

IDENTIFICATION

Since seawatching began, the diminutive Little Shearwater has been one of the biggest identification challenges. It still is, but after years of tubenose scrutiny and another trip to warmer waters, Anthony McGeehan takes a fresh look at the problem. Artwork by Killian Mullarney.

A little he

Fitzzz! The sweet sound of a bottle of San Miguel being cracked. Yes, here I am in Tenerife, glugging cool beer to the backdrop of cicadas and a distant karaoke. To show I've been seawatching and not sunning myself on the beach, the only part of me which is sun-tanned is my face – save for a white oval around my right eye, of course.

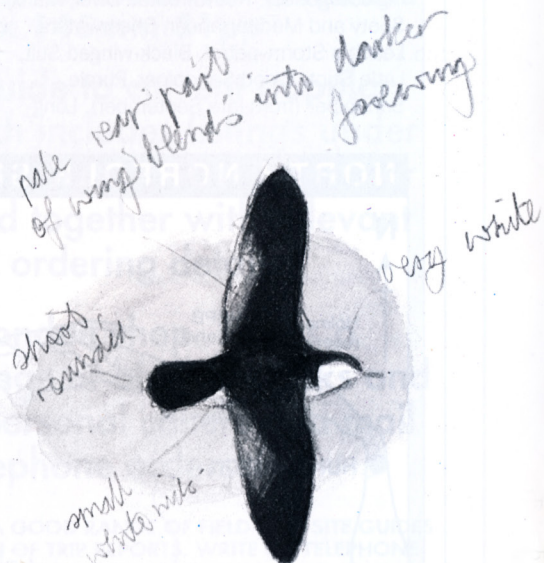
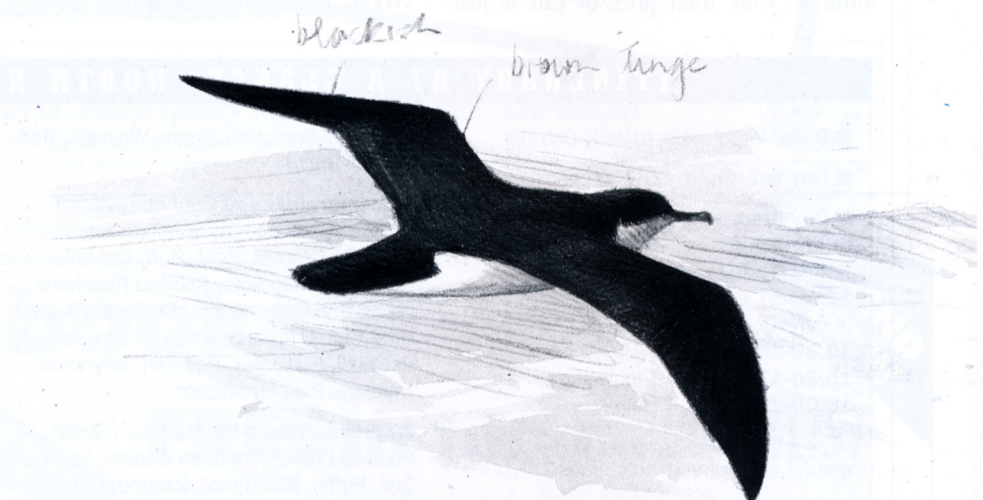
Tonight a weight of responsibility hangs heavy, for I've now seen almost a dozen Little Shearwaters from land as well as, wait for it, two separate Manx. I feel honour-bound to tell you, fellow seawatchers, what they looked like, but first the mother of all cautions is necessary. It is this: to appreciate what follows on Little Shearwater identification you need to know your Manx Shearwaters. If you don't, you could easily 'see' a lot of the criteria which make Little quite distinctive – on a Manx. So be careful: Little Shearwaters are unique birds, but their identification has been dogged for far too long by an insufficient grounding in Manx.

