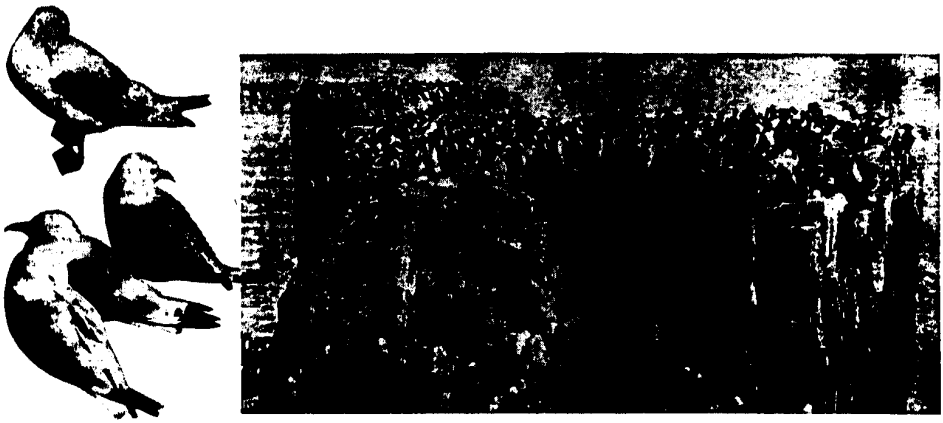
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To the Irish Sea for an Eyeful of Puffins

THE WHITENED CLIFFS OF SALTEE—The island was "bristling with seabirds unhampered by the malaise of pollution . . . a primodial scene of surrealistic splendor, an elemental spectacle of those fabulous diving birds of the Irish Sea," including kittiwakes, left, shags and razorbills, right, and puffins, below. Guillemots nest on the Farne Islands in the North Sea, above.

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By ERIC HASS

THE cool of our Manhattan apartment was disrupted one day last summer by an urgent letter from a friend in Ireland. Knowing of our interest in puffins, guillemots and razorbills — those fabulous diving birds of the Irish Sea—he sent up a London newspaper clipping that told of the mysterious disappearance last winter of the seabird colony of Holy Island. These members of the auk family — countless thousands of them — normally returned like clockwork each January from their wintering in the open sea to their traditional nesting places on Holy Island's North Stack cliffs.

The article cited ocean pollution—possibly from oil spills or the chemical pollutant PBC (polychlorinated biphenyl) — as the probable cause of this mass destruction. Since Holy Island lies off the western tip of Wales, diagonally across the Irish Sea and St. George's Channel from the Saltee Islands on the southeastern coast of Ireland, our friend sounded the grim but logical warning that a similar fate might befall the Saltees' seabird colonies.

A bird lover warned is a bird lover galvanized into action: My wife and I booked passage on a flight to Ireland.

Bristling With Seabirds

Happily, our expedition to Great Saltee Island proved to be a complete success. Nothing we saw was to disappoint us. The cliffs were bristling with seabirds unhampered by the malaise of pollution. And we learned after that while pollution could strike the Saltee and neighboring nesting sites at any time, it would be an unforeseen calamity, as with the Holy Island colony, caused by an accident rather than by a specific, predictable industrial pollutant.

We landed at Dublin's Shannon Airport and next day drove south on Route 77 through the bewitchingly beautiful Wicklow Mountains through Enniscorthy and Wexford in County Wexford to the Old Rectory, a farm guesthouse near Murrintown. The overnight stop there left us only seven miles to drive in the morning to Crossfarnoge Point and Kilmore Quay, the crossing point to our objective, Great Saltee, about three miles out.

At Kilmore Quay, a fishing village with thatched cottages, we sought out a fisherman who, for $17, agreed to take us to the island in his boat and pick us up again in the late afternoon.

It was a heavenly day. Except for the cumulus that garnished the distant Wexford Mountains, the azure sky was entirely free from clouds. The sea was calm.

Minister Offer Safety

Our idyllic Saltee is counting on the tax title. The many of the hills of Ireland, they are covered with grasses, sedges, bracken, furze and other shrubs. There are no decking facilities, and the landing was made in a dory from which we stepped with great caution onto slippery rocks and a spongy mass of seaweed. Ruefully we recalled that we had brought light rubber soles for just such an occasion — but they were in the Volkswagen parked at Kilmore Quay.

Our Idealist Rendezvous

As we turned to wave to the departing fisherman, a lone oystercatcher winged its way to a smallish rendezvous with his tribe. Herring gulls roosted themselves on half-submerged rocks. The commonest scene gave no hint of the teeming, noisy bird life that revealed no less than a quarter of a mile away on the windward side of the island.

