

Isle of May

National Nature Reserve



Diving on the Isle of May



Scotland's
National Nature
Reserves

Magical places, amazing wildlife.



Aerial view of Isle of May NNR

The Isle of May

On a clear day, the Isle of May seems to float in the sea like a giant basking whale. This rocky island, with sheer cliffs, caves and gentle slopes, is home to thousands of grey seals and seabirds. It lies at the junction of the sheltered Firth of Forth and the expanses of the North Sea. The rocky reefs in these cold, tide-swept waters support kelp forests and rich marine life, providing foraging grounds for the seals which breed on the island.

The 'May Isle', as it is known locally, lies 7 kilometres (km) from Crail on the Fife coast. Although the island is only 57 hectares it is nationally and internationally important for its seabird and seal colonies. A National Nature Reserve (NNR) since 1956, the island was purchased from the Northern Lighthouse Board in 1989 and since then it has been owned and managed by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH). The island is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), a Special Protection Area (SPA) for its breeding seabirds and a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) for its seals and rocky reefs.

Ever since Fife was inhabited over 8000 years ago, the island must have attracted attention with its wild and rugged appearance. Excavations have uncovered artefacts including flint, arrowheads and a piece of polished stone axe. The oldest dateable find is a piece of Bronze Age pot made around 2000 years BC. Certainly, the abundant seabirds and seals would have attracted our early ancestors who would have had the boats and skills to exploit them. Medieval records tell us of a holy man called Ethernan who might have established the first religious community on the island.

Diving

The reefs and large numbers of wrecks around the Isle of May offer many opportunities for diving and for several years the island has been a popular dive site. Plenty of fin nibbling from the seals, wrecks aplenty, an abundance of colourful and inspiring marine life and, with any luck, excellent visibility!

We welcome divers on the Isle of May and ask them to abide by the guidelines given in the island's voluntary code of conduct so they can help to protect the island's breeding birds and seals.



Kelp forest

Rocky reefs

The island's rocky shores are covered with mosaics of white encrusting barnacles, tufts of wrack and, on the cliffs of the west coast, mussels, one of the favourite foods of eider ducks. In the shelter of ridges and headlands, the knotted wrack blankets the shore. Seals bask comfortably on these rocky platforms. Rock pools lined with bright pink encrusting seaweeds are studded with ruby-red anemones while guano beneath seabird roosts encourages the growth of mats of a tiny green seaweed (*Prasiola stipitata*).



Bladder wrack

Forests of kelp beneath the water are tall enough for a seal or diver to swim through. These shelter many other species, including fish, octopus and crabs, which all form part of the seals' diet. White lacy sea mats and sea firs cover the kelp fronds whilst feathery seaweeds grow on the upright stipes.



Dead man's fingers

The rock surfaces and crevices harbour sea anemones, velvet and edible crabs. Gobies swim amongst the plants and scorpion fish, masters of camouflage, blend into the rock surface.



Brittle stars

In the dimmer waters beyond the kelp forest, sea urchins graze the rock. Brightly coloured cuckoo and ballan wrasse patrol these areas, orange and white dead man's fingers cover the seabed, and octopus and wolf fish lie concealed between boulders. Beyond the boulder slope is a cobble and gravel plain, carpeted by brittle stars raising their feathery arms into the strong currents to feed, with large dahlia anemones and scallops scattered amongst them.

Edible sea urchins
among kelp forest



Shipwrecks

The Firth of Forth has long been a major shipping route providing access to the open North Sea for the City of Edinburgh and surrounding harbours.

Many vessels have come to grief over the centuries around the rocky shores of the Isle of May and the wrecks now provide a haven for marine life. One such wreck is the Anlaby. The broken wreckage of this steamer lies just off the West pier, Altarstones, in 18 metres (m) of water and shelters fish such as wrasse, saithe, cod, monkfish and conger eel whilst colourful invertebrates such as plumose anemones cover the rusting steel of its hull.



Wreck

Caves, arches and gullies

The steep rock of the west coast has eroded into a series of caves, arches and stacks with steep-sided gullies underwater. These have rich communities of surge-tolerant animals on their walls, including brightly coloured sponges and daisy-like anemones. Colourful sea slugs can be found feeding on short turfs of sea firs and sea squirts.





Grey seal underwater

Seals

The island supports the fifth largest breeding group of grey seals (*Halichoerus grypus*) in the UK, which has almost 40% of the world population of the species.

