

The Saltee Islands



An introduction to one of Ireland's most beautiful and most popular bird islands.

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The Saltee Islands

1. MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE

A visit to the Saltee Islands is a memorable experience. The islands are easily accessible from Kilmore Quay on the mainland, support twelve species of breeding sea-birds in summer, and 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 at 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.



Figure 1. Atlantic Puffin.

2. SOME BASIC FACTS

The Saltee Islands are located in the Celtic Sea off Kilmore Quay on the south Wexford heritage coastline in the sunny south-east corner of the island of Ireland¹ (Figure 2 and Figure 3).



Figure 2. Location map and the South Wexford Coast.

The island 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 or Great Saltee, the larger island on the right when viewed from the mainland at Kilmore Quay, and Saltee Island Little or Little Saltee.

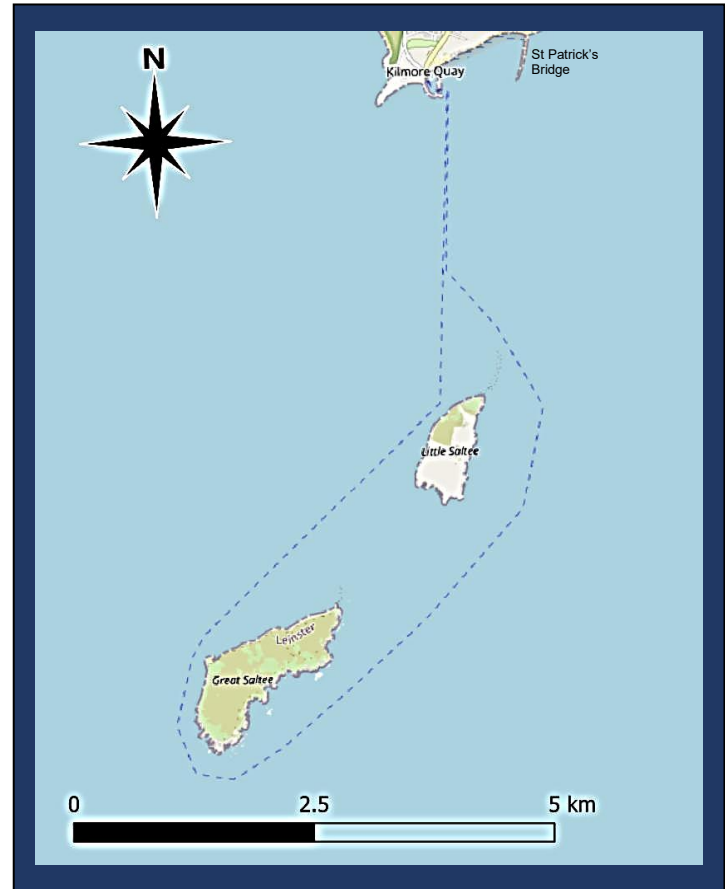


Figure 3. Indicative route of a boat trip around the islands.

Little Saltee lies about 3.8km south of Kilmore Quay, is orientated more north-south, and has an area of about 37ha¹. The island is whale-backed in shape with low cliffs on its shores and rising to over 30m along its centre¹.



Great Saltee lies approximately



6km from Kilmore Quay, is orientated more NE-SW, is 2km long, has an area of about 89ha¹, and is wedge-shaped like a door stop ascending from a low shore on the mainland side to 20-30m high cliffs on its south-eastern side. The island rises to an altitude of 58m at its southern summit¹.



Figure 4. Boulders and bedrock of dolerite (dark bluish-grey) on the northern shore of Great Saltee. The dolerite intruded into the Saltee Granite (pinkish pale brown).

3. ROCKY FOUNDATION

The Saltees are composed of a fine, pinkish-brown granite (Figure 7) unique to the area. The Saltee Granite extends over a large oval area of seabed. It was formed some 436 million years ago during the Silurian Period of geological time. Together with dolerite (Figure 4), the granite is one of several intrusives that cored the centre of the former Caledonian Mountains as they were thrust up^{2&3}. Subsequent erosion over millions of years exposed the granite and dolerite.

The Saltee Islands are rated “an important County Geological Site and should be designated a geological NHA [Natural Heritage Area]”³.

4. PLACENAME

The name ‘Saltee’ is interpreted as ‘Salt Island’, a combination of the English word ‘salt’ and the Norse / Viking suffix ‘-ey’ meaning island⁴. In stormy weather, the islands are regularly drenched with spray from waves breaking against the southern cliffs.



Figure 5. A cruise around the islands in early summer is a memorable experience.

5. HUMAN HABITATION

Both islands are privately owned or occupied.

Great Saltee was farmed in the past but agricultural activities ceased in 1943. At harvest time in its heyday, the larger island supported a community of some twenty people^{5&6}. Some of the former fields are now overgrown with dense stands of Bracken and impenetrable thickets of Bramble scrub.

Farming on Little Saltee ceased in 1946 but resumed in 1997 and still continues. Raising Soay Sheep, a few native Irish Kerry cattle (Figure 6), and a much smaller number of Fallow Deer are the main enterprises⁷.



Figure 6. Kerry cattle grazing on Little Saltee.

6. SAINT PATRICK'S BRIDGE

Allegedly constructed by Ireland’s national apostle so that he could gain access dry-shod to Little Saltee, Saint Patrick’s Bridge is a long ridge of shingle stretching out from the mainland shore towards the smaller island.

The landform is now interpreted as a recessional glacial moraine: a mass of cobbles, boulders and fine sediment carried by, and deposited by, a retreating and melting ice sheet during the last glaciation⁸.

At low water, the ends of the bridge may be seen jutting out from both the townland of Nemestown on the mainland (Figure 8) and from the north-eastern corner of Little Saltee.

The end of a similar landform extends from Great Saltee and is known as Sebber Bridge. Sebber is interpreted as a corruption of ‘Saint Ibar’, an early Christian saint who founded a monastery on Beggerin Island in Wexford Harbour⁹. While Sebber Bridge extends northwards from Great Saltee towards the mainland, there is no trace of it on the mainland shore.



