

Manx Shearwaters

I expect you have all seen the recent TV news concerning Manx Shearwaters struggling in the surf on the beach at Newgale and the subsequent rescue of about 400 birds. As the news footage was not always quite correct or very informative I thought you might like to know a little more!

The Manx Shearwaters at Newgale were young birds which had recently left their burrows on Skomer and Skokholm to take flight for the first time. These birds will have developed from an egg laid way back in the spring, which has then been incubated for about 50 days. The chick has then been fed in the burrow for about 60 days until their parents then desert them, leaving them very fat indeed. These juveniles then go through a quick “teenager-hood” (about 8 days) as they rapidly mature, wandering around in an ungainly fashion outside their burrow for the first time, starting to flap their wings and then eventually leaving the burrow for good. All this, of course, happens at night – any birds caught out in the daytime will be snapped up by a gull.

They need a good breeze to get airborne for the first time and they climb up to a high spot in order to get a good start. After taking their first flight they would typically feed for a while in the Irish Sea before embarking on their long migration to the South Atlantic. However the winds in early September were really very strong indeed and some of them couldn't cope. Many probably crash landed in the sea and there they would essentially be OK providing they could find some food – they have to do this by instinct and this will be their first meal for some time. However, the very stormy seas would have made it difficult to find food and impossible to get airborne so that weaker birds were basically wind-driven to the shore. Others would have perished at sea.

We shall never know how many birds did not survive their first few days at sea – probably something like 150,000 young birds left the islands in the first few days of September so the proportion at Newgale was very small. Manx Shearwaters are long lived birds once they reach maturity so one poor breeding season is not a disaster. But at an animal welfare level, the whole event was distressing. We were actually volunteering on Skokholm Island at the time and had “adopted” a young Shearwater who we would see toddling around and stretching his wings at night just outside our accommodation. On Monday night he was no longer there – he had gone and we shall never know what happened to him.