



Chick magnet: Bass Rock is home to nesting colonies of gannets

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SEABIRDS, SEAL PUPS AND SEAFARI

Paul Miles finds a wildlife 'wonder of the world' in the Forth of Firth

'SCOTLAND IN AUTUMN?' For a long weekend?' asks Lucy. 'As if the nights aren't drawing in fast enough, you want to head north?' she continues incredulously. 'A city-break maybe. But cycling along the coast and a boat ride out to uninhabited islands? With children? What are you thinking?'

But these aren't just any old islands. One is a sheer-walled lump of basalt, soaring to over

100m above the sea, white as if snow-capped. Wheeling above it are thousands of birds that look from a distance like snowflakes in a snow dome. The island is Bass Rock in the Firth of Forth, the beautiful estuary above Edinburgh, and the birds, which with their droppings give the rock its colour, are gannets, Britain's largest seabird. For about 10 months each year, this

volcanic plug is crowded with nesting pairs, a peck apart, as they raise their chicks to become strapping grey juveniles, so greedy they are soon heavier than the parents. When the 150,000 gannets leave at the end of October, grey seals arrive, coming ashore on other, gentler islands to give birth and suckle young. Their mother's milk is so fatty it's the equivalent of consuming six packs of butter daily.

Puffins and their 'pufflings' in spring; gannets and their chicks in spring, summer and autumn; seals and their pups in autumn and winter – the rocky outcrops in the Forth may be uninhabited by humans but the comings and goings of other species and their families provide the budding naturalist with a full diary. David Attenborough has called the Bass Rock gannet colony one of the great 'wildlife wonders of the world'.

‘The sky is grey and the clouds are like turreted castles. The seascape is a treasure’



The Firth of Forth is home to a fascinating array of wildlife. This beach is in front of the Macdonald Marine Hotel



Leaving Lucy with her youngest chick, Isaac (eight), to enjoy the indoor swimming pool where we're staying in the Marine Hotel, 27 miles east of Edinburgh, I set off with her older fledgling, Ellie (10), on a 10-minute walk over sandy beaches towards the centre of North Berwick (not to be confused with Berwick-upon-Tweed, 40 miles away). Here, we meet our cycling guide, Alasdair Langlands, who kites us out with bicycles and helmets. 'East Lothian is good for cycling,' he says as he leads us along country lanes. 'There are



lots of quiet roads and it's relatively flat. As for weather, Scotland's east coast is pretty dry, even in winter. We visit a ruined castle and cycle down a track to a curving golden strand where Ellie pockets seashells. Everywhere we go, Bass Rock is always in the distance, just a mile or so from shore, its lighthouse facing us.

'This beach belongs to descendants of the author Robert Louis Stevenson,' explains Langlands. 'His father built the lighthouses on the islands.' Stevenson used to holiday in North



Piper Steve and son Thomas from Morpeth pipe band

Berwick. His most famous book, *Treasure Island*, was probably inspired by one of the Forth islands, Fidra. We cycle back to town between fields and over a golf course. 'East Lothian used to be called the breadbasket of Scotland but now it's known as the golf coast,' laments Langlands, a non-golfer.

Golfers and others have been holidaying on this coast since Victorian times and the sturdy architecture recalls those days. As well as a new spa, the beachside Macdonald Marine Hotel has baronial flourishes and vast turret suites complete with telescopes trained on the Rock, two miles to the east. If you want to get a closer view, however, the award-winning Scottish Seabird Centre in the harbour has TV screens beaming pictures from wireless, solar-powered cameras on the islands. Visitors can control the cameras remotely, using a joystick. Isaac adeptly zooms in on a bird preening its fluffy chick.

To get physically closer to the wildlife, the centre runs new 'seafari' trips out to the islands. We don thick waterproofs and lifejackets before stepping aboard a rigid inflatable. 'Will it be scary?' asks Isaac. It's not. The boat zips effortlessly above the waves, spray occasionally splashing over the bow as we hold onto saddle-style seats. The sky is grey and the clouds are like turreted castles but the sun's rays break through the blackness, illuminating the white rock. Even on dark, wintry days, this seascape of islands and clouds is a treasure. As we reach nearer, guide John Baxter warns us to put our hoods up. 'Remember, there are thousands of birds flying overhead.' He tells us how gannets fish by diving like missiles into the sea at 90mph. 'They have special air-bags in their skulls to protect them and, to be more streamlined, they dislocate their wings as they enter the water.' Once, on one trip, a bird speared the side of the



Ruins of Tantallon castle on the mainland

‘The gannets like Bass Rock because it is so steep, they can launch themselves off’

boat, puncturing a section. ‘The boat survived, I’m not sure about the gannet.’

We are surrounded by birds – flying, diving, nesting, preening and even tumbling down the cliff in an attempt to make a first flight. Little downy feathers float through the air from the seabird city. There is the smell of guano and a constant squawking chatter. The gannets live here because it’s so steep, explains John. ‘They

like to launch themselves from a high cliff. Men used to gather the birds, once known as ‘solan geese’, for food. They would ‘harry’ them: hanging down the cliff-face on a rope, they would knock birds from their nests into the sea for waiting boats. These days, the visitors in their boats just come to look in wonder.

In October, grey seals breed on the nearby Isle of May, but, explains Therese Alampo, the island’s



ISLANDS OF MYSTERY

Room for a spoon bender?

It’s not just the wildlife that finds the islands of the Firth of Forth special. Some say they have mystical significance. In February this year, Uri Geller, cutlery botherer and former friend of Michael Jackson, bought the small speck of Lamb Island for £30,000. He will never be able to build on it as it is a protected Site of Special Scientific Interest but Geller believes the Forth islands have special powers due to having the same configuration as the Great Pyramids of Giza. On his website, he explains how this was first written about in the *Scotichronicon*, a 15th-century manuscript, described by the National Library of Scotland (*George IV Bridge, Edinburgh, 0131 623 3700, www.nls.uk*) as ‘probably the most important mediaeval account of early Scottish history’. According to Geller, the nearby Isle of May may be Avalon, the mysterious island of Arthurian legend, where King Arthur’s sword, Excalibur, was forged. Weird.

reserve manager, ‘the island closes at the end of September because we don’t want to scare the seals. Plus, they can be dangerous when they’re protecting their young.’ There are two live cameras on the Isle of May, which broadcast directly to the Scottish Seabird Centre, so people can see the seals safely. And now’s the time to watch them. ‘Last October the cameras saw pups being born live. It was amazing!’

Paul Miles, Rex

GET THERE, GET AROUND, STAY OVER

North Berwick is a 30-minute local train ride or an hour’s bus journey from Edinburgh. Virgin Trains go to Edinburgh from Birmingham and from London Euston, via Crewe. www.virgintrains.co.uk // **Macdonald Marine Hotel & Spa** (Cromwell Rd, North Berwick, East Lothian, 0844

879 9130, www.macdonaldhotels.co.uk/marine) is five minutes’ walk from North Berwick train station. It has seafront double rooms from £125 per night in October including breakfast and use of spa facilities. // **The Scottish Seabird Centre** (The Harbour, North Berwick,

01620 890202, www.seabird.org) is open daily except Christmas Day. Seafari trips are dependent on weather. To see the gannets, you should visit before the end of October but once they have left, the seals and their pups make for another wildlife spectacle. // **2 Wheels Tours** (07900

365769, www.2wheel-tours.com) offers half-day and full-day cycle rides from North Berwick and, next year, plans longer cycling holidays. *For more information about visiting Scotland, go to www.visitscotland.com, or call 0845 225 5121*