

Saltee Islands



The Saltee Islands

— One of the jewels of the South Wexford Coast —

Marine wonderland

Easily accessible and supporting twelve species of breeding seabirds in summer, the Saltee Islands are one of the best known and most popular bird islands in Ireland. In addition to the sights, sounds and smells of the seabird cities in high summer, a visit to the islands brings the diverse mixture of pleasures of time spent on the sea, impressive cliff scenery, wild flowers in bloom, the magic of a world apart, a Grey Seal rookery, outstanding marine life in the surrounding waters and the ever present possibility of experiencing something new, unusual or exciting.

Some basic facts

The Saltee Islands complex comprises two islands, several adjoining nearshore and offshore islets and sea rocks and a large area of surrounding seabed. The two islands are called Saltee Island Great — the large island on the right when viewed from the mainland — and Saltee Island Little. The islands are located in the Celtic Sea off Kilmore Quay on the sunny south coast of County Wexford¹. Saltee Island Little lies about 4km from Kilmore Quay and has an area of about 38ha. The island is whale-backed in shape with low cliffs on its shores and rising to over 30m along its centre. Saltee Island Great lies about 6km from Kilmore Quay, has an area of about 87ha, and is wedge-shaped. Saltee Island Great ascends from a low shore on the mainland side to 20-30m high cliffs on its south-eastern side². It rises to an altitude of 58m at its southern summit.

The foundation of rock

The Saltees are composed of a fine, pinkish-brown granite. The Saltee Granite extends over a large oval area of seabed. Formed some 436 million years ago during the Silurian Period of geological time, the granite is one of several intrusives that cored the former Caledonian Mountains³.

Human habitation

Both islands are privately owned. Saltee Island Great was farmed in the past but war-time agricultural activities stopped in 1943. At harvest time, the larger island supported a community of some twenty people^{4&5}. The island is now largely overgrown with dense stands of Bracken and impenetrable thickets of Bramble scrub. Farming on Saltee Island Little ceased in 1946 but resumed in 1999⁶ and still continues. Raising Kerry cows, Fallow Deer and Soay Sheep are the main enterprises.

Saint Patrick's Bridge

Saint Patrick's Bridge is a long finger of shingle stretching out from the mainland shore towards Saltee Island Little. The landform is interpreted as a moraine, a mass of cobbles, boulders and fine sediments carried and deposited by a glacier that melted in the area more than 13,000 years ago. At

low water, the ends of the bridge may be seen jutting out from the townland of Nemestown on the mainland and from the north-eastern corner of Saltee Island Little. St Patrick's Rock is one of several large, named glacial erratics of Carnsore Granite scattered along the seashore on the eastern side of the bridge⁷.

Celtic Sea Front

The Celtic Sea Front is the boundary that forms in summer where the shallower, mixed waters of the Irish Sea meet the deeper, layered waters of the Celtic Sea⁸. The frontal system meanders along a line stretching from the Saltees to the coast of Wales. Upwellings along the thermal front cause plankton to bloom triggering the development of food chains that end in large predatory fish, seabirds, porpoises, dolphins and whales.

Wild flowers in bloom

The islands returned 131 species of wild plant during survey work for the atlas produced in 2002 by the Botanical Society of the British Isles⁹. Changing hues give the islands a unique beauty as different species dominate the palette as it changes with the seasons. Parts of the islands turn blue in spring when the understory of Bluebells flowers.

Bluebells blooming in springtime on Saltee Island Great.



Later, yellows merge with the fading blues as Wild Turnip flowers. Greens dominate when Bracken is in full leaf. Reds provide an early autumn glow as Common Sorrel fruits and browns take over in late autumn as the Bracken dies down.

Butterflies and moths

In early summer the Saltees are a welcome and important landfall for migrant butterflies and moths moving into Ireland from Britain and mainland Europe. Regularly recorded species include Red Admiral, Painted Lady, Silver-Y, and a number of hawk moths.

Possibility of unusual fish

Sunfish and Basking Sharks, the second largest fish in the world, have been spotted in waters around the islands on rare occasions.



Wild Birds

While the Saltees are famous for their seabirds, some forty species of other birds have been recorded breeding on the islands⁴. These range from such well-known garden favourites as the Blackbird and Robin to the rarer Peregrine Falcon, Raven and Chough. Due to their location at the south-eastern corner of Ireland, the islands are ideally located as a landfall for migrants arriving into Ireland in springtime from Britain and mainland Europe. In May, the islands are regarded among the very best sites in Ireland for spring migrants and vagrants; consequently, long lists of rarities have been compiled^{10 & 11}. The autumn migration is less spectacular with September being the best month. May, June and July are the best months to visit to see seabirds.

