

Storm Petrels in Kentish waters



Storm Petrel, Deal Pier by Richard Collins. (The white underwing bar is a good field mark of this species)

At the beginning of June following a day and night of strong westerly winds, a number of **Storm Petrels** were found inshore between Dungeness and Thanet. This provided a good opportunity to catch up with this elusive species and a maximum of 121 were recorded between the 7th and 9th June. More details can be found in Chris Hindle's excellent Summary.

This was not entirely unprecedented as in the last week of May 2006, following a severe storm, there was a substantial westerly passage of this species through the channel, with a maximum of 424 birds recorded between the 20th and 28th May.

It is very difficult to assess the true numbers involved in these movements as Storm petrels may well move with tides to exploit local food resources and could easily back track during darkness and potentially be recorded again, but generally the maximum number gives an indication of the scale of the movement.

What makes these events extraordinary is their scarcity; a look back through KOS records reveals that these are the only years when Storm Petrel records reached double figures. In general, only two or three are recorded in a year, mostly in the autumn sea watch period where they are markedly less frequent than Leach's Petrel. This in part reflects the breeding distribution of the species, with Storm Petrels having very large colonies along the western seaboard of Europe from Ushant on northern France to Iceland.



Storm Petrel, Calf of Man, 1993 by Norman McCanch

I have been fortunate to ring hundreds of Storm Petrels over the years at offshore sites such as Skomer, South Bishop and Calf of Man. Experience there suggests that these recent influxes probably involve what are known in petrel ringing circles as 'wandering non-breeders'. Like many seabirds Storm Petrels do not breed until they are about three years old and probably do not visit their natal colony in their first year of life. In subsequent years they will return but not land, and form large aggregations which visit breeding sites throughout the north Atlantic range. Journey times can be amazingly fast, I had two returns from one nights ringing on Skomer, a bird recaptured on Ushant only nine days later, another to St Kilda in only four days!! This influx of non-breeders tends to happen after breeding birds have arrived at colonies and settled down to breed, usually from mid-summer onwards, so it seems highly probable that the birds recorded in the channel this year (and in 2006) were part of this cohort of 'wandering non-breeders'.



Storm Petrels, Skomer 1976 by Norman McCanch

Norman McCanch

