



Sign at Gannet colony on Great Saltee Island. **Photo:** Debs Allbrook

Disturbance to Gannets on Great Saltee Island

Disturbance, especially by photographers, exposes Gannets' nests to predators. Researcher **Debs Allbrook** reports

As the days get longer and the sunlight stronger, my thoughts turn to seabird colonies that I've been lucky enough to have visited over the years. In Ireland, we are lucky to have a range of iconic and beautiful species nesting in great numbers around our coasts each summer. The **Gannet** is one such bird.

Gannets are large seabirds, somewhat clumsy on land, which arrive here in early spring, pair up for the breeding season, form nests and rear young. They don't leave until the autumn, when their chicks are grown and ready to fledge. They then depart for warmer climes, returning to Ireland the following spring.

As people enjoy more and more time outdoors and explore farther afield, many come in contact with wildlife. It's an enjoyable experience, but unfortunately there is evidence some encounters have a negative impact on vulnerable species.

In 2017, as part of my Master's degree in University College Cork, I researched the effects visitors have on an important breeding colony of Gannets in County Wexford.

For those who haven't visited the Saltee Islands, they are a gem in the waters off Kilmore Quay in Wexford. The larger of the two islands, **Great Saltee**, is a paradise of bracken-covered knolls and rocky sea-stacks, backdropped by the sparkling Celtic Sea. Its grassy stretches in spring are covered in

bluebells and other wild flowers.

As far as seabirds are concerned, Great Saltee is a safe haven: it is privately-owned, quiet, free from large land predators... and then the tourist season starts. The once-

overgrown paths are soon stamped flat, exposing **gull nests** that were hidden in the vegetation and putting them at risk of predation from rats, crows, falcons and even some gulls.



A photographer clammers through the Great Saltee Island colony, almost stepping on Gannets' eggs
Photo: John Quinn (UCC)

Alarmingly, **Puffins** find themselves looking down long camera lenses being pointed at them in their burrows, while **Gannets** sit in the open, posing nervously for reluctant close-ups. While you would expect Gannets to fly away when disturbed by people, they don't always do so and, evolutionarily, this makes sense: although stressed by the intrusion of humans, the sole mission of each pair is to protect and successfully raise their one chick. When Gannets are disturbed by people approaching too closely, this can distract them from the greater threat to their eggs or chicks – the ever-present gulls waiting to pounce. On just one day, we observed ten separate incidents of gulls raiding Gannet nests and taking their eggs or chicks.

When I compared the nesting success of Gannets in two parts of the colony – one a disturbed area, the other an undisturbed area – the average number of chicks fledged per occupied nest was 0.5 in the undisturbed area and 0.3 in the disturbed area. To put this in context, the average success rate for Gannets across Britain and Ireland in recent years has been 0.7 chicks per nest.

The more the birds are displaced from their nests, the more vulnerable their nests are to predation, so this led me to looking at the kinds of human disturbance causing displacement. I found that proximity to the colony was key, and that photographers were the people who ventured the closest to nests, coming to within 2.55m (on average) of nests, in comparison to regular tourists (4.46m) and birdwatchers (8m).

I designed a sign explaining how the near-



Photographers at the Great Saltee Island colony. **Photo:** Debs Allbrook

approach of visitors impacted birds negatively and asking them to stay back from the nests. With this in place, I found all groups stayed at least five metres away, with the exception of some eleven individual photographers.

More encouragingly, the nesting Gannets actually seemed far less disturbed after I put up the sign. Displacement from nests was reduced to the low level seen when no tourists were present.

As many of you will know, our precious seabirds are suffering severe declines, with loss of critical habitat and plummeting fish stocks cited to explain falling numbers. Disturbance is just one more factor in the list, but is actually

the thing we can do the most about. I believe we should all be able to enjoy nature and its spectacles, but I would urge anyone venturing out to the coast, or to islands, to practice social distancing from seabirds. Advancing that extra metre to get the perfect photo should never be prioritised above the survival of nestlings.

As for Saltee... well, the sign is now permanent, so sit back and enjoy the squawking, clamour and chaos that comes with the breeding season of one of our most interesting seabirds, on one of our most accessible islands. Just do it from a safe distance... please! ■

Nest photography and the law

Many people are unaware that it is illegal to disturb or photograph nesting birds, unless a specific licence has been granted by the National Parks and Wildlife Service. Under Section 22 (9)(f) of the Wildlife Act, 1976 (as amended), a licence is required for a person to take video or pictures of a wild bird “on or near a nest containing eggs or unflown young.”

BirdWatch Ireland asks all photographers please to respect the law and to refrain from photographing birds at or near their nests.

For more information about the legal position in Ireland, as well as the harm that can be caused by nest photography and other forms of disturbance to birds during the breeding season, please visit:

<https://birdwatchireland.ie/too-close-for-comfort-bird-nests>



Photographers at the Saltee Gannet colony. **Photo:** Debs Allbrook