Figure 7. View from the south summit of Great Saltee with Little Saltee and the mainland in the background.

St Patrick's Rock is one of several large, named glacial erratics of Carnsore Granite scattered along the sea-shore on the eastern side of the bridge. These erratics were moved about and deposited by ice as it flowed southwards in the basin of the Irish Sea during the last glaciation⁸.



Figure 8. The S-shaped St Patrick's Bridge at low tide stretching out to the right from the mainland at Nemestown before curving left towards Little Saltee.

St Patrick's Bridge is rated an "important County Geological Site [that] merits designation as a Geological NHA [Natural Heritage Area]"¹⁰.

7. CELTIC SEA FRONT

The Celtic Sea Front is the boundary that forms in summer between the shallower, mixed waters of the Irish Sea and the deeper, layered waters of the Celtic Sea¹¹. The thermal frontal system meanders along a line stretching from the Saltee Islands to the coast of Wales.

Upwellings along the front cause plankton to bloom triggering the development of food chains that end in large predatory fish, seabirds, porpoises, dolphins and whales.

8. WILD FLOWERS IN BLOOM

A total of 278 species of wild plant was recorded on the Saltee Islands by visiting botanists up to 30 June 2022¹². Changing hues from the colourful blooms and vegetation 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 (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Bluebells in flower on Great Saltee with Little Saltee in the background.

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

9. 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 (Figure 10), Silver-Y, Hummingbird Hawk-moth, and others.



Figure 10. A Painted Lady butterfly resting on the ground.

10. UNUSUAL LIFE FORMS

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

11. 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 in Ireland in springtime from Britain and mainland Europe.

In April and May, Great Saltee is regarded among the best sites in Ireland for seeing spring migrants and vagrants; consequently, long lists of rarities have been compiled^{13, 14 & 15}. The autumn migration is less spectacular with September being the best month. May, June and July are the best months to visit to see the breeding seabirds.



12. BIRD OBSERVATORY

Ireland's first bird observatory was operated by Robert (Robin) Ruttledge (Figure 11) and John Weaving on Great Saltee from 1950 to 1963 by permission of the then land owner: Michael Neale, Prince Michael the First. The importance of the island as a landfall for migrants was established and documented^{16 & 17}.

With the continued support of the Neale family, researchers from universities, especially University College Cork (UCC), 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 biodiversity. As a result, the Saltees are one the best documented islands in Ireland.

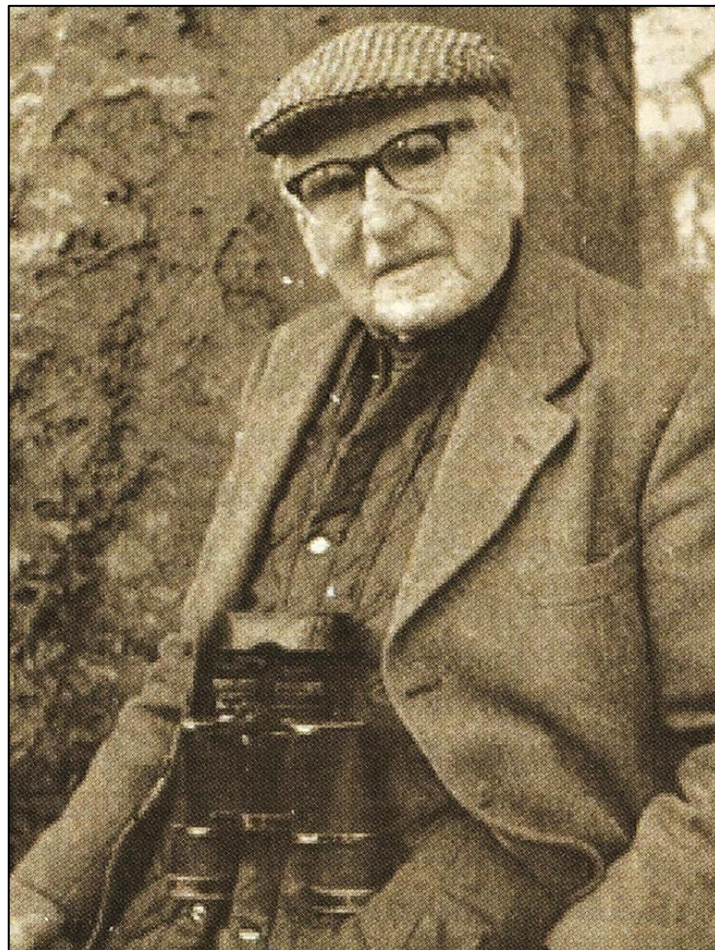


Figure 11. Robert Ruttledge(1899-2002).



Figure 12. A nesting ledge supporting a pair of Common Guillemots and their egg.

The Common Guillemot is the most numerous breeding seabird on the Saltee Islands. With over 25,000 individual birds present on Great Saltee during the breeding season, the population is believed to be the largest in Ireland. Pairs of breeding birds are present from May to the end of July. They do not build a nest; the mother bird lays a single pear-shaped egg on a rock ledge (Figure 12). The pear-shape means that the egg rolls in a tight circle thus preventing it from falling off the cliff ledge.



13. TERRESTRIAL MAMMALS

Land mammals recorded on Great Saltee include Pygmy Shrew, Rabbit, and Eurasian Otter^{5 & 15}. A female Leisler's Bat that was caught in a hand net on 4 October 1986 while roosting in the house¹⁸ was believed to be a migrant. An animal dropping found in 2011 was believed to be an American Mink scat¹⁹. Brown Rats were common on Great Saltee in the past but to protect the breeding seabirds, especially Atlantic Puffins, they were successfully exterminated by the National Parks and Wildlife Service and their contractors Envirico Ltd during the winter of 2020²⁰.

