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ON THE ROCKS

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**

"Bird!" 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. ➜

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Leaving North Berwick harbour, we headed first for Craigleith, one of a chain of three small islands just off shore. I point out the others to my six-year-old son: the Lamb and beyond it Fidra, and he nods in approval – Fidra deemed a proper island because it has a lighthouse, built by the grandfather of Robert Louis Stevenson and said to have inspired Treasure Island. Craigleith becomes a miniature seabird city in summer and already kittiwakes are busy nesting. These delicate little gulls, as pretty as their name, fly around the cliffs as we approach. Fulmars glide past us, curving through the air on stiff wings. Common and grey seals are sprawled on the tideline, camouflaged against the greys and browns and soft ochres of the rock. We stop here a while, enjoying the comedy of a young seal making numerous attempts to leave the water, flapping and flopping up a steep rock.

Maggie explains that this small island has recently been the site of a successful conservation project, 'SOS Puffin'. She was among regular observers who were alarmed when puffin populations here crashed dramatically. In 1999 there were 28,000 pairs of breeding puffins on this small island but by 2006 there were only 5,000 pairs. The culprit was found to be tree mallow – a non-native plant, which spread rapidly here due to milder winters. With 3m high stems and dusky pink flowers it was an impressive sight but it formed a dense jungle, which prevented puffins returning to their burrows. So a volunteer army was enlisted to wage war on the mallow on behalf of the puffins. The whole island has now been lopped several times over, and puffin numbers are increasing once again.

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It's time to return to our seats as the bow lifts slightly and we're off, zooming over the grey-green sea with white water leaping beside us. We're looking back at Craigleith when my son glances over his shoulder and gasps: "Look, the Bass Rock, it's gone big!" I turn and get the same perspective shock. From land the Bass is an impressive sight, rearing abruptly from the sea. But this close it is jaw-droppingly awesome, its sheer cliffs towering above us – huge craggy rock in subtle hues of grey and blue and purple. At the bottom the rock is stained with a ring of brilliant green and shags stand sentinel, holding their glossy wings out. And

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everywhere, filling the sky and sea and nesting on improbably small ledges all over the rock, are gannets and gannets and gannets.

Maggie tells us that the Bass looks crowded now but will soon be shining white with the sheer density of gannets. Many more are still arriving, some returning home from as far away as the west coast of Africa. While other British seabirds are struggling, it seems that gannets are currently doing well. They are more resilient to changes as they feed on a wide range of fish species and can travel great distances. Satellite tracking by scientists from Leeds University has revealed Bass gannets feeding as far as the Norwegian coast, 550km away.

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The Bass hasn't always belonged to the gannets, and remnants and ruins remind us of the island's significant human history. It's hard to imagine that sheep once grazed the grassy slopes here and lighthouse keepers tended their kitchen garden. But I can imagine the Bass as a desolate and foreboding prison in Jacobite times, and the isolation of the monk who lived as a hermit here in the 6th century. Gannets, in smaller numbers, have been here throughout, and have long been a resource for humans: for meat, oil and feathers and later for sport, the target of Victorian shooting parties.

Now gannets have claimed the entire island,

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colonizing its cliffs and summit, ruined chapel and lighthouse garden. Some guillemots and razorbills squeeze on to the eastern cliffs and occasional puffins nest in the ruined battlements, but gannets reign supreme. They're a resource still, but now for researchers, photographers and wildlife watchers who come simply to admire them.

As I watch, the soft dome of a seal's head emerges from the luminous green water at the foot of the rock, then rolls and disappears and re-emerges, gazing steadily at us. I point it out to my son but he doesn't turn around, he's unusually still and silent in his seat. I go to check he's not seasick, or bored, but he's gazing up at the Bass Rock as if mesmerised, eyes and mouth open in wonder.

I make a promise to bring him back here in the summer to see the first white gawky gannet chicks. And again when they've grown to 'gugas' – gangly young birds all speckled black with random bits of fluffy white like a badly-made fancy dress costume. I turn a slow circle, taking it all in. I want to show him the Bass in all its seasons, Tantallon Castle over there on the mainland, and the long, sandy stretches of beach running from North Berwick. This place makes me hungry for summer. Winter's had its teeth in this year and wouldn't

POINT OF VIEW

Watch wildlife in comfort from the Scottish Seabird Centre

"Inspiring people about wildlife – that's at the heart of all we do," says Tom Brock, Chief Executive of the award-winning Scottish Seabird Centre, "And the key is sustainability – if wildlife tourism is done right it's a win, win, win: the visitors benefit from an inspiring experience, the local economy benefits from the tourism spend and the wildlife benefits from conservation and education work, from ensuring we're not destroying what people have come to see."

