Town Beach, stopping from time to time at the far end to examine the plant life emerging from the stone walls along the roadside, then turned off past the sandy beach of Porthmellon and on up to Porthloo. A few gulls were out on the rocks at low tide and one of them proved to be our 'target' bird, an immature **Iceland Gull**. It was mostly seen hunkered down and resting on rocks above the beach, but did do a wing-stretch or two. A very pale creamy-white bird with no trace of dark on the wing tips, but a dark bill. Several **Iceland Gulls** have spent the winter on the Scillies, on leave from their place of origin in Northern Greenland (despite their name, they do not actually breed in Iceland). Also in Porthloo Bay were a few each of **Curlew** and **Whimbrel**.

From Porthloo it was a short climb uphill to Juliet's Garden for a sit down with a stunning view back towards Hugh Town and very welcome hot drinks and more nice cake from the good selection there. The usual **House Sparrows** were in attendance on 'crumb patrol' and it was nice to hear, and see, a singing male **Greenfinch** in the trees behind the café, a bird which has all but vanished from mainland Britain where it was once commonplace. Offshore, a couple of the racing gig crews were getting some practice in for the coming Championship over the next weekend and, to judge from the appearance of some of the crews as they came back in from their practising, they looked exhausted and in need of the practice, or perhaps of fitness training?

Dragging ourselves away from Juliet's we continued further into the middle area of St. Mary's, walking along roads lined with wild flowers. One bulb field had a fine display of **Corn Marigold**, a plant of arable land that it now almost unknown on the mainland. There were a few of the commoner birds around – **Linnet**, **House Sparrow** and a single **Spotted Flycatcher**. At Carreg Dhu community gardens we found a few warblers, but no large numbers, just a few each of **Willow Warbler**, **Chiffchaff** and **Blackcap**. The best bird seen here was a male **Pied Flycatcher** glimpsed in the trees.

Walking down the hill from Carreg Dhu brought us to Lower Moors and the wetland nature reserve there. In the late Autumn this can be a very good area for sheltering migrant birds but to-day it was very quiet, with very few small birds seen and the pools only held four **Mallard**, so we continued walking a short distance further to emerge at Old Town. The waters of the Bay there were glittering in the sunlight on an incoming tide and there were views across towards Peninnis Head and the first sightings of the granite rock formations which are such a feature of this area, in this case, the jutting-out slab called The Pulpit. Lunch-time refreshments were taken at Old Town Café (the pasties were especially favourably-commented on) before we walked round to the churchyard with its many interesting

memorials to mariners lost at sea and also the grave of Harold Wilson. A **Rock Pipit** was seen on the rocky beach in this area, but little else.

We then followed the coastal footpath up on to Peninnis Head, the most southerly point on St. Mary's, with its beacon set amidst strangely-shaped weathered granite boulders. A good sea-watching place in the right conditions in the Autumn, but to-day we had to content ourselves with views of several of the large Greenland-race **Northern Wheatears** which were feeding on the short turf around the boulders. There was also a steady trickle of **Barn Swallows** through to the north, while on the walk back into Hugh Town a small group of four **Whimbrel** briefly lifted off from their high-tide roosting site on the rocks below.

Monday April 30th: St. Martin's and The Garrison

The weather continued in the same vein to-day, cool and bright, warm in sheltered places and without any rain at all. Much better that what we heard was happening back in Kent...

We crossed the channel to St. Martin's and landed at the jetty at Lower Town, having seen not much on the way for the usual scattering of **Shags** and one or two **Cormorants**. Once on St. Martin's we walked through the fields of the southern side of the island at first and then turned left, climbing up onto the much more exposed and dramatic north coast. There were few birds about in either locality, in fact – resident **Blackbirds**, **Wrens** and **Greenfinch** in the farmed area, and a **Stonechat** and some **Linnets** up on the northern cliff-tops. A solitary **Raven** passed over and there was a steady northward movement of **Swallows**, skimming over the ground as they went by.

We took our lunch-break at The Bakery- large fresh local crab rolls for those fortunate enough to be near the head of the queue - and then went down to the Higher Town jetty and Par Beach. Here we found the target bird of the day, the immature **Laughing Gull**. This wanderer from North America didn't look in terribly good condition and permitted quite close approach but it was feeding itself on scraps along the tide-line and was able to fly, so perhaps it *will* have a future. Five **Whimbrel** were further along Par Beach and the passage of **Swallows** and a few **House Martins** continued. On the way back to St. Mary's some of the group were lucky enough to see two different **Great Northern Divers** out in the Sound, a single **Northern Gannet** went by and, nearer to Hugh Town harbour, there were three **Razorbills** close to the launch.