One of the joys of boating and diving around the Isle of May is the likelihood of encountering seals, Britain's largest living carnivores. Curious heads will pop up a short distance from the boat and maintain a watchful eye on activities. Divers exploring the shallow underwater gullies and kelp forests may glimpse a graceful silver shadow — a seal checking out the noisy intruders in its peaceful world. The seal is perhaps the only large wild mammal in Britain which will allow humans the privilege of such close contact in its natural habitat.

They can be seen around the Isle of May all year round and use the island as a breeding ground. The silky white pups are born and raised on the shores of the island during the main pupping period of mid-October to January. A pup is helpless at birth and relies on its mother's milk, which is more than 50% fat, for up to three weeks, growing rapidly at her expense. Eventually, she must return to the sea to feed, leaving the pup to fend for itself.

Meanwhile, the males are fighting to establish territories on shore; most bulls are over 10 years old before they are strong enough to win these battles. Mating takes place just a few weeks after the females give birth. Nine months later, the adults return to the same site — sometimes to exactly the same area — to repeat this cycle. They spend the intervening months feeding at sea, making long fishing expeditions and occasionally hauling-out on rocks and sandbanks to rest. Large groups of seals can also be seen during annual moults. Females moult between mid-January and late February, while males moult between mid-February and early April.

Grey seals can swim hundreds of kilometres to feed and are skilled divers, able to dive in excess of 100m. They eat a variety of prey including fish, shellfish, squid and octopus, some of which they can find around the kelp forests, gullies and wrecks of the Isle of May.



Grey seal with pup

A thick layer of blubber beneath the skin insulates them from the cold water. This is so efficient that they can overheat and seals hauled-out on the rocks are sometimes seen flapping their flippers to cool down.

Grey seals can live for as long as 46 years and they are the third rarest species of seal in the world, with approximately 400,000 worldwide. Seals are very vulnerable to disturbance during their breeding season and are easily startled by boats or divers approaching too close. A sudden rush for the sea can result in adults losing contact with or crushing the pups at this vital stage of their life.

Boats and divers should follow the island's voluntary code of conduct and keep well clear of the breeding sites at this time.



Grey seal cow

Seabirds

One of the greatest wildlife spectacles we have in Scotland is our seabird colonies. The smell, deafening noise and sight of a packed seabird cliff as you approach fills all of your senses.

The Isle of May is home to over 200,000 breeding seabirds in the spring and summer and hosts a huge colony of 90,000 puffins that start arriving back on the island in the spring. The island is honeycombed with their burrows. Terns nest at the top of the island, on the beaches and in the chapel and will dive-bomb intruders repeatedly.

Guillemots and razorbills lay their eggs directly onto rocky ledges on the west coast cliffs; if the birds are disturbed, these eggs can easily be knocked from their precarious perch or predated by waiting gulls, so visitors, whether on foot or in boats, should take care not to disturb them. Guillemots, razorbills and puffins seem more at home in the water than on land and divers can see them swimming underwater beneath the bird cliffs. Eider ducks, gulls, shags, kittiwakes and fulmars are amongst the other breeding seabirds that can be seen on the island.



Seabird cliffs



Puffin

Northern seas

Cold waters from the Arctic which travel south past the Shetland and Orkney Islands into the North Sea influence the species that live around the Isle of May and give the reefs here their distinctly northern character. The wolf fish, with its ferocious-looking front teeth, is a species of the northern waters which prefers this rocky island off the Scottish east coast to the warmer inshore waters of the west. Likewise, the bottlebrush hydroid (*Thuiaria thuja*) and the pink sea anemone (*Bolocera tuediae*) are typical of cold, northern waters.



Wolf fish

We need your help to monitor how the reefs around the Isle of May are changing.

SNH carries out site condition monitoring of the reefs every six years. However, divers can play a vital role in constantly monitoring yearly changes due to climate or disturbance.

Would your club be interested in helping to record and monitor changes in and around the waters and reefs of the Isle of May ?



Isle of May NNR Voluntary Code of Conduct

Seals, Seabirds and Divers

The Isle of May supports a large grey seal breeding colony in the autumn and winter, with large numbers of individuals coming ashore to pup and breed from October to January. During this time they are very sensitive to disturbance, resulting in pup mortality. Access to the island is not advisable as any landing will potentially disturb breeding seals. If landing is necessary, it is restricted to the West landing, Altarstones.

During the spring and summer months, April to August, the island supports large colonies of breeding seabirds, many of which are vulnerable to disturbance. Cliff nesting seabirds are easily flushed from their nest sites causing eggs to be lost. Large rafts of birds also congregate on the sea and care must be taken to avoid scattering them.

