



Purfleet-Rotterdam-Leixões survey 25th August to 3rd September

Rick Morris and Grahame Madge MARINELife surveyors

Day 1

After much planning and negotiating, MARINELife and shipping partner CLdN have reopened the exciting survey route from Purfleet to Leixões via Rotterdam and back.

It was a privilege to be the first surveyors on this re-established route. On arrival at Purfleet, our hosts gave us a warm welcome and escorted us to the MV Catherine. After being shown to our quarters and unloading our equipment, we went to the bridge, where we met Captain Sergei, familiarised ourselves with the layout, and reviewed the route ahead. Shortly before 6pm, we left our berth and headed steadily along the Thames towards the mouth of the estuary.

Gulls were very much in evidence with small parties of Common Gull almost in constant view. In fact, over 50 were seen along the estuary, with potentially many more lining the estuary's mudflats and sandbanks. This was an unusual sight for two West Country-based surveyors as the Common Gull is far from common in the west.



Common Gull (Grahame Madge)



Manx Shearwater (Rick Morris)

Far smaller numbers of 4 other gull species were present. The ubiquitous Black-headed gulls all in their winter livery attended the vessel along with smaller numbers of Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls, and the occasional adult and juvenile Great Black-backed Gull putting in an appearance. 6 Cormorant and a few Little Egret brought a good supporting cast. We weren't expecting any pelagic species before leaving the estuary mouth, so a surprised shout from Rick of 'Manx Shearwater' was most unexpected. We both trained our binoculars on the single bird as it weaved back and forth across the Thames. We are familiar with this species, but usually on Lundy surveys in open waters. We certainly weren't expecting to see this pelagic bird against a backdrop of oil refineries and jetties.

A group of Common Seals hauled out on a distant sandbank just before Southend-on-Sea was an extremely nice sighting for us as we're more used to seeing Grey Seals off the West Country coastlines. We continued with our survey until 8pm and with the moon rising ahead of us, the sun was setting behind us over London in the distance, knowing that our next sight of land would be the Netherlands and the vibrant port of Rotterdam.



Moon and sunset (Rick Morris)



Purfleet-Rotterdam-Leixões survey 25th August to 3rd September
Rick Morris and Grahame Madge MARINELife surveyors

Day 2

At first light the coast of the Netherlands moved into view as the gloom of the night yielded to the rising sun. By the time we entered the Nieuwe Waterweg channel on our approach to Rotterdam the city's vast industrialised landscape was increasingly revealed in sharp detail. A range of gull species were on display with juvenile Lesser Black-backed Gull predominating. Among them Black-headed Gull, Herring Gull and Common Gull were in evidence along with a few Great Black-backed Gull. On the approach to Rotterdam, our skipper Sergei pointed out a wetland area with a wide range of gulls and other wetland birds, including Canada Geese. Before berthing we managed to close the survey and then we had an opportunity to grab some breakfast before our routine immigration checks. Once cleared we were taken to our new home, the MV Faustine our vessel taking us to Portugal.



MV Faustine (Grahame Madge)

Like the crew of the MV Catherine, our new cohort of at-sea colleagues made us feel very welcome. A tour of the vessel was followed by a briefing and lunch with our new Captain, Ruslan Zbrodon.

A few hours in port allowed us to catch up with a few things including setting our bearings for the long journey ahead.

We left Rotterdam just after 5pm which allowed us to get a few hours of surveying. Turning the MV Faustine around after we left our berth created an upwelling in the dock which attracted a large

number of gulls. Among the now very familiar suite of species was an adult bird that looked distinctly different. Could it be an adult Yellow-legged Gull.



(probable) YL Gull (Grahame Madge_

It was a target species for our time in Holland. Scrutiny of the photos and a chat with experts will hopefully confirm the identification and the addition of the seventh gull species to the list. Once underway a number of new birds for the trip came into view, including a Grey Heron and several Curlew flying low over the water. The approach to Rotterdam contains an important concentration of Cormorant and we counted several hundred individuals lining the bank in large congregations. A Shag was spotted a few miles from the sea, giving away its identity by the characteristic 'duck dive' of that species. Many more gulls later, as we were about to leave for the sea, a large concentration of 40 Sandwich Tern were busy feeding before heading off to Africa. The sheer number of terns and cormorants is a clue to the wealth of fish which must inhabit this region.