Bird observatory

Ireland's first bird observatory was operated by Robin Rutledge and John Weaving on Saltee Island Great from 1950 to 1963 by kind permission of the land owner, Prince Michael the First. The importance of the island as a landfall for migrants was established and documented¹². With the continued support of the land owners, Dr David Cabot, Maurice Cassidy, BirdWatch Ireland researchers, staff of the government's National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), and others conduct on-going surveys with regard to migrants, breeding seabirds, and other wildlife. As a result, the Saltees are one the best documented pair of islands in Ireland.

Breeding seabirds

Twelve species of seabirds regularly breed on the Saltee Islands. These birds normally spend their lives at sea but have to come to land to nest. Once their young have fledged many of the birds leave the Saltees and do not return until the following summer breeding season. The summer colonies on the Saltee islands are rated of international importance because together they comprise an assemblage of over 20,000 breeding seabirds¹³.

The following introductory notes on the twelve species of breeding seabirds refer to adult birds in breeding plumage as seen during the



The Common Guillemot is the most numerous breeding seabird on the Saltee Islands.

nesting season. The numbers of breeding birds given are approximate and are based on those recorded during Seabird 2000, the most recent comprehensive census of the bird populations on these islands¹⁴ together with updates kindly provided by David Cabot, Stephen Newton, Oscar Merne, Tony Murray and Alyn Walsh.

- The **Northern Fulmar** is related to the albatross. It glides at length on stiff, straight wings and floats on up-draughts along the cliffs. Unlike the four resident species of breeding gulls it does not have black-and-white patterned wing-tips. It also differs from the gulls in that it has a large head, a dark eye smudge, a tube-nose, a short thick neck, and a grey tail. About 500 pairs nest on both islands and the population is declining slowly.
- **Manx Shearwaters** are long-winged birds that are rarely seen. However, they may very occasionally be seen in small flocks at sea near the islands during the daytime. In flight they often bank steeply forming black and white cross-shapes shearing the water. About 250 pairs are believed to breed underground on both islands but the colonies have never been fully censused.
- The goose-sized **Northern Gannet** is Ireland's largest seabird. Breeding adults are white with black wing tips and a tinge of yellow-buff on their heads. They plunge-dive diagonally from a height and 'fly' underwater catching surface-shoaling fish. About 3,000 breeding pairs. They nest on Saltee Island Great only and numbers continue to increase steadily.

□ Cormorants and Shags are somewhat similar and are consequently easily confused. The **Great Cormorant** is bigger (77-94cm long), has a blue and bronze gloss and white cheek and thigh patches. It also has a thick bill, a thick neck and a low, flat head. About 275 pairs breed on both islands. The birds colonised Saltee Island Great in recent years and their numbers continue to grow in tandem with declining numbers on Saltee Island Little.

□ The **European Shag** is smaller (68-78cm long) and slimmer and has an oily, green, glossy sheen. It has a thin bill, a snake-like neck, a steep fore-head and bright emerald-green eyes. About 250 pairs breed on both islands as the population recovers from a significant winter crash some ten years ago.

□ Gulls are a well-known family of seabirds. Four species breed on the Saltees. Gull species that scavenged at landfill sites on the mainland suffered a catastrophic Botulism-induced decline in numbers around in the late 1990s. However, numbers are slowly recovering. The **Lesser Black-backed Gull** is medium-sized (48-56cm), has a dark slate-grey back, bright yellow-ochre legs, bright orange eye-ring, and a gentle expression on its face. About 200 pairs breed on both islands.

□ The **Herring Gull** (54-60cm) is the quintessential 'seagull'. It has a pale grey back and pale flesh-pink legs. Its eye-ring is yellow or pale orange. About 250 pairs breed on both islands recovering from a crash from a peak population of some 1,450 pairs in the late 1980s.

□ The **Great Black-backed Gull** is the biggest (61-74cm long) of the four regular breeders. It has a black back, a very heavy bill, pale pink legs and a red eye-ring that gives its face a rather fierce expression. About 150 pairs breed on both islands.

□ The **Black-legged Kittiwake** is the smallest (37-42cm) of the four gulls and is the only one with black legs and black eyes. Its legs are also very short. It nests on the cliffs where it repeatedly calls its name 'kit-ti-week; kit-ti-week' in a rhythmic nasal voice. About 2,125 pairs breed on Saltee Island Great. The species is absent from Saltee Island Little but it formerly bred there.

