

The Storm Petrel

The Storm Petrel is a nocturnal seabird which you may never have heard of and have probably never seen. Thousands of them nest on the Pembrokeshire Islands but they are even more difficult to see than their cousin the Manx Shearwater. Whereas Manx Shearwaters can be seen in the evening as they raft up on the sea off the islands and sometimes a young bird is blown off-course or attracted to the local lights and finishes up in somebody's back garden, neither is true of Storm Petrels. To see Storm Petrels, you need to stay overnight on the islands and go on a conducted tour to a location where the birds are breeding such as the quarry on Skokholm.



Although this elusive little bird spends most of its life out in the stormy ocean seas, it is genuinely tiny – not much bigger than a Chaffinch. It has all-black plumage apart from a white rump which makes it look rather like a House Martin in flight. I have only seen these birds once or twice myself. The first time was when I was at the helm when sailing across Lyme Bay as dusk descended. I wondered why there were several House Martins following the boat and then the penny dropped – I was very excited! They were pattering along on top of the waves and hovering which is how they catch their food.

Whereas Manx Shearwaters nest in burrows, Storm Petrels nest in rock cavities, typically under a patch of scree or in an old wall. Very little is known about their breeding habits as they are much harder to monitor than Shearwaters - their nest tunnels are narrow, often go around corners and can be in very inaccessible places.

On Skokholm, the wardens have decided to try and address this by building a tailor-made nest wall consisting of cleverly designed concrete boxes disguised by stone facing. The backs of the boxes have ports to allow access by remote cameras and other devices. The Storm Petrel wall is now finished and it looks wonderful. There is good chance some of the boxes will be used next year as Storm Petrels have to be quite adaptable. The areas in which they breed are often prone to rock falls so they must be capable of adapting to changes and to finding new nest cavities.

The wall has been constructed primarily with materials donated by local firms and using money collected from the “Orphean Warbler Twitch” at Orlandon Kilns in 2013. Oh yes, and it has been given a nick-name - “The Petrel Station”!

For more information, look at the excellent Skokholm blog - <http://skokholm.blogspot.co.uk/> and find the entry for September 2nd where there is a full account of this fascinating project.

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