Once out to sea a few more ocean-going species were sighted including several Gannet and two Guillemot. After more than three hours of surveying the situation began to quieten down as two Harbour Porpoise were seen heading past our vessel. Their diminutive behaviour just allowing them to reveal their dorsal fins as the slipped quietly past.



Gannet (Grahame Madge)



Purfleet-Rotterdam-Leixões survey 25th August to 3rd September

Rick Morris and Grahame Madge MARINElife surveyors

Day 3

Our first full day of surveying was eagerly awaited by both of us and after a night in our well-appointed and comfortable cabins we arrived on the bridge at first light. The band of thunderstorms which had passed through the English Channel an hour or so earlier had dissipated leaving a clear morning. The MV Faustine was more or less level with Eastbourne as we sailed west, and a 15-hour run down the English Channel lay ahead.

Our recording began at 07:15 and as always with a sweep of the ship's instruments to obtain the basic recording information needed such as latitude, longitude, course and speed. We were interrupted by the appearance of a Chiffchaff fluttering at the bridge windows. Another stowaway was a Ringed Plover running around on the ochre-coloured roof of one of the many container lorries on the back deck, had this bird mistaken the roof for a sandy beach?

The marine species observations were slow and steady during the day, beginning at 7.30am with a trickle of Gannet, and Herring Gull and Lesser Black-backed Gulls.



Fulmar (Rick Morris)

The first new bird of the entire trip was a lone Fulmar at 09.30am and a Guillemot a couple of hours later. The English Channel can be quiet for birds at times and observations can come in fits and starts with sometimes long pauses in between. But as surveyors you know that the wildlife is somewhere out there and that busy periods are inevitable. Our lull was broken by a congregation of 20 feeding Gannet. Was a 'work-up' underway? Watching the patch of sea where the gannets were feeding, revealed the unmistakable fins of 5 Harbour Porpoise. Our location at this point was around halfway between Alderney and the South Devon coast. These frenzied moments are busy for surveyors as we have a lot of information to record in a brief time. We understand that obtaining quality data is paramount and with seabirds we not only record species and numbers but also age and activities the birds were engaging with. Gathering this additional information provides more granularity to the

record, but it adds to the workload. Trying to record this variety of information on both Gannet and Harbour Porpoise during a feeding frenzy is a mind-bending activity but one that is good for the soul.



Harbour Porpoise (Rick Morris)

The afternoon continued slowly with the steady accumulation of seabird records. Gannet and Manx Shearwater were the most frequently sighted and identifiable species, although a passing trawler steaming up Channel had an attendant mixed flock of around 70 gulls. Among them was the unmistakable form of a single Fulmar wheeling above the throng.

The real action began in the early evening with a spread-out pod of 19 Common Dolphin engaging in activities such as breaching, feeding and coming into the boat. Again, the surveyor's mindset and discipline kicked in as we both resisted the urge to reach for our cameras, instead choosing to focus on gathering data to maximise the value of the record.

The evening session closed at 9:30pm – over 14 hours after it began – with a Sooty Shearwater flying in front of the boat.



Sooty Shearwater (Rick Morris)

Even with tired eyes we both realised this bird had a different feel from the Manx Shearwaters we had been seeing during the day, and even in the fading light we could see the bird's all-dark plumage.



Purfleet-Rotterdam-Leixões survey 25th August to 3rd September
Rick Morris and Grahame Madge MARINELife surveyors

Day 4

After a restful night we started our survey again at first light. While we rested overnight the Faustine had made good progress taking us around the Brittany coast and well south and into the outer reaches of the Bay of Biscay. Eager for sightings we speculated on what our first species of the survey may be. Gannet is often a species that makes its survey debut early in the day because the chalk-white plumage of these large birds can seem to pierce the gloom. However, we were surprised that our new bird of the day was a new one for the trip, a Cory's Shearwater. Although we get a number of this larger shearwater in British waters in autumn seeing them in some numbers in Biscay was a reminder of just how far south, we had travelled. Continuing to plough on to the south-western horizon, we encountered a party of four adult Sabine's Gulls, presumably individuals migrating south after their nesting season in the Arctic.



Cory's Shearwater (Rick Morris)



Sabine's Gull (Rick Morris)

The birds were really nice to record, but no spell in the Bay of Biscay would be complete without sightings of cetaceans. Conditions were challenging with a moderate swell, modest waves creating clusters of white caps. A distant whale blow created a buzz of excitement. We continued watching the area, our binoculars trained on the area, a few further 'bushy' blows from the same location led us to believe that the animal was a Sperm Whale and that it had been resting at the surface preparing itself before taking a deep dive. We were, after all, over some of the deepest waters on earth.

