

Skomer Island

Frequently Asked Questions



All the questions you have always wanted to ask. Now answered by the Assistant Warden Sarah Harris .

SEABIRDS

[What's the difference between Guillemots and Razorbills?](#)

[Why do the Guillemots build nests so close together?](#)

[Where do the Puffins, Guillemots and Razorbills feed?](#)

[What's the difference between Herring, GBB & LBB Gulls?](#)

[Where do all the Gull species breed?](#)

[Are Fulmars and Gulls closely related?](#)

[I saw several bird skeletons alongside the path- are there any need for concern?](#)

[Why are only the bodies of Manx Shearwaters eaten?](#)

[Why are Manx Shearwaters only seen during night time?](#)

[Where do the Manx Shearwaters feed?](#)

[Are all these burrows caused by the Rabbits?](#)

[Would there be Manx Shearwaters and Puffins on Skomer if there were no Rabbits? Do they need Rabbits to dig their burrows?](#)

[Why are many seabirds seen without nests?](#)

[What are seabirds doing when they raft?](#)

[Are the seabirds here all year round- where do they go in the winter?](#)

[Where do the Puffins go in the winter?](#)

[Why are cetaceans and Gannets often seen during tidal rips?](#)

[Why do the Gannet flocks build up so quickly?](#)

[Although there are plenty about, I haven't seen any Gannets breeding on Skomer. Where is the nearest Gannet breeding colony?](#)

[What is the difference between Cormorants and Shags?](#)

RABBITS

[Does the large Rabbit population cause any problems?](#)

[Do Skomer Rabbits suffer from myxomatosis?](#)

[When were Rabbits introduced to Skomer?](#)

[Why are there black rabbits on Skomer?](#)

SEALS

[When are the Seal pups born and when will they leave their parents?](#)

[What are Seals doing when they haul out?](#)

FLORA and HUMAN HISTORY

[When was Skomer first occupied and what were peoples' occupations here?](#)

[Why are there no trees on Skomer?](#)

[Why are there so many bluebells on Skomer?](#)

Skomer Island

Frequently Asked Questions



[What is the Harold Stone?](#)

[What are the lime kilns for?](#)

MISCELLANEOUS POO AND OTHER ANIMALS

[What makes the big brown droppings that looks like mammal droppings?](#)

[Are there rats on the island?](#)

[Are there adders on the island?](#)

[How many people live on the island?](#)

Skomer Island

Frequently Asked Questions



SEABIRDS

What's the difference between Guillemots and Razorbills?

Guillemot; Thin pointy bill

Long-bodied

Dark brown above

Razorbill; Wide bill, crossed by white lines

Stocky build

Black above with white line in front of the eye

In flight – the feet of the Guillemot protrude beyond the tail but stop before the tail tip in Razorbills.

Colonies – Guillemots nest in large, crowded colonies whereas Razorbills are more spread out on cliffs and under boulders.

Why do the Guillemots build nests so close together?

The main reason for this is safety in numbers. No other bird breeds in such close proximity.

There are about 20,000 individuals breeding on Skomer.

Where do the Puffins, Guillemots and Razorbills feed?

All three species feed in the Irish Sea. The exact location will depend on where the food source happens to be at the time.

What's the difference between Herring, GBB & LBB Gulls?

In adults;

Lesser Black-backed Gull; Smaller than Herring Gull and Great Black-backed Gull

Dark grey back

Yellow legs

Herring Gull;

Bigger than a Lesser Black-backed Gull and smaller than a Great Black-backed Gull

Pale grey back

Pink legs

Great Black-backed Gull; Biggest gull on Skomer

Black back

Pink legs

Where do all the Gull species breed?

The Lesser Black-backed Gulls tend to nest in flocks inland from the cliffs, Herring Gulls nest largely on the cliffs and occasionally within Lesser Black-backed Gull colonies and the Great Black-backed Gulls nest alone on the rocky outcrops all over the island and on some of the cliffs.

Are Fulmars and Gulls closely related?

No, although they are superficially similar, Gulls and Fulmars are from different families.

Gulls are from the Laridae family and Fulmars are part of the Procellariidae family which

CLICK HERE TO RETURN TO QUESTIONS

Skomer Island

Frequently Asked Questions



is Petrels and Shearwaters.

I saw several bird skeletons alongside the path- are there any need for concern?

No, these are most likely Manx Shearwaters and there are over 120,000 breeding pairs on Skomer so the number seen on walks around the island are only a small proportion of the total number of breeding birds.

Why are only the bodies of Manx Shearwaters eaten?

Most of the shearwater carcasses around the island are left by Greater black-backed gulls, which kill and eat any shearwaters that do not reach the safety of the sea, or their burrow by dawn. Just like you with your Sunday roast chicken, they usually leave the wings, feet and head behind as these are not easy to swallow or digest.

Why are Manx Shearwaters only seen during night time?

