

Saltee Islands



Atlantic Puffin



The Saltee Islands

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 3.8km south of Kilmore Quay and has an area of about 37ha. 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 89ha, 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 centre of the former Caledonian Mountains³.

Placename

The name 'Saltee' is interpreted as a combination of the English word 'Salt' and the Norse suffix '-ey' meaning island⁴. In stormy weather, the islands are regularly drenched with spray.

Human habitation

Both islands are privately owned or occupied. Saltee Island Great was farmed in the past but agricultural activities ceased in 1943. At harvest time, the larger island supported a community of some twenty people^{5 & 6}. 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 1999⁷ and still continues. Raising Kerry cows, Fallow Deer and Soay Sheep are the main enterprises.

Saint Patrick's Bridge

Allegedly constructed by Ireland's national apostle, Saint Patrick's Bridge is a long ridge of shingle

stretching out from the mainland shore towards Saltee Island Little. The landform is interpreted as a glacial moraine: a mass of cobbles, boulders and fine sediment carried by, and deposited by, an ice sheet during the last glaciation⁸. 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 bridge. These erratics were moved about and deposited by ice as it flowed south in the basin of the Irish Sea during the last glaciation⁹.

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 Sea¹⁰. The frontal system meanders along a line stretching from the Saltee Islands 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

278 species of wild plant were recorded on the Saltee Islands by visiting botanists up to 30 June 2022¹¹. 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 hawk moths.

Unusual life forms

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

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Wild Birds

While the Saltees are famous for their seabirds, some forty species of other birds have been recorded breeding on the islands⁵. 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 seeing spring migrants and vagrants; consequently, long lists of rarities have been compiled^{12&13}. 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 Ruttledge and John Weaving on Saltee Island Great from 1950 to 1963 by kind permission of the land owner: Michael Neale, Prince Michael the First. The importance of the island as a landfall for migrants was established and documented¹⁴.

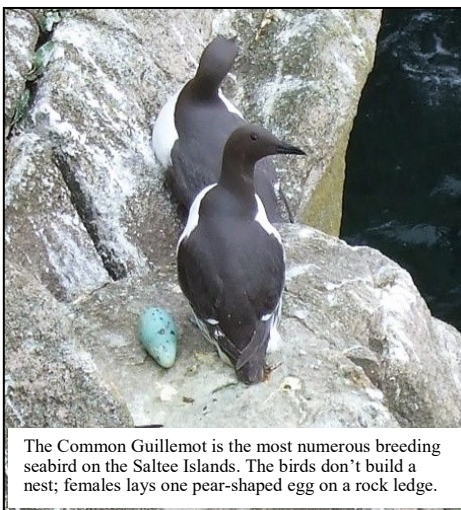
With the continued support of the land owners, researchers from several universities, the government's National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), BirdWatch Ireland, and others, conduct on-going surveys and research with regard to migrants, breeding seabirds, and other wildlife. As a result, the Saltees are one of the best documented 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 seabirds¹⁵.

The following very brief introductory notes to the twelve species of breeding seabirds refer to adult birds in breeding plumage as seen during the nesting season. Population sizes are taken from the most recent published data¹⁶ together with earlier sources where applicable.



The Common Guillemot is the most numerous breeding seabird on the Saltee Islands. The birds don't build a nest; females lay one pear-shaped egg on a rock ledge.

Twelve breeding seabirds

1. 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 is off-white in colour, has a large head, a dark eye smudge, a tube-nose, a short thick neck, and a grey tail. 357 pairs (190 on Saltee Island Great and 167 on Saltee Island Little) nested (2015-2018)¹⁶. The population is declining.
2. **Manx Shearwaters** are long-winged birds that are rarely seen in small flocks at sea near the islands during the daytime. They are black above and white below and have a characteristic switchback flight forming alternative black and white cross-shapes as they fly low shearing the wave crests. They breed underground and come ashore only under cover of darkness. The population size on Saltee Island Little is estimated at 718 pairs¹⁷; the population on Saltee Island Great has not yet been fully censused.
3. 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. They nest on Saltee Island Great only, occur at two main sites (the Makestone and Cat Cliff) and their numbers continue to increase steadily: 4,722 pairs (2013-2014)¹⁶.

Cormorants and Shags are somewhat similar birds and are consequently easily confused.

4. 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. 208 pairs bred on Saltee Island Little (2015-2018)¹⁶. The birds colonised Saltee Island Great in recent years and numbers continue to grow there in tandem with declining numbers on Saltee Island Little.
5. 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. They breed on both islands; 112 pairs on Saltee Island Great (2015-2018)¹⁶.

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 in the late 1990s. However, numbers are slowly recovering.

