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“**B**ird!” says my nearly two-year-old daughter, pointing a tiny finger skyward, “Bird.” It’s a glorious understatement. The sky above us is crowded with birds, their long, outstretched wings and torpedo bodies forming elegant cross shapes, which are swirling and circling in ever-changing patterns – a kaleidoscope of black and white birds against a grey and white sky.

And not just any ‘bird’ but gannets – the largest seabird in Britain and to my mind the most beautiful. I fell in love with gannets while traveling in search of dolphins, first in New Zealand then in the Hebrides. Gannets were our guides in the sky, their spectacular feeding revealing where the fish were and so where dolphins might be. Soon I enjoyed the gannets as much as the dolphin watching. There’s something uplifting about the sight of gannets, the exquisite precision of their movement and markings. I was

enthralled by the drama of their diving, the way they fold their wings and plunge with such power and grace into the sea, sending huge fountains of white water into the sky behind them.

Now we’re approaching the Bass Rock, just off the East Lothian coastline, the best place in Britain for a gannet fix. More than 150,000 gannets crowd this basalt island at the height of the breeding season, making it the largest single rock gannet colony in the world. We’re aboard the Seafari Explorer, a new 57-seater catamaran, purpose-built for the Scottish Seabird Centre. It offers a stable platform for wildlife watching trips for all ages, as well as a floating classroom for visiting school groups. We’re joining one of its very first trips as the seabirds return to the islands of the Forth for the summer breeding season. Our guide, Maggie Sheddan, knows these islands like the back of her hand. Her commentary is no tourist spiel, but real stories, acquired over years of experience and close observation. →

Just half an hour from Edinburgh, Bass Rock in the Forth Islands is bustling not with people but thousands of gannets, Britain’s largest seabird, writes **Anna Levin**

ON THE ROCKS