MARINElife CLdN 2025 Survey Report

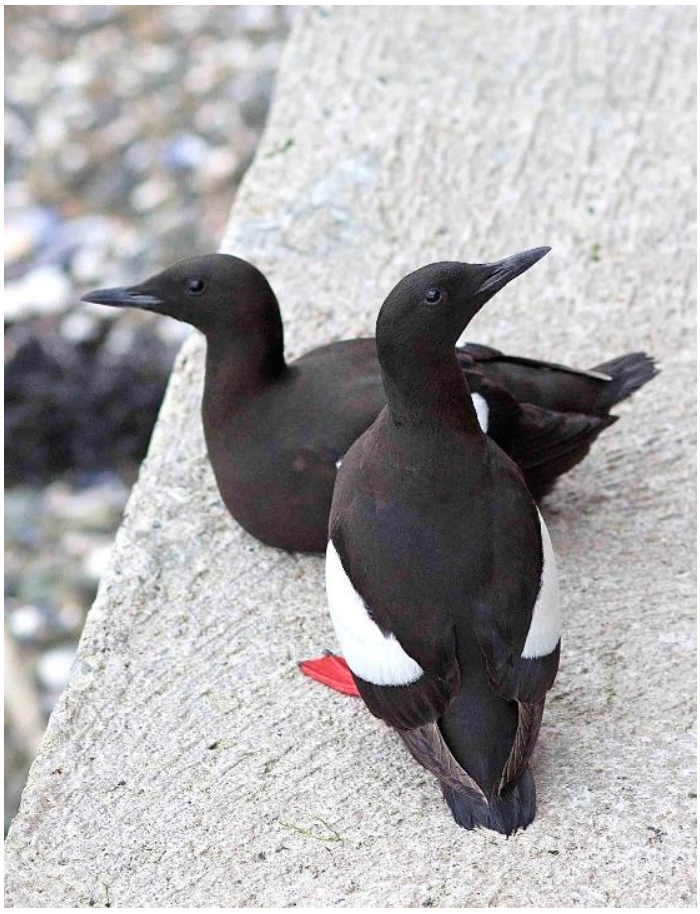
Compiled by Rob Petley-Jones, MARINElife Route Coordinator (Irish Sea)

Introduction

2025 was yet another very successful year in the partnership between MARINElife and CLdN. This has allowed us to continue the valuable study of seabird and cetacean populations and movements in the Irish Sea, a vitally important sea area for Britain's internationally significant population of marine wildlife.

MARINElife surveys were carried out monthly on the two routes of **Heysham to Dublin** and **Heysham to Warrenpoint** using our long-established standard methodology. As in 2024, the **Heysham to Dublin** route was also used for MARINElife's **Volunteer Seabirds at Sea (VSAS)** programme, where the European standard **European Seabirds at Sea (ESAS)** methodology was employed on one survey each month.

These Irish Sea survey routes are just part of MARINElife's network of survey routes that operate in UK waters, which are building increasingly valuable data sets on marine wildlife encounters and is broadening our knowledge and understanding of how marine wildlife is performing. This data is being used by MARINElife Research to report on the state of UK marine wildlife and so inform appropriate decision making and policy development on issues affecting UK waters.



Black Guillemot – summer plumage
Photo: Rob Petley-Jones

MARINElife Standard Surveys

The **Heysham to Dublin** route remains extremely popular with MARINElife's volunteer Researchers, with all monthly surveys fully booked with teams of two Surveyors. Unfortunately, the October, November and December surveys had to be cancelled, due to issues for one of the teams and because of stormy weather.

The **Heysham to Warrenpoint** survey route was also very popular with our volunteers, and all surveys took place.

Both routes are well suited to the initiation of new volunteers to MARINElife's research team, and have allowed some of our experienced Senior Surveyors to train new Surveyor recruits in the use of the survey methodology and protocols that need to be followed on board CLdN vessels.

