

Pembrokeshire Taster , Thursday 10th May to Monday 14th May 2012

Skomer Island - 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. Ramsey Island, home to chough, kittiwake, deer, ponies, peregrines and the rarest golden hair lichen – and not to mention the spectacular whelps and bitches. And to top it all, the world famous Pembrokeshire Coast Path, with a birds-eye view of the islands and swathes of wildflowers and small birds.

Outline Itinerary:

Thursday 10th May

Arrive Slate Mill Lodge, your 4 star accommodation for 4 nights, to be met by our genial host David Warren Davis. Unpack, unwind and maybe sample some of David's pre-dinner hospitality. As we'll be arriving late, we'll have an informal dinner of soup and a cold buffet, to keep things flexible.

Friday 11th May

A day exploring the coast path and local area, which we'll arrange dependent on the weather. We'll look out for stonechats singing from the tops of the gorse bushes, pipits, larks and warblers, and shy birds like the mouse-like dunnoek, as well as the amazing array of wildflowers along the banks and

cliffs. We'll also keep a look out for the cliff-dwellers like chough and raven, which are likely to have young in the nest, or even fledged this time of the year. We should also take a trip to nearby Dale and its headland and enjoy the boats bobbing in the harbour, and we'll maybe visit Dale Fort with its spectacular views.

We'll go back to Slate Mill lodge for tea and refreshments, and leave you to explore or just relax for a while, getting ready for Slate Mill Lodge's culinary treat.

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'll spend the morning exploring the island, with its chough, peregrine, lapwings and herds of deer and ponies, and spend the afternoon exploring its cliffs by boat, seeing its seabirds and seals closer-up. Returning mid afternoon to the mainland, we'll make a quick visit to St David's Head with its cromlechs if we have time, before heading back to Slate Mill Lodge and dinner.

Sunday 13th - May

We're off to Skomer Island! Subject to safe sailing, we'll have an early breakfast and go down to Martins Haven in time to meet an early sailing of the Dale Princess, parking in the NT car park there. 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 brief us on the island, although there are some steps to negotiate first! You'll be able to join the residents for a quick cup of tea, or take off on your own for a preliminary exploration.

One of the first things you'll notice will be the amazing vistas and scent of acres of bluebells and red campion – as the season progresses, the landscape shifts from blue, through mauve to brilliant pink as the bluebells fade and the red campion takes over. You may know it will be there, but prepare to be amazed – it's breathtaking!

We'll have a picnic lunch with our eyes peeled for exciting sightings, and we'll definitely be meeting some of the sedge warblers that frequent the farmhouse. Other small birds we may see include the melodious whitethroat, wrens, and possibly spotted flycatchers.

After lunch, we'll have a guided tour around part of the island for an introduction to the best of Skomer's offerings. Here are some of the other things you might see during the day:



Bird's Foot Trefoil



Up Close and Personal – 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!



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!



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 vermillion 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!



The last boat leaves the island around 4pm, the boatman will tell us exactly when in the morning, and we'll need to make sure you're back at the landing stage in good time. We'll wave you off, but jealous that you'll be dining back at Slate Mill Lodge again! Arrive back at Martinshaven, maybe popping into the marine exhibition first, and then Lockley Lodge for a few souvenirs, before collecting your car at the NT car park. Have a great dinner at Slate Mill Lodge!

Monday 14th May

Some of the 'not to be missed' attractions around Pembrokeshire include St David's, if you have time, as it is a little further north. The cathedral is spectacular, hidden in a basin so as to be invisible from the seaward side. So is the village-sized city, a maze of lanes, hills and alleyways with fabulous shops and cafes. Another of the wonders is St Govan's Chapel to the south, carved out of the rocks themselves. Or just explore some more of the amazing coast path and the fabulous rocky coastline, before waving goodbye to Pembrokeshire – you'll certainly be back!

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.