In fact, it has been a real sweat to find any Littles at all on this visit. Various attempts at Punta de la Rasca (on the south-west coast, just 10 kilometres from Los Cristianos), on the windier south coast, at the far north-east headland of Punta del Hidalgo, and even two ferry crossings to Gomera were a total flop. Panic! Four days down and only three to

go. Finally I struck gold on 12 July at Punta del Casado in the north-west.

It was about 7pm. I'd been there for an hour, and after the first Little Shearwater I saw a total of half a dozen more until divorce beckoned at 8.45. Most passed in the last hour, dusk falling at about 9pm. With hindsight, this timing of passage seems critical: seawatches earlier in the day may have been a waste of time for this very reason.

Height above sea level, range, weather and so on are all important to gauge on a seawatch, and at the lighthouse I reckoned I was about 50 feet up – just about perfect. Normally I seawatch with a 20x wide-angle eyepiece but, noticing the omnipresent Cory's weren't coming any closer than a quarter-mile range, I opted for a 30x as I guessed any Littles would be



UNRAVELLING THE MYSTERY

The sketches featured here are reproduced from Killian Mullarney's field notebooks. Here, the artist explains the background to his observations:

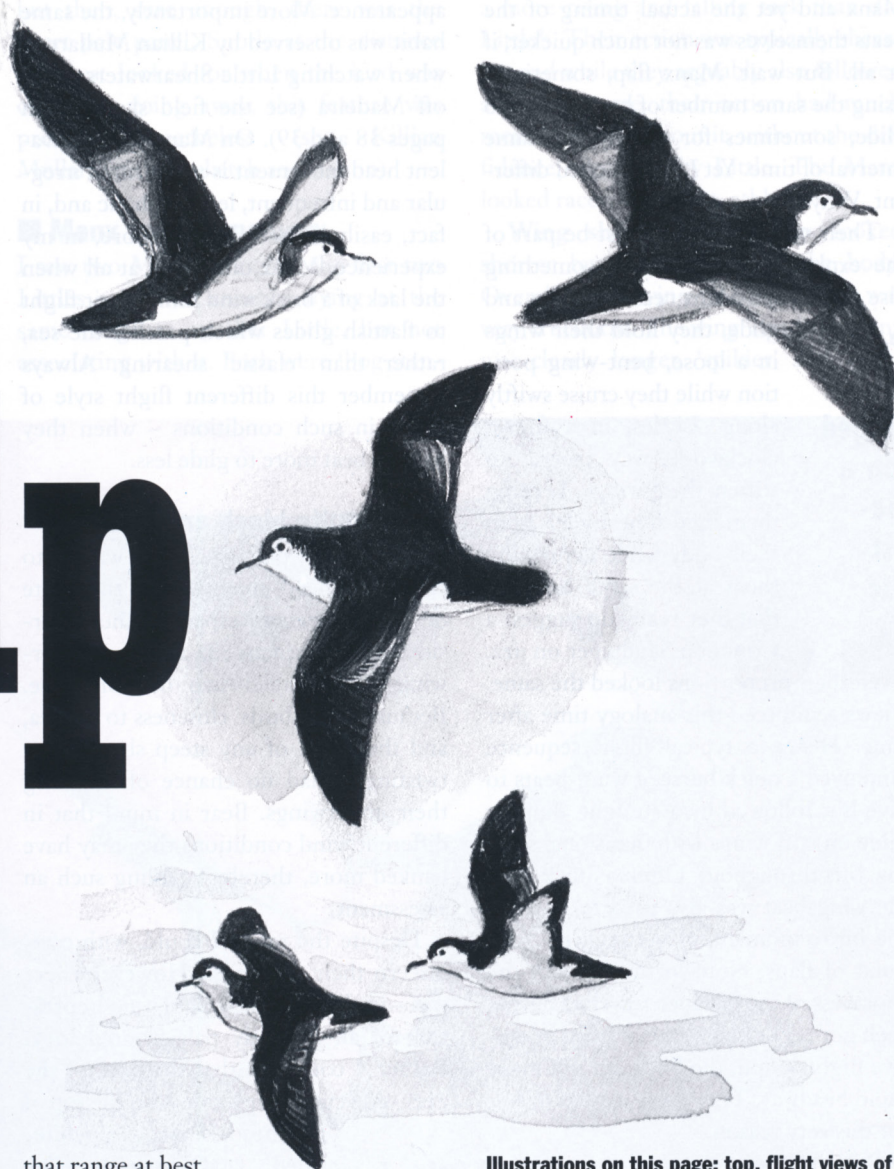
"Over a two-week period in July 1987 I saw almost 100 Little Shearwaters from land, off Tenerife. Perhaps the most significant insight I gained from this experience was that in spite of the emphasis placed in some of the literature (for example BWP, Vol 1) on their 'auk-like' appearance in flight, these birds were obvious shearwaters and they generally reminded me much more of Manx Shearwater than of any auk.

