

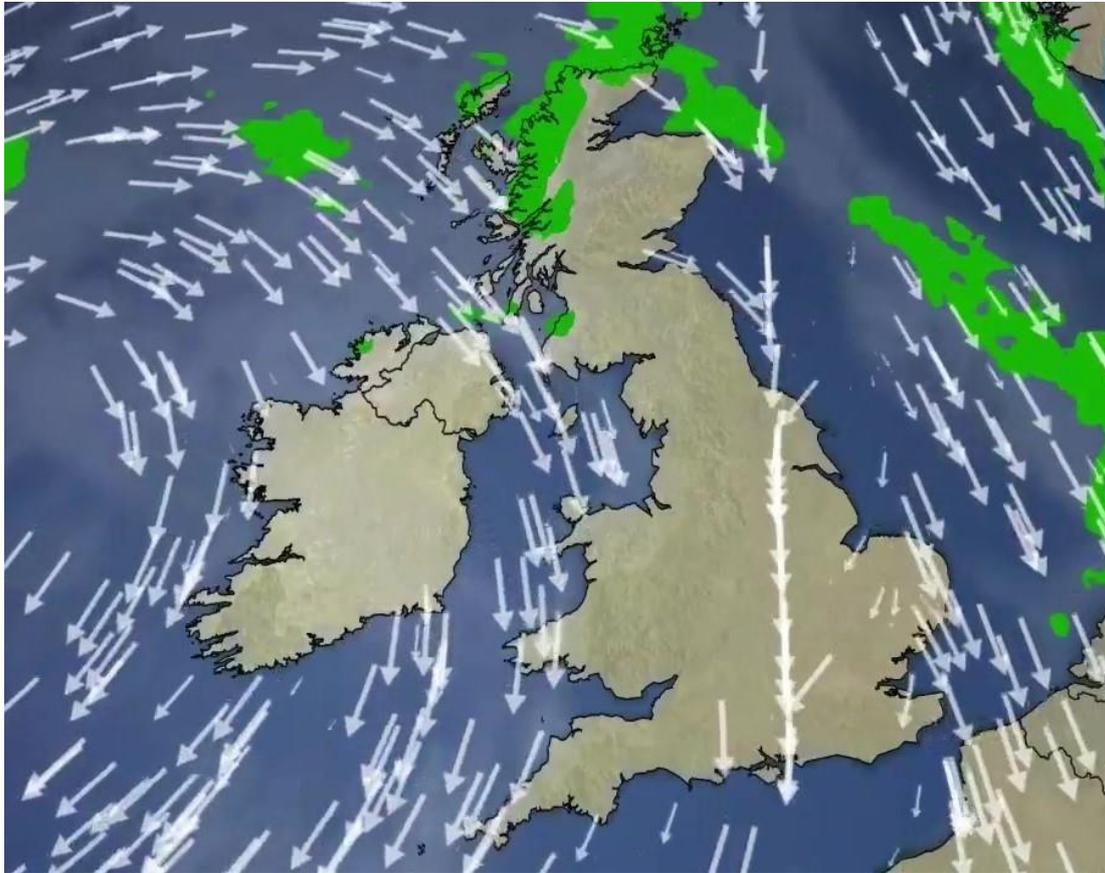
A Seawatching Big Day

Predicting weather patterns is often fraught with danger and disappointment. Couple this with the hopes of seeing seabirds off the Kent coast on a weekend when most of us are actually not working is a real rarity in itself. Fortunately as the days passed early in the week the weather was still looking good for Sunday 23rd September 2018 and, sure enough, late on Saturday 22nd it was quite clear that many were poised and ready for operation North Kent coast.



Bonxie by Simon Mitchell

I woke up a little late on the 23rd but an early tweet from Dominic Mitchell forwarded on by Howard Vaughan indicated that Oare at dawn there were Great Skuas or Bonxies as I'll now refer to them as, the Shetland term. Knowing that others would be already in situ at various localities from North Foreland to the Thames Estuary I thought I'd better get my act together and don my waterproofs. Just before I left the house looking outside it was dead calm so I phoned Mark Chidwick to ask him if it was windy outside as I knew he'd be out. The reply was pretty blunt and indicated it was indeed very windy and raining heavily the predictions were coming true and I needed to be on the coast soon. I opted to drive straight to Shellness on Sheppey as I knew it would potentially be a good place to position myself and there was the added advantage that I might find shelter.