The Manx Shearwater has legs positioned at the back of the body. This is perfect for diving but not for wandering about on land. Therefore they are very clumpy and slow on land. Therefore they only come ashore under the protection of darkness when gulls find it harder to hunt them.

Where do the Manx Shearwaters feed?

By tracking the movements of Manx shearwaters from Skomer using miniature GPS tags we know that they usually feed in the Irish and Celtic Seas. To find enough food for their hungry chick, shearwater parents on Skomer frequently make round trips of 300 km or more, heading north, south or west from the island.

Are all these burrows caused by the Rabbits?

No, the burrows of Skomer are a combination of Rabbit, Puffin and Manx Shearwater burrows.

Would there be Manx Shearwaters and Puffins on Skomer if there were no Rabbits? Do they need Rabbits to dig their burrows?

Yes, both Manx Shearwaters and Puffins have very sharp claws making them very good at digging. They surely appreciate help from Rabbits but they are not dependent upon them.

Why are many seabirds seen without nests?

Birds without nests could be the other half of a pair waiting for their turn to attend the nest, or checking up on their partner. Alternatively, they could be immature birds sussing out what all this breeding is all about! Many seabirds take many years to reach sexual maturity. For example Fulmars take about eight to nine years to start breeding and they start visiting land and nesting sites after about four years at sea. Kittiwakes return to nest sites at the age of two years between May and July to assess the situation and start to breed between three and six years of age. A final example are Guillemots which take five to six years to reach sexual maturity but visit nesting colonies each year prior to breeding.

[CLICK HERE TO RETURN TO QUESTIONS](#)

Skomer Island

Frequently Asked Questions



What are seabirds doing when they raft?

The main reason for birds rafting is to rest, and it is safest to do this in large numbers when many birds are looking out for danger. For some species other reasons may apply. For example, the Manx Shearwater rafts offshore of Skomer in the evenings, waiting to return under the safety of darkness. For Puffins, rafting is a time to socialise, an important aspect of a Puffins life.

Are the seabirds here all year round- where do they go in the winter?

Different seabirds do different things in the winter. Below is a list of where they spend the winter.

Razorbill;	Remain on the continental shelf. Some go to western France and even down to northwest Africa.
Guillemot;	Stay on the continental shelf, avoiding deep oceanic water. They visit places such as the North Sea and English Channel.
Puffin;	Out into the North Atlantic...somewhere!
Fulmar;	Remain close to their nest sites, visiting occasionally. The males spend more time visiting their nesting cliffs than females.
Kittiwake;	Go into the deeper seas of the Atlantic. Their movements are influenced by weather and food availability.
Shag;	Remain close to breeding colonies year round.
Cormorant;	Most remain close to breeding colonies. Some move south to winter off the coast of France and Portugal.
Manx Shearwater;	Migrate south to Argentina.
Storm Petrel;	Western and southern coasts of Africa.

Where do the Puffins go in the winter?

All we know is that Puffins spend the winter out at sea in the North Atlantic. Where exactly is unknown. However, researchers on Skomer are tracking a number of Puffins in order to gain more information on the Puffins whereabouts during the winter. They leave at the end of July and do not return to land until mid-March.

Why are cetaceans and Gannets often seen during tidal rips?

Nutrients is often stirred up in tidal rips which provides a food source for fish and in turn cetaceans and gannets. So both are often seen in tidal rips as this is where the food is.

Why do the Gannet flocks build up so quickly?

They want their supper before the others take it all!

Also, Gannets do benefit from feeding together, creating a hailstorm of diving Gannets disorientates the shoal of fish being targeted.

[CLICK HERE TO RETURN TO QUESTIONS](#)

Skomer Island

Frequently Asked Questions



Although there are plenty about, I haven't seen any Gannets breeding on Skomer. Where is the nearest Gannet breeding colony?

Gannets feeding in the waters surrounding Skomer are mostly from Grassholm. This is an island 12km west of Skomer. There are about 38,000 pairs of Gannet breeding on Grassholm.

What is the difference between Cormorants and Shags?

Cormorant; Bigger and fatter than shag

Bill heavy

Head wedge shaped

Juveniles, dark brown above, underparts white with dark streaks

Adults, Black with bluish gloss, wings tinged bronze

In flight, Thick, kinked neck, less pronounced belly, long wings, shallow wingbeats

When diving does a half-leap prior to dive

Shag; Smaller and slimmer than Cormorant

Bill slender

Head rounded with steep forehead

Juveniles, dark brown above, pale brown below

Adults, black with green gloss, wings tinged purplish

In flight, narrow, straight neck, pot belly, blunt wings, fast wing-beats

When diving leaps clear of water before the dive

RABBITS

Does the large Rabbit population cause any problems?