None was closer than 600 m, and many were perhaps twice this distance away, but most that I saw reasonably well showed a lighter silvery-grey area towards the outer secondaries and their coverts, the upperwing appearing much more contrastingly two-toned than in Manx.

Prior to this I had noticed how on several species of shearwater, but especially Cory's, the actually dark secondaries can, from certain angles, appear eye-catchingly pale. Viewed from the side this paleness is often apparent on the 'far' wing only (for a good example of this, see photo 193 in Peter Harrison's *Seabirds of the World: a Photographic Guide*). On the Little Shearwaters off Tenerife the lighter shade was apparent on both wings simultaneously and I concluded that it was not just the effect of light on the surfaces of the feathers.

It wasn't until August 1993, when I joined my friend Colm Moore on a ship that sailed from Portugal to Madeira, that I had further opportunities to study Little Shearwaters, this time at much closer range. It was exciting to see that these birds too showed the two-toned upperwing pattern and that it could be detected even at quite long range. Furthermore, on the few really close birds (field sketches of which are reproduced here) I could see a thin but distinct white wing bar on the tips of the greater coverts.

That Little Shearwater could show such an 'un-Manx-like' upperwing pattern was not a complete surprise: Curtis, Lassey and Wallace (*Brit. Birds* 78: 123-138) referred to Littles seen and photographed by Richard Porter off the Canary Islands in August with noticeably variegated upperwings, but attributed it to wear and suggested that vagrants in northern waters were unlikely to include birds in this condition, the assumption being that most vagrant tubenoses are inexperienced, highly dispersive immatures. This may well be the case, but my close-range observations of birds off Madeira and an inspection of the skin collection at the Natural History Museum in Funchal suggest that the two-tone upperwing of Little Shearwater is not an effect of wear. It may well be a feature which, if looked for, will be detected on vagrants in northern waters within and outside the July/August period of my observations."



that range at best.

In reality none came even that close. The closest were around half a mile away. The 'good' thing about this was that there was no sun, the wind was brisk (about force four with small wave crests and a moderate swell) and I felt whatever impressions I gained would be comparable to often similar conditions on a British or Irish seawatch. It should also be stressed that in stronger wind conditions than I experienced there is every possibility that the flight of Little Shearwater may alter somewhat. If I was to speculate I'd say that, in common with other shearwaters at such times (as a general rule, when the breeze comes up so does the bird), Littles may employ more set-wing soaring and arcing: but I don't know.

■ Tom Thumb of tubenoses

As each passed I took notes. Later individuals cleared up misconceptions of earlier ones, which was a great help in honing field characters and jizz down to those

Illustrations on this page: top, flight views of two Little Shearwaters (Madeira, August). Centre: Little Shearwater. Note the short wings, chubby shape and noticeably rounded head, reminiscent of Common Sandpiper (Madeira, August). Below: two Little Shearwaters, with leading bird 'head-jerking' (Madeira, August).

