

## Hoping for a wild party

Set in an unbounded sea, a collection of variously-sized, low-lying islands emerge through the mist.

As RMV Scillonian III, sails through Crow Sound and past the uninhabited Eastern Isles, with their colonies of cormorants, fulmars and grey seals, the extraordinary magnetism of the Isles of Scilly draws everyone on deck. A school of common dolphins performs a leap and greet, as if guiding us towards the dock at St Mary's. There will be passengers on this boat who have returned to this archipelago year after year, decade after decade. "Very few people come to Scilly only once," explains Karen, one of my Scillonian in-laws accompanying me. This particular pilgrimage has a purpose: we are booked on a sea trip to witness an extraordinary spectacle that has only recently returned to British shores. Twenty four hours after our arrival, we are back at the harbour ready for our five-hour 'pelagic' trip, in search of something special.

Queuing with us are a dozen seasoned birders, swapping news of recent sightings. "Citrine wagtail spotted at Porth Hellick pool yesterday," says camo man. I do wonder if my sky-blue waterproof is not a better colour choice if we're talking camouflage. Most of the group sport gargantuan camera lenses. To avoid embarrassment, I decide to use my mobile phone camera only in an emergency. I am a birder too, but rather than squinting through a lens, I prefer to watch in awe, with nothing between me and the birds.

The open-hulled boat is designed to navigate the shallow inter-island waters, but as we head away from the shelter of the Eastern Isles, the boat rolls, disconcertingly at times. I appear to be the only one to notice. The eyes, minds and cameras of my companions are focused on the multitude of gulls that have appeared out of the blue. I grab a railing nonchalantly. Dangling in the water below me is a bag of chum, a mix of ground fish that leaves an oily trail in the boat's wake. Chumming is an olfactory cue to shearwaters and petrels in particular, and a smell unlikely to encourage you to head for the local chip shop.

The engine is cut and we drift silently, watching the aerial performance and the growing greasy slick behind. "Sooty shearwater coming in left," yells Bob, our guide and international seabird expert. There is a rush to port, lenses at the ready. It is easy to see why this species is so called. The fifty shades of grey and brown shearwaters fly in low, slicing the waves and narrowly missing the dagger-like gannets disappearing Tom Daley-like into the depths. It is hard to imagine that these sooties will fly another 8,000 miles to breed in the south Atlantic, before returning for next year's summer vacation in the north Atlantic. That's quite a feat to forever avoid winter. Scilly provides these migrating miracles with a much needed stop-over before their marathon continues.

"Wilson's petrel to starboard." This creates a sudden stampede in my direction. I have never seen this passage migrant, so any concern for the balance of the boat evaporates and I reach for my Iphone, snapping flappy mcflapflap as it flies in low. I have a Mother Carey's chicken in the bag.

Excitement over, we chug and drift for perhaps another hour or two, seabirds following us like the pied piper. The list gets longer: European storm petrel, Sabine's gull, Manx and great shearwater. Even if we cut the trip short now, this has already been my greatest seabird experience of a lifetime.

I clamber round the wheelhouse to the foredeck and scan the horizon, watching a passing yacht heading for sanctuary. And then I, simultaneously with others, see the Holy Grail. Across the water, two or three hundred metres away, something is churning up the surface. It reminds me of a James Bond film and I expect to see an 'M'-designed craft appear out of the boiling ocean. Gannets, gulls and a host of other seabirds circle above. We head closer and then drift towards the seething surf. Dozens of fish, some must be well over 100kilos, appear to be partying, riding the waves as they chase a shoal of herring or mackerel. The birds join in this frantic feast, catching the small fish catapulting chaotically out of the water as they optimistically try to evade capture. I am mesmerised. We are witnessing an Atlantic bluefin tuna feeding frenzy, a phenomenon absent from British waters for so many years. The endangered Atlantic bluefin tuna, oblivious to our presence, are back and they certainly know how to party.