

Keeragh Islands



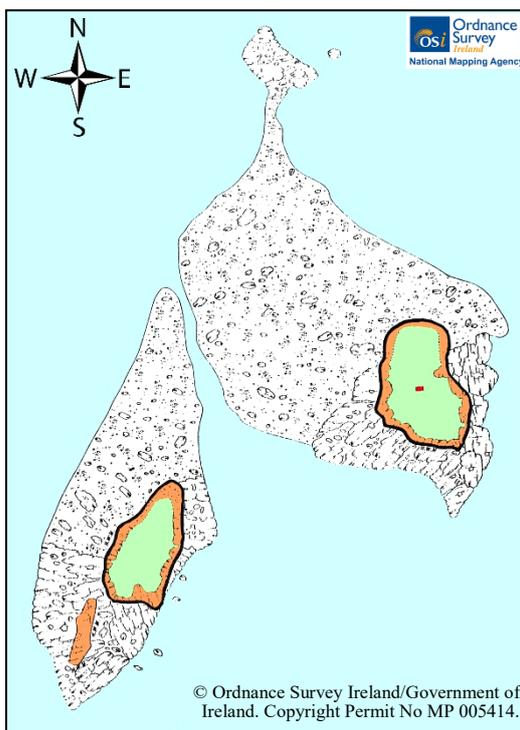
The Keeragh Islands

Introduction. The Keeragh (say 'Key-rock') Islands (Irish Grid Ref: S 86 05) are located in Ballyteige Bay 10.5km west-north-west of Kilmore Quay on the South Wexford Coast^{1 & 2}.



Location map: screenshot from NPWS <http://webgis.npws.ie/npwsviewer/>. © Ordnance Survey Ireland/Government of Ireland. OSi copyright Permit No MP 005414.

There are two islands: The Big Keeragh and The Little Keeragh. The islands lie 375m apart and 1.5km south of Ballymadder Point on the mainland. Both islands are wedge-shaped with low cliffs of outcropping bedrock on their southern shores. At low tide both islands are surrounded by very extensive boulder-strewn reefs that taper to the north.



The Big Keeragh (right/north-east) has an area of 0.9ha (land; green) + 0.4ha (shore; brown) and rises to an altitude of 9m. It has a house ruin at its centre. The Little Keeragh (left/south-west) has an area of 0.6ha (land) + 0.4ha (shore) and rises to an altitude of 4m. A small (0.2ha) outlier at its south-western extremity is above the reach of ordinary tides.

Meaning of the placename

The placename 'Keeragh' is pronounced 'Key-rock' and Keeragh Islands is interpreted as an anglicisation of the Irish 'Oileáin na gCaorach' meaning 'islands of the sheep', that is, 'Sheep Islands'^{3 & 4}.

The foundation of rock

The bedrocks that form the Keeragh Islands are dark quartzites with pale green and purple slates⁵. These rock types are well exposed on the reef on northern shore of The Big Keeragh (pictured below).



The rocks on the Keeragh Islands are part of the Shelmaliere Formation, one of nine formations that make up the Cahore Group, an extensive group of altered sediments that stretches from Cahore in Co Wexford to Tramore in Co Waterford. The parent sandy and muddy sediments that gave rise to these rocks accumulated in a trough called the Leinster Basin located on the sea floor during the late Cambrian Period some 500 million years ago⁵.

Land ownership

Following the Cromwellian plantation of Wexford in 1649, Nathaniel Boyse was granted 4,340 acres, 1 rood and 6 perches of land under the *Act of Settlement of Bannow*. His holding included "*The Islands in the Sea*". Boyse was High Sheriff of County Wexford in 1677 and a member of the Irish House of Commons in 1692^{6 & 7}.

In 1816, one of his descendants, Samuel Boyse, started building Bannow House (below) at Grange. The house was completed by Samuel's son Thomas Boyse in 1834⁶.



The owners of the Bannow estate

Bannow House and the Bannow estate remained in the Boyse family from the 17th century until 1947. The 4,000-acre estate was subject to division by the Land Commission and was reduced to some 400 acres. In 1947 Mervyn Boyse sold the house and estate, including the Keeragh Islands, to Timothy Mulcahy of Dublin. In 1961 Mr Mulcahy sold the property to Richard Herring a businessman from Hamburg, Germany^{4,6&7}. The property is now owned by the late Mr Herring's daughter, Katrin.

