

Where to watch

By **Matthew Tickner**



Ramore Head. – Matthew Tickner

Top 5 sites:

1 Ramore Head

Target species: Leach's Petrel, Sabine's Gull, shearwaters, skuas

Access: From the West Strand car park in Portrush, follow the beach or promenade to the harbour. Cross the footbridge, turn right and climb the steps adjacent to the restaurant. Turn left and follow the path around the coastal headland for panoramic views (see also www.walkni.com). Alternatively, from the East Strand car park, simply follow the coastal paths and pavements north and westwards until you reach the headland.

Habitats: Coastal headland with sweeping sandy bays on either side.

Birds: This site is best in autumn for passing seabirds, notably Leach's and Storm Petrels, four species of skua (including Long-tailed), shearwaters (including Sooty and rare Cory's, Great and Balearic) and Sabine's Gull. The seawatching is best in strong northwesterly winds in September. Some passage may also be seen through the spring and summer months, e.g. Gannet, Fulmar, auks, terns, divers and, with luck, Arctic and Great Skuas. Kittiwake, Shag and Black Guillemot breed locally and may be seen. Herring and Lesser Black-backed Gulls and a few Razorbills breed on the offshore islands (The Skerries) here.

Migrants that may be seen later in the autumn are Barnacle Goose and Whooper Swan. Purple Sandpiper and Turnstone are present on the rocks, especially in winter, when Snow Bunting and Twite can occasionally be seen. Wheatear and Rock Pipit are also regular.

Should you park at the East Strand car park, or have time to visit here, watch out for gulls and terns resting on the strand or the tarmac. A Ring-billed Gull has been present regularly here recently, and Mediterranean Gulls have been seen in recent autumns.

Anthony McGeehan



Sabine's Gull

2 Giant's Causeway

Target species: Peregrine, Raven, Buzzard

Access: Take the B146 from the A2 at the Smuggler's Inn, one mile north of Bushmills. The causeway is signposted from here. It is a major visitor attraction with attendant car parking and facilities. It offers a dramatic coastal walk with unique scenery. The north Antrim coastal path can be followed some four miles eastwards, past numerous spectacular headlands, as far as Dunseverick Castle, where the path meets the road again.

Habitats: Basalt cliffs, cliff slopes, maritime heath.

Birds: Ravens breed locally and may be seen tumbling above the cliffs in the spring. Other corvids include abundant Jackdaws, which find the holes in the cliffs to their liking. Chough may also be seen occasionally and have bred here within the last few years. Peregrines also use these cliffs – you might see a bird patiently keeping watch on an offshore stack. Amongst the seabirds present, Fulmars are the most abundant, but Kittiwake and Shag also breed along this stretch of coastline, and Black Guillemots and Eider may be seen offshore.

Of the small passerines here, Linnet and Stonechat breed and Grasshopper Warblers are sometimes present in the scrub at the base of the cliffs. Wheatears are likely to be seen, especially at passage times. Twite might be seen during the breeding season, but are more likely outside this period, whilst Snow Buntings are often found with Skylarks in stubble fields behind the cliffs in winter.





Carrick-a-Rede Island with Sheep Island in background.
 – Matthew Tickner



Tom Cuffe

Twite

3 Carrick-a-Rede and Larrybane

Target species: Razorbill, Kittiwake, Twite

Access: Take the B15 from Ballycastle to Ballintoy; Carrick-a-Rede is half a mile east of Ballintoy. Larrybane is a disused limestone quarry close to the Carrick-a-Rede car park and tearoom and a half-a-mile walk from the famous Carrick-a-Rede rope bridge.

Habitats: Limestone quarry and cliffs, grassland, scrub, offshore islands.

Birds: A walk between Larrybane and Carrick-a-Rede can be particularly rewarding in early summer. Kittiwake, Common and Black Guillemots, Razorbill, Buzzard, Peregrine, Shag and Fulmar may all be seen along this stretch of coast, and the seabirds listed are present in the breeding season in the seabird colony around Carrick-a-Rede Island. The rope bridge to the island is erected at this time of year.

The limestone cliffs afford many nesting opportunities and, amongst other species, House Martins breed here (Swallows and Swifts have also been suspected of using these cliffs). There is a large Cormorant colony (usually 200-300 pairs) on the top of Sheep Island offshore, and a variety of other seabirds use the cliffs of the island for breeding. Back on the mainland, one or two pairs of Puffins and Twites may still breed in the locality. The latter may be encountered at any time of year, feeding in the grasslands adjacent to the cliffs, as can Stonechat, and Meadow and Rock Pipits.



Kittiwake

Alison McFaul



Buzzard
 – Shay Connolly



0 Distance (kilometres) 5.5



Area covered by map

Antrim

Where to watch ... on the North Antrim Coast

RSPB sea-cliffs reserve, Rathlin Island.

— Alison McFaul



Female Eider with ducklings

John Carey



Golden Eagle

Ken Kinsella

4 Rathlin Island

Target species: Puffin, Eider, Chough

Access: Take the Rathlin Island Ferry to the island, a six-mile sea journey from Ballycastle harbour.