MARINElife VSAS Programme

The VSAS programme from **Heysham to Dublin** continued though 2025 with surveys on the last Saturday of each month. This survey route has been very popular with VSAS survey teams, though we have a been a little unlucky with weather in 2024.

Future VSAS surveys will be carried out with surveyors using the new VSAS recording app, which makes sending data on to the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) much more effective. The data is used by JNCC for inclusion on the ESAS (European Seabirds at Sea) dataset for seabird research.

MARINElife survey team at work on the bridge

MARINElife website

Reports from all completed surveys can be viewed on the MARINElife website at **https://www.marine-life.org.uk/survey-reports**

The 2026 Surveys

Littke Gull
Photo: Peter Howlett

Heysham to Dublin

January and February

Pleasantly calm seas made the January survey to Dublin a very comfortable trip and there were sightings of some of the Irish Sea's special winter birds, including a small flock of **Little Gull**, as well as several **Grey Seal** and a couple of **Harbour Porpoise**. The calm conditions allowed fog banks to develop in the afternoon, which restricted the team's chances of recording more distant wildlife encounters.

February sea conditions were more typical of winter months with a sea state of five, and a significant swell. This did not prove a problem for Rhys, a new recruit on his first survey, who was perfectly at ease with the slight ship movement as the vessel sailed south of the Isle of Man! His reward was his first sighting of **Harbour Porpoise**, despite these small cetaceans being tricky to spot in anything over a sea state of 3! A small flock of **Common Scoter,** several winter plumaged **Mediterranean Gull,** and a solitary **Red-throated Diver** just out from Dublin were a bonus.

Low seabird numbers can be expected in winter months when the weather is reasonably settled, when birds are more likely to be out in the oceanic waters of the Atlantic. Such was the case this year, with winter numbers of seabirds like **Gannet**, **Fulmar**, and **Kittiwake** being fairly low.

March and April

Calm weather conditions gave the survey team a comfortable passage to Dublin and back. Although seabird numbers were fairly low, there were still reasonable numbers of **Kittiwake** and **Fulmar** seen. However, the highlight was of 18 **Common Dolphin** coming to ride on the bow wave of the Power as the vessel passed the Isle of Man.

Common Dolphin pod
Photo: Peter Howlett

The survey team also reported a **Harbour Seal** just out from the Dublin Port breakwater. This small coast-hugging seal is less frequently recorded in the Irish Sea than the much larger and easier-to-spot **Grey Seal**, so this was a valuable record from the team.

An early flight of three **Manx Shearwater** was an advance indication of the many thousands yet to arrive after their migration from their non-breeding feeding waters off Brazil and Argentina. The first Manx Shearwater of the year is always a good experience – a bit like seeing the first **Swallow** of Spring on land!

As no trained team was available for the VSAS survey later in March, this was run using the standard MARINElife survey methodology and produced a welcome sighting of another less frequent species in the Irish Sea, a **Puffin**! There were also signs of active migration of land birds, with sightings of **Pied Wagtail** and **Meadow Pipit** passing the bridge on their way north over the sea!

A small pod of **Common Dolphin** and a few **Harbour Porpoise** were also recorded, but the absolute highlight of the trip was a large pod of at least 30 **Bottlenose Dolphin**, leaping and bow riding in front of the vessel as it passed the Isle of Man!

Although rare species do not really add to the developing knowledge that we are getting from the regular sightings of the common species, rarities are always pleasant to see. The survey team was resting on board the Power as the vessel re-loaded at Dublin, and when scanning the rafts of duck on the Liffey one of the team picked out a rare **Green-winged Teal** amongst the usual **European Teal** and **Mallard**. This is a scarce American species and had already been recorded in Dublin Harbour earlier that week.

May and June

With the increased daylight of the summer months longer survey periods were possible on this route, with teams getting to the bridge at 06.00 and surveying until 10.00 when the vessel berthed in Dublin, and then being able to survey from 13.00 and to remain on the bridge until nearly 10.00 as the vessel approached Heysham!