Illustrations on facing page: top, Manx Shearwater. In late summer the upperparts and inner wing are brown-tinged with the 'hand' looking contrastingly blacker (July). Below: Little Shearwater. Note the two-toned upperwing pattern and extensively white face (Tenerife, July).

which were the most consistent. I recorded just what struck me from the live birds, ignoring all published literature to ensure that I wasn't influenced by the perception of other authors. When the first appeared I had an extra problem: personal tension! How the hell do you handle a year's adrenalin in one go?

Nearby, the Cory's looked magnificent as ever, but were useless in terms of providing realistic scale so, naturally enough, the first Little looked an absolute titch. It was moving briskly, seemed to be constantly flapping (I detected a certain quick, shallow, Kestrel-like winnowing in its wing-beats) and was keeping a dead straight course. Its pitches from side to side were only minor tilts and not proper 'shears' at all. Any glides were brief and seemed unimportant in sustaining its progress. Unlike the Cory's, it seemed to ignore the available wind for arcing and gliding and, instead, was propelling itself along. At a distance of over half a mile it looked almost wader-like and I had to concede that, based on an initial reaction, I would not instantly have thought it was a shearwater at all.

Say I'd been at Porthgwarra and, ignoring plumage features for the moment, this was the full extent of my views. How correct would I have been in interpreting the bird's flight? By the time a few more passed I realised several of my first thoughts were pretty off-beam. Not only had I missed some aspects completely, but I'd wrongly recorded others. Crikey! In reality, each did endeavour to follow a direct line course and kept low and pretty parallel to the sea's surface. Their sideways tilts were as before but the birds weren't constantly flapping at all. Because of their low trajectory I hadn't noticed that their regular, brief glides (lasting usually not quite two seconds) between short bursts of around five quick flaps occurred when the bird was behind a wave and gliding along a trough. Consequently I was seeing the quick bursts of flaps but missing most of the alternating glides. Two days later, at Punta de la Rasca, I saw other observers duped in precisely the same way.

Now the bird's true flight action emerged and took on a very distinctive, almost metronomic quality. Several factors combined to produce this. The wing-beats were quick, almost (but not quite) too quick to count individually; the amplitude of each stroke was shallow and in shape and dimensions the wings were shorter, squarer and blunter than on Manx. I wrote: "On these views the wing-tips look almost clipped". All of this gave the beat a stiffer, 'buzzier' quality than

Manx and yet the actual timing of the beats themselves was not much quicker, if at all. But wait. Manx flap, sometimes using the same number of beats, and also glide, sometimes for exactly the same interval of time. Yet Littles looked different. Why?

Their wing structure must be part of the explanation, but there's something else too. When Manx cease flapping and glide, they hold their wings in a loose, bent-wing position while they cruise swiftly along. Littles, in a funny, clockwork way, seem to stiffen their wings, keeping them rigid at nearly 90° from their body while depressing them at the same time, so that they really do suggest a Common Sandpiper on jizz.

Even their proportions looked the same. Views reinforced this analogy time after time. Hence a typical flight sequence employed a quick burst of wing-beats to give lift, followed by a straight, dipping glide on stiff wings with occasional shallow tilts throughout. Often a quick double wing-beat was also used to 'top up' the bird's momentum between its main burst of flaps. Noteworthy too was the shortness of the distance travelled during each glide. For, despite their busy, repetitive flight action, the birds did not make rapid headway. They were easy to follow for this very reason.

