

SALTEE ISLANDS



ROBERT THOMPSON

Saltee Islands

Off the southeast coast of Ireland lie the islands of Great and Little Saltee, one of Europe's most important seabird breeding sites. **Robert Thompson**, who has been visiting the islands for 20 years, reveals why he keeps coming back



With so many northern gannets (*Morus bassanus*) squeezed into a small space, individuals frequently find it difficult to land or find their spot. The other birds are quick to show their disapproval

Nikon D800, Nikkor 300mm f/2.8,
ISO 400, f/8, tripod

Ireland is perhaps better known for its remarkable landscapes rather than its rich and varied wildlife. Thousands of seabirds make the annual journey in spring to breed on many well-known islands around the Irish coast. The Saltees are one of the most important breeding sites in Europe for a number of seabirds. They lie in St George's Channel, about 5km off the County Wexford coast in southeast Ireland.

Geologically, the islands date back 600 million years to the pre-Cambrian period and are composed mainly of metamorphic Lewisian Gneiss – one of the oldest rocks in the world, named after the Isle of Lewis in the Outer

Hebrides. Archaeological surveys have revealed evidence of Viking and religious settlements on the islands. Pirates were also present at one point, using it as a base for smuggling and plundering the wealthy merchant ships that ran the gauntlet through the channel. The islands also became known as “the graveyard of a thousand ships”, due to the many vessels that met their fate in these turbulent waters.

Rugged terrain

The Saltees have been uninhabited since the 1940s when all farming ceased after the Second World War. There is no shelter or facilities of any kind on the islands and visitors must

bring their own provisions along with appropriate clothing as weather conditions can change suddenly, and frequently do. The wind and rain can make it a pretty uncomfortable place to be – although extreme weather can often produce some exceptional photographs. Having said that, Wexford has a more favorable climate than the rest of Ireland. It has a lower annual rainfall and longer hours of sunshine than any other county. During May and June it can get very hot on the islands and protection from the sun is strongly advisable.

Great Saltee is the largest island, about 1.6km in length and wedge-shaped. The mainland, or north side of the island has a low rocky shoreline, but rises to around 58m on

its southern summit. The large precipitous rocky outcrops along the eastern side hold the biggest concentration of birds including two gannet colonies – the smaller one occupies an offshore islet, while the largest encompasses the higher crags at the southern end of the island.

Little Saltee is closer to the mainland and less than a kilometre long, gently rising to an elevation of 30m, with a series of small coves mainly towards the south of the island. Sea erosion has left the land edges steeply incised, making it difficult to get down to sea level in places. Landing is difficult as there is no suitable place to dock a boat and can only be attempted in calm conditions. Transfer is usually via Zodiac and then a paddle for the remaining few yards. Little Saltee has a large population of breeding cormorants and they are a magnificent sight when seen for the first time. Unfortunately, cormorants no longer appear to breed on Great Saltee.

Both islands are in private ownership, originally purchased by the late Michael Neale (the self-styled Prince Michael I) in 1943. Following his death, they passed to his children. Today, permission to visit Great Saltee is by courtesy of the Neale family, while authorisation to land on Little Saltee is required from the new owner in advance.



A composite image showing the lichen-covered east cliffs of Great Saltee and the smaller gannet colony on Makestone Islet. The cliffs in this area support large populations of guillemots, razorbills and kittiwakes

Nikon D3X, Nikkor 24-70mm lens, ISO 100, f/16, tripod

“The sight and smell of over 20,000 seabirds on the cliffs is truly breathtaking and it never fails to stir my emotions”

A noisy welcome

When you experience Great Saltee for the first time the memory lasts forever. I have been coming to the islands for nearly 20 years both as photographer running workshops and on commissioning contracts from the National Parks and Wildlife Service. The sight and smell of over 20,000 seabirds on the cliffs is truly breathtaking and it never fails to stir my emotions. Once on the island, you ascend a series of large stone steps and a path that takes you past the Neale family house and finally to the Prince's Throne – a large stone structure where Prince Michael I was crowned.

A short walk from here towards the cliffs provides an excellent view of the Makestone – an islet with a small colony of gannets and a number of other breeding seabirds. Following the well-defined path west of the stone throne takes you to the Wherry Hole, which is one of the best bays for photographing puffins. The nesting burrows in this area are among patches of thrift, which provide an attractive backdrop. Further along the cliffs guillemots, razorbills, fulmars and kittiwakes pack the ledges with little or no capacity at times to move or even turn sideways.



"The islands also became known as 'the graveyard of a thousand ships', due to the many vessels that met their fate in these turbulent waters"

Northern gannet (*Morus bassanu*) The large rocky outcrops around Great Saltee can be treacherous and have claimed many ships and smaller vessels over the years. I had been watching gannets for a while using this route to approach the land. It was just a question of timing in terms of getting the wave action with an incoming bird.

Nikon D3X, Nikkor 300mm f/2.8, ISO 200, f/8, tripod

The noise levels can be overwhelming at times and only as dusk approaches does it drop to a level that is tolerable. Seabirds which breed on a regular basis on the islands include fulmar, manx shearwater, northern gannet, great cormorant, shag, lesser black-backed gull, herring gull, great black-backed gull, black-legged kittiwake, common guillemot, razorbill and, of course, Atlantic puffin. However, there are other birds that have bred on the islands including oystercatcher, chough and peregrine falcon.

Planning your trip

The ideal time to visit the islands is during May and June when bird activity is at its peak. From mid-May, Great Saltee is awash with colour: bluebells, campion and thrift provide an attractive backdrop to the nesting burrows of puffins and grassy ledges occupied by fulmars. There are over 130 species of wild flower recorded on the islands, but by June most of the flowers are past their best and the large vibrant flushes of pink on the ledges from the thrift have almost petered out. Bracken now dominates a large part of the island, which intensifies towards the higher, southern summit.