As a consequence, many more wildlife encounters were recorded, not least the over 2000 **Herring Gull** and **Lesser Black-backed Gull** flying to their roost on the sand flats just off Fleetwood at the close of the May survey. **Guillemot** numbers on this survey were well up on the low totals seen earlier in the season, as birds returned from their wintering areas in the Atlantic to their summer feeding areas in the Irish Sea.

It was unusual to see a large **Barrel Jellyfish** floating alongside the Power at its berth in Dublin Harbour. These large creatures are generally seen in numbers well out to sea as they drift through northwards, feeding on the abundant plankton of the warmer summer waters.

Barrel Jellyfish - Dublin Port
Photo: Rob Petley-Jones

Less welcome sights were the all too numerous spent balloons encountered floating on the sea surface during the May survey. Many of these bore images of the Union Flag, no doubt having been part of balloon releases at the time of the D-Day anniversary celebrations. Balloon releases may seem like fun to humans, but to a choking dolphin or minke whale they are no fun at all! The survey team recorded over 30 spent balloons on the narrow corridor that the survey covers – it does not bear thinking just how many there must have been across the whole marine expanse of the Irish Sea!

Later in May, the Volunteer Seabird at Sea survey team recorded a very early **Sooty Shearwater** flying among the large numbers of **Manx Shearwater**. This species of dark long-winged shearwater is infrequently recorded in the Irish Sea, preferring migration routes to the west of Ireland. It has an extraordinary annual cycle, breeding in the southern summer on the southern Atlantic islands like Tristan da Cuna and then following a lengthy migration route up past Brazil to the rich feeding waters off North America in the spring and early summer of the north. The birds then pass through European waters later in the northern summer at the start pf their long journey back to their breeding grounds. A late May record in the Irish Sea is therefore unusually early.

Even more unusual was the report of a very high number of large shearwaters in June, these possibly being **Cory's Shearwater** and **Great Shearwater**. Records of both species are exceptionally infrequent in the northern parts of the Irish Sea, and so such a large number over the deeper waters out from Dublin remains somewhat of a mystery.

MARINElife requires detailed reports and photographic evidence to be able to accept records of such rarely encountered species, but unfortunately no photographs were taken during this encounter to allow verification of the record.

However, later in the summer very large numbers of both these large shearwater species were recorded from the Western Approaches off Cornwall, and in the Atlantic waters off Western Scotland, at a more usual time for the birds to occur in UK waters. Future MARINElife surveys will look to see if any significant changes are occurring in seabird migration patterns and seek to understand the reasons behind any such changes.

Great Shearwater Photo: Rob Petley-Jones

July and August

With calm seas on the Irish Sea and long hours of survey from the bridge of the Power possible, there were many sightings of note in July.

The least welcome of these was an encounter with a dead **Minke Whale** in the water on the approach to Dublin. This large corpse was floating on its back, with several **Fulmar** perched on its belly, presumably feeding on the bonanza of whale flesh! Analysis of the photographs later showed several **European Storm Petrel** flitting around the waters by the whale, also engaged at feasting on this vast amount of food! There was no indication of how the whale had met its end, but there is always the possibility of a ship strike in the busy shipping lanes on the approach to Dublin.

Other cetacean sightings in this period were on the low side, but a pod of at least 18 **Common Dolphin** was a brief highlight of the August survey.

The July survey was notable for the sighting of a sub-adult **Sabine's Gull** just outside the Dublin breakwaters, where it was flying before the bows of the Power, together with numbers of **Mediterranean Gull**. There had been a large number of sightings of Sabine's Gull in UK and European waters over the previous weeks, so this record was not a total surprise but no less welcome for that!

Sabine's Gull is a small gull of the High Arctic, where it breeds in the far north of Canada and Greenland, spending the winter months in the southerly temperate waters of the Atlantic. Birds normally migrate out into the ocean waters to the west of Scotland, Ireland, and Brittany, but weeks of unsettled summer weather in the Atlantic may have driven migrating birds further to the east to the more sheltered waters of the Irish Sea and the North Sea.