But there was more to it yet. "Mmm, the last bird did that too." And so did the one after that, and the one after that. In fact, they all did it. Precisely what they did looked kind of bizarre yet somehow consistent with their 'cuteness': they frequently jerked their heads. Most often, this came at the end of a glide. Their heads were yanked upwards in a quick, jerking movement looking for all the world as though they were checking the route ahead. Although on a small bird at half a mile it was a rather subtle action to detect, it was nevertheless distinctive once noticed and subliminally reinforced the Common Sandpiper analogy. Somehow it also added a 'nosey', 'inquisitive' or even 'unsure' element to their character and could be vigorous enough to give the bird a momentary concave, arch-backed

appearance. More importantly, the same habit was observed by Killian Mullarney when watching Little Shearwaters at sea off Madeira (see the field sketches on pages 38 and 39). On Manx, the equivalent head movement is much more irregular and infrequent, less emphatic and, in fact, easily missed. Furthermore, in my experience, Manx only do it at all when the lack of a brisk wind limits their flight to flattish glides which parallel the sea, rather than 'classic' shearing. Always remember this different flight style of Manx in such conditions – when they have to beat more to glide less.

■ Not quite black and white

I had three key plumage areas I wanted to check: the head, the extent of the white on the underwings (especially the underside of the primaries), and the upperwings. I managed two out of three. Because of the birds' closeness to the sea, and their lack of any steep shearing or twisting, I had no chance of checking their underwings. Bear in mind that in different wind conditions they may have banked more, thereby enabling such an assessment.

Despite the range I could, with care, discern their pale faces. However, there was – in the prevailing light – no impression of an instantly pale-fronted look. Rather, I could see that the dark of the neck-side curved upwards onto the top of

the head, leaving a white-sided face pattern. The upswinging dark margin (very different from Manx – except when the latter are flying into low sun when their faces can brighten to *appear* white) was, if anything, easier to see than the pale face – on these views. On my absolute best look I felt I could also just about locate the dark eye on the pale face.

On the upperwing I was looking specifically for a two-tone pattern caused by white tips to the greater coverts and a frosty grey panel concentrated along the outer secondaries and their coverts. This feature had been detected by Killian Mullarney on closer birds in Madeira. Obviously an extremely important, perhaps even diagnostic, aid to identification – but could I see it? On the best views, yes! At a half-mile minimum I had to look hard and wait for opportune views of the right part of the upperwing

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but then, sure enough, there was the short pale panel. Subtle at the distance and best looked for when the bird was obliquely going away, this feature was present nonetheless (see Killian Mullarney's field sketch annotation).

■ Manx for the memory

I saw two Manx, one after the first two Littles and then another flying at the same range as another Little, but not associating with it. Both were 'bog stan-

a more rising and falling tack than did Little's. Their action was typically shearing and while they arguably also followed a direct course, their action had much more 'freestyle' about it, without the diffidence suggested by Little. The Manx looked racey, confident, athletic.

Wing shape Little's wings looked shorter but also squarer to the body. Overall, their wing-to-body shape was very cruciform. The wing 'hand' on Manx was clearly longer, 'spikier' and, espe-

Size While clearly smaller, naturally enough the Littles did not look as diminutive alongside Manx as against Cory's. I found it especially interesting that when I detected the second Manx while watching a Little it was the jizz differences, rather than the overall size, which stuck me most forcibly.

If I was to single out the most telling comparative size difference then I'd probably cite the longer wing length of Manx (particularly the 'hand') as being significant.

Left: Little Shearwater, Madeira, April 1988. Compared to Manx the face is extensively white. As a result, black plumage areas are restricted to above the eye and in an arc behind the ear-coverts. Below: Manx Shearwater, Seaforth, September 1992. Note obvious differences in fact pattern from Little Shearwater.

Important negative features It is axiomatic to say that the Manx did not show any suggestion of a pale upperwing panel. They had classic dark heads but their (entirely typical) white rear flanks did stand out more than did those on Little. On the Manx, especially when viewed turning or passing obliquely away, this white plumage formed a white oval on either side of the black uppertail coverts. Most of the world's black-and-white shearwaters have this feature, but I found it to be much more eye-catching on the Manx.