□ The three members of the Auk family are black-and-white birds. The stubby-tailed auks may be thought of as the penguins of the northern hemisphere. Size and bill shape are good field marks for telling them apart. The **Common Guillemot** is the biggest (38-46cm) of the trio, is more dark-chocolate-brown than black in colour and has a slender, pointed bill (see image above). It is the most numerous seabird found on the Saltees. About 21,500 birds breed on Saltee Island Great. They lay single eggs directly on rocky ledges without building any nest (see image above). The species is a very recent coloniser on Saltee Island Little.

□ The **Razorbill** is not significantly smaller (38-43cm) than the Common Guillemot but is heavier-billed, squatter and has a thicker neck. It is jet black and has a flattened bill like a cut-throat razor ('razor-bill') with white lines on it. A white stripe on the bill is



A cruise around the islands in high summer is a most memorable experience.

Photo: Jim Hurley

linked to a white line running from the bill to the dark brown eye. About 3,750 birds breed, the majority on Saltee Island Great.

- The **Atlantic Puffin** is significantly smaller (28-34cm) has a big head, a parrot-like colourful bill, large white cheek patches and bright orange legs (see image on page 1). Puffins nest in underground burrows near the cliff tops. About 2,000 individuals breed on both islands.

Land mammals

Land mammals recorded on Saltee Island Great include Pygmy Shrew⁴, unidentified bats, Rabbit, Eurasian Otter and Brown Rat. An animal dropping found in 2011 was believed to be an American Mink scat¹⁵.

Whales and dolphins

The Saltees are regarded a hotspot for seeing whales and dolphins. The cliff-tops provide excellent vantage points for scanning the surrounding coastal waters. Small groups of Risso's Dolphin are regularly seen in summer. Harbour Porpoises and Common Dolphins are occasionally spotted. Killer Whales, White-beaked Dolphins and Fin Whales have been recorded in the waters around the islands¹⁶.

Grey Seals rookery

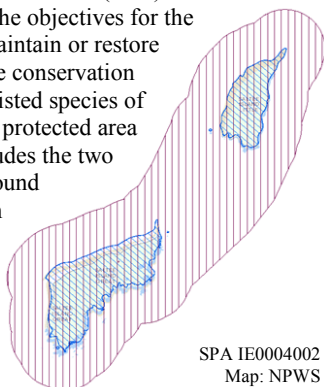
The Saltee Islands are among the top five Grey Seal breeding sites in Ireland. About 120 pups are born each autumn at some 25 pupping sites on both islands. The pupping season extends from August to December¹⁷. Pup mortality varies from year to year depending on both the severity of the gales that often occur during the pupping season and the level of disturbance caused by the presence of people on the pupping beaches.



Grey Seal pup on the Saltees. Photo: Edward Delaney.

Nature conservation

The Saltees are internationally important for supporting an assemblage of over 20,000 breeding seabirds. The two islands have been a Special Protection Area (SPA) for wild birds since 1985. The objectives for the SPA are to maintain or restore the favourable conservation condition of listed species of seabirds. The protected area for birds includes the two islands, the sound between them and a surrounding skirt of nearshore sea and seabed approximately 500m wide. Two species listed on Annex I of the EU Birds Directive regularly breed: the



SPA IE0004002
Map: NPWS

The Makestone (right) is the biggest islet off Saltee Island Great.



Peregrine Falcon (1-2 pairs) and Chough (1 pair). The Chough is significant in that Saltee Island Great is the eastern edge of its Irish range. Full details with regard to the SPA together with site descriptions, maps, etc., are available online¹³.

The islands and a large area of surrounding seabed are also a candidate Special Area of Conservation (cSAC) for their habitats and the marine life that these habitats support. With an area of 15,809ha, the cSAC extends to, and includes part of, the mainland shore (see map, below right). The site is of high conservation importance for marine habitats, with reefs, sea caves, large shallow bays, and intertidal sediments all well represented. Reefs are large areas of exposed rock either on the seabed or on the seashore. They are important habitats for wildlife. The very extensive underwater reefs around the Saltees are exceptionally rich in marine life. They support excellent examples of the communities of tide-swept areas and areas subject to sand scour. The range of colonial sea squirts present is particularly notable. Full details with regard to the cSAC together with site descriptions, maps, etc., are available online¹³.

