

Skomer Island

Manx Shearwater Factsheet

CHARACTERISTICS

The Manx Shearwater is a member of the Procellariiformes, the order of birds which includes the albatrosses, the Fulmar and the Storm Petrels. It is beautifully adapted to leaving at sea, with long, narrow wings, and its feet placed far back on its body for efficient swimming. Unfortunately this makes life on land difficult; it cannot walk easily and tends to be very ungainly on land, shuffling and sometimes sledging along on its belly. This clumsy gait makes it easy prey for predators such as



Great Black-backed Gulls, hence the number of carcasses around the Island, the remains of those unfortunate birds that didn't make it. In order to minimise this danger Manx Shearwaters nest in burrows, and only come to or leave the Island at night, in the dark. To help visitors see and hear live birds, cameras have been placed in two burrows on the Island and pictures showing the adult birds and then the chicks can be seen on the screens in the Island Visitor Centre or Lockley Lodge and on the Trust website. Manx Shearwaters are extremely noisy at their colonies after dark, calling to their mates to ensure they return to the correct burrow. The darker the night the more cacophonous the sound – a most wonderful experience for those lucky enough to experience it first hand by staying on the Island.

DISTRIBUTION

There are an estimated 120,000 breeding pairs on Skomer and a further 45,000 pairs on Skokholm, making the two islands the largest known concentration of this species in the world. Elsewhere the Manx Shearwater nests in a small number of island colonies from the Western Islands, Iceland, in the Faroes, in northern and western Britain and Ireland, Brittany, to the Azores, Madeira and the Canaries.

The Manx Shearwater is a recent colonist of islands in the western Atlantic. Ringing recoveries reveal that birds from Skokholm and Skomer colonised Middle Lawn Island off Newfoundland in the 1970's, while they may now also nest on other small islands south to Rhode Island.

Although nocturnal at the colonies Manx Shearwaters can often be seen off the west side of Skomer during the day especially during inclement weather, while in the evening large numbers come into St. Bride's Bay and Broad Sound and can be viewed from vantage points like Wooltack Point. An ideal way to see Manx Shearwaters at close quarters is by taking one of the mid-summer evening boat cruises – the Seabird Spectaculars – from Martin's Haven. During this one can often come close to rafting birds, while others are flying past. Each evening, and again in early mornings, vast passages of birds moving between the islands and distant feeding grounds can be observed from Strumble Head

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BREEDING

Manx Shearwaters return to the Island in March each year. They start to breed at about 6 - 7 years old, and tend to use the same burrows each year. On their return they clean out their burrows and find their mates, most staying with the same partner each year. After mating it is thought that the female leaves the island again, fishing further afield for about a fortnight during which time the single egg develops in her. The egg is large, being up to 15% of the body weight of the bird. New studies have shown that the birds go up through Cardigan Bay to the north of the Irish Sea where it appears that there are still plentiful stocks of small oily fish such as Sandeels. It is likely that the male meanwhile stays closer to the Island, visiting the burrow each night, perhaps to ensure that no-one else takes it over. When the female returns in early/mid May she lays the egg and departs again to feed, leaving the male to do the first incubation stint. Thereafter the pair take it in turns to incubate the egg, each doing from four to eight days at a time whilst the other goes off to feed.

The incubation stints get shorter towards hatching, with the birds feeding closer to home in the southern part of Cardigan Bay. The egg hatches after 51 days incubation. The chick then remains in the burrow for a further 70 days, during which time feeding visits become progressively more frequent, until when the chicks are large the parent birds will be bringing food every night. Being nocturnal when on the Island, and spending the rest of their lives on the other side of the world, Manx Shearwaters are difficult to study and a great deal of our knowledge has been gained from years of systematic observation of their behaviour. Technology has now enabled researchers from Oxford University to undertake exciting new studies, where a number of birds have been fitted with satellite tracking devices and data loggers which will enable us to find out much more about their movements and to find out about their lives both on and off the Island.



Manx Shearwater with a fitted geolocator

Towards the end of the season, in late August, the adults leave the burrows with the chicks remaining there for another eight days or so. During this time the chicks emerge from the burrows occasionally, flapping their wings and getting used to the outside world, this is a very dangerous time for them and unfortunately many fall prey to Gulls. The adults do tend to remain around the area but the chicks are effectively now on their own. At this stage they weigh around a third heavier than an adult, the large amount of stored fat being necessary to help them on their first long journey.