Graveyard of a Thousand Ships

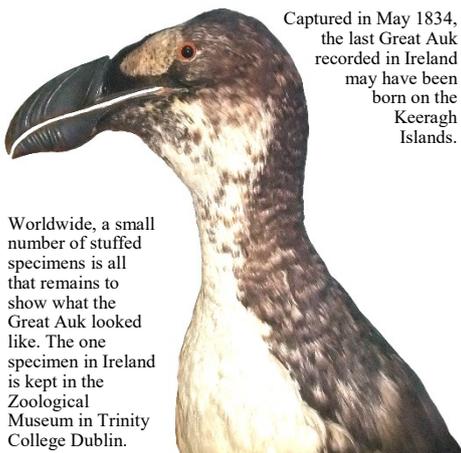
In the nineteenth century, Ballyteige Bay was the "Graveyard of a Thousand Ships"⁸. The prevailing southerly winds blow into the circular bay making it difficult for sailing ships to escape from the bay against the wind especially when laden with cargo and with reduced manoeuvrability due to fouling of the hull after crossing the Atlantic Ocean. During the winter of 1805-06 "no fewer than seventeen ships of large burthen are known to have come ashore on Ballyteigue Strand"⁹.

Some of the notable sailing ships that were wrecked on the Keeragh Islands included

- *Demarara*, 1819, cargo of sugar, rum, coffee and cotton; seventeen lives lost.
- *Niobe*, 1847, carrying maize from New York for famine relief during An Gorta Mór, the Potato Famine of the 1840s; all of the crew perished.
- *Mexico*, 1914, carrying baulks of mahogany from Central America; one crewman died and nine Fethard lifeboat men drowned during an ill-fated rescue attempt during foul weather^{7,8 & 10}.

The Great Auk

The Great Auk is one of very few European breeding birds to become extinct. It was a large, flightless seabird standing nearly 1m tall and was a powerful swimmer. Its breeding range was on both sides of the North Atlantic Ocean extending in the east from Arctic Norway to the Bay of Biscay, and in the west



Captured in May 1834, the last Great Auk recorded in Ireland may have been born on the Keeragh Islands.

Worldwide, a small number of stuffed specimens is all that remains to show what the Great Auk looked like. The one specimen in Ireland is kept in the Zoological Museum in Trinity College Dublin.



Approaching the wedge-shaped Big Keeragh by sea from the east.

from Arctic Canada south to Boston including southern Greenland, Iceland and the Faroe Islands.

The last Great Auk recorded in Ireland was spotted by David Hardy in May 1834 swimming in the sea close to the cliffs between Ballymacaw and Brownstown Head, Co Waterford. The bird was caught alive in a landing net. Francis Davis of Waterford purchased the bird ten days later and sent it to Jacob Goff of Horetown, Co Wexford. Goff kept the bird in captivity for four months before it died. Its remains were given to Trinity College Dublin¹¹.

Richard Ussher, the Cappagh, Co Waterford archaeologist and ornithologist, speculated that since Great Auk bones were plentiful in the extensive kitchen-middens excavated in the dunes at Tramore, there must have been a breeding colony nearby. From his knowledge of Irish seabirds and their breeding places he concluded that the Keeragh Islands, 25km east of Tramore, would have been "... *eminently suited for such a bird to breed on* ..." ¹². Since these islands were offshore the birds would have been safe from predators and since they were low-lying they would have been accessible to Great Auks that could neither fly nor climb cliffs.

The Roseate Tern

The Roseate Tern was first described in 1813 by George Montagu, a British ornithologist. His description was based on a specimen shot in Scotland by a friend of Dr Peter MacDougall. The species was named Roseate Tern after both the very subtle rosy flush on the breasts of breeding adults.

The species was persecuted over the following 75 years by a combination of shooting for sport, egg collecting and feather collecting for decorating ladies hats. The Victorian millinery trade took a significant toll: "*Market records indicate that hundreds of thousands of terns were killed for this purpose, both in Europe and North America*" ¹³.