A further distant blow, this time tall and columnar, was recorded. Although a little closer at around 1500 metres, the animal wasn't seen. After a quick discussion, we agreed that the blow probably belonged to a Fin Whale – a species widely recorded in the Bay. Our second cetacean species of the day; but the day wasn't over.

After another quiet spell, a small blow appeared as a whale surfaced directly ahead of the vessel. Seemingly aware of the ship, it dived before resurfacing alongside us, giving us a second brief view. The whale was dark and uniformly coloured, with a large head and a dorsal fin about two-thirds

along its estimated seven to eight-metre body. Although we saw it only briefly on two occasions, these features were enough to identify it as a Northern Bottlenose Whale.



Northern Bottlenose Whale (library image – Adrian Shephard)

Just after this flurry of excitement, a smallish and dainty juvenile skua flew elegantly in front of our view. Based on this fleeting and tantalising glimpse the surveyors believed that the bird was a young Long-tailed Skua, but we felt that it was preferable to recognise the bird as a skua species, rather than go beyond confidence and try to shoehorn it to species level.

A quietish afternoon for sightings was a reminder that the approach to the Bay of Biscay is a huge region; the wildlife is out there but you don't always find it.



Purfleet-Rotterdam-Leixões survey 25th August to 3rd September
Rick Morris and Grahame Madge MARINELife surveyors

Day 5

We awoke in Portuguese waters, which meant that we weren't far from our destination of Leixões.

With an early morning arrival, we were up on the bridge at first light to get in some survey data, at least including the run-in to the port. A trio of gull species comprised of Lesser Black-backed Gull, Great Black-backed Gull, and the Yellow-legged Gull; a local breeding bird in Portugal. A lone Cory's Shearwater was the only non-gull entry on to the data sheet before we closed the survey outside the harbour. A small group of Shag lining the outer harbour wall looked like soldiers guarding the entrance.



Yellow-legged Gull (Rick Morris)

As the crew skilfully berthed our vessel, large groups of gulls were seen around the harbour, again comprising the same three species.

Our evening return journey meant that we had a day to catch up on the non-survey essential elements of the voyage, such as processing pictures and checking data. But first, after three days at sea, we needed to get ashore to replenish supplies and stretch our legs. With the assistance of CLdN's Leixões representative (Miguel), we went through the necessary immigration checks and headed for Matosinhos, the coastal and beachside town neighbouring the port.

A walk along the seafront allowed us to get some further practice identifying and familiarising ourselves with all the ages of Yellow-legged Gull. We even found quite a few Herring Gull among the large gull flocks on the quieter stretches of the beach.



CLdN 'Faustine' seen from the beach (Rick Morris)

Returning to the vessel we had time to take some photos of the harbour's gulls as they flew past.

This had been a welcome chance to have a break and catch our breath before surveying begins again in earnest tomorrow.



Purfleet-Rotterdam-Leixões survey 25th August to 3rd September
Rick Morris and Grahame Madge MARINELife surveyors

Day 6

Leaving Leixões late evening meant that by first light we had already made good progress on our voyage north and we were already in Spanish waters.

We assembled on the bridge and gathered our materials together with the survey beginning when we had just enough light to pierce the gloom. At first the birds arrived in singles and small groups, beginning with a Cory's Shearwater. After half an hour or so of recording the flood gates opened with a torrent of shearwaters pouring out of the Bay of Biscay to our east. Cory's Shearwaters predominated but among them were smaller numbers of Great Shearwater, with a smattering of Manx Shearwater and the occasional Sooty Shearwater thrown in for good measure. A breathtaking and exhilarating sight. Then the Sabine's Gulls began to appear, at least a dozen individuals – like the throng of shearwaters - all heading west.



Great Shearwater (Rick Morris)

Just at that moment the dolphins began to appear, a group of five Common Dolphins bursting through the side of the swell, but a few minutes later that number had grown to a group of around 100 feeding individuals. And among them yet another new seabird for the voyage, a single Balearic Shearwater.



Common Dolphin, Cory's and Balearic Shearwater (Rick Morris)

From a frenzied period of activity things quietened down a pace but during the coming hours more seabirds revealed themselves including many more Great and Cory's Shearwater and parties of Sabine's Gull, with attendant Kittiwake. A brace of skuas, with a Great and dark-phase Arctic Skua were added to the day's totals.