Sabine's Gull (above) and juvenile Mediterranean Gull (below) ***Photo: Rob Petley-Jones***

Large numbers of **Manx Shearwater** were also recorded in this period, probably of adults beginning their southward migration back to their winter-feeding grounds in the South Atlantic, having left their fat offspring to fast alone in their nest burrows before fledging and beginning their own migration later in the summer. How they manage this by intuition is one of nature's great mysteries!

August saw good numbers of recently fledged **Guillemot** and **Razorbill**, still flightless and floating together with one of their parents in attendance. These youngsters are sometime referred to as

'jumplings' as they leave their nesting cliffs by leaping into the void before they can fly, often tumbling down the cliff face before finally reaching their waiting anxious parents on the sea below! Not all make it to the safety of the sea, however, as some fall foul of waiting **Great Black-backed Gull** who regard this bounty as a windfall for themselves and their chicks!

September, October, November, and December

Rougher sea conditions welcomed the survey team in September, making cetacean spotting very difficult, and only one **Harbour Porpoise** was briefly seen in the vigorous waves. The conditions were more favourable for seabirds like **Gannet** and **Kittiwake**, which use the wind to enable them to stay aloft for long periods.

Manx Shearwater numbers were well down on those of earlier surveys, these being the stragglers if the vast numbers that breed in the UK, and with many of the summer's breeding birds now far south towards the equator.

Great Skua
Photo: Peter Howlett

Notable sightings in September were of a couple of **Arctic Skua** and a solitary **Great Skua**. Great Skua breed in the far north of Scotland and on the islands to the west and north, but in the last few years its population has been catastrophically hit by Avian Influenza. Where MARINElife surveys would regularly record several Great Skua throughout the year, sightings are now extremely scarce, and this was the first record for the Irish Sea in 2025. Hopefully the species population will begin to recover in future years, and future MARINElife surveys will be able to chart any welcome increase in sightings.

Unfortunately, the October, November and December surveys on the Heysham to Dublin route had to be cancelled, these falling foul of the several severe winter storms sweeping in from the Atlantic!

Heysham to Warrenpoint

January and February

The two-day survey across to Warrenpoint in January initially began in typical quiet fashion, with few bird sightings as the Performance sailed past the Isle of Man. Things picked up on the approach to the Irish coast, with good numbers of **Fulmar** seen, including one in the plumage of the dark Arctic form, a **'Blue' Fulmar**! A large diver was also seen, possibly a **Black-threated Diver**. This is a rare species in the Irish Sea, where winter numbers of **Great Northern Diver** are more likely.

Carlingford Lough is always a great place for wintering seabirds, although it is not included in the formal MARINElife survey schedule as it is not strictly part of the marine environment. There were notable numbers of **Mediterranean Gull** and **Black-headed Gull** recorded on the January survey.

The January survey took place after a period of strong northern winds, bring very cold air down from the Arctic. Such conditions can produce sightings of rare northerly gulls, and the Surveyor reported a flock of large white-winged gulls, which may have been **Glaucous Gull** or **Iceland Gull**, both scarce winter visitors to UK waters. Even rarer is the **Ross's Gull**, a small Arctic species, and the Surveyor reported a small gull with pink-tinged undersides – unfortunately, fading light conditions and unfamiliarity with such rare species made certain identification impossible in these cases!

Most bizarre sighting on this survey was of a large **Barrel Jellyfish**! These animals are much more frequent in the summer months, and a winter sighting is perhaps a worrying indication of sea water warming. Such warming is a consequence of world climate change and is not good news for marine wildlife, as it is likely to disrupt the usual patterns of migration, which may impact on feeding opportunities for the important seabird populations found in UK waters.

The February survey produced a good variety of seabird species, but numbers were still low. However, signs of approaching Spring were apparent in Carlingford Lough, where several of the resident **Black Guillemot** were already showing their jet-black summer plumage.

