

# No passport needed for Grassholm's gannets

Forget the Antarctic—the well-travelled Stanley Johnson is awestruck by a seabird extravaganza closer to home

**W**HEN Mike Clarke, the RSPB's chief executive, invited me to join him on a visit to Grassholm and Ramsey Island, I jumped at the chance. I have been lucky enough to visit some of the great sea-bird breeding areas in the world—the albatross colonies on Bird Island, South Georgia, the penguin colonies of the Antarctic peninsula, the crested auks off Russia's Kamchatka peninsula—but in decades of wildlife watching I have never managed to visit the incomparable south-west Pembrokeshire coast. The island of Grassholm alone has 40,000 pairs of gannets, 10% of the total world population.

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## 'What I saw will stay with me for the rest of my life'

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Right up to the last moment, there was an element of doubt about whether the sea would be calm enough for us to cross from St Justinian. But, in the event, our little venture was blessed with a most glorious day. Landings are no longer permitted in the interests of the wildlife—unless you're part of a scientific team. The science, of course, is crucially important: each year, scores of gannets are tagged and vital information is thereby gleaned about migration patterns and other movements.

As a non-scientist, I was quite content with the non-landing edict, for what I saw from the deck of the boat that morning will stay with me for the rest of my life. Every surface of the rock—for Grassholm is really just a great rock rising sheer from the sea—seemed to be occupied by a nesting bird. At the same time, the sky above and around the island was full of birds, whirling and diving. Of course, there were puffins and guillemots, razorbills and shags as well, but it is the sight of those mighty gannets that will stay with me to my dying day.

Ramsey Island is larger—two miles long

and a mile wide. Our hosts were wardens Greg and Lisa Morgan, who have lived full-time on the island for the past six years. Landing is permitted, so with the Morgans' guidance, this time on foot, we explored another extraordinary environment. From the clifftop, you can look down into the coves to the grey seal pups—Ramsey has the largest population of grey seals in southern England.

There are seven or eight pairs of choughs there, and we must have seen three of them that day. 'There are only 500 pairs in the whole of the UK,' Mr Morgan told us, 'and 250 of those are in Wales.' It is no accident that choughs are thriving on Ramsey—Mrs Morgan keeps a close eye on the sheep. 'They keep the grass short' she explains, 'which means the choughs can get at the worms and beetles and other insects they feed on.'

There are about 3,500 guillemots on Ramsey Island, and some 1,500 razorbills, but the truly exciting thing for me is that about 2,000 pairs of Manx shearwaters have made it their home. Mr Morgan crouched over a shearwater burrow in the sward, put his iPhone to the mouth of the hole and played the recorded call of the male bird. 'If there's another male there, he'll answer the call; if it's the female's turn to take care of the nest, she'll keep quiet.' He tried a couple of burrows, but answer came there none.

At the third attempt, our luck changed. Mr Morgan put his hand to the hole and pressed the switch. As soon as the recording had finished, from somewhere in the burrow below us there came an answering call, mimicking exactly the sound that we had just played. It was uncanny. But, I promise you, this was what happened. Mr Morgan stood up. 'When that chick finally emerges from the burrow later this summer, he'll fly straight off to South America.'

*Thousand Islands Expeditions in St Davids organises visits to Ramsey Island or boat trips around Grassholm (01437 721721; [www.thousandislands.co.uk](http://www.thousandislands.co.uk))*

**Grassholm's breeding colony of gannets is home to 10% of the global population**



