

Wildlife Photography on Great Cumbrae

The island of Great Cumbrae sits in the Firth of Clyde, approximately a 10 minute ferry ride from the seaside resort town of Largs on the mainland. Considering that it is only about 40 minutes drive from Glasgow, and the proximity of large towns and ferry ports such as Greenock, Gourock and Ardrossan (not to mention Hunterston power stations!), Great Cumbrae still manages to feel as though it is miles away in the heart of the Scottish countryside, and is home to a great many species of marine birds and mammals. Best of all, because the island is relatively small and the 12-mile coastal road is almost completely flat, it is possible to cycle round quite easily, leaving you free to abandon your car and enjoy the peace and quite of the island.



The islands of Great and Little Cumbrae are shown in blue.

Image from Wikimedia commons.

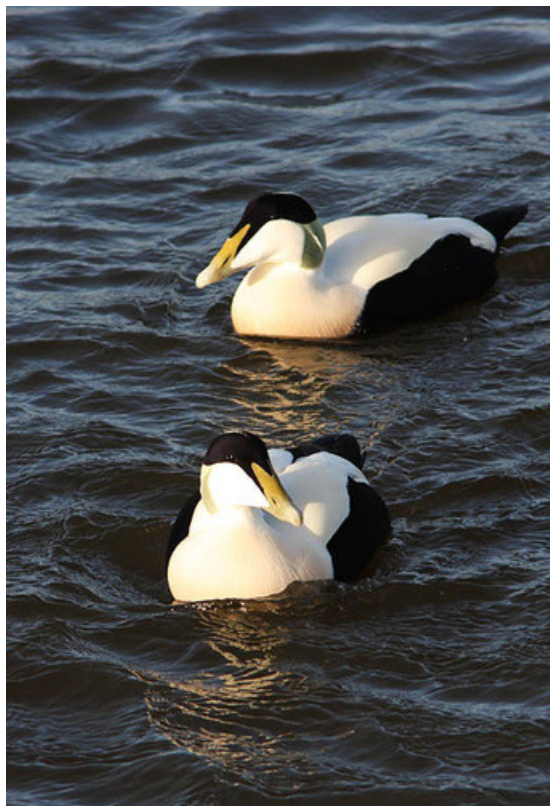
Marine Life on the Beaches

Aside from the sandy Fintry Bay and Kames Bay (a Site of Special Scientific Interest, SSSI) in the town of Millport itself, the shoreline around Great Cumbrae is mostly rocky, making it ideal for rockpooling and exploring the shallows when the tide is out. The bay at Farland Point (at the south east point of the island) is particularly good for rockpooling, and there are plenty to explore. The marine life here is quite typical for a rocky shore, and all the usual species of green and brown seaweeds, limpets, barnacles, winkles, mussels and beadlet anemones can be found readily in the pools. If you have a net and fancy a bit of pool-dipping, you can also often small crustaceans (e.g. shrimp and amphipods) and occasionally small fish in many of the rockpools here. There is an easy circular path around Farland point which makes it suitable for people of all ages.

If you are particularly fond of marine biology, many of the bays around Millport are noted as being of exceptional value as teaching areas, and provide excellent examples of typical rocky shore habitats. For more information, it is well worth visiting the University Marine Biology Station, Millport (UMBSM) which has a small museum and aquarium which are both open to the public. The field station is located on the outskirts of Millport, just north of Farland point.

Coastal birds and Seabirds

There are a huge variety of coastal birds and seabirds around Great Cumbrae, which a quick trip around the island will prove! Eider ducks are common around the entire coast, and can regularly be seen diving for food, or calling to each other in large groups. Oystercatchers and curlews are also extremely common, and can often be seen in large groups, either resting or feeding at the beaches, along with shags and cormorants.



Oystercatchers and Eider ducks can be seen all around the coast of the island

Around Millport itself, it is not uncommon to spot red-breasted mergansers, as well as all the usual gulls you would expect to find in a seaside town! Moving back to the coast again, you can occasionally spot Dunlin, Redshank and Rock pipits. I have generally seen these species most often along the western side of the island and the bays in the north, although I would expect them to be seen around most of the coast. In the north and north-west of the island there are also several Swan (or Chinese) geese, which are a domestic species and are not native to Scotland.



Rock pipits are frequently seen around the shores, although they can be tricky to spot

Several species of seabird also live on the island, including a small colony of Fulmars which live on the cliffs in the south of the island. Kittiwakes and gannets can also commonly be seen further out at sea. There is a large gannet colony at Ailsa Craig, south of the Firth of Clyde, and the waters around Millport are a popular feeding area for these birds in the summer (particularly when the fishing boats are working).

Marine Mammals and Basking Sharks

The Firth of Clyde is home to a large number of marine mammals, including large groups of harbour porpoise, common dolphins and common dolphins. Minke whales can also be seen in this area. In the past, there have also been sightings of Killer whales (Orca), a Risso's Dolphin, and even a humpback whale! Sightings of these species are incredibly rare however, and are certainly the exception rather than the norm.

Around the coast of Great Cumbrae, it is quite common to spot common and grey seals, of which there is a colony on the island.



Great Cumbrae is home to a colony of Grey Seals

The waters around Great Cumbrae are famous for basking sharks, not least because this was until very recently, the home of the last basking shark fishery in the UK. In 2005, the Firth of Clyde had the second highest sightings rate for basking sharks in Scotland (after the Minches).

To see more photographs like the ones in this article, have a look at the [Seabirds](#), [Coastal Wildlife](#) and [Marine Mammals](#) galleries.