The Scottish Seabird Centre, which is based in a graceful, eco-friendly building by North Berwick's historic harbour, takes an innovative approach to inspiration. It uses the latest cutting edge technology to bring the wildlife wonders of the Forth Islands to a wider public. Inside the Discovery Centre, visitors can explore the islands at their own pace via live interactive cameras –•– panning around, zooming in and out to watch gannets greet each other on their Bass nests, peregrines hunched on their rock on Craigleith, or puffins on the May with beaks full of sand eels. The controls in the centre move the actual cameras on the islands and the images are beamed back in real time, using satellite technology.

This makes wildlife watching accessible to all, in warmth and comfort throughout the year. When the summer seabird cities have dispersed, the stars of the screen in the Discovery Centre are the grey seals on the Isle of May. Around 2,000 of them gather to breed on the island, and visitors can watch through the cameras as the fluffy white pups are born and weaned.

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let go but I'm dreaming of wildflowers and butterflies, paddling and pottering in rock pools, long summer evenings under East Lothian's huge, light-washed skies.

I keep turning, following the long, tapered arm of the Fife coast and at the end of it the Isle of May, owned and managed as a National Nature Reserve by Scottish Natural Heritage. It's known as the 'jewel of the Forth' and I've seen why. I visited on a bright, blue sky day in June and found it to be an enchanted island, its cliffs crowded with seabirds and raucous with their cries, its grassy slopes decorated with the pink and white of thrift and sea campion, and the entire island seemed to be covered in puffins, strutting around in their pantomime costumes on comical orange feet. From across the sea the May calls me with the promise of a perfect summer's day: more than 40,000 puffins and a lighthouse.

I'm still gazing at it when we're asked to return to our seats and we're soon picking up speed and heading back to the harbour. I savour it all – the light rippling on green water, the smell of the sea, salt on my lips and spray in my face.

Soon we're snug in the Seabird Centre's café, warming up over hot chocolate and gazing out at the panorama through the window: the sea still rolling towards us; Craigleith a stone's throw away; the Bass smaller but its grandeur undiminished; and the May sprawled on the horizon, changing all the time in the shifting light. WT

TRIP ADVISER

COST RATING ★☆☆☆☆

SAMPLE TOUR OF THE ISLANDS: The Scottish Seabird Centre offers a range of boat trips to the Bass Rock and Isle of May, including an hour long 'Seabird Cruise' from North Berwick to the Bass Rock and Craigleith. Alternatively you can choose the 'Seafari Bass' and to go to Bass Rock on a RIB (rigid inflatable boat), also about an hour and from North Berwick. Trips to the Isle of May, taking in Bass Rock en-route, last four hours, with at least two on the island. When possible a 'Bass Landing' enables a small group (up to 11) to set foot on the rock for around three hours. North Berwick offers a wide range accommodation options, including hotels, B&Bs, self catering, caravanning and camping.

GETTING THERE: Scotrail run regular trains from Edinburgh to North Berwick: every hour through the week and every 30 minutes on Saturdays. An anytime return costs £6.80 (www.scotrail.com). Visitors travelling by train receive 20 per cent off admission to the Scottish Seabird Centre (full price, £8.95 for adults).

TIPS AND WARNINGS: All trips subject to weather, so always phone ahead or check websites. The Bass Rock is a particularly exposed island, and landing is not always possible. Boat trip operators also advise passengers to wrap up warm as it can be surprisingly cold off shore. RIB trips are not suitable for anyone with back ailments or who is pregnant.

For Bass Rock landings, visitors need a level of fitness and wear appropriate clothes, it can be smelly and muddy! A hat is recommended for Isle of May landings, not only as protection from the sun but from occasional swooping birds.

Binoculars will greatly enhance your wildlife viewing. They are available to hire from the Scottish Seabird Centre for £3.

WHEN TO GO: Boat trips to the Forth Islands run from April to September. The Seabird Centre is open year round.

TOUR OPERATORS:

- **SCOTTISH SEABIRD CENTRE,** Tel: 01620 890 202; www.seabird.org
- **BRAVEHEART BOAT TRIPS,** Tel: 07967 877383; www.northberwickboattrips.co.uk
- **ANSTRUTHER PLEASURE CRUISES,** Tel: 07957 585200; www.isleofmayferry.com