

# A Macaronesian Shearwater comes calling

Tim Davis

Lundy was certainly the place to be in early June 2010, for those birdwatchers lucky enough to be staying on the island were in for a treat, thanks to a discovery by Chris Townend and Helen Booker during the course of a night-time survey of possible Storm Petrel breeding sites.

In Chris and Helen's own words:

*"Manx Shearwaters were abundant on the night of 4-5 June, when between midnight and 1 a.m., while listening for Storm Petrels at the jetty, we heard a call we had not experienced before, but which was similar to that of a Little Shearwater, coming from the sheer bracken slope below the Castle. We recorded the call using [a] parabolic reflector, along with the calls of passing Manx Shearwaters and intermittent blasts of the South Light foghorn, and after some analysis and consultation with experts were able to confirm that it was a male Little (Barolo's or Macaronesian) Shearwater."*

Tim Jones and I were fortunate to arrive on the island shortly after the discovery and spent two evenings on the lower part of the Beach Road listening to the bird calling amongst the cacophony of calling Manx Shearwaters. Our entry in the Lundy Field Society (LFS) Logbook reads:

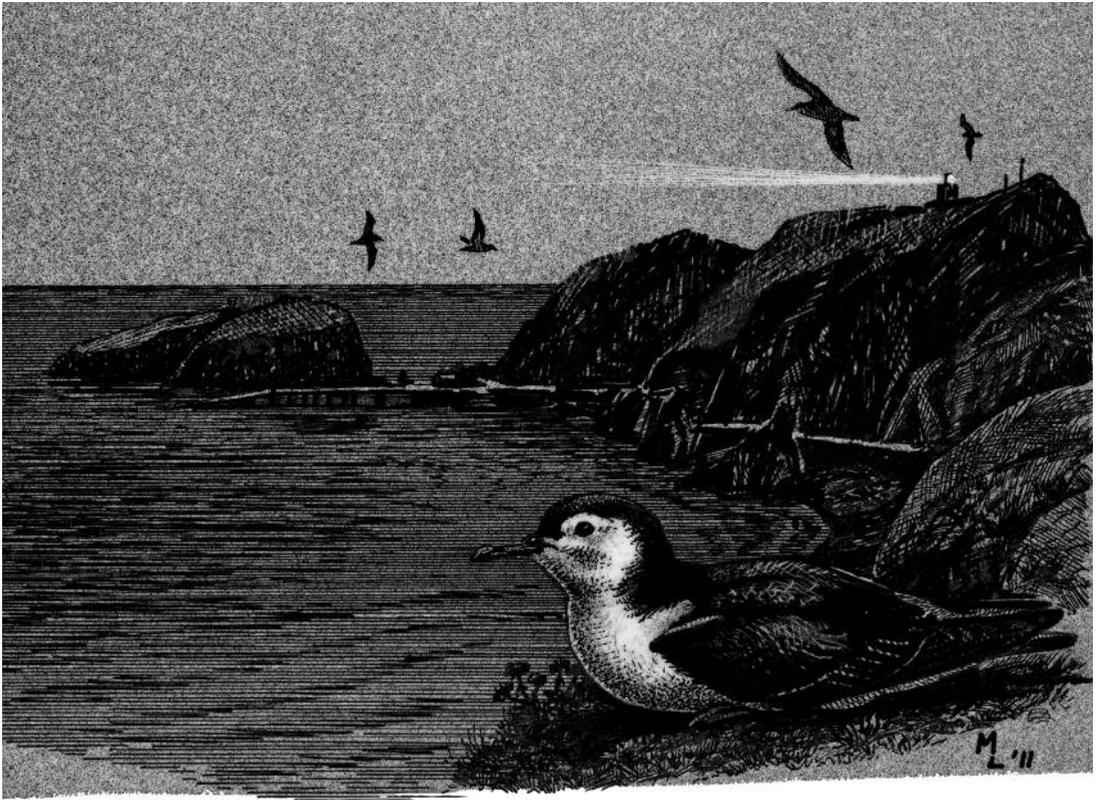
*"Nights of 6-7th and 7-8th June: Bird heard calling from sidelands and in flight above the Beach Road a little way up from the Landing Bay. Started calling around midnight on 6-7th and called more or less continuously from the same place – assumed perched/sitting on sidelands. Still calling when we left at c.01:00. Excellent sound recording made by Carl Pimlott on Grant Sherman's audio equipment. Clear, starlit but moonless. Calm and dry."*

*"On night of 7-8th, started calling approx. 23:45 and heard intermittently until c.00:10, then more frequently from 00:30 to 01:30, with peak in activity 00:45 to 01:15. In contrast to previous night, calling mostly in flight, at times relatively close, at other times high up towards the Castle. Very overcast/ misty with drizzle and patchy rain. Light SE wind. Fog horn from 01:15."*

Perhaps to the chagrin of the handful of hardy twitchers who arrived on the island wet and bedraggled after a late-evening crossing from Clovelly, the bird was not seen either on land or in flight. The shearwater's call would have to do: a somewhat maniacal, whistle-like, half-cackling, half-laughing four, occasionally five-note call clearly heard above the longer, slower, lower-pitched, throaty calls of the Manx Shearwaters. (A sound clip of Carl Pimlott's recording, produced by André Coutanche of the Lundy Field Society, is available at <http://www.devonbirds.org/node/449>.) The bird was present until at least 24 June when it was heard calling briefly from the Beach Road by Grant Sherman.

The shearwater turned up again this year. Chris Dee, a bird-ringer from Hertfordshire, and his wife Mandy heard it calling above the Beach Road on the night of 21 April. Intriguingly, it appears that this is the third year at least in which the shearwater has been present on Lundy. In spring 2009, island chef Carl Pimlott made a recording of a "strange call" on his mobile phone while night-fishing from the jetty. Fortunately he kept the recording and playback clearly reveals the same calls heard in 2010 and again this year.

A British Ornithologists' Union note on taxonomic changes to the British List (see [www.bou.org.uk/recnews05.html](http://www.bou.org.uk/recnews05.html)) dated 14 October 2005 includes the following:



**Macaronesian Shearwater on Lundy** by Mike Langman

*Little Shearwater* *Puffinus assimilis*

The three forms breeding in the tropical and subtropical parts of the Atlantic Ocean (*P. l. lherminieri*, *P. a. baroli*, *P. a. boydi*) [form] a monophyletic group which is not closely related to the other forms of the complex (including nominate *P. a. assimilis*). The three tropical and subtropical Atlantic taxa are best treated as two species: Macaronesian Shearwater *P. baroli* (polytypic, with subspecies *baroli* and *boydi*); and Audubon's Shearwater *P. lherminieri* (monotypic). Macaronesian Shearwater *P. b. baroli* is on Category A of the British List (replacing Little Shearwater *P. assimilis*). The taxonomic status of *P. b. boydi* remains under consideration pending study of recently collected sound recordings of that taxon.

The record is subject to acceptance by the British Birds Rarities Committee, with which a full description of the encounter, complete with the sound-recordings, currently resides. The BBRC is currently carrying out a review of all North Atlantic Little Shearwater records in the light of recent identification papers, so formal acceptance is still pending.

Macaronesian Shearwaters breed on the North Atlantic islands of Madeira, the Azores and the Canaries. It is somewhat sad to think of this solitary bird, hundreds of miles from its natal area, plaintively calling night after night in a vain attempt to attract a mate – unless of course it's been breeding happily on Lundy for the past three or more years!

*Tim Davis* is joint bird recorder for Lundy, on behalf of the Lundy Field Society, and co-author, with Tim Jones, of *The Birds of Lundy*, published in 2007.

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