After a rest-break, most of the group went for a late-afternoon walk around The Garrison. Lots of military history and fine views at almost every turn, but very few birds to be seen. Three **Rabbits** were noted, one of which was pure black. This variant is well-known from The Garrison and it is assumed that it is the result of a gene passed on by some person's escaped pet bunny in the past.

Tuesday May 1st: St. Agnes

The weather forecast proved exactly right to-day, when we awoke to grey skies and a strengthening wind from the west or south-west, which brought steady light rain by late morning and through the rest of the day.

There was no boat going to Annet in these deteriorating weather conditions, so most of the group got the boat out to St. Agnes instead, while some members went to Tresco to look round the Abbey Gardens at a more leisurely pace. The ritual of ordering lunch-time pasties at The Turk's Head was the first activity on St. Agnes and we then walked up towards the Gugh Bar. More discussion of the nature of granite took place as we examined the wide range of differently-coloured boulders strewn along the Bar, with their mixtures of glassy quartz, black mica and pink or white feldspar. Some of the group went out and actually set foot on Gugh itself, if only briefly.

Little of ornithological note was seen in the morning as we wandered slowly up the concrete road towards the centre of the island, arriving at The Coastguards Café well after normal coffee time, but by then the rain had set in more steadily and it was a welcome respite to take cover for a while. Others in the group were exploring further-flung parts of the island, across towards Troytown and out onto the exposed Wingletang Down, at the southern end of the island. A male **Cuckoo** had been calling just before we arrived at the Coastguards and a short burst of the female's reply on the iPhone app. had the bird flying right past us and then perched up calling for a while. It doesn't always work, but on this occasion, it did!

Back at The Turk's Head for lunch-time refreshments and then we walked along the northern side of the island past Porth Killier and on to Periglis, before coming back across the island by way of Parsonage Lane. Some **Rock Pipits** were along the rocky bays on this side of the island and we had good looks at a couple of **Ruddy Turnstone** here too, plus some **Curlews** and **Oystercatchers**. A small flock of about a dozen **Linnets** were mostly male birds. We were all back at the quay in good time for the return to St. Mary's on 'The Meridian'.

Wednesday May 2nd: St. Mary's

We awoke to a fine clear day with little cloud but with the wind blowing steadily and briskly from the north-west and these conditions continued for most of the rest of the day. This did not bode very well for seeing lots of birds to-day – a north-west wind is just about the worse possible direction it can come from in terms of bringing birds on to the Scillies, whatever the season. A check on the Scilly Boatmen's notice-board on the quayside showed that no trips were going to Annet and that Bryher was only going to have a return boat at 4.30 p.m., so the group decided to stay on St. Mary's.

The previous evening there had been talk of hiring electric vehicles from Scilly Carts so this is what we did, with a selection of 2 to 6-seater converted golf buggies available. Most of the group squeezed themselves into their seats and off we went in a rather bizarre convoy towards the east of the island. Our first stop was at Higher Moors Nature Reserve where we disembarked and walked down the footpath towards the sea at Porthhellick. The pools on

Higher Moors did not hold much apart from a few **Gadwall** and a **Coot** and Porthellick was even quieter. Still, it was pleasant enough to spend some time wandering about on the upper beach here before retracing our steps to the waiting buggies. A swing up through Normandy and on past Maypole and before we knew it we had arrived at the Kaffeehaus for a late-morning tea or coffee and authentic apple strudel for those that appreciate these things. The owner of the place is a lovely woman of Austrian origin and the food was truly great.

On then for a short distance, the buggies eating up the road at 10 miles an hour, before we again parked up and took a trail off towards Halangy Down. Here there were wonderful views across towards Tresco and beyond, but the main interest were the archaeological remains on the site – a well-preserved 4,000 year old chambered tomb from the early Bronze Age, called Bants Carn, and some Iron Age hut circles lower down the slope. As we left the site, a couple of us noted a very small plant growing on the tomb and this turned out to be a very rare plant indeed, found nowhere else in Britain, the **Scilly Pigmyweed**, (*Crassula decumbens*).

