



TOUR REPORT
Scilly Pelagics
7th-10th August 2026

Trip Summary

The weekend produced an excellent combination of seabirds, marine mammals and memorable wildlife encounters around the Isles of Scilly. The three pelagic trips produced particularly good numbers of storm-petrels, with approximately **50 Wilson's Storm Petrels** and **55 European Storm Petrels** recorded overall, alongside a good selection of shearwaters, including **17 Great Shearwaters**, three Sooty Shearwaters and two Cory's Shearwaters.

The contrast in weather conditions provided an interesting comparison between the trips. Saturday's stronger south-easterly winds proved especially productive for storm-petrels, while the calmer conditions on Friday and Sunday favoured marine mammals and produced some excellent close views of Great Shearwaters.

Marine wildlife was a major feature throughout the weekend, with Harbour Porpoises, Short-beaked Common Dolphins, Risso's Dolphins, Ocean Sunfish and Blue Shark all recorded. The undoubted highlight was a **Minke Whale**, which eventually surfaced alongside the boat and provided a memorable encounter for the whole group.

Friday 7 August

Weather: Sunny and warm throughout, with very light winds of around 3 knots, a flat-calm sea and excellent visibility.

We met as a group punctually at Penzance Ferry Terminal, boarded and headed onto the rear deck. The ferry departed on time and made a good, smooth crossing in calm, sunny conditions.

The crossing produced the expected seabirds, including Gannet, Fulmar, Manx Shearwater and Storm Petrels. Although distant, the Storm Petrels were thought to be European Storm Petrels. Shag, Common Tern and Mediterranean Gull greeted us on arrival at St Mary's Harbour.

Marine wildlife was well represented, with Harbour Porpoise, Short-beaked Common Dolphin and a bonus Ocean Sunfish all recorded.

After checking into our accommodation and meeting for lunch, the group enjoyed some free time before reconvening on the quay for the first pelagic trip of the weekend aboard *Sapphire*, skippered by Joe Pender, accompanied by seabird expert Bob Flood and members of his team.

Leaving St Mary's Harbour, we passed Tresco and the western end of St Martin's before heading towards our destination, the Seven Stones Lightship, approximately 12 miles north-east of St Mary's. Conditions remained warm and sunny, with a mirror-like sea.

Initially, the calm weather favoured marine mammals rather than seabirds. Several Harbour Porpoises were seen, together with around 20 Short-beaked Common Dolphins, including several individuals bow-riding alongside the boat. Other notable sightings included four Risso's Dolphins, an Ocean Sunfish and a Blue Shark.

Throughout the trip, bread, fish oil and chum were used to attract seabirds. Eventually, the first European Storm Petrels appeared, followed by the main target species, Wilson's Storm Petrel, with three seen during the trip.

Larger shearwaters proved more elusive. A single distant Great Shearwater and a Cory's Shearwater were seen, but both remained silhouetted and offered unsatisfactory views. Sooty Shearwater fared better, with three birds seen reasonably well. The final bird gave particularly good views, the low evening sun highlighting the species' characteristic silvery underwing as it flew past and away from the boat.

One particularly photogenic bird was a recently fledged Puffin, or "puffling", which sat calmly on the sea surface and allowed the boat to drift close enough for excellent views and photographs.



We returned to St Mary's at around 9.30 pm beneath a glorious sunset, retracing our route past St Martin's and Tresco.

Saturday 8 August

Weather: South-easterly winds around 15 knots, with a mixture of cloud and blue sky and occasional sunshine. Moderate sea conditions.

The stronger breeze created much more favourable conditions for storm-petrels, and the day's trip, approximately eight miles south-east of St Mary's, proved to be the most productive of the weekend.

A healthy number of gulls followed the boat as we departed St Mary's, attracted by the bread trail laid behind us. The increased wind appeared to concentrate feeding birds around the slick, and Wilson's Storm Petrels responded particularly well.

The fish-oil slick created ideal feeding conditions, with multiple Wilson's Storm Petrels visible simultaneously along its length. Their distinctive feeding technique could be observed repeatedly at close range. Birds hovered into the wind while pattering across the surface, using their long legs and feet to skim or "pogo" across the water as they fed.



The stronger wind appeared to be particularly important in maintaining this activity. It enabled the storm-petrels to remain over the slick and around the boat for longer periods, producing prolonged and often spectacular views. At times, double-figure numbers of Wilson's Storm Petrels could be seen feeding simultaneously. In total approximately **50 Wilson's Storm Petrels** alongside around **40 European Storm Petrels** were recorded during the day's trip.