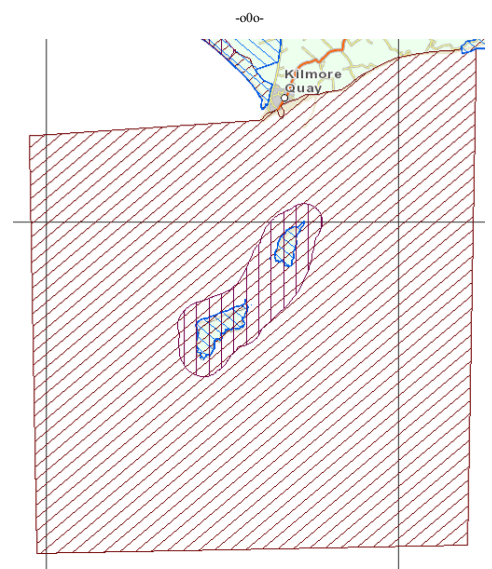
The great wealth of marine life and the presence of several wrecked ships attracts scuba divers to the area. Wexford Sub Aqua maintain their clubhouse and boathouse at Kilmore Quay and their website includes a guide to the best dive sites on the South Wexford Coast¹⁸.

Sources and references

1. Ordnance Survey of Ireland. Discovery Series. Sheet 77. South-east Wexford. Scale: 1:50,000.
2. Ordnance Survey of Ireland website at maps.osi.ie/publicviewer/.
3. Tietzsch-Tyler, D., and Sleeman, A. G. 1994. *Geology of South Wexford*. Dublin: Geological Survey of Ireland.
4. Roche, R., and Merne, O. 1977. *Saltees - Islands of birds and legends*. Dublin: The O'Brien Press Ltd.
5. Owners' website at www.salteeislands.info/.
6. Grattan Bellew, H. 2003. *A Pinch of Saltee*. Justin Nelson Publications.
7. Culleton, E. (Editor). 1994. *Treasures of the Landscape: County Wexford's Rural Heritage*. Wexford: Wexford Organisation for Rural Development (WORD).
8. ICES. 2007. *Report of the Working Group for Regional*

Ecosystem Description (WGRED), 19 - 23 February 2007. Copenhagen: International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) Headquarters.

9. Preston, C. D., Pearman, D. A. and Dines, T. D. (Editors). 2002. *New Atlas of the British and Irish Flora*. Oxford: University Press.
10. Milne, P., and Hutchinson, C. 2009 (Second edition). *Where to watch birds - Ireland*. London: Christopher Helm.
11. Dempsey, E., and O'Cleary, M. 2007. *Finding Birds in Ireland: The Complete Guide*. London: Gill and Macmillan.
12. Ruttledge, R.F. 1965. Migrant and other birds of Great Saltee, Co. Wexford. *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy Volume 63B*, pages 71-86.
13. Website of the National Parks and Wildlife Service at www.npws.ie/.
14. Mitchell, P. I., Newton, S. F., Ratcliffe, N., and Dunn, T. E. 2004. *Seabird Populations of Britain and Ireland: Results of the Seabird 2000 census (1998-2002)*. London: T & A D Poyser.
15. BirdWatch Ireland website at www.birdwatchireland.ie/Publications/eWings/eWingsIssue23August2011/AmericanMinkposenewthreat/tabid/1196/Default.aspx.
16. Irish Whale and Dolphin Group online database at www.iwdg.ie/iscope/sightings/.
17. Ó Cadhla, O., Strong, D., O'Keefe, C., Coleman, M., Cronin, M., Duck, C., Murray, T., Dower, P., Nairn, R., Murphy, P., Smiddy, P., Saich, C., Lyons, D., and Hiby, A. R. 2007. An assessment of the breeding population of grey seals in the Republic of Ireland, 2005. *Irish Wildlife Manuals* No. 34. Dublin: National Parks and Wildlife Service. Available online at www.npws.ie/publications/irishwildlifemanuals/IWM34.pdf.
18. Website of Wexford Sub Aqua Club at www.divewexford.org/.