Other wildlife to be seen

Although the vast majority of people visit the Saltees primarily for the seabirds, the islands also support other species. Butterflies and moths are seen on a regular basis, including migrants such as the red admiral, painted lady and a number of hawk moths. There is also a breeding population of grey seals – one of the few colonies in the east of Ireland. The islands are also regarded as a hot spot for whales and dolphins. Risso's dolphin is seen regularly during the summer months; common dolphins and harbour porpoises have also been observed. The marine environment surrounding the islands is currently being considered for special protection.

"There are ample opportunities here for a whole range of behavioral images, from territorial squabbles, to flight shots and simple portraits of mothers and their offspring"



Oystercatchers (*Haematopus ostralegus*) are seen in small numbers usually around the northern part of the island near the Prince's Throne

Nikon D3X, Nikkor 300mm f/2.8,
ISO 200, f/5.6



Little Saltee holds a large population of breeding cormorants (*Phalacrocorax carbo*)
Nikon D3X, Nikkor 300mm f/2.8, ISO 200, f/11, tripod

With nesting space at a premium, frequent squabbles
are common among nesting gannets (*Morus bassanus*)
and make for interesting behavioural shots

Nikon D800, Nikkor 300mm f/2.8, ISO 400, f/8, tripod



Advice

The ledges and rocky outcrops along the eastern and southern sides of Great Saltee have the largest concentration of nesting razorbills, guillemots and kittiwakes. Much of the cliffs and rocky crags allow excellent views of the birds, but mostly from an elevated position looking down into the small bays and coves, parts of which are often in shadow, especially in early morning. However, there are some rocky areas where you can get down to eye-level and these tend to be the most productive spots photographically. Shags also frequent here in small numbers – they like the protection of the large rocky outcrops and overhangs. The youngsters frequently perch on the larger angulated rocks and are fairly tolerant of approaching photographers.

“The noise levels can be overwhelming at times and only as dusk approaches does it drop to a level that is tolerable”

The climb up to the gannet colony along the fringe of the south summit, past the abandoned agricultural fields, provides an impressive vista across the island, with Little Saltee clearly visible in the distance. The orange and yellow lichen-covered rocks of Xanthoria aureola and X. parietina form patches of colour in some of the larger bays.

There are around 3000 breeding pairs of gannets on the island, which are without doubt the big attraction for every photographer. Warm evening light and the prevailing southwesterly winds around the south summit provide the ideal conditions for flight photography and one can easily become absorbed in the ambience and the sight of countless birds landing and taking off. The cliffs and sky here are awash with gannets – many nesting on the rocky ground virtually in front of you. There are ample opportunities here for a whole range of behavioral images, from territorial squabbles, to flight shots and simple portraits of mothers and their offspring.

Sitting quietly among the rocks looking towards the colony is a humbling experience for me. Even after 20 years of coming to the islands, I still get choked up and consider myself lucky to have experienced one of nature's truly amazing scenes. ☺

I came across this nesting great black-backed gull (*Larus marinus*) in a secluded little rocky outcrop on my way up to the gannet colony. The lichen-covered rocks attracted my eye and provided colour contrast to the composition. While all species of gull still breed throughout most of the island, there has been a marked decline in recent years

Nikon D800, Nikkor 300mm f/2.8, ISO 100, f/8, tripod



Conservation concerns

The Saltee Islands are recognised internationally for their large populations of breeding seabirds. Both islands are of high conservation importance. They are listed on Annex I of the EU Habitats Directive and have been a Special Protection Area (SPA) since the mid-1980s. Ireland's first bird observatory was opened on Great Saltee in 1950 and played an important role in research and ringing programs until its closure in 1963.

There are many species of bird that pass through the islands during the peak spring and autumn migration times. Over 200 species have been recorded since the 1960s, which makes the Saltées a big attraction for ornithologists and photographers from Britain and Europe.

When I first visited Great Saltee its popularity as a seabird photography destination was less well-known outside Ireland. Today, that is no longer the case and with an increasing number of day-trippers and photographers from further afield coming to Great Saltee its fragile ecosystem is under more pressure than ever. Despite the increase in tourists and photographers, there appears to be no immediate threat to the gannets and other species, since numbers have shown a slight, but steady annual increase. However, it is difficult to assess the long-term impact that increased human traffic will have on the bird populations and the habitat. On-going research and monitoring by BirdWatch Ireland and the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) makes the Saltées the most documented group of islands in terms of bird recording in Ireland.

As photographers we have a duty of care to put the welfare of the subject first. Sadly, this has not always been the case and recently there have been reports of some people acting irresponsibly and putting unnecessary stress on nesting birds. Although this behaviour is perhaps isolated to a few individuals, it is often enough to provide the catalyst for others (who would want to see control measures in place during the breeding season) to voice their concern to the relevant authorities about the level of disturbance. The islands are unique in many ways and it would be a pity if future generations were deprived of experiencing nature in such a beautiful and intimate way.



Robert Thompson is an accomplished freelance natural history photographer, writer and naturalist, living in Ireland. He is an acclaimed macro specialist and author of a number of books on natural history and photography. His work is widely published in the UK, Ireland and internationally.

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Puffins (*Fratercula arctica*) are scattered along the east side of Great Saltee, but numbers vary depending upon conditions and time of day. The Wherry Hole is one of the more reliable areas to photograph them at relatively close quarters. The carpets of thrift around the nesting burrows add a colourful backdrop to the photograph.
Nikon D3X, Nikkor 300mm f/2.8, ISO 200, f/11, tripod

