



Gannet. Photograph: Shay Connolly

Visitors are asked to respect the wildlife and habitats of the Skelligs

BirdWatch Ireland Reserves



County Kerry: Little Skellig Nature Reserve

Dave Suddaby describes the attractions of Little Skellig off the coast of Kerry

BirdWatch Ireland's Little Skellig Nature Reserve is located some eleven kilometres out in the vast Atlantic Ocean off the southwest tip of County Kerry. It has been an iconic BirdWatch Ireland nature reserve since its establishment in 1969. The jagged pinnacles of rock rising out of the sea up to 134 metres in height make for an impressive sight. Despite its isolated position, these pinnacles can be seen from the mainland on clear days, alongside its larger partner, Skellig Michael, famous for its monastic settlers from around the 6th century onwards, situated some one kilometre further out to sea.

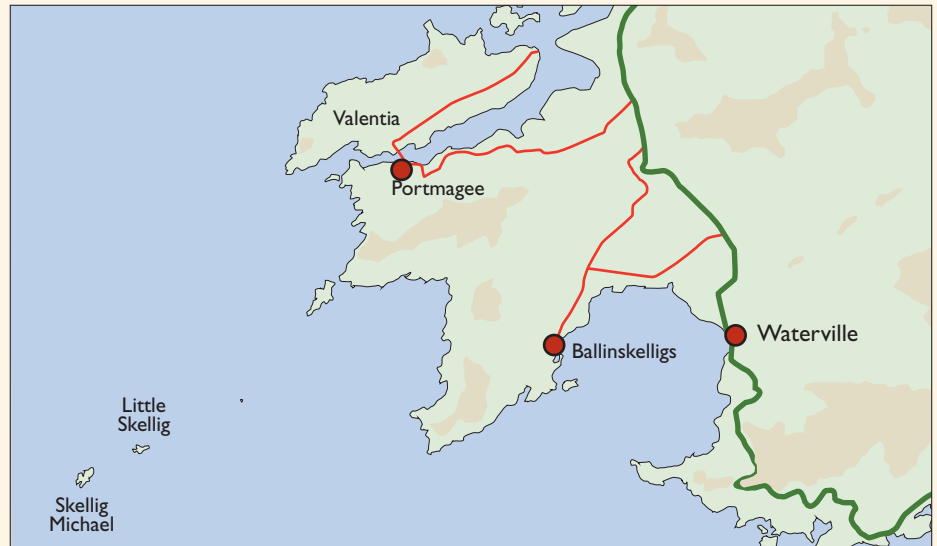
Exploring the reserve

To appreciate the Skelligs requires setting out to sea, and it is well worthwhile – these cathedrals of rocks, home to a vast array of seabirds, will leave a lasting impression on the memory. But unlike Skellig Michael, there are no landing facilities on Little Skellig and therefore the awe-inspiring spectacle of thousands of Gannets crammed onto cliff ledges has to be admired from onboard a boat. This offers a wonderful opportunity to see these majestic seabirds at close quarters.

The island supports a massive colony of some 35,000 pairs of **Gannets**, the largest breeding colony in Ireland and among the largest in the world. There are also smaller numbers of **Guillemots, Puffins** and **Kittiwakes** present but these often prove difficult to see or hear among the swirling throng and deafening noise of the Gannets. Puffins are much easier to see on Skellig Michael where they are often referred to as the friendliest in the world! **Grey Seals** often haul themselves out and can be seen on the lower ledges.

This impressive 'seabird city' only happens for a few months every summer, when birds occupy every available nesting site, from the cliff base to the summit. This is sought-after, high-rise accommodation with a scenic view and with space at a premium. By midsummer, there can be at least 100,000 Gannets on the rock as most pairs will have at least one chick and there will usually be a queue of non-breeding birds waiting their turn to nest!

Although the seabirds return to these islands to breed, they are all highly dependent on the surrounding seas and are therefore part of the marine ecosystem, and their fate is closely linked to it.



Work we are doing associated with Little Skellig

The importance of this island, together with Skellig Michael, is well known and the Skelligs are protected by a **Special Protection Area**, designated under the European Union Birds Directive. These islands also form one of Ireland's **Important Bird Areas**, as identified by BirdWatch Ireland. By monitoring the success of this seabird colony, we are measuring the health of the surrounding marine environment. This reserve and your support are vital in helping us to:

- Protect one of Ireland's most important breeding seabird colonies
- Promote the reserve as a place to learn about seabirds
- Provide an environment in which to learn
- Encourage amateurs and experts alike to undertake environmental studies.

Visitor information

Many licensed boat operators do daily tours through the summer months from **Valentia, Portmagee** and **Ballinskelligs**, leaving in the morning and returning in the afternoon. These boat trips will circumnavigate the island en route to or from Skellig Michael.

Don't miss.....

- The sounds, smells, hustle and bustle of a major 'seabird city'
- The spectacle of thousands of **Gannets** swirling overhead.
- Other seabirds, including **Puffins, Kittiwakes, Fulmars** and **Manx Shearwaters**.
- Possible sightings of **Grey Seals, Basking Sharks, dolphins, porpoises** and **whales**.

We hope you enjoy your visit!

DICK COOMBS