As a result of persecution it is believed that the species became extinct in Ireland by the end of the nineteenth century: "*There is not sufficient evidence to show that the Roseate Tern breeds in Ireland at the present day*" ^{12 & 13}. Re-colonising birds were noted at Malahide, Co Dublin, in 1913 and more than 23 pairs bred at the Keeragh Islands in 1917¹⁴ and 15¹⁵. The Lady's Island Lake area was colonised sometime later and a large colony of birds was

discovered breeding on Tern Island, a mobile sandbank in Wexford Harbour in 1961¹³. However, Tern Island washed away in 1977¹³. Birds returned to Lady's Island Lake but breeding was unsuccessful there.

The Irish Wildbird Conservancy (IWC) (now BirdWatch Ireland) felt that the Keeragh Islands would be a safe breeding place for terns. Consequently, a tern restoration project started there in 1986.



Tern decoys in 1986 on a shingle beach at the Big Keeragh during the tern attraction project.

However, the project was abandoned some years later when the numbers of breeding terns at Lady's Island Lake and at Rockabill, Co Dublin, started to rise significantly^{16 & 17}. Consequently, resources were relocated there. Both of these sites continue to do exceptionally well¹⁸ and the Keeragh Islands remain a possible additional nesting area.

Great Cormorant

The Great Cormorant is a large, widespread and common black seabird that is often seen standing with its wings outstretched as it dries its feathers in the breeze after hunting for fish underwater.

In County Wexford, Great Cormorants breed on the ground at two coastal cliff locations: the Keeragh Islands and the Saltee Islands.

Great Cormorants were first recorded breeding on the Keeragh Islands in 1968¹⁹. Since then the population has grown steadily. A mean of 194 apparently occupied nests (AONs) (range 131-242) was recorded in the period 2008-2014²⁰.

On the Keeragh Islands the birds build a substantial nest in springtime using a mixture of seaweeds, the leaves of Bluebells and other wild plants and last year's storm-broken stems of Tree-mallow. Some birds build elaborate, structures more than knee-high.



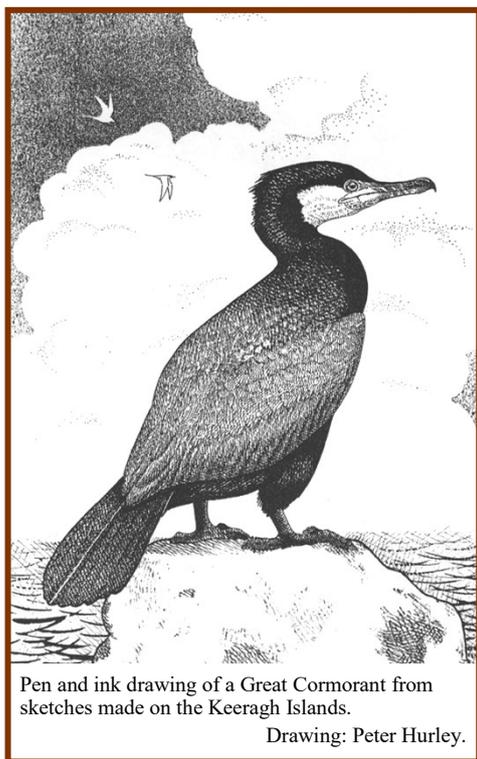
Tree-mallows (above) and Bluebells (below) in bloom in May.

Great Cormorants usually start breeding on the Keeragh Islands in March. The eggs are large in size and are pale blue in colour but the blue colour is normally concealed by a white chalky deposit. Three or four eggs is the normal clutch size. The eggs hatch in about one month and while the young fledge in about two months they are dependent on their parents for food for a further

three months or so. Consequently the breeding season is long and can exceptionally extend from late February to early September.

Special Protection Area

In 1976 the Irish Wildbird Conservancy (IWC) (now BirdWatch Ireland) made the Keeragh Islands an IWC Wildbird Reserve by Management Agreement with Richard Herring the owner at the time. The islands were subsequently identified an Area of Scientific



Pen and ink drawing of a Great Cormorant from sketches made on the Keeragh Islands.

Drawing: Peter Hurley.



Great Cormorants nesting on the Big Keeragh with Lesser Black-backed Gulls in attendance in the hope of stealing an unguarded egg or small nestling.

Interest (ASI)²¹ and ²², an EU Important Bird Area (IBA)²³ and ²⁴ and a proposed Natural Heritage Area (pNHA)²⁵.