6. 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. They breed on both islands; 251 pairs on Saltee Island Great (2015-2018)¹⁶.
7. 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. They breed on both islands; 115 pairs on Saltee Island Great (2015-2018)¹⁶ recovering from a crash from a peak population of some 1,450 pairs in the late 1980s.
8. 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.
9. 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. The species is absent from Saltee Island Little but it formerly bred there; 1,038 pairs bred on Saltee Island Great. (2015-2018)¹⁶.

The three members of the Auk family are black-and-white. 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 the trio apart.

10. 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. 25,851 birds bred on Saltee Island Great (2015-2018)¹⁶. They lay single eggs directly on rocky ledges without building any nest (image page 2). The species is a very recent coloniser on Saltee Island Little.
11. The **Razorbill** is not significantly smaller (38-43cm) than the Common Guillemot but is heavier-billed, squatter and has a



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

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 linked to a white line running from the bill to the dark brown eye. 6,519 pairs (5,669 on Saltee Island Great and 850 on Saltee Island Little) nested (2015-2018)¹⁶. The population is rising steadily.

12. 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. The estimated population on Saltee Island Great suffered a dramatic decline (from 1,522 pairs in 1998-2002 to 120 pairs in 2015-2017) whereas the population on Saltee Island Little remained relatively stable (300 pairs in 1998-2002 and 270 pairs in 2015-2017)^{18 and 19}.

Land mammals

Land mammals recorded on Saltee Island Great include Pygmy Shrew^{5 & 15}, unidentified bats, Rabbit, and Eurasian Otter. An animal dropping found in 2011 was believed to be an American Mink scat²⁰. To protect the seabirds, Brown Rats were exterminated on Saltee Island Great by the National Parks and Wildlife Service in the winter of 2020¹⁹.

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. Minke Whales, Killer Whales and Fin Whales have been recorded²¹.

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 twenty-five pupping sites on both islands. The pupping season extends from August to December.



Grey Seal pup.

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 beaches²².

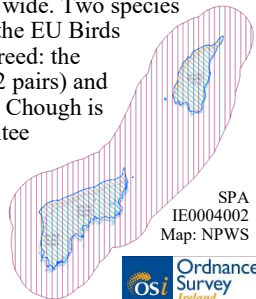
Nature conservation

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

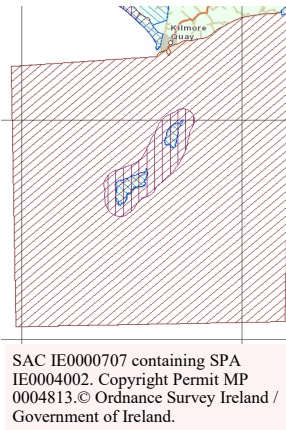


The Makestone (right) is the biggest islet off Saltee Island Great.

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 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 online¹⁵.



The islands and a large area of surrounding seabed are also a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) for their habitats and the marine life that these habitats support. With an area of 15,809ha, the SAC extends to, and includes part of, the mainland shore. 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 SAC together with site descriptions, maps, etc., are available online²³.



The great wealth of marine life and the presence of several wrecked ships attracts scuba divers to the area. Members of Wexford Sub Aqua Club maintain their boathouse at Kilmore Quay and their website includes a guide to the best dive sites on the South Wexford Coast²⁴.

Visiting the Saltee Islands

Both islands are privately owned or occupied. Landing on Saltee Island Little is hazardous and as it is a working farm, 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 needed⁶. However, the owners of the island kindly request day visitors to respect the following three rules: (1) day visitors are allowed between the hours of 11:30am and 4:30pm only, (2) dogs, drones, camping, and the lighting of fires are all forbidden, and (3) privacy should be afforded to the owners by not approaching their house⁶.

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.

There is no pier on the island. Landing is wind-dependent and involves offloading at sea from the ferry boat into a dingy to go ashore to disembark, depending on the state of the tide, on either a sandy beach, a mass of wet seaweed, or over slippery, seaweed-covered rocks. Landing is at your own risk.

Once ashore, there are no facilities or shelter on the island.

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.



Kerry cattle grazing on Saltee Island Little.

Self-guided tour around Saltee Island Great

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. After lunch on the Rabbit-grazed lawn by the throne, 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. A 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 visit to complete.



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 photographs and memories.
- Pay careful attention to the cliff edges; the ground may be unsafe and may give way. Stay back at least your body length. 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 nature conservation report your concerns to Tony Murray, the local NPWS Conservation Ranger, email Tony.Murray@npws.gov.ie, telephone 01 539 3212 . Thank you.

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View east from the South Summit on Saltee Island Great.