

Wildlife on the Isle of May

The Isle of May is a National Nature Reserve (NNR) lying approximately eight miles off the Scottish mainland in the outer Firth of Forth. The island is only 1.5km long, but is a hugely important site for breeding seabirds thanks to its steep cliffs and relative isolation. Every year, the island is host to over 200,000 pairs of birds that come ashore to breed, including species such as puffins, razorbills, guillemots, terns and eider ducks, and is also the site of an important grey seal colony.

There is a good path that runs around and through the island and it is possible to walk around the whole reserve easily in a couple of hours.

Wildlife

To see the seabirds, it is best to visit in the early to mid summer (April-July). The eider ducks are the first to nest and breed, and will begin to arrive around April, hatch their chicks, and leave by around the end of May-June. The other birds are a little bit later in breeding, and most activity occurs between May-July. June is reportedly the best time to go and see the young hatchlings, and watch the parents feeding the young, although I have not personally visited at this time of year.

Amongst the other species that breed here are guillemots, razorbills, shags, puffins, fulmars, terns (arctic and common) and black-legged kittiwakes to name a few. Some of these species are quite commonly seen at sea, for example following behind ferries or fishing vessels (such as the scavengers, like the fulmars and gulls), but others, like the puffins and guillemots, are often much harder to spot due to their small size, speed and feeding habits, while the terns will migrate south for the winter. Visiting a breeding colony like the Isle of May is therefore a really good way to see these birds up close, in large numbers before they return to sea and all but disappear again.

The grey seals are present all year round, but will give birth to their pups in the autumn (October), which are bright white and fluffy. Common seal pups are born with grey coats and can swim within a few hours of birth, but grey seals can't. Their white coat stays with them for around six weeks and is not waterproof, meaning that the pups have to stay on land during this time. This makes them particularly vulnerable to predators, and grey seals therefore tend to breed in more remote areas than common seals.



Common seals and eider ducks can be seen all round the island early in the summer

Photography

As you may expect, seabird colonies in general provide excellent photographic opportunities. The birds that nest in these reserves seem to have learned that humans pose virtually no threat to them, as they must stay on the paths. As a result, it is possible to find nests all along the sides of the path, often within a few feet of the trail.

While some birds do nest close to the paths, I would still recommend bringing a long telephoto lens and perhaps a shorter zoom to reach those birds that nest further away or on the cliffs (e.g. fulmars, kittiwakes and razorbills) as the paths won't take you close enough to use a standard lens. I personally use a 70-200mm and a 300mm with 1.4x teleconverter and find this to be a really nice combination to use hand-held. However, a shorter lens can still be used in places to give a different perspective on the wildlife and is definitely still worth taking in your kit bag.



Kittiwakes nest around the shore cliffs alongside razorbills, puffins and guillemots

There are plenty of opportunities for in-flight shots as well, although a great deal of patience is required for shooting the smaller, faster auks! There is no shortage of birds at the Isle though, so with a little practice and luck, it is possible to get good results in a relatively short time. As with all in-flight photography, it is always worth taking your time. Pick a spot you like that will provide a nice background to your shot and where there is plenty of activity, then pick a single species to focus on and sit and watch it for a few minutes. Animals are often very predictable if you can interpret their behaviour, and it should be possible to predict their movements after a little while. Once you can do this, you will be in a much better position to photograph them.

Don't forget to have your camera out for the crossing (weather permitting of course). As you approach the island you will find the boat surrounded by wildlife, and it is a great opportunity for getting photos of the birds on the water, be it diving, feeding or taking off and landing. It also provides a different setting to the majority of the shots you will take on land, which can be a refreshing change once you've filled several gigabytes of memory cards and are reviewing your results! After your trip round the island, the boat will often take you around to see the seal colony and give you a view of some of the seabirds from below, so make sure you've got some space left on your memory cards for that.



Puffins are amongst the best loved and photogenic subjects, and are fortunately not hard to find!

If you are looking for a particular subject it is best to plan ahead, as the different species nest and leave at different times through the summer. If, for example, you wanted a photograph of a puffin bringing sandeels back to feed its chick, you may want to time your trip for June, whereas you would need to visit in April-May to see the eider ducks on their nests. There is no reason not to make several trips though, as there is no shortage of willing subjects!

To see more photographs of the amazing wildlife around the Isle of May, have a look at the [Seabird](#) and [Marine Mammal](#) galleries.