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The fulmars at the end of my street

The first time I saw a fulmar was one spring on Skomer Island. I had no idea then that one day they'd become important to me on a daily basis. To be fair, I'd already been wowed by puffins scurrying virtually at my feet and mesmerised by the noise of the busy seabird colony. So I could be forgiven for not paying much attention to a few birds nesting in a fissure in the cliff.

Infamous for projectile vomiting (a clever defence mechanism of nesting birds) and famed for being related to albatrosses, fulmars get overlooked because at a glance they resemble gulls. Mostly white with grey backs and wings, closer inspection reveals a chunkier body and characteristic narrow wing shape as they glide. There's also their 'tube nose' and large dark eyes. Keep looking and you realise there's great variability in the grey of the wings and sometimes in leg colour too. If you're familiar with seabirds you might see a similarity with another Skomer bird, Manx shearwaters. It's there in the way the legs are positioned quite far back on the body and sometimes in their flight as they skim the sea. The fulmar's call isn't a million miles from a 'Manxie' either, although they don't rely on their voices the way the nocturnal nesting shearwaters do.

Whether it's their resemblance to gulls, or something else, fulmars today are underrated. In the past however there was a man who was very interested in them, but even James Fisher described them as 'primitive [and] rather stupid'! Nevertheless he studied them and wrote a benchmark book that is still considered important today. Originally published in 1952 and re-issued in paperback in 1984, making this year a 40th anniversary, *The Fulmar* was No. 6 in the New Naturalist Library series of books (of which Fisher was also a co-founder). In it he traced the history of the remarkable expansion of its population, from Iceland and the Faroe Islands, to the remote Outer Hebrides island of St Kilda and onwards to mainland Britain and its islands.

Until roughly the 1870s, the fulmar was considered an Arctic breeding bird that happened to have an outpost in St Kilda. It turned out the species was moving south and had spread considerably further. By the 1930s when the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) and the Edward Grey Institute began a comprehensive fulmar survey (later taken on by Fisher) it turned out that not only were there colonies in the Outer Hebrides, but also on Shetland, Orkney, the Scottish mainland, Ireland and more than 200 colonies in England and Wales.

By the time Fisher published his book he was able to report that fulmars were now found almost all around Britain and Ireland - with an estimated 365 colonies overall and a couple of hundred more places where they'd been seen 'prospecting' (checking out new places to breed). More than 100,000 nest sites were recorded. About a third of which were on the original outpost of St Kilda.

Things continued to go well for the fulmar throughout most of the 20th century. Their spread took them as far as north west Europe and across the Atlantic to Canada. Numbers of birds carried on increasing and it's believed they benefited from an increase in food discarded by commercial fisheries. By the mid 1980s though the increases stopped and some local declines began being recorded.

Right: A fulmar in flight

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In latter years though, in common with many other seabirds, fulmar numbers continued to falter. Scientists have also found microplastics in the guts of dead fulmars and determined that it could make surviving birds more susceptible to disease. The BTO also says the species is especially vulnerable to bird flu because they are long-lived birds. (At least one individual has made it to 45-years-old.)

As things stand though we still have a good number of fulmars to enjoy and although I've not gone to Fisher's lengths to study them, a few years ago I found myself with the opportunity to see them every day for most of the year. No, I'm not one of those intrepid sorts who throws everything in to live on an island. All I did was move from Devon to a corner of north east Kent where I'm lucky enough to live within about three minutes walk of the chalky clifftops between Broadstairs and Margate.

For me, the novelty of going on the beach in winter has never worn off. Which is why instead of last minute present-wrapping, my first Christmas Eve in Kent was spent walking towards Margate as the sun began to think about setting.

I must have learned the sound of the fulmar's raspy, cackling call on Skomer all those years ago but I wasn't particularly conscious of having done so. Yet as I stood on the beach, looking at an appropriately Turneresque sky, and heard what seemed like weird rasping laughter I knew straight away what it was. Not a heavy smoker reacting to a joke, but a fulmar. Several fulmars as it turned out, perched on the cliffs in pairs, and apparently beginning a jovial Christmas on Thanet's white cliffs.

It might sound daft, but it was like seeing an old friend for the first time in ages as I realised I probably hadn't seen a fulmar since I was last on Skomer - far too long ago. I was captivated then by how they held their wings so stiff and straight as they flew. I've since read (in Fisher's book) that they seem to enjoy strong winds and rough seas, but I had the good fortune to discover this first hand one January day. There was a stiff, chilly breeze blowing from the water. The sort that makes lots of white horses, but stops short of being a gale.

There were at least a dozen fulmars as I walked along the cliff top, which allows the privileged view of birds flying both at eye level and below so you can look down on them in flight. One particular spot, where there is a narrow gap between the cliff and a chalk islet, was very busy with fulmars flying in circles and riding the wind.

If it was a show you'd paid to see, you'd feel it was an epic because the fulmars seemed to be performing their flight and showing off. Obviously not for us. I imagine we're nothing to them, but that's an advantage because once my husband and I had stood still watching them for long enough they came closer and closer, flying right by us and giving us the best views.

An example: sometimes they dangled their legs and held their wings back in a posture quite different from their classic flight stance. They would fly and fly in circles, as if doing laps or circuits. First high, then lower along the cliff ledge, then lower still - down towards the beach - then up again past our faces. It was like a fulmar circus, with birds as acrobats, but even that doesn't do it justice. It was more like a dance. An exquisite piece of apparently spontaneous avian choreography, featuring fulmars dancing on the wind. When I thought it couldn't get any more dramatic, one suddenly appeared to fly backwards. I thought my eyes had played a trick on me, until I saw it happen again. Other birds then flew sideways and, circus-like again, one flew backwards while another flew forwards above it. Forget TV nature programmes, this was a vastly superior live show, and I was blessed with being able to see it within walking distance of my house.

As the weather calms and spring comes, the circus performances wane and most of the fulmars disappear out to sea. But over the years I've noticed a few pairs stay on - and local data says some breed. One pair uses a hole in the chalk face not far from the end of my street. I don't know if they were the 'circus' birds but a couple of years ago they offered something else to coo over, a big fluffy fulmar chick that got less and less fluffy over time and then was gone. The following summer I spotted a second pair nearby, also with chick and for two summers both pairs have had young. Despite the challenges they face, I can't help hoping that future years might see a true Thanet fulmar colony.

Cliff top view, Thanet

Text and images by Sophie Atherton (unless credited otherwise).

Species fact file: Fulmar

Scientific name: *Fulmarus glacialis*

Length: 45 - 50cm

Wingspan: 101 - 117cm

UK numbers: 350,000 breeding pairs.

Breeding habits: Doesn't breed until around six years old, maybe not until 12. Lays one egg per season.

Life expectancy: 44 years.

Diet: Versatile, including fish waste, plankton, sand eels and crustaceans.

Where to see them: Most of the UK's fulmars are in Scotland, but as per Fisher's findings they are also dotted all around the coast, not always restricted to islands. Consult a county bird report to find local sites.

Article by Sophie Atherton
Commission me to write for you!
Email: sophieatherton@gmx.com