

# A Typical Day on the Bass

by Maggie Sheddan, Senior Bass Rock Landing Guide

*04:45* With the first glimmer of dawn breaking through the darkened sky, I raced down the road for a moment regretting my offer to bring flasks of tea and coffee for the film crew. Turning the corner at the Seabird Centre I stopped dead in my tracks, my mood transformed in a split second.

The night sky turned purple and lilac with spreading fingers of deep reds from the rising sun, the calm sea reflecting the splendour. There, silhouetted in this changing scene, is our destination; the Bass Rock.

Camera in hand, time stopped for five minutes. I watched and snapped as the orange and yellows painted out the night sky. How lucky am I to start my working day like this.

*05:02* reality! I had 20 minutes to make the coffee and meet the film crew. Filming on the Bass had finished the previous day but the Bass Rock experience had taken them (as it does for many) by surprise. They wanted another chance to film this exceptional spectacle along with more footage of plunge diving gannets. (You can see this footage on the BBC's Nature's Top 40 programme on YouTube).

My normal day during the gannet season starts at 05:15 with the latest weather and swell reports scrutinised while I have breakfast. The rucksack fills up: flask, food, waterproofs, gloves and hats plus suntan lotion and more. En-route I stop near Canty Bay and with binoculars have a good look at the sea around the Bass landing area.

This wondrous lump of basalt, 120m in height, stands at the mouth of the Firth of Forth. It's home to the world's largest colony of Northern gannets. Sea conditions can be very different just three miles offshore. For the photographers I am meeting they want to hear those words: "Yes, we should be able to land today."

From professionals to amateurs, journalists to wildlife filming, from all corners of the globe, they have one thing in common - this unique opportunity to be within a metre of a gannet. To capture that one image, to catch that moment in time!

Names are checked and after the initial safety talk, the briefing begins. My job is to safeguard the photographers, advise on various locations on the Rock and, importantly, I'm there to protect the gannets.

As we approach the Rock, for many the awesome reality is kicking in. Gordon our skipper manoeuvres the boat broadside allowing for that close-up image of this magnificent bustling colony. The reality that the 'white rock' viewed from the shore is indeed white because of the sheer number of gannets.

For the first-time visitor it can be quite overwhelming, with the first hour the most dangerous - for the gannets! The lens/ legs detachment (as I like to call it) takes over. This is when photographers absorbed and excited by what they see through the lens, forget what their legs are doing.



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Gannets are ground-nesting birds and easily disturbed if movement is sudden or too close. On the other hand, if you sit quietly the birds treat you as if you own your territory and act completely naturally, at times within a metre of you.

Each month brings different challenges for the photographer, but always spectacular!

- March and April territorial fights and nesting are taking place
- April and May spot that first egg
- June is the key time for hatching. It's a challenge to capture that fleeting few seconds as the adult tenderly feeds the wobbly dark reptilian squab
- July is comical as the white down-covered chicks are all so obvious but still in need of care.

The colony has started to settle down. 'Clubs' of younger birds have formed, activity is constant and, if warm, the flies can be rife. Throw into the equation the breeding herring gulls whose young chicks at times have even been seen to try and stow away in open rucksacks. Guillemot, razorbill, kittiwake, fulmar and shag all nest on this historical site.

- August the dark speckled plumage of the guga is appearing as moulting young now sport the distinctive and amusing 'parliament goose' plumage (unreachable wisps of down on the crown of the bird)
- September is the wandering jumpers, as I call them. The young guga runs the gauntlet through the colony to reach an area where it must summon the courage to take that first flight/ leap to the sea, to begin its arduous journey for survival. This is a real test of patience for the photographer. You wait, and wait, and wait, hoping to capture that moment, that very first faltering 'flight'.

Late August and September is my favourite time - more relaxed as breeding is over. The light is softer. Adults continue nest building, bill fencing, territorial disputes, all the displays that gannets continually present, along with the excitement of the gugas journey unfolding. It really can be a wonderful time to land.

Three hours can pass so quickly and before long it is time to leave this very special island , but we still have chumming!



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Chumming is when bait is thrown over the side of the boat enticing the gannets into their spectacular plunge dive. Gordon our skipper has this down to a fine art. I remind everyone to have the correct lenses, charged batteries and most importantly enough space on cards to accommodate this overwhelming experience. Once we start there is no stopping the event, hence why warnings about batteries. Despite this, there is always one! The frantic rummaging in bags gives it away. I do all I can to help. After the event, the smiles say it all.

The journey back to harbour is much more relaxed with some already downloading shots. Others now realise it was dawn when they last ate and sandwiches appear, some want to catnap. Having experienced these beautiful seabirds at close quarters many now want to know more. On our return to Dunbar harbour, often the last surprise for everyone, appears in the form of Sammy the seal and on many an occasion he follows us, at speed, into harbour. Cameras are hastily unpacked as Sammy, not one to disappoint, rears out of the water to receive his fish.

The swell, the wind and the light are our main enemies but even the most challenging conditions can produce magnificent photographs, such as the mud-covered gannets, braving the torrential rain and gales under thunderous skies. I remember that evening well! From mist enshrouded days, to the perfect blue sky. The weather is always the photographers' challenge. The gannets endure it all. As I head home with 'eau de gannet' filling the air, I can't wait for my next visit to this ever- changing wonder of the world.



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