This voluntary code has been developed to help inform the diver on safe and conservation-minded diving around the Isle of May. Please follow the guidelines in order to safeguard the island's large numbers of breeding seabirds and seals.

Please also observe the British Sub-Aqua Club Diver's Code of Conduct (www.bsac.com) and the Scottish Marine Wildlife Watching Code (www.marinecode.org).

Spring and Summer

Please keep a reasonable distance (c.50m) from the cliffs during seabird breeding season (April–August).

This is particularly important from late March until early August, when nesting birds are vulnerable to disturbance.

Adult birds are easily scared from nest sites, losing eggs or leaving eggs and chicks to predators and the elements.

Please reduce boat speed to ‘no-wake’ speed when approaching the island or rafts of birds on the water.

Keep to a slow, steady boat speed and course to minimise wash and disturbance i.e. not exceeding five knots. This will greatly reduce the chance of scaring birds from nests and reduce the chances of striking birds (including young birds) on the water.

Please do not land anywhere on the island other than the Altarstones or Kirkhaven landings.

Landing at other sites will cause disturbance to breeding birds and collapse of fragile puffin burrows.

Please show courtesy to other users of the landings.

Allow them to moor easily and unload passengers or cargo. This will be made easier if careful attention is paid to information given by the SNH staff such as the imminent arrival of other boats.

Please do not discard fishing line, hooks or other litter into the water.

The harbour is often a busy place. Please do not dive in the harbour for your own safety and that of others.

Autumn and Winter

Please keep a reasonable distance (c.100m) from major haul-out/breeding areas such as Mars rocks, Rona and Maiden rocks and keep to 'no-wake' speed.

Large numbers of seals come to pup and breed on the Isle of May from October to January. Seals are protected by law and are particularly sensitive to disturbance at haul-out/breeding sites. Care needs to be exercised during this period as females that have been frightened back into the sea may crush pups and abort breeding. Seals that are alarmed may bite and even pups can cause substantial injury. Seal saliva contains bacteria not found in the human population and even minor bites often become seriously infected and require hospital treatment.

Please reduce speed when approaching seals in the water.

If you see a seal(s) in the sea, slow down to 'no-wake' speed.

Any passage in these areas should be at low speed to minimise wash and disturbance i.e. not exceeding five knots. Keep to a slow, steady boat speed and course. Do not chase the seal — let the seal approach you. They are inquisitive animals but are easily frightened by careless boat handling.

Please do not land anywhere on the island other than Altarstanes during the pupping season. Landing at Kirkhaven harbour is not permitted during the seal breeding season.

If landing at Altarstanes, please exercise care when walking around the island, remain on the marked paths and follow any onsite instructions. Do not approach haul-out or pupping areas; any attempt to approach may cause distress to both the pup and the cow and may result in injury.

Please remember that seals are wild animals and can be aggressive to divers. The sea is their territory.

Thank you for drawing these matters to your members' attention. We hope you have a good season's diving.

For more information please contact:

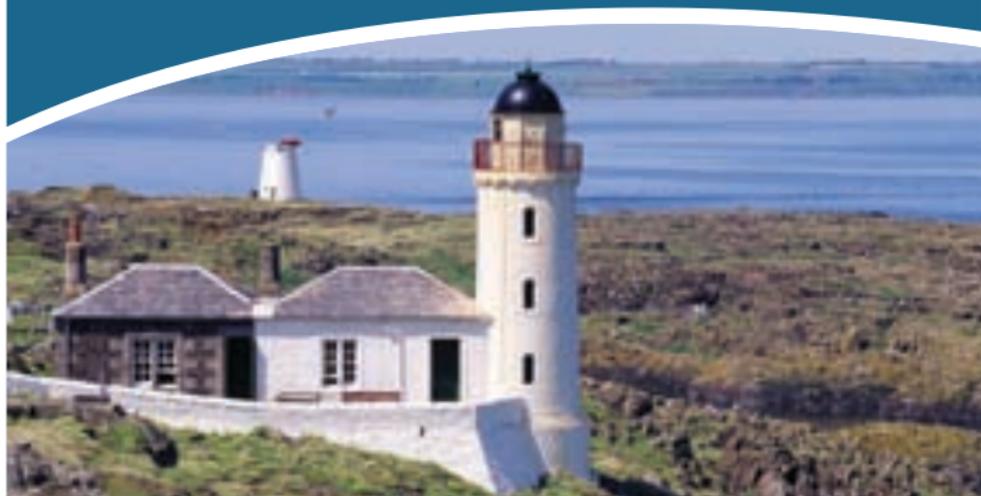
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