14. MARINE MAMMALS

Whales and dolphins

The cliff-tops provide excellent vantage points for scanning the surrounding coastal waters.



Figure 13. The remains of a Minke Whale washed ashore on Great Saltee in June 2025.

Small groups (pods) of Risso's Dolphin are regularly seen in summer, and the area is regarded one of a small number of hot spots nationally for seeing these large grey dolphins. Harbour Porpoises, Common Dolphins, and Bottle-nosed Dolphins are occasionally spotted. Minke Whales (Figure 13) occur and Killer Whales and Fin Whales have been recorded nearby on rare occasions.

Recent whale and dolphin strandings on, and sightings around, the Saltee Islands may be accessed via the 'All Locations' filter facility on the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group online database²¹.



Figure 14. Female Grey Seal (right) exiting the water to join her pup (left) asleep in weak autumn sunshine.



Figure 15. Grey Seal pup.

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. Pups have a white coat when they are born and do not swim. When they are ready to go to sea they moult to a grey sea coat.

The pupping season extends from late August to December. 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.

15. INVENTORY OF LIFE FORMS

The Saltee Islands are contained within 10km square X99 of the Irish National Grid (Figure 16).

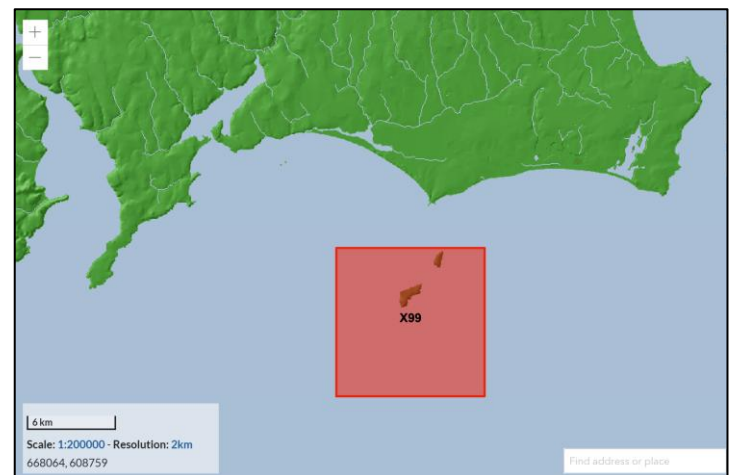


Figure 16. 10km square X99.

Interrogation of the online National Biodiversity Data Centre database¹⁵ produced 1,186 species recorded within 10km square X99; a summary follows to illustrate the great wealth of biodiversity that the islands and their

surrounding waters support. The list is arranged in alphabetical order of species group with the number of species recorded in parentheses for each group: algae (105 species), annelid worms (18), birds (207), bony fish, (26), bryozoans [moss animals] (25), cartilaginous fish [sharks and dogfish] (3), chromists [single-celled organisms, seaweeds, etc] (41), coelenterates [jellyfish, anemones, cup corals, hydroids, etc] (53), crustaceans [lobsters, prawns, crabs, shrimps, etc] (22), echinoderms [starfish, brittlestars, urchins, sea cucumbers, etc] (23), ferns (18), flowering plants (270), horsetails (1), beetles (8), butterflies (21), dragonflies (3), fleas (1), hymenoptera [bees, ants and wasps] (14), moths (117), bugs (1), flies (14), liverworts (2), marine mammals (13), molluscs (70), mosses (11), reptiles (1), sponges (60), terrestrial mammals (5), and tunicates [sea squirts, salps, etc] (33).

16. NATURE CONSERVATION

The Natura 2000 network²³ is the European Union's (EU) flagship project to address the ongoing loss of biodiversity globally.

The network is composed of Special Protection Areas (SPAs) to protect wild birds, and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) to protect habitats (places) and life forms other than wild birds.



As a Member State of the EU, Ireland manages a wide range of SPAs and SACs. The Saltee Islands are designated both a SPA and a SAC and are a *de facto* Marine Protected Area.

17. SALTEE ISLANDS SPA

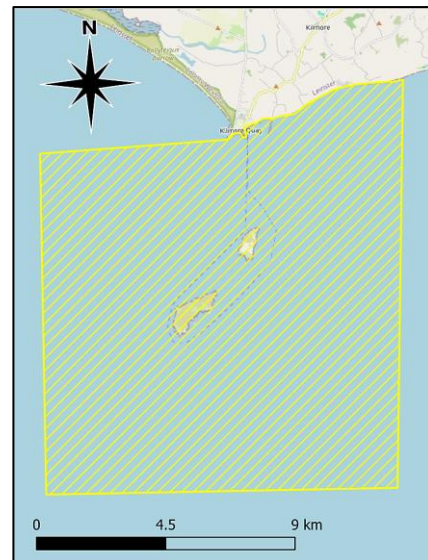
The Saltee Islands are internationally important for supporting an assemblage of over 20,000 breeding sea-birds. The two islands have been a Special Protection Area (SPA) for wild birds since 1985. The objective of the SPA designation is to maintain or restore the favourable conservation condition of named species of sea birds. Ten of the twelve species of breeding sea-birds are named as qualifying interests of the Saltees SPA; the two missing species are the Manx Shearwater and the Great Black-backed Gull. The protected area for seabirds includes the two islands, the sound between them and a surrounding skirt of nearshore sea and seabed extending approximately 500m from the islands' shores. Two species listed on Annex I of the EU Birds Directive also



regularly breed on the islands: Peregrine Falcon (1-2 pairs) and Chough (1 pair). The Chough is significant in that Great Saltee is the extreme eastern edge of the species range in Ireland. The SPA is the peanut-shaped area in the middle of Figure 17. Full details with regard to the SPA together with site descriptions, maps, etc., are available online²⁴.

