

High-performance petrel

Wilson's Storm-petrel is often elusive among the waves, unless it is chummed for from a vessel. This bird was photographed from a pelagic out of Scilly on 12 August 2011.

RICHARD STONIER

Wilson's Storm-petrel has become an expected feature of pelagic trips in the South-West at this time of year, but within living memory the species was a legendary mega seen only on the most intrepid voyages. **David Callahan** recounts how this dainty tubenose became an achievable target for the serious birder.

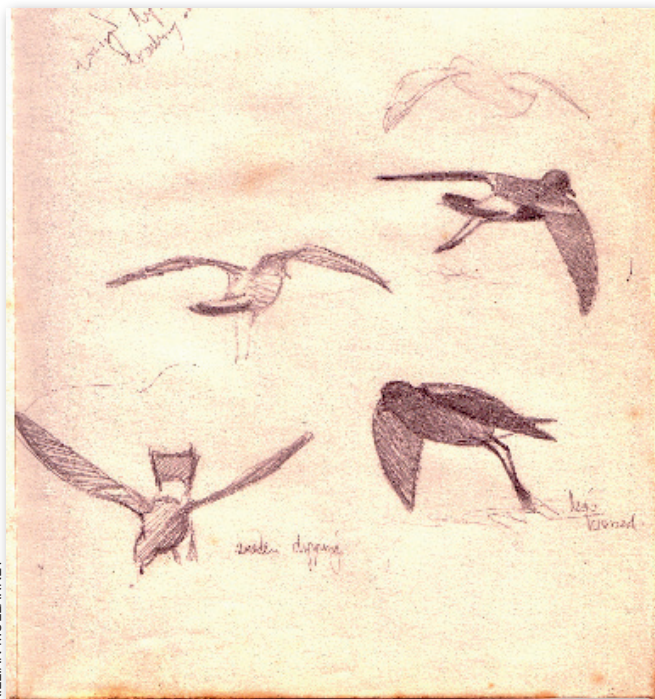
Until the 1980s, Wilson's Storm-petrel was barely known in British waters, with no prospect of seeing the species except from a ship way out in the Atlantic, where few birders ever ventured. Now, particularly during the peak months of July and August, it is expected off the south-west coasts of Britain and Ireland, and sometimes – such as during the strong winds of August 2009 – it is observed from known seawatching hot-spots in double figures.

The first accepted British record derived from a 'wreck' of European Storm-petrels near Polperro, Cornwall, in 1838, when a corpse was picked up in a field. There were several other records from this and the following year, suggesting something of an influx at the time. The species then remained exceptionally rare from that time until the 1980s.

So what led to this dramatic change in status over just a few decades? On 3 September 1983, Force 8 north-west gales off St Ives, Cornwall, produced one of the finest-ever seawatches, with around 100 Sabine's Gulls, 52 Great Shearwaters and a Roseate Tern logged, among other species. But the real cherry on the cake was a Wilson's Storm-petrel which lingered for several hours around the bay's famous outfall, allowing binocular-filling views.

Petrel pioneers

That we expect the species these days is due to the pioneering work of a few seabird enthusiasts researching



KILLIAN MULLARNEY

Wilson's Storm-petrel was still a mega rarity in 1985, when this bird was observed on 17 August from a pelagic off Cork. We now know that waters off south-west Ireland offer one of the best chances of seeing the species.



JOE PENDER

Wilson's Storm-petrel, six miles south-east of St Mary's, Scilly, 22 July 2010. The shorter pale wing panel helps separate the species from Leach's, along with the square-ended tail.

the species' frequency and range in the North Atlantic. The first of these was Peter Harrison, who organised the first pelagics aboard the MV *Chalice*. These trips ran from Scilly from 1986-89, and by 1988 were logging the species almost without fail, with four excursions that year recording double figures, though one didn't connect. The pelagics coincided with the rise of the twitching era, with such enterprises as regional birdlines and the specialist birding press all contributing to the atmosphere that this rarity was truly both on the map and on the grapevine.

The success of these early trips spurred Scilly birders into beginning further pelagics every second or third Sunday in August on the MV *Scillonian III* out of Penzance (this was also the regular mainland to Scilly ferry). Running from



GARY THOBURN

Wilson's Storm-petrel, *Sapphire* Scilly pelagic, 8 August 2014. The habit of gliding for long distances and the lack of a broad white band on the underwing separates Wilson's from European Storm-petrel.

1989 to 2004, the trips specifically targeted Wilson's Storm-petrel. A hot-spot which became known as the 'Wilson's Triangle' was established at sea, and judicious chumming with fish discards and oil brought birds in fairly reliably, sometimes in twos and threes. The inaugural pelagic was hard work, however, and five hours went by with no birds at all, though one Wilson's was eventually seen that day. Often the pelagic technique involved finding active Spanish long-line trawlers, which would attract many tubenoses as they threw non-quota fish overboard.