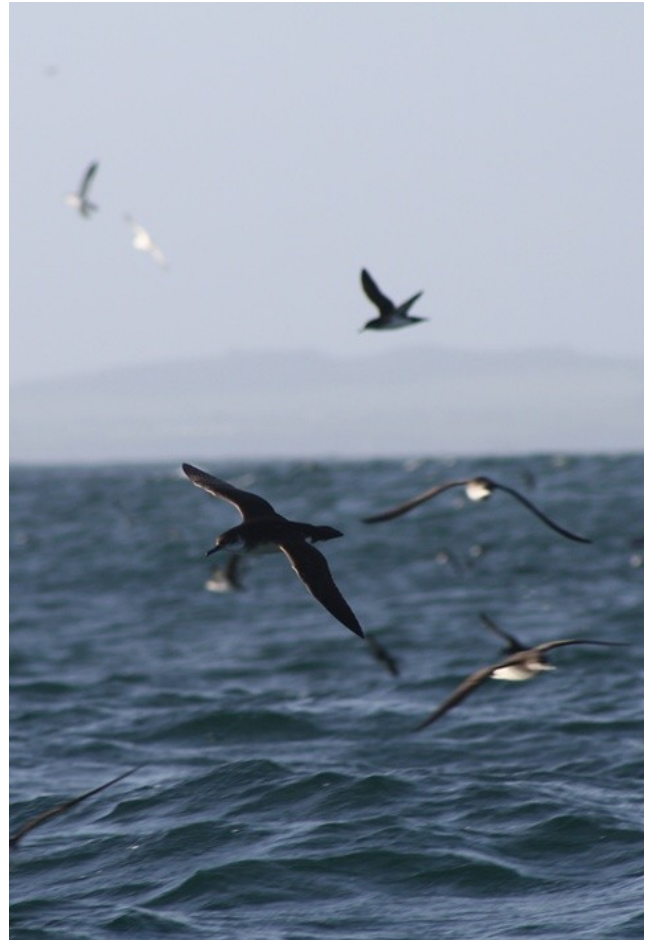
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GREAT JOURNEYS

Young Manx Shearwaters go to sea, at night, without their parents, and immediately head for the winter quarters off the coast of southern Brazil and Argentina. Ringing studies on Skokholm and Skomer show that some of the young make this 6000 – 7000 mile journey in less than a fortnight. Some Manx Shearwaters at the start of their journey are lured to the mainland, probably attracted by the bright lights, or are blown inland during stormy weather, to be reported in the main towns and villages of Pembrokeshire, and not infrequently further afield. Their speedy return to sea is essential if they are to begin their migration whilst still in good condition.

We do not know what the young birds do in the following summer – almost none of them land and there are roughly as many recoveries of ringed first-year birds in the western Atlantic as there are in European waters. The following year, when the young birds are two, some return to colonies, though only on a few dark nights around the new moons in mid-summer. Remarkably, they tend to make landfall close to the burrow in which they were born. Progressively more birds return at the ages of three and four, spending longer and longer visiting the island, searching for a mate and a burrow. Most Shearwaters do not breed until they are at least six years old.



AN UNUSUAL HAZARD

The most conspicuous cause of mortality is a disease called *puffinosis* which kills off many fledglings in some years. Apart from this, and a few breeding birds which fail to lay an egg, Manx Shearwaters have a high breeding success, about 80% of eggs hatch and about 90% of those that do so produce a fledgling which leaves the island; overall about 70 chicks fledge per 100 pairs. About one third of the fledged chicks survive from one year to the next. This means that, on average, each adult breeds for about 10 years. It must be stressed that this is an average figure; the oldest known Manx Shearwater (on the North Wales island of Bardsey) is more than 50 years old.

THE MANX PUFFIN

The scientific name of the Manx Shearwater *Puffinus puffinus* often causes surprise. In the Middle Ages the plump young Shearwaters, when taken for food, were known as 'puffins' or 'puffings' from their plump and fatty nature. In 1676 the bird was first described from specimens collected on the Calf of Man and named the 'Manx Puffin', Shearwater not appearing in the name until about a century later, by which time *puffinus* had been incorporated into the scientific name for all time.

Pictures by Dave Boyle and Julia Baer.