



LIVING SEAS  
MOROEDD BYW  
CYMRU

**Name:** Sarah-Kay Purdon.

**Date:** 2014.

**Location:** Skomer Island, Pembrokeshire.

**Title:** Humpback whale off Skomer, 2014.

**Memory:**

“The boat trip in 2014 was very memorable for me. It was one of the first releases of manx shearwaters as part of Ollie Padget’s PhD. They’d clock-shifted the manxies, and chartered the boat out to the celtic deep to release the birds out of sight of land.

There were a dozen or maybe 20 birds in the front box of the rib. I don’t remember a huge amount of the ride out...Then when it was time to release the birds we stopped, and Ollie and the rest of the Oxnaver’s started getting everything ready. They had a wooden board they put of the side of the rib - a bit like a gangplank - to place the birds on. The first one or two went fine, one or two kinda plopped off fairly un-gacefully, but mostly fine! None of us noticed a great black backed gull (GBBG) come and hang around nearby.

The next bird was placed on the end of board and **SWOOSH**. The GBBG swooped down and tried to grab the manxie! There was commotion and a bit of a struggle. I can’t really remember what order things happened next. But at one point Ollie just instructed the skipper to drive towards the birds. This forced the gull to let go, and the manxie dove. The next 15 minutes were **SO STRESSFUL!** We essentially were all on high alert! The manxie would surface, the gull would swoop. We’d drive around scaring off the GBBG to give the maxie a chance to get away. Eventually, the oxnavers were happy the manxie had got away and needed to release the next bird. Only problem was there were now three GBBGs on or around the boat. They tried throwing their lunch (pasta of some kind) out to try distract them, but nothing helped. So then we **DROVE!**

We essentially went full speed in a straight line until the GBBGs were out of sight. We’d then stop, everyone scan for gulls, if the coast was clear, release a manxie , or two... every time a gull was spotted we’d have to relocate at full speed. It was incredibly tense! The final manxie was released and there was a collective sigh of relief.

I (or someone!) said “you can relax now!” and Jason (Skomer Island Assistant Warden at the time) pointed out a group of ~25 gannets half way to the horizon which had been flying along the surface of the water and suddenly “stalled” (kind of halted forward progress and all gone up to 20m above the water, looking down). Jason said “I love it when they do that!” and then with (almost) everyone on board looking in the same direction, the whale breached. It was a half breach, up and sideways creating a huge wave. There was an amazing sound of “mwoooooaaah!” from the entire boat. It was amazing!

I was pretty new to all of this at the time so I left the whale identifying to the others!”