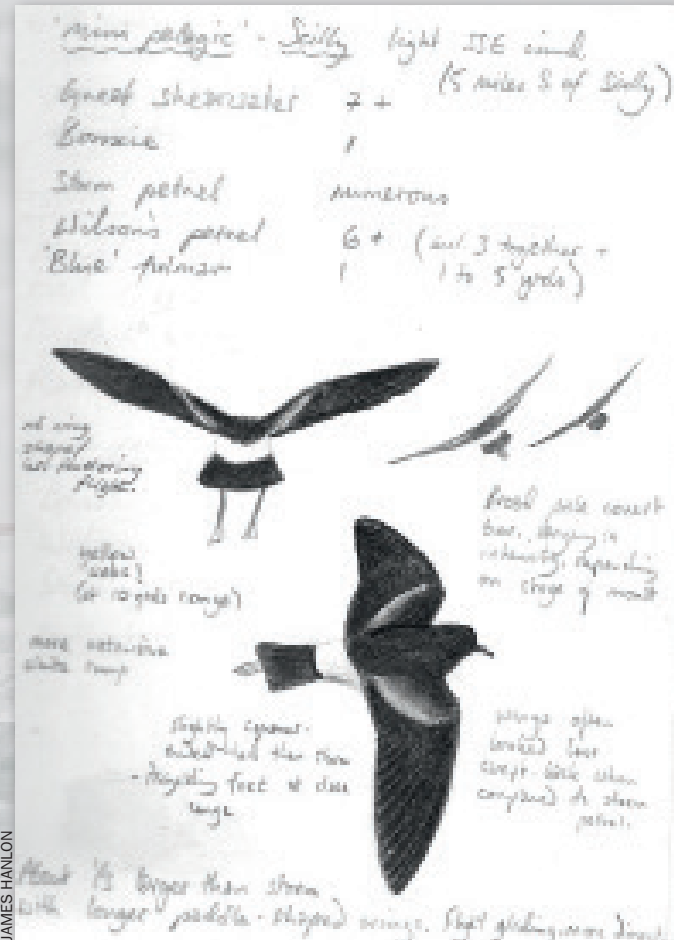
A second key pioneer in the upgrading of the species' British status was Scilly-based Bob Flood. He initially began going out into the Atlantic on shark- and reef-fishing boats during the mid-1990s, and has now been out on this part



Pelagic trips from Ireland also stand a very good chance of connecting with Wilson's. This bird, which is typically near to completing its primary moult in late summer, was photographed on 7 August 2009 off Co Kerry.



Pelagics can be miserable experiences, with changeable weather and long sailings under heavy rain or intense sunshine. This *Scillonian III* pelagic on 8 August 2004 offered such conditions for birders.



Above: with luck, pelagics may offer views close enough to sketch the bird on board, as these detailed drawing show.

Below: chartered trips aboard ships like *Scillonian III* (this is the same trip as illustrated left) were notoriously sold out many months ahead, and dozens of birders added their life Wilson's Storm-petrel on such sailings.



Away from Western Palearctic waters, Wilson's Storm-petrel is one of the most numerous seabirds in the world's oceans, and even on the opposite side of the Atlantic Ocean the species gathers in numbers in favoured areas. This fluttering feeding flock was photographed at Oregon Inlet, North Carolina, USA, on 30 May 2008, where the Gulf Stream meets cooler water, forcing small fish and crustaceans closer to the sea's surface.

of the ocean on many hundreds of occasions. The shark fishermen used buckets of waste fish and offal which they termed 'rubby-dubby' to attract their prey, but Bob Flood observed that this practice also had the welcome side effect of luring in seabirds, including storm-petrels.

Possible, probable and finally a definite Wilson's were observed consecutively in 1995, 1996 and 1997, the last becoming the first record for Scilly (now usurped by a retrospectively identified photographed bird from 1995). The very next day, another bird was seen by other birders on a shark-fishing trip, and the species was then well on the radar for anyone keen to see it. By 1999, up to 14 individuals

per season were seen on the now-regular trips.

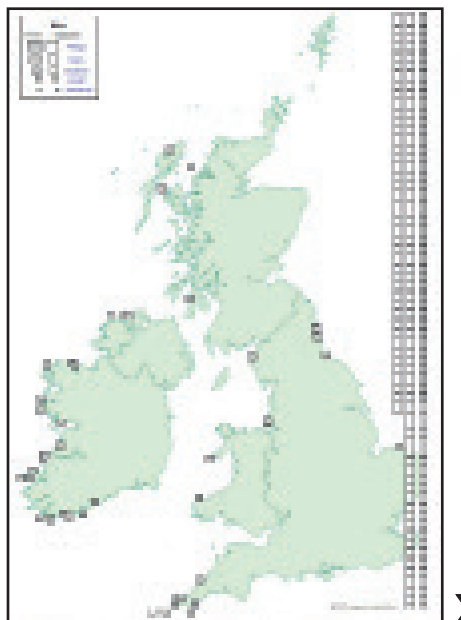
After becoming resident on St Mary's, Scilly, from 2000, a major part of Bob's (and birding associate Ashley Fisher's) strategy was to adopt short-range systematic searches from shark- and reef-fishing boats. The aim was to reveal Wilson's Storm-petrel's true status as a hard-to-see scarcity, annually occurring in the South-West Approaches as part of its normal long-range dispersal strategy from the Southern Ocean.