Also, as is normal, the undersides of most of the primaries were dark on Manx. On Little there should have been a narrower pattern of black. Although it was possible to see the expected pattern on the Manx (you have to be quick), the Littles' parallel, low-to-the-sea flight progress prevented equivalent views. Finally, is it even physiologically possible for a Little and Manx to fly over a given distance at the same pace and associate together? I doubt it. The two seem to have divergent flight styles, jizz and maybe more ...

ard' Manx in every respect. There were quite a few differences between the two species, especially in jizz.

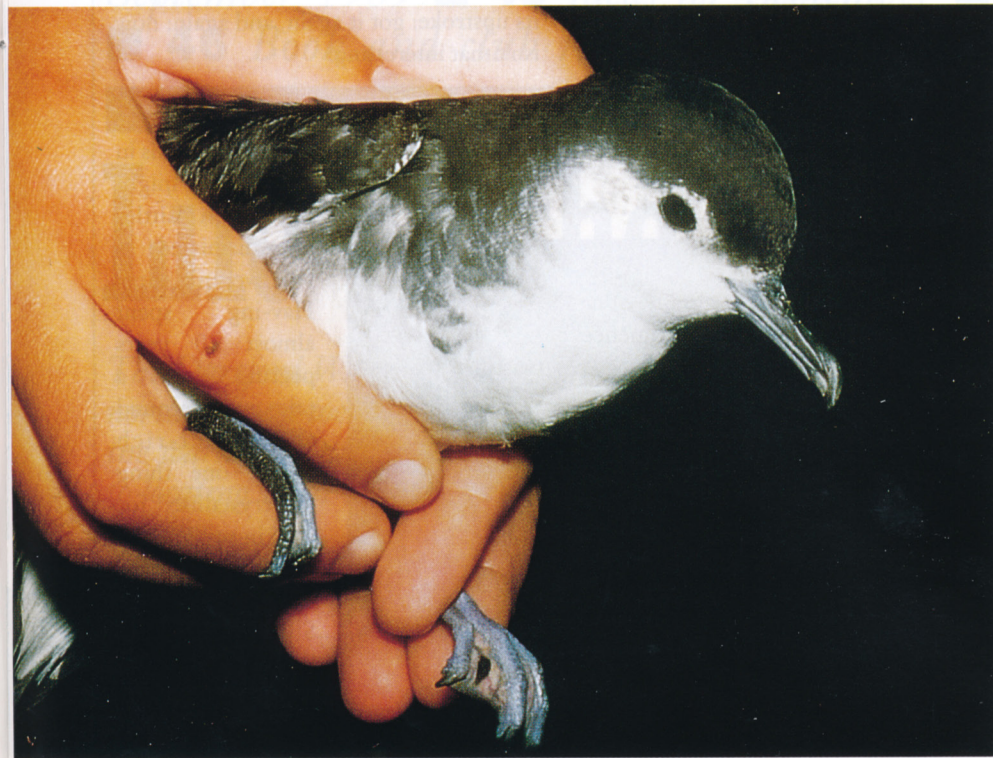
Speed The sheer pace of the Manx was striking. I picked up the second bird while watching a Little, switched my gaze to it, followed it for about a minute and saw it zip past the Little and quickly leave it way behind. Its speed through the air and the sheer length of the distance travelled during glides was much greater than the Little's piddling efforts and resultant slow rate of progress.

Flight style The Manx had a more irregular combination of bursts of wingbeats to glides. Longer series of flaps (of around 9-12) were mixed with shorter bursts, and the flight sequence chopped and changed more, lacking Little's regular 'metronomic' pattern or rhythm.

Arcs Both Manx seemed to be in a hurry. Their whole progress undulated more, particularly their glides which took

cially, more crooked and swept back. This was nothing like as obvious with Little. I found this to be a useful difference between the two species.

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STEVE YOUNG

■ The surprise

Before this trip I'd seen four Littles around the Canaries. All were from boats. Each had been disturbed from the sea and had skittered off, in different weather conditions, to settle again somewhere else. At Casado on 12 July and at Rasca on the early mornings of 13th and 14th I saw Littles land several times on the sea, either alighting for a few minutes or pausing for just a short time before continuing – and then sometimes pausing again.