Arctic Skua (Rick Morris)

The numbers of birds and cetaceans slowed to a trickle, but a single Grey Phalarope immediately off the bow was a good find especially from the bridge of such a large vessel.

During the last couple of hours of evening light, we scoured the ocean looking for signs of Striped Dolphin and Sperm Whale as we knew this was our only real chance of a sighting of these species while we were still in deep water over the abyssal plain. By morning's first light we will have already crossed the Continental Shelf edge and into shallower seas.



Purfleet-Rotterdam-Leixões survey 25th August to 3rd September
Rick Morris and Grahame Madge MARINELife surveyors

Day 7

We arrived on the bridge just as light was breaking over the Brittany coast. It didn't take long for the tiredness of another early start to dissipate once the sightings started clocking up. The first of eight Great Shearwater glided across our bows, accompanied by a supporting cast of Manx Shearwater.

Once around the Brittany coast we started to pick up lots of Gannet sightings with adult birds streaming down the Channel in twos and threes presumably towards their nesting colonies. We had only seen immature birds further south, and we assumed that the adult birds were still somewhat tied to their nesting sites.



Gannet (Grahame Madge)

Steaming up the Western Approaches we saw many more Gannet, along with frequent sightings of Manx Shearwater and a couple of storm-petrels. The petrels were seen too briefly to confidently make an identification, but we believed they were European Storm-petrel: the most likely species.

At one point our attention was grabbed by a single sandpiper which flew in front of the bridge. Had we had a stowaway? Probably. Later on, we saw a flight of three waders, with at least one Dunlin and a Ringed Plover. Adding further wader bird interest, a Grey Plover was also seen heading away from the boat. Around 16 nautical miles north-west of Alderney, a couple of Sabine's Gull crossed in front of us, creating an additional peak of interest.



Sabine's Gull (Rick Moris)

Four separate sightings of Common Dolphin represented the only cetaceans seen today. We were surprised that two of the sightings comprised single individuals – had we missed more in the swell and relatively rough seas?



Common Dolphin (Rick Morris)

The last Common Dolphin sighting coincided with a purple patch for birds, with a mixed species flock of gulls, Gannets and around 40 Common Tern; a mix of young birds and adults.

The last couple of hours of surveying were very quiet.



Purfleet-Rotterdam-Leixões survey 25th August to 3rd September
Rick Morris and Grahame Madge MARINELife surveyors

Day 8

Having travelled considerably further north and east, dawn broke earlier this morning than previous days. We started our survey around the border between France and Belgium and we were on a course heading for Zeebrugge. As expected, the first species to be seen were gulls, with Herring, Lesser Black-backed and Great Black-backed Gull all putting in early appearances.

As we approached our destination, we started to encounter a number of terns. Those closer to the vessel could be confidently identified as Sandwich Tern. A couple of flocks of approximately 50 terns were beyond confident identification.



Sandwich Tern (Rick Morris)

Closing in on the port, reasonable numbers of Black-headed Gull were streaming out of the harbour entrance. After closing the survey, we observed Shag and Cormorant in the harbour.

After stopping for several hours in the Belgian port, we headed for our next destination, Rotterdam. Leaving Zeebrugge and the throngs of coastal terns behind we headed out to sea avoiding the huge offshore wind farms, with several hundred individual turbines.



Windfarm off the coast of Ostend (Grahame Madge)

With still waters and good light we had hoped for a cetacean as we knew this would be our last chance on this voyage. No dolphins, whales or porpoises, but a mixed age range of Gannet flying past, some buzzing our vessel, was a nice sight. We closed the effort at dusk as the lights of Rotterdam and the Netherlands coast came into view.



Juvenile Gannet (Rick Morris)

After spending the night on the 'Faustine' in Rotterdam, we enjoyed breakfast before saying our farewells to the captain and his crew. We were met in Rotterdam by a CLdN representative and taken to the MV Palatine which was berthed along from the 'Faustine'. After being taken up to our cabins, we spent the day in port inputting the many sheets of effort data collected. Our journey back to Purfleet lacked enough daylight hours, so we enjoyed some downtime followed by a well-earned early night! Arriving in Purfleet, we were met by Dan from CLdN's port office and taken to our car for our onward journey home.

A huge thank you to CLdN and all the ships captains, crew and shore staff who made this very important conservation research trip possible.

Rick Morris and Grahame Madge, MARINELife Senior Surveyors