

St. Agnes, Isles of Scilly - Oct/Nov 2004

by Renton Righelato

29th October - 1st November 2004

After a week of gales from the South and East and a telephone call with Doug Page on St Agnes telling me the island was inundated with birds, I couldn't resist it. I took the train from Reading on Thursday afternoon only to find the line was washed away at Exeter and near Penzance and there was no e.t.a. So, jumping off at Taunton, the next train back to Reading and into my car for a night ride to Penzance, feeling guilty about carbon emissions, but I had to get there.

By 10 that morning, I was on St Agnes, gasping at Porth Killier beach, bouncing with hundreds of Chiff Chaffs feeding on the weed; hundreds of continental Robins, some with such pale breasts one had to look twice; and dozens of Black Redstarts. Four Waxwings flew by, though no sign of the Pallas's Warbler Doug had seen on the beach yesterday. But as we walked up to the Lighthouse, there flitting along the hedgerow in the sunshine amongst the Chiffs, that spectacular little bird, all yellow stripes and rump.

This was the biggest fall I can recall in Scilly for many years; there were in excess of 300 Chiffchaffs, 500 Robins and 50 Black Redstarts on St Agnes alone and probably a similar density on the other islands. St Agnes kept me busy though: over the next couple of days the Waxwing numbers grew to at least 12. A stream of the common late migrants, like Redwings, Fieldfares, Brambling, Redpoll, Woodcock, Golden Plover, Snipe, Short-eared Owl, Blackcaps, some late Swallows and a not quite good enough view of a Barred Warbler. On the sea: a Grey Phalarope and parties of Little Gulls inshore and a Great Northern Diver further off.

That weekend Pallid Swifts were being reported all along the eastern seaboard; it had to be only a matter of time before one appeared in Scilly. So I wasn't surprised when it came on the pager Pallid Swift on St Mary's. However, although visibility and my imagination were good, I just couldn't see it at 2-3 miles range. Later that afternoon, though, as I was counting finches in a turnip field a swift shot over me, with pale flight feathers and rounded wingtips. Dragging Doug Page from the Liverpool match, we had splendid views on and off until dusk when it went to roost on Castella Down.

On the Monday morning, just before leaving, I stood under the apple trees in the Parsonage garden, with Firecrests and Goldcrests beside me and Waxwings eating the windfalls around my feet sadly no camera, but the memories are vivid.