The close views also provided an excellent opportunity to compare the two species. European Storm Petrel showed its characteristic fast, bounding, bat-like flight, with an erratic and flicking wingbeat. Wilson's Storm Petrel appeared steadier and more buoyant, with shallow wingbeats interspersed with noticeable flat-winged glides.

Identification features could also be seen, including the darker upperwing and white underwing line of European Storm Petrel, compared with the pale upper wing panels of Wilson's Storm Petrel. The latter's noticeably longer legs, extending beyond the tail in flight, were also evident.



The trip also produced an excellent selection of shearwaters:

- **4 Great Shearwaters**
- **1 Cory's Shearwater**
- **2 Sooty Shearwaters**
- **Approximately 300 Manx Shearwaters**

The Great Shearwaters provided much better views than on the previous day, allowing key identification features to be appreciated. The single Cory's Shearwater remained brief and somewhat distant, although identifiable.

Other birds included five Common Terns and a single adult Kittiwake.

The wildlife highlight beyond the birds was a Blue Shark estimated at around 150 lb, which appeared right beside the boat, tugging at the chum bag, and gave exceptional views.

Sunday 9 August

Weather: North-westerly winds around 5 knots, with sunny conditions, a flat-calm sea and excellent visibility.

Conditions had reverted to those experienced on Friday, creating a more challenging pelagic day. We headed north-east once again, following a similar route and eventually reaching a position around nine miles north-east of St Mary's.

A small contingent of gulls followed the boat, including at least two Mediterranean Gulls.

Although we had hoped for improved views of Cory's Shearwater, this unfortunately did not materialise. Great Shearwater, however, featured prominently, with twelve birds recorded. Several sightings involved two birds together, and some close fly-bys in good light provided the best views of the weekend, which also included one bird sat briefly on the sea.



The presence of increasing numbers of Great Shearwaters through August is consistent with the species' annual post-breeding dispersal from the South Atlantic into the North Atlantic. Great Shearwaters breed on islands in the southern Atlantic, including the Tristan da Cunha group, before undertaking a long northward migration. Their occurrence is strongly influenced by weather systems, sea conditions and the availability of prey.

The 12 birds recorded on Sunday, following four on Saturday and a distant individual on Friday, provided an interesting progression through the weekend and demonstrated the value of repeated pelagic trips during the late-summer period.



The lack of wind reduced storm-petrel activity considerably. Despite laying a chum trail as usual, only around **15 European Storm Petrels** and **five Wilson's Storm Petrels** were recorded. Nevertheless, some good views were obtained, although sightings were often brief and occasionally distant.

Other notable bird sightings included a fly-by Sooty Shearwater, a Bonxie (Great Skua), a second Puffin and a first-calendar-year Kittiwake.

Marine mammals once again featured strongly. Sightings included:

- **6 Risso's Dolphins**
- **20 Short-beaked Common Dolphins**
- **20 Harbour Porpoises**
- **1 Ocean Sunfish**

Arguably the wildlife highlight of the trip though was a Minke Whale. Initially spotted some distance away, the boat approached cautiously as the whale surfaced repeatedly. Eventually it appeared alongside the vessel, surfacing several times in full view of the group. The silence on board as everyone watched and admired the animal spoke volumes about the quality of the encounter.



Monday 10 August

Weather: Sunny with clear blue skies, light winds and calm seas.

A free day allowed the group to split up, with some remaining on St Mary's while others travelled to nearby Tresco.

On St Mary's, birders were rewarded with exceptionally close views of a Wood Sandpiper at Porth Hellick Pool.



Four Greenshanks and four Ringed Plovers were also present on the beach, although the Pied Flycatcher seen at St Mary's Church the previous day could not be relocated.

On Tresco, attention focused on the Great Pool, where birding was particularly productive. Wood Sandpiper again featured prominently, with eight birds present. Other species included Green Sandpiper, Common Sandpiper, Greenshank, Redshank and up to ten Little Egrets.

The group reconvened during the afternoon for the return sailing to the mainland. Unsurprisingly, the crossing took place in flat-calm conditions. Birding was relatively quiet, with the expected Manx Shearwaters and only a couple of distant, brief Storm Petrels recorded, though two Turnstones flying alongside the boat were a surprise.

Several pods of Short-beaked Common Dolphins were encountered, together with Harbour Porpoise. The dolphins proved especially popular with passengers on board.



We arrived back in Penzance on schedule, disembarked, collected our belongings and said our goodbyes before beginning our respective journeys home.

Thanks are due to Steve and Tony for allowing me to include several of their excellent photographs in this report.