18. SALTEE ISLANDS SAC

The Saltee Islands are a site of high conservation importance. The two islands and a large area of surrounding seabed are a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) for Grey Seals, five habitats (reefs, sea caves, large shallow bays, intertidal sediments, and vegetated sea cliffs) and the marine life that these habitats support. With an area of 15,809ha the box-shaped SAC extends to, and includes part of, the mainland shore extending from Forlorn Point to Ringbaun.



Reefs are large areas of bedrock exposed underwater or on the seashore. They are important habitats for wildlife. The very extensive underwater reefs around the Saltees 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 online²⁵.

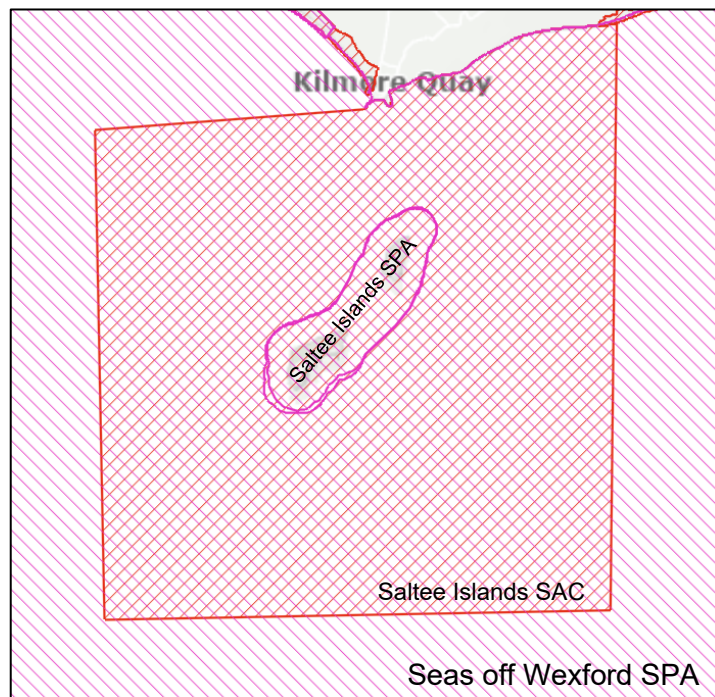


Figure 17. Three overlapping protected areas.

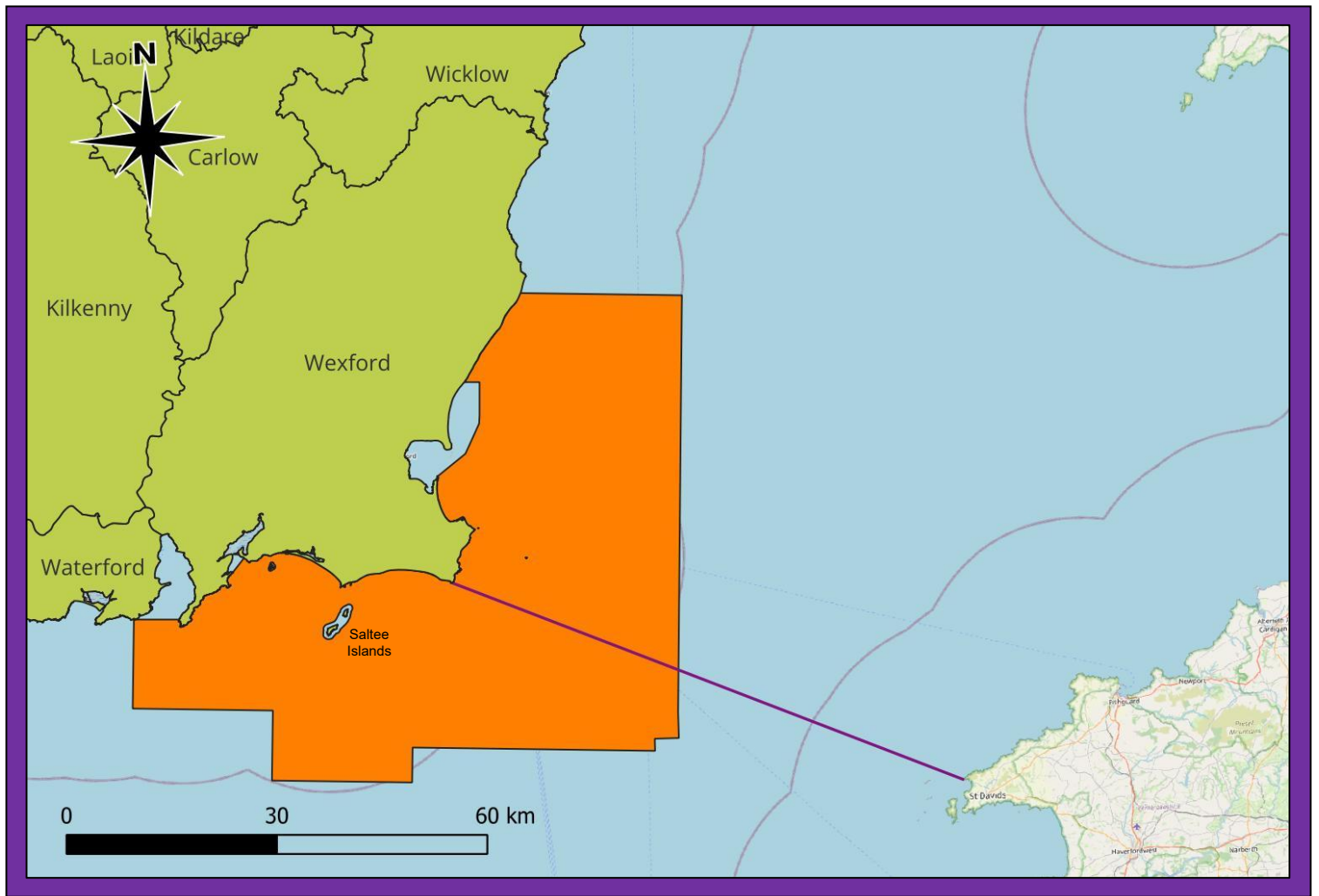


Figure 18. Seas off Wexford SPA (orange).