At sea, the most frequent bird seen was **Kittiwake**, but numbers of **Common Gull** were also recorded, beginning their move toward their more norther breeding grounds.

Common Scoter
Photo: Rob Petley-Jones

March and April

An early treat for the survey team was of a splendid male **Eider,** spotted as the Point sailed down the Lune Deep just after leaving Heysham.

As the vessel passed out into the deeper waters beyond the wind farms, good numbers of **Gannet** began to be seen. These are Britain's largest seabird, and are truly spectacular both in plumage and behaviour, and these birds were probably returning to their breeding colony ion Ailsa Craig in the Firth of Clyde. The British population of Gannet has been very severely hit by Avian Influenza in the past few years, and it is a very important part of the MARINElife surveys to chart the recovery in numbers of birds as the impact of the disease passes.

Weather on this two-day trip can vary quite dramatically. The outward leg was notable for fairly boisterous seas reaching states of 5 to 6, while the return crossing was calm. Calm conditions are usually the most productive for spotting cetaceans, but this time they came with the marine observer's main enemy – fog! It is always frustrating to wonder what wildlife activity there might be in the waters beyond the close confines of the fog bank!

Thankfully, the fog slowly cleared as the vessel approached the Isle of Man where the survey team were delighted to see three graceful **Manx Shearwater**. This the first sighting of the year of these amazing and important birds of UK waters, being the vanguard of the around 300,000 birds that will return from overwintering off the coast of South America to breed on the remote islands in the northwest of Britain.

The Irish Sea is extremely important for this species, and to the south-west of the Isle of Man is the **Irish Sea Front Special Protection Area**, which supports the third largest foraging aggregation of Manx Shearwater yet identified in British waters.

Manx Shearwater Photo: Rob Petley-Jones

Winter merges into Spring this time of year, and sightings of a late-staying **Great Northern Diver** off the Irish coast and a late staying numbers of **Little Gull** off Blackpool, mixed with the first spring sightings of returning **Sandwich Tern** and the growing number of **Manx Shearwater**. The survey team was also pleased to report good numbers of **Gannet** passing back and forth, and also good numbers of **Guillemot**, another species being hit by Avian Influenza on their British breeding colonies.

May and June

The May survey to Warrenpoint was a quiet affair, with survey effort only possible on the outward trip during the Thursday, the return trip being delayed until the Friday night for operational reasons. This survey leg recorded moderate numbers of the usual Irish Sea species of **Gannet**, **Kittiwake**, **Guillemot**, and **Manx Shearwater**, but the highlight of the trip for one pf the survey team was to see an **Otter** sporting itself on the shore of Carlingford Lough during her day at Warrenpoint!

Despite the June survey team recording small numbers of **Common Dolphin** and a solitary **European Storm Petrel** during their trip, the highlight for them was of the rather bizarre sight of many **Black Guillemot** roosting on the sea wall at Warrenpoint, mere inches away from the speeding traffic on the main Newry to Belfast main road! These birds seemed to be completely relaxed about the human bustle next to their roosting location, even allowing one of the MARINElife survey team to approach close enough to get some enchanting photos of their often-squabbling behaviour!

Black Guillemots at Warrenpoint Photo: Rob Petley-Jones

July and August

The July survey began well with a sighting of a magnificent **Mediterranean Gull,** resplendent in its full summer plumage of wholly white wing tips and charcoal black hood, contrasting dramatically with its scarlet bill. This gull species used to be an extreme rarity in the UK, but over the last couple of decades it has become an established breeding species at many coastal sites and is now recorded regularly on MARINElife surveys.

Following the spectacular large shearwater encounter on the June Heysham to Dublin survey, a single **Cory's Shearwater** was seen flying with the many hundreds of **Manx Shearwater**. This sighting alone would have made the July survey memorable, but the encounter with a **Basking Shark** just off the Calf of Man was equally extraordinary. Despite being the second largest fish on the planet, Basking Shark are usually very difficult to spot even in good conditions, and all they show is a couple of fin tips as they cruise just under the sea surface. They are regularly recorded in the coastal waters of the Isle of Man, but the speed of CLdN vessels makes it almost impossible to spot them from the vantage of the bridge.