The rabbits nibble heathland and other flowering plants and therefore promote dominance of unpalatable plants. A number of chicken wire enclosures have been constructed around the island to keep rabbits out, in an effort to encourage regeneration of the heathland and flowering plants. In recent decades the area of heathland has declined dramatically due to huge population of nibbling rabbits. Rabbits also cause soil erosion.

On the other hand, rabbits are a food source for the islands Buzzards and Gulls. They provide good feeding habitats for the Chough and Meadow Pipits by keeping grass short through grazing and surely the Manx Shearwaters and Puffins don't mind some help from rabbits digging burrows or providing unoccupied burrows for the birds, but too much digging can lead to erosion. They are a conservation conundrum.

Do Skomer Rabbits suffer from myxomatosis?

Yes. The last major outbreak of myxomatosis was in 2007 causing a 95% decline in the population. As a result the following years flowering plants thrived.

[CLICK HERE TO RETURN TO QUESTIONS](#)

Skomer Island

Frequently Asked Questions



When were Rabbits introduced to Skomer?

In the 13th Century when they were farmed for food and fur.

Why are there black rabbits on Skomer?

Skomer is home to rabbits of all different colours, this is because they originated from domestic stock.

SEALS

When are the Seal pups born and when will they leave their parents?

On Skomer the pupping season is from August to February. This is a particularly long pupping season and probably due to the large numbers of Grey Seals which pup on the island. The females leave when their pups reach three weeks old. By then the pups are starting to moult their white fluffy coat. The pups remain on or near the beach they were born on for another week or so before venturing out into the sea.

What are Seals doing when they haul out?

Resting!

FLORA and HUMAN HISTORY

When was Skomer first occupied and what were peoples' occupations here?

There is evidence of humans from around 37,000 years Before Present (BP), although these peoples would have been nomadic hunter gatherers and wouldn't have had a permanent settlement.

The first evidence of occupation is from around 5000 to 2000 BP, in the Bronze and Iron Age, and possibly even Neolithic. There are remains of huts, fields and their boundaries and cairns which indicates a farming community which at its peak would have sustained around 250 people. They may have farmed livestock such as cattle and sheep, as well as geese, hens and pigs. The deep and fertile soils would have also allowed for crop cultivation, which most likely would have been primitive forms of cereals, wheat and barley. It was likely that there was also an exploitation of the surrounding seas and shores in fishing, scavenging on the beaches (where accessible) and taking birds and their eggs from the cliffs and burrows.

Why are there no trees on Skomer?

There used to be extensive Oak and Birch scrubland on Skomer, but it is believed it was removed by early settlers to allow vegetation to thrive for farming and also used for fuel. The trees have not returned, probably due to the harsh climate on Skomer and the impact of rabbits nibbling any young saplings. Some woodland

[CLICK HERE TO RETURN TO QUESTIONS](#)

Skomer Island

Frequently Asked Questions



plants still remain on the island such as Bluebells and Wood Sage.

Why are there so many bluebells on Skomer?

The bluebells, as well as bracken and wood sage, are often associated with woodland, and it can be proposed that these plants are the ground flora of former woodland of the island, although not precisely in the areas they now cover, of course, for many of these are within the prehistoric and more recent field systems. The bracken now provides a surrogate cover for the bluebells, instead of the woodland.

What is the Harold Stone?

This feature is one of Skomer's mysteries. The standing stone is possibly of prehistoric date, and perhaps contemporary with the ancient fields and settlements. The stone is unshaped by human hand, but the corners have been smoothed, probably by cattle rubbing themselves against it. Its purpose can only be speculated upon. For example, it may mark the site of an ancient burial or be a ritual monument of some kind. Alternatively, since it can be seen on the skyline as one approaches the island by sea from the east, it may well have served as a navigation aid.

What are the lime kilns for?

There are two quite large 19th Century lime kilns on the Island: one below the Information and Welcome Point (at the top of the path from the beach at North Haven) now used as a shelter, and one above the Information and Welcome Point, below the Harold Stone. Lime was important on the island both to be used as mortar for the buildings and to spread on the land as a fertilizer, the volcanic rocks of the Island not giving rise to a naturally fertile soil. Limestone (and coal) would have been imported from the mainland, landed on the beach at North Haven and then moved to the kilns where it would be heated. The intense heat changed the rock, making it brittle and easy to crush to a fine powder ready for use.

MISCELLANEOUS POO AND OTHER ANIMALS

What makes the big brown droppings that looks like mammal droppings?

Canada Geese

Are there rats on the island?

No, this is one of the reasons so many seabirds nest on Skomer.

Are there adders on the island?

No, but there are Slow Worms, Common Toads, Common Lizards and Common Frogs.

How many people live on the island?

Mid-season there is four Wildlife Trust staff members, five researchers, one Long-term volunteer, six Short-term volunteers, up to 16 over-night guests and a maximum of 250 day visitors.

CLICK HERE TO RETURN TO QUESTIONS