In March 2002 the islands were advertised and notified a proposed Special Protection Area (SPA). Statutory instrument No 901 of 2004²⁶ followed. That statutory instrument was subsequently revoked and replaced by S I No 68 of 2010²⁷ that came into operation on 19 February 2010. SPA No IE004118 has an area of 80.04ha and comprises the two islands, their shores and surrounding reefs and the nearshore waters extending offshore for a distance of about 200m.

The islands are designated for the breeding Great Cormorants they support and for the potential they have to become a safe breeding place for terns in the future should these birds decide to use the area again to nest in.

Wild flowers

During some 40 visits to the Keeragh Islands during the period 1985-1991, Jim Hurley maintained a list of seed plants recorded on the two islands in all seasons. His list comprised 57 species of wild flowers, grasses and sedges, 53 species on Big Keeragh and 23 on Little Keeragh.

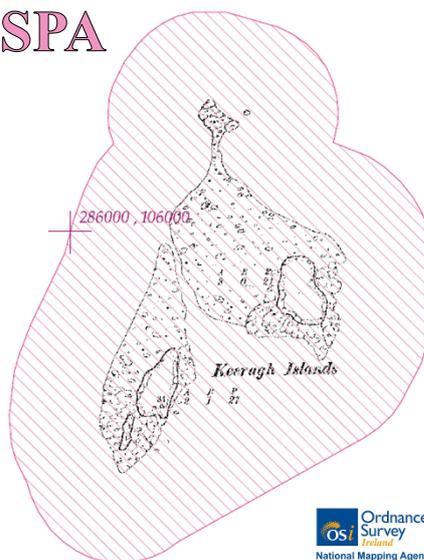
On Monday 1 September 2014, Paul Green and Paula O'Meara, joint Vice County Recorders for County Wexford (H12) for the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland (BSBI) visited both islands and found the flora impoverished with a total of only 33 species, 30 on Big Keeragh and 17 on Little Keeragh. However, they did record four additional species to the 1980s list.

Mammals

Both islands are entirely free of land mammals. It is considered likely that Brown Rats swam ashore from ship wrecks in the past but there has been no evidence of their presence on either island for a long number of years. Rabbits were introduced by local people for sport and as a possible source of food for

anyone marooned on the islands but they died out too. Grey Seals are regular visitors as are Risso's Dolphins (pictured below) and Harbour Porpoises.

SPA



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Other breeding birds

Birds that have regularly bred on the Keeragh Island in recent years include^{11, 16 and 17}

- Great Black-backed Gull
- Herring Gull
- Lesser Black-backed Gull
- Oystercatcher
- Mallard
- Ringed Plover
- Rock Pipit

Birds that are known to have bred on the islands in the past include^{18 and 14}

- European Shag
- Little Tern
- Sandwich Tern
- Common Tern
- Arctic Tern
- Roseate Tern

Birds that may have bred include

- Great Auk^{12 and 11}
- Hooded Crow



Wintering waterbirds

In winter the islands are a safe refuge and night roost for wintering waterbirds. Flocks of Light-bellied Brent Geese, Mallard and Wigeon regularly frequent the area together with smaller numbers of Teal and Shoveler.

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Nature conservation

The National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), one of the technical services of the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, is the central government body responsible for nature conservation in the Republic of Ireland. A description of the protected area at the Keeragh Islands is available on the NPWS webpages at www.npws.ie/ together with a map, aerial photo, conservation objectives and the statutory instruments establishing the Special Protection Area (SPA)²⁸.

Visiting the Keeragh Islands

The main conservation objective for the Keeragh Islands Special Protection Area (SPA) is to protect the breeding colony of Great Cormorants.

The breeding season of these birds is very protracted and can, exceptionally, extend from February to September. Since the breeding season is so protracted, since the birds nest on the ground and since the islands are so small, it is not possible to visit the islands during spring or summer without disturbing the birds.

Since the islands are remote from the nearest departure ports at Kilmore Quay and Fethard, visiting in autumn and winter brings its own hazards. The islands are also privately owned.

Visiting can therefore be problematical and should not be attempted without seeking permission from the owner and consulting with Tony Murray, the local National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) Conservation Ranger, email Tony.Murray@chg.gov.ie, telephone (076) 100 2662.