They kept detailed notes on each bird seen, logging minimum numbers by attempting to record minor plumage differences such as state of wear, strength of carpal bar and



Left: Wilson's Storm-petrel, about seven miles south of St Mary's, Scilly, taken from an *MV Kingfisher* pelagic in July 2001 – this boat ran in tandem with the *MV Sapphire* for much of the first decade of this century.

Right: this century, Wilson's Storm-petrel has begun to reveal its true status and distribution in British and Irish waters through regular observations, as this BirdGuides.com map of the species' records from BirdGuides 2001-2015 demonstrates. There are now a few records from the east coast, where the species remains mega rare, but sightings are skewed to the South-West.





moult condition. From 2000-09, 338 Wilson's Storm-petrels were counted during 448 trips, all between early June and early September, and showing a maximum 60 per cent success rate. The species' true status as a scarce offshore passage migrant was revealed, with up to nine birds seen per trip in the peak months of July and August.

On the crest of a wave

The main passage seems to vary somewhat. It has been tentatively correlated with the early arrival of snows in the Antarctic during the Austral winter, though movements may also be locked into the seasonal availability of small fish and crustacean stocks, and the state of deep sea currents in the open ocean. Despite its scarcity off British and Irish coasts, the world population actually stands at around 50 million pairs.

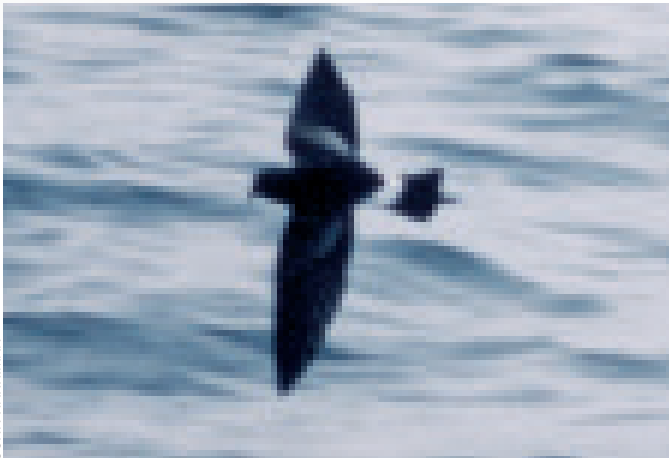
Wilson's breeds widely in rock crevices and burrows on the islands and coasts of the Antarctic continent during the southern summer, with notable colonies on the South Shetlands. It lives a pelagic existence away from its breeding season of usually around 90 days or so. The species is actually rather common in late summer on the opposite side of the Atlantic, being very reliable on pelagics off the east coast of North America, where it can form flocks which follow ships, rather like European Storm-petrel.

Wilson's status as a British scarcity is now officially accepted, with the Rarities Committee 'demoting' it to assessment by county recorders. This decision was somewhat controversial, as the species is still a major rarity away from south-west England and Ireland. The then Rarities Committee Chairman Adam Rowlands justified the

Above: this illustration, drawn from birds observed in the South Atlantic and Ireland, shows the diagnostic yellow webs of the feet of Wilson's Storm-petrel, a feature usually extremely hard to see in the field. **Opposite, top:** the tell-tale yellow webs can just about be glimpsed on the right foot of this bird, which is taking off from its resting position off Scilly from an MV *Kingfisher* pelagic on 2 July 2005. Frame-filling photographs can be obtained with some luck on such trips, which are a reliable way to gain experience with the species in British and Irish waters.



Probably the most reliable site to observe Wilson's Storm-petrel from land is the Bridges of Ross, Co Clare, where Collins Bird Guide illustrator Killian Mullarney was able to sketch this individual on 15 August 1990.



Before the advent of widely available digital cameras, photos of the elusive Wilson's Storm-petrel were few and far between. This 'Holy Grail' shot was taken from land at Land's End, Cornwall, on 8 August 1994.



Another shot showing the yellow webs as this bird comes in to land by the MV *Sapphire*, off Scilly on 22 July 2010. Such trips have had up to a 60 per cent 'hit' rate in recent years.

downlisting, saying: "If we assessed only a proportion of the records of an individual species, for example Wilson's Storm-petrels observed from the mainland, while ignoring the (much more frequent) at-sea records, the statistics that we collected would not truly reflect our core aims." Essentially, Wilson's is now viewed in the same context as a scarce former rarity such as Arctic Redpoll, which is very unlikely to occur away from its limited regular sites in Britain, but expected within those geographical boundaries. Nowadays, Wilson's Storm-petrel can be viewed as an achievable self-found species for the sharp-eyed and prepared birder on an appropriate pelagic trip, though you will have to be very quick to pick one out before experienced

guides on the boat. Certainly, a serious British lister stands an extremely good chance of picking up the species at sea off Scilly between July and September, but can still get the adrenaline-fuelled frisson of finding an extremely rare bird if he or she spots one from land. ■

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