19. SEAS OFF WEXFORD SPA

The Seas off Wexford Special Protection Area (SPA) is a large sea area of the nearshore coasts of Co Wexford (Figure 18). It is a marine SPA for 20 named species of seabird. The SPA straddles the Celtic Seas Front, has an area of 3,054km² approximately, and is the largest SPA in Ireland²⁶.

Figure 18 shows the Seas off Wexford SPA (orange) with the demarcation line (purple) that separates the Irish Sea to the north from the Celtic Sea to the south. The demarcation line extends from Carnsore Point in Ireland to St David's Head in Wales. The Celtic Sea Front forms in summer and meanders north and south of the demarcation line.

20. SEABIRD WARDENS

For the 2025 summer breeding season, the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), in close co-operation with the landowners, initiated a conservation project by appointing Seabird Wardens to protect nesting seabirds on Great Saltee from disturbance by increased visitor numbers. The Seabird Wardens engaged with visitors and day trippers to raise awareness about the diversity of breeding seabirds on the island, and the need to protect them from disturbance pressures during their short breeding season. The project was run by KRC Environmental Consultants with

Seabird Wardens on and off duty, in rotation from May to the end of August. The project proved successful with the vast majority of visitors happy to engage with the NPWS wardens, and to follow both their guidance and the signage in place²⁰.



Figure 19. Some of the twenty-two caves in the cliffs surrounding Great Saltee.

21. ROCK POOLING



Rock pooling in Kilmore Quay is a great introduction and insight to the wealth of marine life that reefs support. Seashore Explore²⁷ offers guided family and small-group tours of rocky shore ecosystems, specifically focusing on the abundance of marine biodiversity.

22. SCUBA DIVING

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 a boat-house at Kilmore Quay and their website includes a guide to the best dive sites on the South Wexford Coast²⁸.

23. BIOSECURITY

Following their successful extermination of rats in 2020, the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) continues to step up plans for biosecurity on the islands. On Tuesday 18th November 2025, the NPWS, along with the project facilitators, Habitat Assessment & Restoration Ltd., invited interested members of the public to take part in an open meeting in the Stella Maris Centre, Kilmore Quay, to discuss a proposed *Saltee Islands Biosecurity and Incursion Response Plan*. The purpose of the Plan is to keep the Saltee Islands free from invasive species, and to have a rapid response plan in place to support the long-term protection of their biodiversity.

24. LANDING ON THE SALTEES

The islands may be visited either by landing on one of them, or by taking a boat trip around both of them. Both islands are privately owned or occupied. Landing on Little Saltee 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 required⁶. However, the owners of the island kindly request day visitors to respect the following three rules:-

- Day visitors are allowed between the hours of 11:30am and 4:30pm only,
- Dogs, drones, camping, lighting fires and overnight stays are all forbidden, and
- Privacy should be afforded to the owners by not approaching their house⁶.



Disturbance of the breeding seabirds is a significant threat due to the increasingly high number of day-trippers visiting the island. The owners' warn "*If things do not improve with the bird population due to the current foot fall we will be forced to close the island to visitors.*"⁶

Those hiring a boat to access Great Saltee, or paying for a place on 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 main provider of trips to the island is Saltee Ferry, part of the Three Sisters Cruise Company²⁹.

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. Disembarking from the dingy depends on the state of the tide. Landing could be on either a sandy beach, a mass of wet seaweed, or over slippery, seaweed-covered rocks. The exercise is described as a 'wet landing' and is at your own risk. Once ashore, there are no facilities, no water, or no shelter on the island.

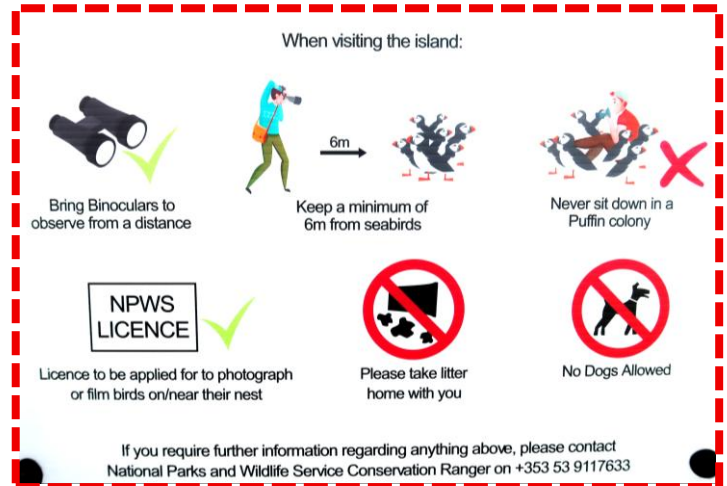


Figure 20. NPWS advice when visiting Great Saltee.

25. NATURE CONSERVATION

Both the Saltee Islands SPA and SAC are managed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) with the cooperation of the owners/occupiers. To assist with conserving the wildlife that day-trippers come to experience the NPWS asks that visitors: -

- Follow the directions of the Seabird Wardens.
- Keep a minimum distance of 6m from seabirds.
- Never sit down in an Atlantic Puffin colony. Atlantic Puffins nest in underground burrows. If Atlantic Puffins returning from fishing trips are blocked from accessing their burrows to feed their chicks, gulls may steal their catch and chicks may go hungry. Atlantic Puffin populations are declining globally.

26. CRUISING AROUND

Weather and sea conditions permitting, cruises around the islands (Figure 3) to see and enjoy the scenery, seabirds, seals, and possibly dolphins, are offered by a number of licensed charter boats operating out of Kilmore Quay marina. The main operator is Saltee Sea Safaris³⁰ who offer a guided 1½ hour cruise around both islands. In cooperation with boat-



owners, a Code of Conduct for Marine Watching is being piloted and trailed to ensure that all activities at sea are environmentally sustainable and in line with the conservation objectives for the protected areas.