Impatient to see our first auks, we climbed rapidly and, in minutes, emerged upon a scene of surrealistic splendor—a terrain of tumbled, lichen and moss-covered granite boulders. This air we knew was pure; the lush growth of gray-green and bright golden lichen proved it. (Lichens cannot prosper where the air is polluted.)

At the island's crest we came upon the concrete throne of Michael the First. The Saltees are privately owned and their Dublin-dwelling owner, with the characteristic Irish gift for romantic exaggeration, proclaimed himself their first prince. An inscription on the throne reads:

"This chair is erected in memory of my mother to whom I made a vow when I was ten years old that one day I would own the Saltee Islands and become the FIRST PRINCE OF THE SALTEES.

"Henceforth my heir and successors can only proclaim themselves princes of these islands by sitting in this chair fully garbed in the robes and crown of the islands and take the Oath of Succession."

Michael the First

From Michael's throne, the path divided and led to a half a dozen points of vantage above the cliffs. The one we followed brought us abruptly to a scene that for a fleeting moment seemed unreal, conceived in fantasy. Multitudes of nesting seabirds crowded the steep and fractured cliffs and filled the air with their cacophony.

As far as we could see in either direction, the cliffs and offshore "stacks" — rugged rock formations that have resisted the relentless pounding of the seas over the millions—were alive with kittiwakes, guillemots, razorbills, puffins and shags.

The impact of the primordial scene was terrific. This was seashore wilderness, unspoiled, untamed, bewilderingly colorful—wilderness as it was a thousand or ten thousand years ago—with only the path to bear witness to man's intrusion.

Anyone having even a modicum of sensitivity to natural beauty would respond emotionally to this elemental spectacle. There is a certain pleasure, too, in experiencing human solitude, especially on an island. And we were alone on the Great Saltee.

But were we alone? Some 180 feet below our point of vantage, shy seals reclined gaudily on the blue-green water of a sheltered basin, staring back at us as though to refute our claim to solitude.

Kittiwake Look-Alike

And all about us, in easy camera range, the kittiwakes brooded their chicks on ledges only a few inches wide. Kittiwakes, so named for the plaintive cry of their strident call, are small, exquisitely tailored gulls. Their pure white plumage against the blue sky was brilliant and very beautiful, and their coal-black eyes lent them a singular gentleness. Look-alike males and females took turns with the brooding while their mates circled exuberantly, or flew on black-tipped, pointed wings to and from the open sea where, like the seals, they dive and feed.



Photographs by Eric Hass/ Eric Hosking

The seals were there, too, in encouraging numbers. Most numerous were the compactly built razorbills, with black heads and backs, pure white breasts, and stubby necks and wings.

The guillemots, also plentiful on Great Saltee, have similar color patterns. But they are built longer and they have long, pointed beaks. Both razorbills and guillemots nested on the cliffs in substantial colonies of five to 20 nests or more.

On the grassy slope above the cliff's edge were numerous holes measuring three to four inches in diameter. They were the entrances to two-and three-foot burrows of Atlantic puffins, those comical auks with the huge, bright, orange and red triangular bills, eyes made up like clowns, and vivid orange feet and legs. Easy to approach for pictures, puffins stand about, usually in groups, as though meeting to confer with one another. Their absurd air of solemn dignity combined with their fantastic color-

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ing make them easily the most entertaining, as well as the most photogenic, of the auks.

It was like watching a three-ring circus. Razorbills and guillemots assume a horizontal posture when brooding, but all the auks stand upright when in repose. They alight clumsily, spraddle-legged, and take off by "falling" from the cliff, gliding downward, then leveling off with rapid wingbeats. Our bird books tell us they can "fly" under water, too. That is, they use their wings as well as feet to gain the underwater velocity needed to catch small fish.

Fair Guess About Fry

As we followed the drama before us, a razorbill with a beakful of herring fry alighted on a nearby rock. The fry were arranged crosswise, a fact that caused us to speculate on how he managed to hold the first fry when he opened his beak to catch the second, and the first two when he caught the third, and so on. A fair guess is that he held the fry he had caught against his upper mandible with his tongue while catching new prey. (Later, at The Skelligs, off the Kerry peninsula of southwestern Ireland, we photographed a puffin with a beakful of fishes similarly arranged.)

Another species well represented on the Saltee cliffs was the shag. Shags resemble cormorants except that they are smaller, have shorter necks and no white on their faces. As they stand around upright in groups, they look ungainly. But as they swim half submerged and their outsize feet propel them with seeming effortless ease, they are marvels of efficiency. Submerged, they are like streamlined missiles and can readily overtake their prey.

Although we make this expedition on our own, we discovered something on our return to Dublin that would have substantially enhanced our visit: the people and facilities of the Irish Wildlife Conservancy at the Royal Irish Academy, 19 Dawson Street.

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