I also saw something else: on three occasions I observed feeding behaviour, each time the same. I swear I was stone-cold sober. Suddenly birds broke from their normal flight and went into a dip-feeding hover over the sea reminiscent of European Storm-petrel. Their wings were thrust out from the body and beaten in a whirring action while still held in a basically horizontal plane. The inescapable conclusion was that the birds were foot-pattering like small petrels. Even more astounding were occasional forward jumps – which looked more like bounces, almost as in Wilson's Storm-petrel – to feed over new positions. One bird settled for a short time after engaging in this activity, others flew on. I've never seen a Manx do this. Is this why Littles fly closer to the sea, seem to prefer the troughs, and aren't in a fast-travelling mode?

■ Checking out at Rasca

With only two days left I reckoned dawn starts at Punta de la Rasca might catch an early morning passage period, if such a thing existed. It certainly did for Cory's. Whether this was the proper explanation or simply luck, I did manage poor views of two single Little Shearwaters around 8am on 13th and then at least five singletons (at an equivalent distance to those I'd seen at Casado) next morning between 8am and 9am, with no more until I left an hour later. At Rasca the seawatch point was lower, the wind less, and low morning sun shone onto the birds from a side angle.

All of the features noted at Casado checked out, but there were some differences. The greatest of these was caused by the sun which made the entire head look blinding white, almost like a beacon. In fact, the overall effect was of a small,

At this range, and in ideal light, the classic features of Manx show well. Note the extensive dark cap and broad dark neck 'shawl' – with a small indented white 'division' behind the ear-coverts. Due to the range of flight attitudes frozen on a still photograph, there would appear to be some variation in the extent of dark borders to the underwings. In fact most of this is illusory except for the consistently dark undersides to the outer primaries.



ANTHONY MCGEEHAN




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On Manx, the outer part of the wing (or 'hand') is long, swept back from the carpal joint and, on a travelling bird over the sea, looks tapered and 'spikey'. On Little the impression in life is of a shorter, blunter wing which is also held in a more right-angled position to the body.

largely white seabird, with just its upperparts and hind-neck dark. Because of the low vantage point plus the birds' distance and low track over the sea, it was more difficult to separate all of the flight elements.

Once again, the glides and head jerks could be obscured due to the bird 'blipping' in and out of view behind swells. In spite of this, the upperwing did show the two-tone, variegated pattern. The trick was to watch for a slightly 'going away' angle and concentrate on the far wing on its upstroke: got it again, and again; now isn't that interesting?

■ And finally

Do you have any seawatching skeletons in the cupboard? Birds you thought might have been Littles but dismissed as you weren't sure? Hav-ing spent almost 20 years peering down a telescope around shearwater-rich coasts, one thing has crystallised for sure in my mind. I have never, not ever, seen a Little Shearwater off the coast of Ireland. But if I do get lucky at some time in the future I'll certainly have a better idea of what to look for. Cheers and good night. 

■ Suggested reading

Cramp, S, and Simmons, K (eds) (1977). *Birds of the Western Palearctic*, Vol I (OUP).
Curtis, W F, Lassey, P A, and Wallace, D I M (1985). Identifying the smaller shearwaters. *Brit. Birds* 78: 123-138.
Steel, David S (1988). The Little Shearwater in the western North Atlantic. *Am. Birds* 42: 213-220.

■ Acknowledgements

From Germany, Volker Konrad contacted me and supplied several photographs of Little Shearwaters, one of which is reproduced here, and also passed on his knowledge of the species. Fellow seawatcher and Manx maniac Ken Douglas provided constant help and much valuable advice. Finally, this article would never have been completed without Killian Mullarney who, as always, was generous to a fault in sharing his time, talent, and original observations.