27. SELF-GUIDED TOUR

Those who disembark at the landing on Great Saltee (Figure 22, No 1) ascend a flight of stone steps up the low cliff and are met by one of the Seabird Wardens for a toolbox talk and an informative briefing about the island and its seabirds.

From there they pass close to the owners' house (2) and follow the path to the Prince's stone throne (3). Since there are no other picnic spots along the looped walk, the Rabbit-grazed lawn by the throne is the ideal spot for a picnic lunch before embarking on a trek around the island.

Staying on the path and following the directions of both the signage and the Seabird Wardens, the marked trail opens up views of the cliffs and sea overlooking the Makestone (4), the largest islet, and the Wherry Hole (5), the first bay south-west of the throne, affording views of Atlantic Puffins. After that, the well-trodden path leads the visitor on a trek to the southern corner of the island. The tops of the stone walls (6) surrounding the former agricultural fields afford good views of large gulls.



Figure 21. The Makestone (right), the largest islet off Great Saltee, supports breeding Northern Gannets.

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 Little Saltee and the mainland with Carnsore Point in the distance. The path leads to Cat Cliff (8) that, together with the surrounding cliffs, support the main Northern Gannet colony. 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.

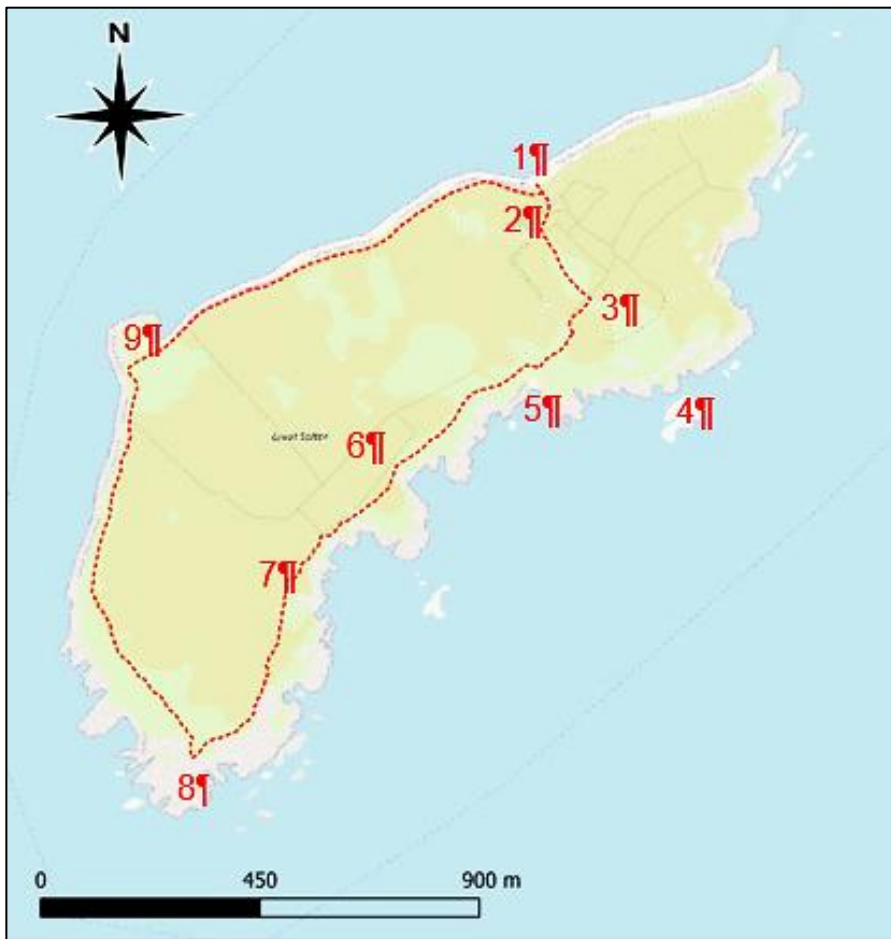


Figure 22. Looped walking trail around Great Saltee.

As always, best practice is to stay on the dedicated path and to follow the directions of both the signage and the Seabird Wardens.

After seeing the impressive main Northern Gannet colony, visitors continue on the clockwise looped walk around the island. The walk affords further excellent views of Atlantic Puffins, opportunities to get one's eye in on the various subtle differences between the various different species of seabird, and opportunities to see land birds, shore birds, wild flowers, and other wildlife.

The Ring (9) is an interesting landform featuring a natural spit-like arm enclosing a sheltered area that often supports the largest beach on the island.



Figure 23. Part of the well-trodden Great Saltee looped walk.

28. LEAVE NO TRACE

If you enjoy the Great Saltee looped walk follow the Country Code so that others can enjoy it too. Allow biodiversity to thrive.

- Leave Great Saltee as you found it. Do nothing to destroy the wonderful amenity you have come to enjoy. Stay on the path. Follow the directions of both the signage and the Seabird Wardens. Kill nothing but time; take nothing but photographs and memories.
- Take your rubbish home with you. Leave nothing but footprints. Leave no trace. Do the right thing.
- Don't venture off the path. If you do, be aware that Rabbits dig burrows and that Atlantic Puffins and Manx Shearwaters nest underground. You may be standing on the roof of a burrow or nest tunnel. The ground may be unsafe and may give way causing you to have a mishap. Remember you are in a remote location; if needed, help may be slow to arrive.
- Help seabird conservation; do not attempt to feed the birds, or to handle either their eggs or chicks.
- Disturbance significantly reduces the birds' breeding success. Visitors, especially serious photographers, disturb birds by sitting down for extended periods off the established path. Use your lens, not your feet. When parents are frightened off their nests, eggs and chicks grow cold and/or are eaten by predatory gulls. Do not approach nesting birds or seal pups closer than 6m. Be aware that one requires a licence to photograph birds on or near a nest containing eggs or young.
- Protect yourself; do not handle dead birds as they may have died from bird flu or another infectious disease.
- Give Grey Seal pups a wide berth; they can give a nasty bite and can transmit infections.