Sea conditions on the August survey were less favourable, and while the seabirds like **Gannet**, **Kittiwake**, **Fulmar**, and **Manx Shearwater** all were enjoying the strong winds, the sea state was such that cetacean spotting was almost impossible, and there was only one sighting of a solitary **Common Dolphin**.

Cory's Shearwater Photo: Rob Petley-Jones

September and October

Calmer sea conditions for the September survey meant that the small and secretive **Harbour Porpoise** could be more easily spotted, and a total of eight animals were seen on the crossing to Warrenpoint.

Migration of seabirds was well underway, and the last of the **Manx Shearwater** were recorded as they flew south to warmer winter quarters. A couple of **European Storm Petrel** were also seen, these sightings made possible by the calm sea conditions, as these tiny Starling-sized birds hug the stiller air immediately above the sea surface. They are usually very difficult to spot when sea conditions are more vigorous, where they are hidden from view by more active waves.

A **Great Skua** sighting was most welcome, and an encounter with a small pod of **Common Dolphin**, initially bow riding and then playing on the receding wake of the Performance, made for a perfect conclusion to the survey.

However, the October survey was to prove one of the most exceptional in the history of MARINElife! Things started well with several **Mediterranean Gull** and a couple of flocks of **Common Scoter** as the vessel passed down the Lune Deep off Blackpool and then began to get even better.

An exceptional feature of this survey were the large numbers of **Razorbill** recorded. This is an auk species that is usually seen in much lower numbers than **Guillemot**, but this survey it outnumbered its usually more abundant relative by nearly five to one! Another **Great Skua** and a single **Red-throated Diver** on the approach to the Haulbowline Lighthouse brought the first day of the survey to a satisfying end.

It was the return trip to Heysham the following day which made this a most exceptional survey for cetacean sightings, favoured by the calm seas as the vessel sailed through over the deeper waters on the approach to the Isle of Man. **Grey Seal** and **Harbour Porpoise** began popping up across the surface in front of the vessel, with several family groups seen, and then flocks of seabirds circling over the sea brought the survey team's attention to where two **Minke Whale** were lunge-feeding, a most spectacular sight!

This would have been more than enough excitement for any survey, but even this was outdone by the spectacular arrival of a super pod (in Irish Sea terms!) of **Common Dolphin** in front of the vessel, where at least 120 animals were counted as they leapt and splashed in front of the vessel, taking turns to ride on the bow wave of the ship, and then to sport in the wake waves as the vessel sailed on.

It is quite likely there were many more animals than those actually counted – one famous cetologist once said that for every dolphin seen on the surface, there were six more beneath the waves! This was a most exceptional encounter never to be forgotten by the lucky survey team!

Common Dolphin super pod Photo: Rob Petley-Jones

The October survey drew to a close as dusk fell on the approach into Heysham, but the excitement continued until the very last with numbers of **Mediterranean Gull**, a couple of **Little Gull**, and even a single dark-phase **Arctic Skua** passing close by the ship as we entered the Lune Deep.

November and December

Despite the frequent severe storms of this period, both planned surveys for this period were completed, although the December trip was curtailed because of the unwelcome approach of Storm Bram!

The November survey was relatively quiet for birds, but a sighting of a **Puffin** was welcome, as this species is only infrequently recorded from MARINElife surveys on the CLdN ferry routes. Rather frustratingly, a distant **skua** was also spotted, but identification to species was not possible as the bird flew away to the south. Skua records are particularly valuable at the moment, as their populations have been sadly depleted because of avian influenza.

Moderate numbers of the usual **Gannet**, **Guillemot** and **Fulmar** kept the surveyor occupied on the return trip from Warrenpoint, and he was rewarded with a magnificent sunset over the Irish Sea as the vessel sailed towards Heysham

The December survey could only be carried out on the outward trip from Heysham to Warrenpoint, as Storm Bram whistled in to disrupt the ferry schedule, with the Surveyor's return sailing delayed until the following night, when no wildlife observations were possible.

