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Letter

The status of Wilson's Storm-petrel in Britain

I enjoyed reading the non-passerine section of the recent scarce migrants report in *BB* (White & Kehoe 2015), but have several points to make about the account for Wilson's Storm-petrel *Oceanites oceanicus*, which states: 'There is potentially some degree of duplication of records seen from ferries and on pelagic trips in the waters around Scilly, where chumming attracts birds to boats from some distance – and so... the totals are best regarded as bird-days rather than accurate counts of individuals.' In my opinion the potential duplication is too small to warrant treating records as 'bird-days'.

During 2011–12, only one of 41 sightings was ferry-based (7th July 2012), and a simi-

larly small percentage of records originate from ferry sightings in other years. The great majority of British records of Wilson's Storm-petrels come from short-range pelagic trips out of Scilly. I have participated in trips every year since 1995 – over 500 trips since 1999, during which I have seen about 400 Wilson's. The real issue concerning bird-days is the possible duplication of records from these trips – duplication during any trip, and between subsequent trips.

Duplication during a trip was addressed at the outset of Scilly pelagics by instituting a conservative counting method – the maximum number of birds seen together, plus any additional birds separable by

plumage or other differences (Flood & Fisher 2010). This limits duplication but almost certainly leads to under-counting on 'big days'. Prior to mid July in years when juveniles occur in good numbers, we may be faced with several very similar, relatively fresh-plumaged juveniles foraging in the slick. At this time adults are moulting and it is relatively simple to distinguish individuals. The turnover of adults is not uncommon, and a similar rate of turnover of juveniles can be assumed – yet we record only the highest number of fresh juveniles seen at one time.

Duplication in consecutive trips is more difficult to deal with. Birds showing distinctive characters (such as a broken wing feather or extreme moult/wear) are looked for carefully, but it is very rare to see such birds on different trips. In fact, only one such bird was seen twice and the two sightings were on consecutive days. My experience of Wilson's Storm-petrel off Scilly is that it is very much a transient passage bird, continuously on the move, rarely foraging for long in Scillonian waters. For example, on Saturday 1st August 2009 we recorded 9+ Wilson's from a Scilly daytime pelagic (probably a significant under-count), while more were seen that evening from a shark fishing trip. We had witnessed part of a large passage of Wilson's off the southwest of England, Wales and Ireland, which included sightings in Cornwall – St Ives (2), Gwennap Head (2), Padstow (5); Pembrokeshire – Strumble Head (1); Co. Kerry – Brandon Point (14); and Co. Clare – Bridges of Ross (27) (Rare Bird Alert archive). It became known as 'Wilson's Saturday'. Remarkably, none was seen the next day from a daytime pelagic off Scilly; in fact, there was not a single report of Wilson's in Britain & Ireland until 7th August. The passage on 1st August 2009 was indeed short-lived.

The effect of the chum used covers an area of perhaps 25 km² during any trip (it is estimated that the odour reaches around 8 km – five miles – and we might drift on average

about 3 km while chumming), which is a tiny fraction of the sea area in the Western Approaches – the idea that chum pulls in the same individuals from a huge area, trip after trip, is just not realistic.

The evidence suggests that sightings of Wilson's from Scilly pelagics 'perhaps involved some slight duplication of records'. Those words come from the account for Pectoral Sandpiper *Calidris melanotos* in the same scarce migrants report, where it deals with 60 birds in the Outer Hebrides in 2011. I contend that the potential for duplication in records of Wilson's Storm-petrel is no more than for those 60 Pectoral Sandpipers; and that there is no good reason why Wilson's should be recorded in bird-days.

The Wilson's account also states that the trend 1990–2012 is uncertain and the annual variability during 2000–12 is high. One of the main reasons for the uncertainty and variability in the data is the changing effort over the years: for example, the rise and demise of MV *Chalice* pelagic trips and RMV *Scillonian* III pelagic trips; and the instigation of regular pelagic trips out of Scilly in June–September since 2000, initially using two boats, reduced to one in 2008 and consequently to about 60% of the effort. In addition, the leanest years for Wilson's off Scilly generally tie in with a weather event such as a high-pressure system blocking the mid North Atlantic, while the most productive years tend to have unsettled weather and regular low depressions passing across the North Atlantic.

Acknowledgments

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References

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Editorial comment Steve White, lead author of the scarce migrants reports, commented: 'We are grateful to Bob Flood for clarifying the methods used to estimate numbers of Wilson's Storm-petrels seen off Scilly and will follow his advice in future reports.'