



Stockbridge Reserve – Volunteers Required

On Thursday & Sunday mornings work is undertaken to manage the site. The jobs include mowing, raking, pruning, hedge trimming and willow control.

Volunteers are needed so why not get involved? The work is for just a couple of hours and helps to keep the diversity. Please either e-mail me at shaun.radcliffe@btinternet.com or ring on 01274 770960 if you are interested.

January 2017. It had obviously been attracted to the site where small amphibians would be found. Clearing the ponds has opened up the area somewhat.
Shaun Radcliffe

Storm Petrel Ringing at Filey Brigg by Chris King

Trapping and ringing sea birds on land using a mist net at night may seem like a wild idea but it has been remarkably successful for catching Storm Petrels at Filey Brigg on the East Yorkshire Coast. Since the ringing team started in 1990, more than 800 birds have been caught.

Storm Petrels are entirely oceanic sea birds that usually only visit remote islands during the breeding season from June to August. They are tiny birds only slightly bigger than the House Martins which they resemble with their all black plumage and a white rump patch. Being so small, they are vulnerable to gulls, rats, stoats, etc. and so also only come inland at night. Once on the ground, they also can't walk properly and instead shuffle round on their lower legs (tarsi) with a bit of wing fluttering to help.

I was on holiday and visiting Bempton RSPB and had a chat with the RSPB Site Manager to ask what birds were about. He said that if I was in the area for a few days, it would be worth going along to the next Storm Petrel trapping session. The ringing team welcome visitors to watch them as they attempt to lure the Storm Petrels and recently they had been catching up to 10 birds in a night. All I needed to do was turn up at the car park overlooking the Brigg at 10pm. I'd not seen Storm Petrels before so thought it was worth a go.



I arrived early at the car park only to find it still crowded with holiday visitors (with chips) and fishermen (with fish). These people began to leave as it got dark but then several cars arrived in convoy and began unloading an odd selection of equipment including some big tannoy speakers that looked like they had been last used in a prison camp. The ringing team had arrived I wandered over and introduced myself.

Filey Brigg is a promontory of land that sticks out about 1.5km into the North Sea and a bird observatory has been built towards the end of the Brigg at the bottom of the cliff. This is where the mist nets are set up. Unfortunately, the paths down the cliffs have been eroded and washed away leaving a very steep, rough

descent that is bad enough in daylight and far worse at night. We made it down though to the observatory building and I helped (sort of) putting up the mist nets.

The key to attracting the Storm Petrels in to land is to play their breeding calls at an extremely loud volume. On still nights, the sound carries about 8-10km out to sea and some petrels are tricked into thinking a breeding colony is established and come in for a look. The speakers are set up behind the nets and the Storm Petrels with luck fly into the nets and are trapped.

Storm Petrel calls are unusual. The 19th century field naturalist Charles Oldham described the sound as "like a fairy being sick". I thought the hideous screeching noise was like a bad street entertainer wrestling with modeling balloons and failing to make a convincing replica of a poodle.

I was surprised when we caught the first Storm Petrel within half an hour. I didn't see it come in until it was fluttering in the net. Once the ringer had retrieved it, the bird was taken into the observatory for recording details. I knew Storm Petrels were small but seeing one close up in the hand for the first time really does emphasis just how tiny they are.

This particular bird was also unusual in two ways. Firstly, it had been caught on Filey Brigg on 4 previous occasions that year meaning that it must be feeding regularly in the same area of the North Sea. Secondly, it was a female with a well-developed brood patch. It is likely that the bird was a failed breeder this year rather than having chicks to feed locally but it does raise the possibility that with so many Storm Petrels feeding in the North Sea, it may just be feasible that Storm Petrels could start breeding in suitable venues along the east coast. The Bempton cliffs for example are extensive, no-one ever descends them and there are grassed / rocky areas along the cliffs which would provide suitable nesting sites.



The bird we had just caught was quickly released. It needed a few moments being left alone on the path outside the building to get its bearings and then it was off.

Two more petrels were soon trapped in quick succession. These were new birds not previously caught and after they were measured and weighed, they too were released with new ID leg rings. Over the next three hours we caught another two 'new' petrels and then at about 1:30am, we caught again the female Storm Petrel that we had trapped first thing. The ringers usually finish around 2am so the nets and equipment were packed up and we ascended the cliff track to the top of the Brigg and back to the cars.

It was an excellent evening out birding and anything is better than going to bed early in a tent which was my other option. I'm grateful to the ringing team for showing me what they do and explaining what their research may reveal. They know from birds recovered at other trapping sites that individual birds can range widely and cover considerable distances in a short period. Nesting sites for Storm Petrels along the East Coast may also be a possibility but finding them is a whole different issue. They have also caught four Leaches Petrels over the years and another ringing site further north at Tyneside once caught a Swinhoe's Petrel. The ringing team are now trying the breeding calls of different petrels to see if there are more species out there

Black-headed Gulls carrying rings



Left: Black-headed Gull with green coloured ring JE09 was ringed near Oslo on 12th June 2014. It was then seen at Redcar Tarn on various dates between 12th July 2014 and 13th June 2015.

Centre: Coloured ringed Black-headed Gull JA15, first seen in 2015, returned after spending the summer in Norway, and was seen once more during the winter of 2016.

Right: The latest visitor, Black-headed Gull with coloured ring J21Z made an appearance on 11th January 2017. photos and information from Ian Hargreaves.