



Atlantic gannets in various stages of development, from chick (top right opposite) to juvenile 'guga' (above).

Towards the end of January, as winter storms pound the Bass, there is a growing sense of anticipation at the Scottish Seabird Centre. All eyes are on the sea and sky, watching and waiting. Any day now, someone will spot white birds on the horizon – bigger and brighter than the gulls, gliding and diving with a graceful, powerful flight – and the good news will spread like wildfire: they're back! The first gannets have returned.

Over the following weeks, the Bass changes colour every day as more and more gannets return to their breeding ground. At first there is just a sprinkling of white, like a dusting of icing sugar, but soon the entire rock will be shining so white with the mass of gannets that it appears snow-capped throughout the summer months.

Gannets return to the same nest site each year, arriving as early as possible to secure their place on the crowded rock. Established pairs then reunite, and new partners bond with ceremonial displays of bill-fencing. Each pair's territory is highly prized and ferociously guarded, and so the nests are evenly spaced – just out of reach of the neighbour's powerful bill.

Both birds share the parental duties, taking turns to incubate the single egg under their webbed feet and then to feed the hungry chick with regurgitated fish. The chick grows quickly from a naked, helpless newborn into a large, fluffy white 'guga', and by 12 weeks old it is bigger than its parents and ready to leave the nest. At this stage the plumage is black, speckled with white spots: by looking so different from an adult, it lessens the chances of being attacked by other gannets.

Leaving home is a perilous time for the young guga. They are too heavy to take off and so must spread their wings and glide to the water below. Falling is easy for those nesting on the sheer cliffs, but gannets born on the top of the Bass have to run the gauntlet through the crowded colony before taking the plunge. Once at sea, the guga lives off its fat reserves, and as soon as it is light enough to fly, must quickly master the specialised skills of fishing gannet-style.



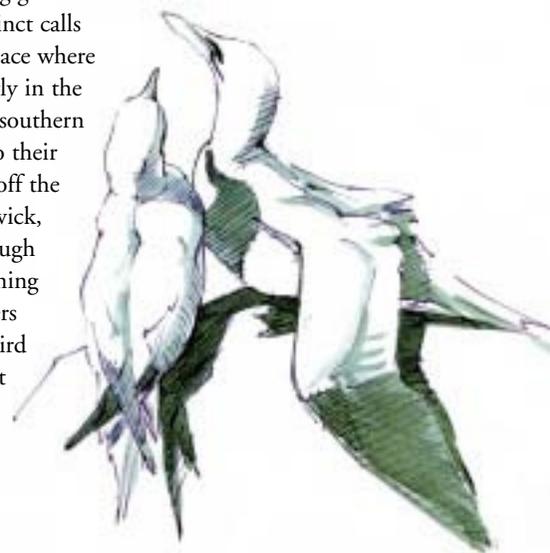
Gannets glide high and use their superb eyesight to spot schools of fish below the water's surface. They then plunge down, folding their wings at the last moment and hitting the surface at speeds of up to 100kmph. Their bodies are specially adapted to this dramatic fishing method – with sealed nostrils, protective membranes that cover the eyes and air cells that cushion the skull and body from the shock of the high-speed impact. Once underwater, they use their wings to swim down in pursuit of their prey.

A year in the life of the

The young gannets are the first to leave the Bass, while the parents stay on until late autumn to defend their territories. Then, as the first snows fall on the hills, the Bass changes colour again, gradually darkening as the departing gannets reveal the underlying rock.

Gannets are long-distance flyers, and the colony disperses widely across the seas. The older gannets stretch their long wings and scatter across the North Sea or ride out the storms in the Hebrides: they have no need to come on land except to breed. The young head south towards the west coast of Africa, many of them reaching the equator.

When the young gannets are ready to breed, instinct calls them back to the place where they were born. Early in the year, they leave the southern sun and fly north to their basalt island home off the coast of North Berwick, where, peering through telescopes and scanning the horizon, watchers at the Scottish Seabird Centre eagerly await their return



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Bass gannets