Weather pattern for the weekend

Once on Sheppey I was able to witness the wind being actually very strong and it was raining heavily. The roads were deserted, the drive down the road past Muswell manor and onto the horrendous potholed Shellness track was certainly memorable. Every time I drove through a big pothole the water would be whipped up by the wind and over the bonnet of the car, more akin to a boat and bough waves. Once at the car park or should I say, 'temporary lake' I quickly got out of the car and jogged down to the shelter of the hamlet wall. The weather was truly horrible but at the same time just what we all wanted in autumn, you can forget your Indian summers, many birders pray for storms, heavy rain and seabirds.

In position out of the wind and rain glued firmly to the hamlet wall I scanned out into the Swale and sure enough, not a single bird anywhere to be seen, here we go again I thought, same old story, the seabirds have missed Kent and me again. My initial disappointment was lifted when I scanned across in the murk to the south shore of the Swale and just about see some vague distant dark shapes that I believed most likely Bonxies.

Messages coming through from Oare and Grenham Bay, indicated seabirds were moving but mainly Bonxies and Gannets, both in good numbers. Another scan from across the Swale and I saw Manx Shearwaters then shortly after Sooty Shearwaters but other distant shapes were much closer to the south shore. New tactics were in order so I decamped and literally ran in the rain to the blockhouse where I the spent the remainder of the day till mid-afternoon.



The Blockhouse, Shellness by Barry Wright

Once in position comfort levels were restored as I could now stand up, drink copious amounts of tea relaxed in the knowledge that I would remain dry, warm, sheltered from the wind and see birds if they passed. Messages constantly updated by other people along the coast indicated most birds were moving westwards hugging the coast and in turn 'should' enter the Swale. One of the advantages of watching from Shellness is that birds often fly close by and secondly you often get two bites at the cherry as birds enter the Swale then exit again later. A major disadvantage is that ideally one needs an all-terrain vehicle at times to drive down the track as well as getting in position requires braving the elements and an often flooded path.

Oare has the advantage of a Hide to overlook the Swale thereby staying warm, dry and as more observers try to squeeze in, veritably tuna tin like... equally birds often fly in and out of the Swale and with the wind the views obtained were spectacular as birds cut in very close to the Hide. Other localities favoured on the day (and other days) for sea watching are Seasalter yacht club, Warden point, Grain foreshore, Lower Hope point at Cliffe, a series of often well used, old and salubrious shelters at Tankerton, Grenham Bay and Palm Bay on Thanet complete with empty beer cans and cigarette butts. The places chosen often reflect geographically where birders live or historical they've had good luck before, in fact one birder, Andy Taylor has the advantage of being able to wash the dishes and watch seabirds from the comfort of his home at Tankerton. The other site I've yet to mention is of course the towers at Reculver a well-used location that has the advantage of some shelter from the wind and rain, plenty of parking nearby, now pay and display whilst at high tide as with most sites the views of the birds are very close indeed.

At Shellness I was now joined by Danny Chesterman and Gary Howard, whilst others remained in position at their chosen watch points. Viewing from Shellness in a strong North Westerly results in the birds flying into the wind and being pushed into the Swale mostly following the south shore therefore closer to the observers at Oare. Further east where most other observers were, the birds were moving at times very close to the shore thus aiding with identification of the Skuas especially. Seawatching is by no means always straightforward, as observers often don't get a second chance at identification with individual birds seen for a limited time as they rapidly fly past. Another issue with seawatching is how the light can change an individual's perception of plumage tones with pale birds appearing dark in some lights and bleached out almost white in other lights. I indicated that birds being close often help with Skuas identification yet strangely enough distant Skuas or indeed Shearwaters when seen more distantly are actually easier to identify based on apparent size and structure.

As I was no longer Billy no mates at Shellness having other observers present watching seabirds can lead to lots of discussion, changes of opinion, frustration at not getting onto birds called out but ultimately helps pass the time away

and second, third opinions help with identification.



Pomarine Skua by Dominic Mitchell

Establishing now that the birds were following distinct routes into and out of the Swale it became easier to pick out birds as they passed by. It would be difficult to give exact numbers of seabirds passing the North Kent coast that day but all four Skua species were recorded, Bonxies, Arctic, Pomarine and Long-tailed Skuas in that order of magnitude. Gulls wise, a few Kittiwakes were moving plus two adult Sabine's Gull, Sooty and Manx Shearwater, a few Leach's Petrel, plenty of Gannet, Sandwich Terns, a Short-eared Owl migrating to Shellness point, Common Scoters and a few Wigeon.

The Shearwaters were recorded at many localities along the North Kent coast, some Manx affording spectacular close views almost coming overland whilst the Sooty Shearwaters remained in the Swale flying back and forth for over an hour whilst some were seen close past Reculver and Tankerton.



