

Skomer Island Spectacular, Friday 11th May to Friday 18th May 2012

With optional visit to Ramsey Island

As seen on Springwatch - green cliffs burgeoning with puffins, ledges packed with guillemots and razorbills, stacks of kittiwakes, the heady smell of acres of bluebells giving way through shades of mauve to the brilliant pink of red campion – and the highlight, the unbelievable noise and spectacle of thousands of nocturnal shearwaters returning to their burrows at night. Spend up to 5 nights on this island paradise in Pembrokeshire, as part of Welsh Wildlife Breaks' special Welsh islands holiday.

Outline Itinerary:

Friday 11th May

Arrive Haverfordwest Station, transportation to Slate Mill Lodge our 4 star accommodation for 2 nights, subject to availability. Refreshments, leave luggage, then straight off to the Deer Park at Martins Haven and our first glimpse of Skomer Island. Exploration of the Deer Park, looking out for summer visitors such as the stonechat, and the evocative calls of flocks of chough that frequent the short turf of the cliffs here. Fabulous cliff views and the jewelled colours of wild flowers of the maritime heath. If we have time, we can pop in to see the exhibition about the special marine reserve around Skomer Island, and explore a little further along the Pembrokeshire Coast Path, which will be alive with wildflowers, butterflies and insects this time of the year. Then back to Slate Mill Lodge, maybe explore the grounds a little before one of the Lodge's famed dinners....



Bird's Foot Trefoil

Saturday 12th May

After breakfast, we head off north to the lovely St David's Peninsular, about an hour away, to catch the boat from St Justinian's life boat station to fabulous Ramsey Island, an RSPB reserve, and Site of Special Scientific Interest for chough. Ramsey couldn't be more different than Skomer – it's grazed by sheep, to keep the turf short for the chough, and has a couple of high peaks to scale if we're feeling energetic! We can either spend the whole day exploring the island, with its chough, peregrine, lapwings and herds of deer and ponies, or spend the afternoon exploring its cliffs by boat, seeing its seabirds and seals closer-up. Returning late afternoon to the mainland, we'll make our way back south, stopping for a leisurely exploration of Dale and refreshments, before heading back to Slate Mill Lodge and dinner.

For anyone choosing not to make the optional trip to Ramsey, and arriving on Saturday, a car will meet your train at Haverfordwest station for Slate Mill Lodge.

Sunday 13th - Thursday 18th May

We're off to Skomer Island! Subject to safe sailing, we'll have an early breakfast in order to get our luggage down to Martins Haven in time to meet an early sailing of the Dale Princess. On the short sea journey across to the island, we'll be greeted by puffins and other seabirds – and we might even have a gull hitching a lift on the boat on the way over. Skomer staff will meet us at the island's North Haven landing stage, to take our luggage up to the visitors' accommodation, although there are some steps to negotiate first! We'll have a quick introduction to the island before making our way up to the farmhouse, our home for the



next 5 days and where the kettle will be on waiting for us. We'll meet fellow visitors to the island, unpack and make our first exploration around the farmhouse. We'll start our island holiday with a quick look at the island exhibition next to our accommodation, and get our bearings of the island and its treasures. Normally Skomer Island has up to 300 visitors every day, especially during peak times such as May. We're really lucky to be able to stay on the island during the one week in the year which is closed to day visitors for gull census – we have the entire island to ourselves, the researchers and the volunteers!

Skomer Island offers 3 star accommodation. Please note that, as Skomer is a small island, power and water are carefully managed, so as a result rooms are not en suite. There are adequate power sockets for charging batteries, phones, laptops etc, but as the supply is solar powered only, you will not be able to use higher power consumption devices such as hair dryers or travel irons / kettles.

Our time on the island is very flexible, to take account of the weather and to make the most of any sightings, such as pods of dolphins that frequent the waters round about. You'll be able to participate in record-keeping for the island, and hear about what others have seen in the daily bird log, generally held every evening at the warden's house. You are welcome to browse the excellent library there. Meals will be provided by Welsh Wildlife Breaks at the Farmhouse, with lunch generally eaten outside so as not to miss any wildlife-spotting! Evenings at the Farmhouse are convivial, exchanging stories and photographs of the day, exchanging knowledge of photography, photo-editing and good birdwatching places around the UK and the world. We may also be able to persuade one or more of the researchers to provide a talk on their work, such as the amazing migratory behaviour of Manx Shearwaters.

Welsh Wildlife Breaks' Sue Wolfe will be leading at least one walk each day to key parts of the island, pointing out where to look for particular species, and where to find the best photo opportunities. Island staff will also help with their specialist knowledge, for example with cetacean-watching for harbour porpoise, dolphins and maybe even an occasional whale! You'll also have plenty of time to explore at your leisure, take photographs, sea-watch, really get to know the island and enjoy island life. Sue's island walks will include:

Up Close and Personal – an Evening with Puffins at the Wick

Puffins have been nesting on the Wick for many years, and as individual birds are long-lived, up to 40 years + in some cases, and often use the same burrows year after year, birds at the Wick are very used to people. While remembering puffins always have right of way, and that we shouldn't obstruct the entrance to their burrows, we'll find that patience will be rewarded by some very close encounters. Puffins are extremely curious, and will readily investigate new objects in their vicinity! We'll be able to observe their behaviour – and they ours! - at close quarters as evening falls and they return from the sea.