SWC Promotions: promoting the natural heritage resource values of the South Wexford Coast.

Litter Lifts on Great Saltee

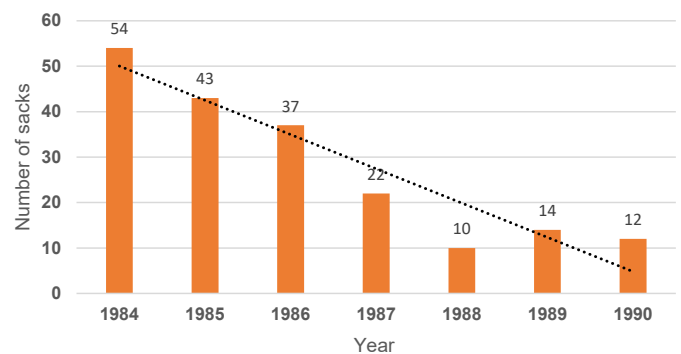
Litter lifts on Great Saltee were organised by Jim and Rose Hurley in the period 1984-1990. Litter was collected on one day in mid-summer each year by a team of up to 24 volunteers from the then Wexford Branch of the Irish Wildbird Conservancy (now BirdWatch Ireland). J. J. Stafford & Sons (Wexford) Ltd., coal and grain merchants, sponsored sacks, and Edmond Hassett Ltd., pharmacists, North Main Street, Wexford, sponsored the printing of promotional material.

Litter picking was confined to litter generated by day-trippers on land. Litter was not collected on the shore. 192 sacks of litter were removed from the island. The litter was transported to the mainland at Kilmore Quay for collection and disposal by Wexford County Council.

Over the seven-year period, the annual haul of rubbish fell in a downward trend from a high of 54 sacks in 1984 to an average of 12 sacks per annum in 1988-1990. While litter lifts on the island had to be abandoned in 1991 due to tightening legal restrictions regarding marine insurance for organised groups landing on offshore islands, Great Saltee has, thankfully, remained relatively litter-free ever since.

In 1985, to promote the Country Code, Edmond Hassett Ltd., pharmacists, North Main Street, Wexford, sponsored the printing of the first edition of this guide to the islands with line drawings by artist Dave Daly.

Number of sacks of litter collected, 1984-1990



The National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) manages the protected areas for wildlife. If you see any threats to nature conservation please report your concerns to the NPWS at **053 911 7633**.

Thank you.

29. COUNTING SEABIRDS

The size of breeding seabird populations is measured or estimated in a number of different ways. One obvious way is to accurately count the number of individual adults (IND). Otherwise, the population size is estimated by counting the number of 'Apparently Occupied Nests' (AON), 'Apparently Occupied Burrows' (AOB), 'Apparently Occupied Sites' (AOS), or 'Apparently Occupied Territories' (AOT).

In addition to surveys of individual sites, four international censuses of seabird numbers in Britain and Ireland have been conducted over the past 55 years: Operation Seafarer (1969-1970), Seabird Colony Register (1970-1998), Seabird 2000 (1998-2002), and most recently Seabirds Count (2015-2021)³¹.

30. BREEDING SEABIRDS

Twelve species of seabirds regularly breed on the Saltee Islands. These birds normally spend their lives at sea, but since they cannot nest at sea they have to come to land to breed. Once their young have fledged many of the birds leave the Salties 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 seabirds³¹. The islands are identified an Important Bird Area (IBA) (colony designation), are part of the Salties-Lady's Island marine extension IBA (covers breeding seabird foraging areas around the two sites) and are part of the Northeast Celtic Sea Marine IBA (extensive site to the southwest, which covers most of the feeding area for Saltee Gannets, Manx Shearwaters and Kittiwakes (personal communication, Dr Steve Newton).

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. The twelve seabird images to accompany the brief introductory notes are provided courtesy of BirdWatch Ireland and are gratefully acknowledged. Population size estimates for breeding seabirds on Great Saltee are taken from the most recent published data^{31, 32, 33 & 34} together with earlier sources where applicable. Data for Little Saltee are gratefully acknowledged courtesy of David Cabot who has been studying the seabirds there since 1960.

Northern Fulmar



Figure 24. Northern Fulmar gliding on updraughts.

Description. The Northern Fulmar (Figure 24) 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. The Northern Fulmar breeds on both islands.

Breeding population size. Little Saltee: numbers rose

from 20 breeding pairs in 1963 to peak at 316 (1995), thereafter declining to 205 (1998-2002), 167 (2015-2018), and 95 (2025) (Manon *per* Jessopp). Great Saltee: 315 (1998-2002) declining to 190 pairs (2015-2018).

Manx Shearwater



Figure 25. Manx Shearwater.

Description. Manx Shearwaters are long-winged birds that are rarely seen during the daytime either on or from the islands. 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 Manx Shearwater breeds on both islands.

Population size. Little Saltee: an estimated 719 pairs (2013). Great Saltee: an estimated 341 pairs (2021).

Northern Gannet



Figure 26. Northern Gannet.

Description. 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. The Northern Gannet breeds on Great Saltee only.

Breeding population size. Little Saltee: No records. Great Saltee: The gannets nest at two main sites (the Makestone and around Cat Cliff / The Seven Heads), and their number in 2013-2014 was 4,722 AOS/AON, an increase of 93% since 2004. The estimated population size in 2023 was 5,963 AOS (effectively the same as breeding pairs) despite the effects of bird flu (personal communication, Mark Jessopp).

Great Cormorants and European Shags are somewhat similar birds and are consequently sometimes confused.

Great Cormorant



Figure 27. Two adult Great Cormorants and one juvenile.

Description. The Great Cormorant is the bigger (77-94cm long) of the two, 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. The Great Cormorant breeds on Great Saltee only.