Leach's Petrel by Terry Laws

The Skuas still seemed to be hugging the south shoreline but after the early large numbers of Bonxie in the morning some flocks numbering forty plus birds many were coming into the Swale very high up maybe several hundred metres above the water. Pomarine Skuas pretty much all adults at this time of year many still retaining the long characteristic adult tail spoons were literally almost flying over the Hide at times at Oare whilst at Shellness birds were a little more distant but one particular group of five birds was still sitting offshore when we left. Looking south east from the blockhouse we tracked one flock of Skuas which we realised comprised five adult Pomarine, an Arctic Skua and a diminutive Long-tailed Skua. This particular flock initially was quite low over the Swale but then gained height and we lost them really high up looking south way over Graveney Marshes. Overland Skua passage is not uncommon and presumably accounts for those Skuas that find themselves well inland on reservoirs, rivers and sometimes fields.



Long-tailed Skua by Simon Mitchell

Long-tailed Skua is the jewel of the Skuas and almost expected in autumn if winds are right but is also often very tricky to identify yet current literature has aided greatly as has the advent of digital photography allowing clinching features to be seen. The long-taileds tend to be juveniles whilst Arctic Skuas were adults and juveniles, with juvenile Pominines extremely rare at this time of year.

The late great Dave Davenport was a migration and seabird obsessive who established some of the migratory routes of Pomarine and Long-tailed Skuas long ago and his jovial and knowledgeable presence are still greatly missed. I recall Dave once seawatching off Dungeness and proclaiming in his deep voice that he had an Arctic Skua that he proceeded to take a fish off of a Sandwich Tern, needless to say the rest of us with him couldn't even see the Skua let alone the attack on the Tern.

Other observers including Dick Elvy now often watch off Shellness but Dave's absence on this day made us realise just how good he was at predicting seabird movements almost to the hour.

Leach's petrels seen off Shellness were very distant and mid channel in the Swale yet remained in the area flying back and forth for thirty minutes or so whilst the views off Reculver were much closer. The Sabines Gulls both adults flew into the Swale one past the wader roost at Shellness and onwards to Oare



Sabines Gull by Alan Fossey

Looking at the day's sightings, four species of Skua were recorded off Grain, Oare, Shellness, Tankerton, Reculver, Grenham and Palm Bay possibly involving up to three individuals, though we'll never know for certain as some birds may cut in from further out at sea before heading towards the coastline whilst Arctic Skuas were in good numbers, I think seventy off of Palm, Walpole Bay was the highest. Pomarines came through in small groups with large numbers recorded off Reculver to Oare. Bonxie is the really difficult one to estimate but it's conceivable that up to five hundred were seen past the coast, a truly remarkable number. Simon Mitchell was at Oare that day along with Dominic Mitchell and others, and have fantastic photos.



Manx Shearwater by Simon Mitchell

The Margate area watchers had the lion's share of the Shearwaters with thirty seven Sooty and forty five Manx seen. Duck numbers were generally low with a few Eider, Wigeon and Arctic Terns featured amongst the movement with a few LittleGulls.

There were few records of displaced seabirds at sites inland, though following this article is a short note from Dave da Silva, detailing one of these.

As is often the case the next day was much quieter as the weather had changed, a few Skuas were still in the Swale but as a rule it tends to happen mostly on one day, the combination of north west winds, heavy overnight and early morning rain, poor visibility and the birds are pushed in from the North Sea close to the Kent shoreline. The low cloud cover accounted for some birds going up River as far as Rainham in Essex as they evidently got disorientated and unable to see extensive open water. As we finished up along the coast it was brilliant sunshine very little wind and the seabirds stopped bar a few Skuas relaxing in the Swale. The double blow of strong winds in quick succession, high tide and birds following deep water channels account for the exact route the birds tend to take hence the choice of location that individual chose to watch from.

It was a fantastic day that all those present will fondly remember and I hope the photos attest to the superb views that some of us were getting of these seabirds. I don't ever recall seeing all four species of Skua in one scope field of view. The Skuas this particular day rarely harassed Terns, though the odd Arctic would make rapid chase of the Sandwich Terns, most of them simply ploughed along over the sea hardly deviating their path. This is by no means a comprehensive account of the day or all the reasons as to why this was a particularly good day. It's just a quick resume of events and I'm grateful to many that helped me out with information, thanks to all of you, I won't list names as I may inadvertently miss someone out, cheers to all

Barry Wright