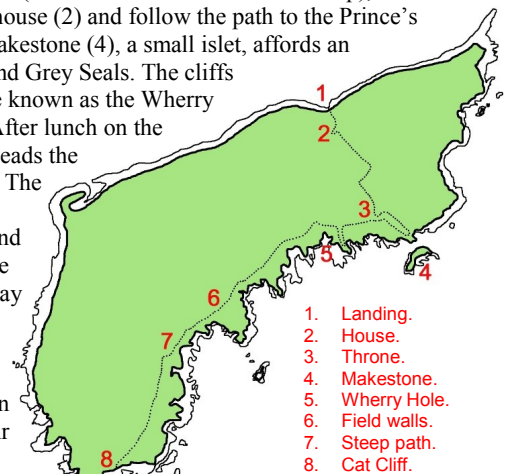
cSAC IE0000707 containing SPA IE0004002. Map: NPWS.

Visiting the Saltee Islands

Both of the islands are privately owned. Landing on Saltee Island Little is hazardous and permission to visit is required. Day visitors to Saltee Island Great are welcome and permission to land, courtesy of the owners — the Neale family — is not needed. However, the owners of the island kindly request day visitors to respect the following four rules: (1) Day visitors are allowed between the hours of 11:00am and 4:30pm only, (2) No camping is allowed on the island, (3) The lighting of fires is strictly forbidden, and (4) Privacy should be afforded to the owners by not approaching their house.

Those hiring a boat to get to Saltee Island Great, or paying for a place of a boat, should be aware that the onus is on them to ensure that the crafts they travel on are properly licensed and insured and that adequate safety precautions are in place. The *Merchant Shipping Act, 1992* requires that all passenger boats must have a copy of their licence displayed onboard. Landing on the island is wind-dependent and involves offloading at sea from the ferry boat into a tender to go ashore onto either a sandy beach, a mass of wet seaweed or over slippery, seaweed-covered rocks depending on the state of the tide. Weather and sea conditions permitting, cruises around the islands to see and enjoy the scenery, seabirds, and seals are offered by a number of licensed charter boats operating out of Kilmore Quay marina. The Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport posts a current List of Certified Passenger Boats on its website at www.dttas.ie/viewitem.asp?id=12735&lang=ENG&loc=1958. For local updates, contact the information desk at the Stella Maris Community and Tourist Centre, Kilmore Quay, e-mail admins@eircom.net, website www.kilmorequayweb.com/, telephone (053) 912 9922; see also www.visitkilmorequay.ie/.

Those who disembark at the landing on Saltee Island Great (location No 1 on the attached map), ascend a flight of steps up the low cliff, pass close to the owners' house (2) and follow the path to the Prince's stone throne (3). A detour to the cliffs overlooking the Makestone (4), a small islet, affords an immediate view of several species of breeding seabirds and Grey Seals. The cliffs surrounding the first bay west of the throne, near the cave known as the Wherry Hole (5), usually afford good views of Atlantic Puffins. After lunch on the Rabbit-grazed lawn by the throne, the well-trodden path leads the visitor on a trek to the south-western corner of the island. The tops of the stone walls (6) surrounding the former agricultural fields afford good views of large gulls. The end of the stone walls marks the start of a steep path (7) up the flank of the South Summit from which excellent views may be had looking back along the axis of the island to Saltee Island Little and the mainland with Carnsore Point in the distance (image below). The path ends at Cat Cliff (8) that, together with the surrounding cliffs, support the main colony of Northern Gannets. These big, noisy birds favour this spot as the combination of the prevailing south-westerly winds and the tall cliffs provide good lift for take-off and landing. Return to the landing via the same route. The round trip is only about 3km long but, allowing for frequent leisured stops, it can take most of the day to complete. Enjoy your visit.



Map: Jim Hurley

Country Code

Please help conserve the biodiversity of the Saltee islands by following the Country Code

- Leave Saltee Island Great as you found it. Do nothing to destroy the wonderful amenity you have come to enjoy. Stay on the paths. Kill nothing but time; take nothing but memories.
- Pay careful attention to the cliff edges; the ground may be unsafe and may give way. Remember you are in a remote location; if needed, help may be slow to arrive.
- Please take your rubbish home with you. Leave nothing but footprints.
- If you are a photographer, help conserve the breeding birds by not driving them off their nests in an attempt to get close-up photographs. Disturbance significantly reduces the birds' breeding success.
- Give Grey Seal pups a wide berth in autumn for fear their mothers might desert them.
- Beware of 'tame' Grey Seals in Kilmore Quay harbour. They can give a nasty bite if they mistake a hand trailing in the water for an offering of food.
- The protected wildlife areas are managed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS). If you see any threats to wildlife report your concerns to Tony Murray, the local NPWS Conservation Ranger, e-mail Tony.Murray@ahg.gov.ie, telephone (053) 914 7576.

Thank you.



Photo: Jim Hurley