Breeding population size. Little Saltee: 276 breeding pairs (1973), 408 (1992), and 208 (AON) (2015-2018) a decline of 24% since 1998, 10 (2022) (Darby), and 0 (2023). The introduction of sheep and cattle coerced the birds to move first from the tops of old stone walls separating the fields to cliff tops, then to the base of cliffs, and then to leave the island. Some displaced birds probably moved to the nearby Keeragh Islands (personal communication, David Cabot). Great Saltee: The birds colonised Great Saltee in recent years and numbers there grew to 61 AON in 2016, in tandem with declining numbers on Little Saltee.



European Shag



Figure 28. European Shag.

Description. The European Shag is the smaller (68-78cm long) of the two, is 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. It breeds on both islands. The European Shag breeds on both islands.

Breeding population size. Little Saltee: 120 breeding pairs (1973). Numbers disseminated by subsequent winter storms; only 2 AON (2016) and 1 pair nesting in 2019. Great Saltee: 112 pairs (2015-2018), a decline of 58%.

Gulls are a well-known family of seabirds. Four species of gulls breed on the Saltees.

Black-legged Kittiwake



Figure 29. Black-legged Kittiwake.

Description. 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 noticeably short. It nests on the cliffs where it repeatedly calls its name: 'kit-ti-week; kit-ti-week' in a rhythmic nasal voice.

The Black-legged Kittiwake breeds on Great Saltee only.

Breeding population size. Little Saltee: 2 pairs (1976), 35 pairs (1978), and 2 pairs (1996). No subsequent breeding reported. Great Saltee: 1,038 pairs (2015-2018) a decline of 51.2% since 2000.

Lesser Black-backed Gull



Figure 30. Lesser Black-backed Gull.

Description. 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. The species breeds on both islands.

Breeding population size. Little Saltee: 525 pairs (2019). "Probably one of the largest breeding colonies in Ireland". (personal communication, David Cabot). Great Saltee: 251 pairs (2015-2018) a 74% increase since 1985-1988.

European Herring Gull



Figure 31. European Herring Gull.

Description. The European 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. The European Herring Gull breeds on both islands.

Breeding population size. Little Saltee: Formerly a "large population" but reduced to 326 pairs (2019). Great Saltee: 115 pairs were recorded on Great Saltee (2015-2018) recovering from a crash down to 43 pairs (1998-2002) from a peak population of some 1,450 pairs in the late 1980s. Many birds died from botulism, a bacterial illness affecting the nervous system and caused by toxins in contaminated food scavenged by birds flying to the mainland to feed. Numbers were also adversely impacted by outbreaks of bird flu.

Great Black-backed Gull



Figure 32. Great Black-backed Gull.

Description. 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. The species breeds on both islands.

Breeding population size. Little Saltee: an estimated 60 pairs (2019). Great Saltee: 64 pairs (AON) (2016).



Figure 33. Great Black-backed Gull chick.

The three members of the Auk family are stubby-tailed, black-and-white birds that may be thought of as the penguins of the northern hemisphere.

Common Guillemot



Figure 34. Common Guillemot.

Description. The Common Guillemot is the biggest (38-46cm) and tallest of the trio, is chocolate-brown in colour and has a slender, pointed bill. Common Guillemots lay single eggs directly on rocky ledges without building any nest (Figure 10). It is the most numerous of the breeding seabird founds on the Saltees, but it breeds on Great Saltee only.

Breeding population size. Little Saltee: 1 or 2 pairs bred in the 1990s but no subsequent records. Great Saltee: 25,851 birds (IND) bred (2015-2018) an increase of 21% since 2000.

Razorbill



Figure 35. Razorbill.

Description. 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 linked to a white line running from the bill to the dark brown eye. The Razorbill breeds on both islands.

Breeding population size. Little Saltee: 850 (IND) (2015-2018), an increase of 70% since the Seabird 2000 survey. Great Saltee: 5,669 (IND) (2015-2018), an increase of 75% since the Seabird 2000 survey. The population continues to rise steadily.

Atlantic Puffin



Figure 36. Atlantic Puffin.

Description. The Atlantic Puffin is a significantly smaller (28-34cm) auk, has a big head, a colourful, parrot-like bill, large white cheek patches and bright orange legs. Atlantic Puffins nest in underground burrows. The Atlantic Puffin breeds on both islands.

Breeding population size. Little Saltee: An estimated 300 pairs (1998-2002) and 270 pairs (AOB) (2015-2017). The population remains relatively stable as there are no rats or day-trippers on the smaller island.

Great Saltee: The estimated population suffered a dramatic decline (from 1,522 pairs (AOB) in 1998-2002 to 120 pairs in 2015-2017). Brown Rats were blamed for the decline, but, while they undoubtedly contributed, bearing in mind that since the rats were present when the estimated 1,522 Puffins were present, it suggests that the rats may not have been the only factor; day-tripper disturbance may have contributed too.

Following the successful NPWS rat eradication programme and the employment of Seabird Wardens, the Puffin population made "a good recovery" with an all-island count on Great Saltee suggesting that there were about 1,940 individuals present in 2025 (personal communication, Mark Jessopp). Now that the rats are gone, the main threat continues to be disturbance by day-trippers, especially Puffin selfie-hunters and serious photographers who sit down at a nest site for an extended period of time disrupting the adults' parenting duties and threatening the survival of their offspring.

31. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Figure 37. Lichens are not individual organisms; they are combinations of a number of different organisms (algae, cyanobacteria, fungi, yeasts, and bacteria) living together in colonies in partnership for their mutual benefit. The colonies cling to rocks and draw nutrients and moisture from the air. The orange crusty ones above are Orange Sea Lichen, and the shrubby, grey-green ones hanging from the rocks are Sea Ivory. The pink flowering plant (centre) is Thrift, and the white-flowered wild flower (foreground) is Sea Campion.



Figure 38, Juvenile Grey Seal on Little Saltee.

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33. NAME THE BIRD