Returning to the buggies we completed our tour of the lanes on the north-east side of the island by driving down past Newford Duck Pond (a rarities hot-spot in some Scilly Octobers) and then back down to pick up our previous route near the top of Holy Vale. The road took us all the way back to Old Town Bay where we had a group discussion about what people wished to do for the afternoon. Most decided to re-visit Carreg Dhu Gardens, while David and Fiona were transported off to far Pelistry Bay on the north-east coast. Those of us who went to Carreg Dhu found it to be quiet but we sat there for perhaps half an hour or more before a short walk took us to the Longstones Centre. More refreshments were taken here!

From this point, we went our separate ways - some walked back towards Hugh Town while others drove up to Porthloo Beach, where the **Iceland Gull** was confirmed as still present and there were about 15 **Whimbrel** and a few **Curlew** on the beach.

Thursday May 3rd: Annet and St. Agnes

The wind had moderated overnight and there was just a light to moderate swell, so the trip to Annet was 'on' for most of the group who wanted to go out to see if we could find any **Atlantic Puffins**. A couple of members of the group stayed on St. Mary's and, after breakfast, we all said out goodbyes to Peter Roberts, who was flying back to the mainland later in the morning.

The journey across to Annet was largely uneventful apart from sightings of the occasional pilot's gig out there getting in some practice before the weekend's big events. A single **Guillemot** was seen and, nearer to Annet, a couple of **Fulmars** were on the water. On arrival in the lee of Annet we could see more **Fulmars** up on their nesting ledges at the top of the low cliffs and both **Herring** and **Lesser Black-backed gulls** were obviously nesting, plus a few **Greater Black-backs**. At first it looked as if we were not going to be lucky with the **Atlantic Puffins**, but we did a run down one side of the island to look at a lot of **Atlantic Grey Seals** hauled out on the rocks and on our return to the north end, managed glimpses of a single **Atlantic Puffin** as it came in low over the water from the open sea. The boat then went further

out and we found another two birds on the water, which gave longer and better views – a new bird for some members of the group. In the distant past, Annet held a major colony of these birds. Conditions were different then, but let's hope that they do make a big come-back on this island.

From Annet the boat took us to the quayside below the Turk's Head on St. Agnes. The main part of the group walked from there down Barnaby Lane and out onto Wingletang Down, a wild, exposed area of **Gorse** and maritime heathland. There were a number of commoner resident birds out here – **Wrens**, **Blackbirds** and **Linnets** – and at one time a **Cuckoo** appeared and perched up on a granite boulder, calling loudly. Others in the group later saw a female bird.

The café at The Coastguards had run out of food just before we arrived so we continued down to Troytown at the western edge of the island and consoled ourselves with rather nice varieties of ice-cream made from milk from the farm's herd of Jersey cows, some of which we later saw munching their way through the lush grass in one of the many enclosed fields on the island. On the way back along the north coast of St. Agnes we did not add anything new to our bird list, but had nice views of a **Whimbrel** at the top of the beach at Porth Killier.

Some of us took advantage of the free time until the 4.30 p.m. departure of the 'Golden Shower', plus the fine warm weather, to sit outside the Turk's Head and have a drink before joining the boat. A very pleasant conclusion to a good day.

Friday May 4th: St. Mary's and the return crossing to Penzance

Our last day on The Scillies was a 'free day' for members of the group, with time to walk round areas near Hugh Town which perhaps hadn't been visited before; do some shopping or visit the island's museum, a fascinating 'glory-hole' of a place with far too much to take in at one visit! There was also much of interest to be seen along Town Beach as preparations for the weekend's gig-racing Championship really began to get under way. Later in the day, as we boarded the Scillonian for the return, we were treated to the spectacle of about fifty of the gigs, all with women teams, rowing out from the harbour and away out to the open sea off St. Agnes, from where they would then race back. Unfortunately, we missed the really exciting race itself as the Scillonian steamed away from St. Mary's.

On the crossing, with seas as calm as they ever get in this area, we had quite a number of seabirds – **Manx Shearwaters** mostly, but also several **Northern Fulmars** and **Northern Gannets** and small groups of **Guillemots**. Off Cornwall, the number of **auks** seemed to increase, with birds flying out to the open sea and some of these appeared to be **Atlantic Puffins** – perhaps about twenty in total. The crossing also gave us distant views of a pod of **Common Dolphins** and the briefest glimpses of a fin breaking the water surface which could only have belonged to a **Minke Whale**.

The return journey in the coach was uneventful, with several stops to allow for the driver to meet legal requirements, and we arrived at Sandwich Bay at about 6.30 in the morning with

the sun just rising over the Straits of Dover – the last time we had seen it, it was setting out in the Western Atlantic, beyond the Isles of Scilly.....

Ken Chapman

May 7th 2018