Owl Watch

Skomer boasts both breeding little owls and short-eared owls – both day-flying - and even barn owls have nested in the old farmhouse in past years. While numbers have been affected by harsh winters recently – which impacts on the Skomer vole population, their principal food – they are still very much in evidence on Skomer. Little owls in particular are very skilled at remaining motionless and blending into the background, so we'll explore likely habitats and hiding places, keeping an eye open for the diminutive birds amongst rocks and walls. The graceful glide of the short-eared owl, out hunting, may be spotted over the swathes of red campion, and it is likely to be feeding young during May – but we'll need to keep our eyes peeled!



Shearwaters at Night

The nocturnal miracle of returning shearwaters is arguably the main highlight of a stay on Skomer Island. Skomer and neighbouring Skokholm together host around 128,000 breeding pairs, a significant proportion of the world breeding population of Manx Shearwaters. Designed for life at sea, they are clumsy on land, but they have an extremely long breeding season, from around April to August, breeding in burrows, often old rabbit burrows, which pepper the island.

Only coming in off the sea late on dark nights, to avoid predation by greater black-backed gulls, their indescribable eerie calls haunt the black night as they call to their mates deep in their underground burrows. So hope for at least one dark or damp night, and sacrifice some sleep for a never-to-be-forgotten lifetime experience.



In Search of Cliff-Dwellers

Skomer is home to a whole host of charismatic birds that breed on its cliffs. As well as Skomer's seabirds, we'll make sure we find nesting ravens, who may well be feeding young fledglings by mid-May, the colourful chough with their vermilion beaks and legs and their unmistakable 'chaaaaa...' call, nesting peregrine, elegance and engineering of the skies, and the big but cowardly buzzard, easily seen off by the peregrine! There are sometimes visiting red kites from the mainland to look out for, and resident flocks of jackdaws, often on the look-out for pic-nickers, approaching crab-wise with their beady blue eyes sharp and wary.



Small Birds – the LBJs of Skomer (Little Brown Jobs...!)

Skomer is home to a whole host of small birds in the late spring and summer – some residents, some summer visitors and some just passing migrants. Everywhere we'll find birds like this spotted flycatcher, linnets, larks, reed buntings, sedge warblers, pipits, dunnocks, wrens, whitethroats, goldfinches, swallows and martins..... We'll try to hone the knack of recognising some of these birds without ever having to pick up our binoculars.

All sorts of rarities can turn up on passage from time to time, like bluethroats, hoopoes, turtle doves – but we will have to be lucky to spot these!



Rabbit Rabbit Rabbit – History and Archaeology of Skomer

The legacy of over 1000 years of human habitation has shaped the landscape and the wildlife of Skomer. From hut circles and ancient field boundaries to the recently renovated farm buildings and newly built warden's house, there is evidence everywhere. Cattle used to graze Skomer island in the summer, and then swim back across the Sound to the mainland for the leaner winter months. Rabbits were farmed on Skomer for hundreds of years, and the Skomer rabbit now has some very special island characteristics – you'll find a whole range of colour variations have evolved, like this 'Dutch' style variation, chocolate brown and black rabbits, and even rabbits with blue eyes! We'll go in search of some of Skomer's historic legacy.



Pond Life, Beasties and Bugs

Skomer's not just seabirds and rabbits - there's a host of beetles, moths and other invertebrates, toads, lizards and a colony of slow worms (right). We'll look out for these on our walks, and see how many we can identify.

The pond at Moory Mere often offers all sorts of surprises, like shoveler ducks and nesting shelduck and a wide range of waders such as curlew, dunlin, godwits and oystercatchers. It's a favourite spot for kittiwakes, and you're certain to get a close-up view of them bathing and collecting nest material. The Moory Mere hide is also an excellent dry place to watch birds during any rain showers!



Friday 19th May

It's finally time to head back to the mainland, so we'll pack our bags and head down to North Haven for a last goodbye to the puffins, guillemots, razorbills and seals. As the line from the poem goes, "If once you have slept on an island, you'll never be quite the same" – you'll certainly be returning to the mainland with a different sense of place, and you're more likely to be bidding Skomer "À bientôt" than goodbye! We'll catch the morning boat back, and see all the eager day visitors pouring onto the island, having been denied access for nearly a week.

By the time we've got our luggage into our vehicle, it's likely to be around 11am, and we'll make our way back to Haverfordwest station for your train home, stopping for an early lunch on the way if we have time.

Note

Boats will only sail to Ramsey and Skomer Islands if it's safe to do so. If there is unusually severe weather, sailing schedules may be affected. In the unlikely event that our landings are delayed, Welsh Wildlife Breaks has planned some excellent wildlife watching and alternative activities in coastal and inland Pembrokeshire until sailings resume. The Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales does not provide any refund for delayed sailing schedules.

Costs:

The cost of Welsh Wildlife Break's Skomer Island Spectacular includes transport, all meals, accommodation and fees (boat fares, landing fees etc) from arrival at Haverfordwest Station on Friday 11th May (Saturday 12th May if not visiting Ramsey Island / Deer Park) to departure from Haverfordwest Station on Friday 18th May.

Cost per person sharing Fri 11th May – Fri 18th May, including Ramsey Island trip £825.00

Cost per person sharing Sat 12th May – Fri 18th May, excluding Ramsey Island trip £718.00

A deposit of £125.00 per person is requested by the first week of October 2011, to secure Skomer and mainland accommodation, with the balance payable by 11th March 2012.

Should you need any assistance in booking trains to Haverfordwest, or if you have any other queries, please don't hesitate to contact Sue Wolfe on 07887 861045 or at info@welshwildlifebreaks.co.uk