Habitats: Offshore island with limestone and basalt cliffs.

Birds: While crossing to Rathlin, watch out for auks, Kittiwakes, Gannets and Manx Shearwaters. In season, and with some luck, it may be possible to see skuas, or even a Sooty Shearwater.

Rathlin holds the largest breeding seabird colony in Northern Ireland. It is best viewed from the RSPB Seabird Centre at the West Lighthouse, four miles from Rathlin harbour. The colony includes Fulmars, Kittiwakes, Common Guillemots, Razorbills, Puffins and Shags, all of which may be seen at close quarters against a dramatic backdrop of cliffs and sea-stacks. Eider congregate in and around the harbour and breed around the island, and Peregrine, Buzzard and Raven are likely to be seen, given a bit of time on the island. The island hosts some breeding Lapwing and, since 2007, Northern Ireland's only breeding pair of Choughs. Twite can be seen, Snow Buntings are regular in winter and rare migrants (such as Rustic Bunting and Gyr Falcon) are occasionally found.



Puffin

Alison McFaul collection

5 Fair Head

Target species: Buzzard, Raven, migrants

Access: Take the A2 east from Ballycastle, and then take a signposted turning at the Hunter's Pub in Ballyvoy.

Habitats: Maritime heath, cliff and slopes, with scrub and woodland at the adjacent Murlough Bay.

Birds: Fair Head's spectacular basalt cliffs are home to Buzzard, Peregrine, Kestrel and Raven, all of which breed in the area. Hen Harriers may be seen in winter. This was previously a favoured area for Chough, although birds have not bred here for the last few years. Another former breeder was the Golden Eagle, which last nested in Northern Ireland here, back in 1960. These impressive birds were known to feed on the Mull of Kintyre (Scotland), commuting back and forth on a daily basis! Fair Head must represent one of the best chances of seeing the species today in Northern Ireland, with birds maybe visiting from Scotland or Donegal.

Smaller birds found in these habitats include Stonechat, Wheatear, Meadow and Rock Pipits, with a chance of Snow Bunting and Twite in the winter months.

Offshore, auks, Gannet, Kittiwake, Cormorant, Shag, Eider and gulls may be seen, whilst waders such as Oystercatcher are often present at the tideline.

Owing to its coastal position at the northeast corner of Ireland, scarce migrants may be found here in season, with Alpine Swift, Turtle Dove, Lapland Bunting and Hoopoe having all been recorded.

Buzzard
– Shay Connolly



Giant's Causeway coastline.
– Matthew Tickner

Top 10 birds:

1 Leach's Petrel

Ramore Head has to be the best place in Northern Ireland to see this species – pick a day with northwesterlies in September, although birds may also be seen in October.

2 Buzzard

Rathlin and the north coast are the areas from which the rest of Ireland has been or is being recolonised; Rathlin remains a very good place to see the species.

3 Golden Eagle

Whilst this species could not be guaranteed these days, Fair Head's history makes it a good place to look, and Rathlin gets more than its fair share of eagle records.

4 Eider

Often these birds may be seen in the harbour area on Rathlin, and they breed in scattered situations around the island.

5 Twite

This species may be encountered at any of our sites, but the best year-round chance of seeing birds is probably at Carrick-a-Rede.

6 Snow Bunting

Look for this winter visitor anywhere along the coast, but stubbles, such as can be found at the Giant's Causeway, give the best chance of success.

7 Raven

Ravens always make for a dramatic sight around the cliff-tops. The Giant's Causeway area and Rathlin hold breeding birds.

8 Puffin

These are best seen at the Seabird Centre on Rathlin during the breeding season.

9 Black Guillemot

All of our sites have breeding birds, but perhaps Rathlin holds the greatest numbers.

10 Kittiwake

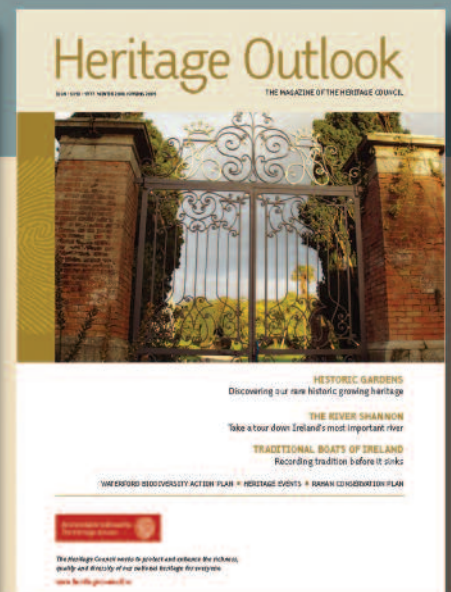
These seabirds breed in noisy colonies on Rathlin and Carrick-a-Rede, but might be encountered at all of our sites.

Thanks to Alison McFaul for photographs and comments.

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