However, the outward leg of the survey was worthy of the best in terms of observations, with the highlight being another sighting of the Irish Sea 'super pod' of **Common Dolphin**, first seen during the October survey. This repeat record of at least one hundred animals is a very good indication that feeding opportunities for cetaceans are looking good, and our survey teams will certainly be looking for further signs of a healthy marine environment during the 2026 survey programme.

Arctic Skua
Photo: Peter Howlett

As ever, MARINElife is extremely grateful to all at CLdN for giving us the opportunity to carry out our survey programme from the bridges of their various vessels crossing the Irish Sea. There is always a warm welcome on board, and the care and interest shown by all CLdN staff on board and on land is hugely appreciated. We look forward to working with you again in 2026.

Report compiled by Rob Petley-Jones, MARINElife Route Coordinator for Irish Sea Surveys

December 2025

Appendix - Species recorded on CLdN Irish Sea routes 2025

		Dublin surveys	**Warrenpoint surveys**
Marine Mammals/others			
Minke Whale	*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*	2	4
Bottlenose Dolphin	*Tursiops truncatus*	37	5
Common Dolphin	*Delphinus delphis*	66	269
Harbour Porpoise	*Phocoena phocoena*	20	54
Grey Seal	*Halichoerus grypus*	10	20
Harbour Seal	*Phoca vitulina*	1	
Whale (unidentified)			1
Dolphin (unidentified)		9	1
Seal (unidentified)		1	
Basking Shark	*Cetorhinus maximus*		1
Barrel Jellyfish	*Rhizostoma pulmo*	2	
	Total encounters	**148**	**355**
Seabirds			
Eider	*Somateria mollissima*		1
Common Scoter	*Melanitta nigra*	24	35
Red-throated Diver	*Gavia stellata*	2	6
Black-throated Diver	*Gavia arctica*		1
Great Northern Diver	*Gavia immer*	2	4
Diver (unidentified)		1	1
Fulmar	*Fulmarus glacialis*	150	158
Sooty Shearwater	*Puffinus griseus*	1	
Manx Shearwater	*Puffinus puffinus*	3197	6197
Cory's Shearwater	*Calonectris borealis*		1
Shearwater (unidentified)		147	

European Storm Petrel	*Hydrobates pelagicus*	4	3
Gannet	*Morus bassanus*	1043	1464
Shag	*Phalacrocorax aristotelis*	45	48
Cormorant	*Phalacrocorax carbo*	33	22
Kittiwake	*Rissa tridactyla*	1243	1499
Black-headed Gull	*Chroicocephalus ridibundus*	199	12
Sabine's Gull	*Xema sabini*	1	
Little Gull	*Hydrocoloeus minutus*		15
Mediterranean Gull	*Larus melanocephalus*	35	86
Common Gull	*Larus canus*	166	242
Great Black-backed Gull	*Larus marinus*	48	108
Herring Gull	*Larus argentatus*	2110	395
Lesser Black-backed Gull	*Larus fuscus*	137	71
Gulls (unidentified)		288	1121
Sandwich Tern	*Sterna sandvicensis*	33	21
Common Tern	*Sterna hirundo*	17	
Arctic Tern	*Sterna paradisaea*	2	
Common/Arctic Tern	*Sterna hirundo/paradisaea*	74	11
Terns (unidentified)		45	6
Great Skua	*Stercorarius skua*	1	3
Arctic Skua	*Stercorarius parasiticus*	2	2
Skuas (unidentified)			2
Guillemot	*Uria aalge*	2884	2171
Razorbill	*Alca torda*	457	663
Black Guillemot	*Cepphus grille*	6	
Puffin	*Fratercula arctica*	22	6
Auks (unidentified)		368	890
	Total encounters	**12787**	**15261**

Puffin
Photo: Peter Howlett