

FIELD CRAFT

Seawatching

It can get addictive!

It may feel strange to start thinking about seawatching when you're still enjoying those ice-creams and long sunny evenings, but the autumn 'seawatching season' is just around the corner, and Sarah Harris has helpful hints to get you hooked.

Ever fancied giving seawatching a go? Or thought about venturing away from your usual seawatching spot? Maybe you'd like to do a tour of some of the UK's top seawatching sites – just as a Black-browed Albatross did in October 2016!

There is a lot to cover when it comes to seawatching, so here I provide the briefest of overviews. This form of birding comes with a warning – once out seawatching, you'll never want to be the first to leave the watchpoint; it can get addictive!

In most cases, you will need a telescope. When you first reach a seawatching spot, work out which direction birds are passing in; north – south, or east – west? Note any reference points out at sea, and if you join

a seawatch with others already watching, listen and follow their directions – you will get a feel for what's about and where to look (the lines of flight). Once you settle into the watch and your experience grows, you may want to start to provide directions to your own birds, should something pass by that you want to get someone else 'on'. For example, you might say 'there's a skua flying south, about to pass over the red buoy. It's just above the horizon, over the rocks now, still going south, looks like an Arctic Skua to me'.

Familiarise yourself with the birds you see most often – it will make picking out the scarcer species easier

It may feel strange call out a species before it is fully identified – but it is better than not mentioning it and everyone else missing what could have been something more unusual.

It will take time to get used to seawatching and to work out the distances at which birds are passing when visiting a new site, which will affect perceived size and therefore identification. First study the common species. Really familiarise yourself with the birds you see most often – it will make both picking out the scarcer species and judging the sizes of nearby 'mystery' birds easier.

Look at the flight pattern: e.g. Sooty Shearwaters have a more undulating flight pattern than Manx and Balearic Shearwaters, and Sabine's Gulls fly with more 'purpose' than Kittiwakes. Think about their proportions and silhouette: e.g. Cormorant and Shag are viewed as potential confusion species, but their silhouettes are quite distinct. Behaviour

The importance of silhouettes in identification



Cormorant



Shag

- ▶ Angular looking
- ▶ Wedge-shaped head and bill
- ▶ Thicker, kinked neck
- ▶ Wings situated at the midpoint of the body
- ▶ Longer looking, pointier wings
- ▶ Heavy, goose-like flight, occasional glides
- ▶ Will fly at height and overland, as well as close to sea level

- ▶ Smaller, slighter bird but with a pot belly!
- ▶ Smaller head with steep forehead and thinner bill
- ▶ Slimmer, straighter neck
- ▶ Wings situated further back along the body
- ▶ More rounded primaries
- ▶ Faster, continuous wingbeats
- ▶ Sticks closer to the waves in flight, rarely gaining height



▶ You might spot Arctic and other skuas on passage off much of our coastline in late summer.



◀ Kittiwakes in flocks might find themselves pursued by Arctic Skuas.

may also provide clues to identification; Arctic Skuas are parasitic and often found pursuing Kittiwakes, bullying them into giving up their latest meal. Piece the puzzle together; 'this diver is slight, with fast wing beats. It's bobbing its head and doesn't look like it's dragging a carrot-like shape (its feet) behind it like a Great Northern Diver – this is a Red-throated Diver!' You will become more efficient at this the more you seawatch.

To start, take it slow. Accept you won't identify every bird, but build on what you already know – the small nuggets of identification 'hints', such as those used as examples above, will gradually build and become invaluable. Practice makes ...slightly fewer birds 'getting away' unidentified! ■

Land-based seawatching – suggested locations

This map provides some ideas for seawatching spots. The arrows show the preferred wind directions, alongside the best months for the sites and the species you might hope to see.



Top tips

Site choice

- ▶ Largely dependent on weather, wind and time of year.
- ▶ Almost any safe promontory or headland can be good in the right conditions; choose somewhere the birds will pass close to as they track along the coast.
- ▶ Height above sea level: too high and you'll have 'too much sea' to scan, too low and the birds are lost between the troughs and waves.
- ▶ Birds can be concentrated in estuaries and bays and pour out of them in the right conditions, e.g. Leach's Petrels in Liverpool Bay after north-westerlies in September.
- ▶ Sheltered spot; somewhere comfortable to sit for a couple of hours – where you can hold your optics steady.

Weather

- ▶ Wind will play an important role; the most productive wind direction will vary depending on the site, but...
- ▶ Generally, onshore winds bring birds closer to the shore.
- ▶ Sun *ideally* behind you – sitting facing east can be tricky in the morning if sunny.
- ▶ Dry – rain can distort the view and result in steamed-up optics!
- ▶ Mist and squally showers obviously hinder the chance of spotting much, but can bring disorientated birds closer to the land. Post-storm watches can also be interesting for the same reason.
- ▶ Cornwall in late summer is a good spot for passing Storm Petrels.

Identification

- ▶ You won't identify everything. Sometimes it's just not physically possible. For example, Guillemot v. Razorbill ('auk sp.') can be tricky at distance, as can Arctic v. Common Tern ('Commic Tern!').
- ▶ Pay attention to the common species – learn their flight pattern, shape and habits and check flocks of common species in case something more unusual is lurking.
- ▶ Dark species against a dark background appear smaller.
- ▶ Dark species against a pale background appear bigger.
- ▶ Pale species against a pale background appear smaller.
- ▶ Pale species against a dark background appear bigger.

