

Brittany's Sept-Iles Preserve in Summer

Brittany is a cultural region of northwestern France. It is a peninsula that juts like a thumb into the North Atlantic.

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Along with our teenage daughters, we visited Paris two summers ago and took tours of the famous museums and monuments. We figured our interaction with birds would be limited to shooing house sparrows off café tables and ducking flocks of pigeons under the Eiffel Tower. We were pleasantly surprised to find, however, that in about as much time as it takes to get from a hotel in Paris to the Hall of Mirrors in Versailles—accounting for the long ticket-buying and security lines in summer—you can travel from Paris to the coast of Brittany, where July and August are fine months to add northern gannets to your life list.

Brittany, one of France's 22 regions, is a peninsula that sticks out like a thumb into the North Atlantic. We were invited to stay with a friend in a small coastal town near Perros-Guirec, which lies roughly along where the base of the thumbnail would be (and across the English channel from Plymouth, England). A high-speed train from Paris to Brest stops in Lannion, which is about a 30-minute drive from Perros-Guirec. It's from Perros-Guirec that one catches the birding boat excursion.

The northern gannets have colonized an eight-acre granite island, Ile Rouzic, about five miles offshore. The island is part of an archipelago called the Sept-

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Iles (though if you're counting, you'll come up with only *cinq* of the expected *sept*, the rest being scattered rocks; "Sept-Iles" is apparently a mistranslation of the Breton name for the archipelago). From mainland coastal towns, from late January through September, you can easily spot Rouzic if the weather is clear. About half of it—the half with the steepest sides—is white, so densely covered is it with nesting gannets. Inexperienced seafarers have apparently mistaken the island for an alarming glimpse of an iceberg.

Of course, there are also other birds to be seen on the Sept-Iles archipelago, depending on the time of year. The site is France's best for seabirds in general, as well as being the only French site for nesting northern gannets. Some 27 species nest here, including Eurasian oystercatcher, Eurasian curlew, ruddy turnstone, Atlantic puffin, razorbill, common murre, and European shag. Others, including common chiffchaff and various warblers, are seen in migration. One may also spot gray seals in summer, though chances are better in winter, when they come ashore to shed their coats. But, when we visited in early August the gannets and European shags were the main attractions.

On the afternoon of our trip, we easily obtained boat tickets

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from the Armor Navigation Company, despite the fact that virtually all of France was on vacation and the weather was terrific. (Tours are also available through the *Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux*; see notes below.)

There are two tours: one includes a stop on an island that is not a gannet-nesting site, and the other just approaches the best birding sites and skips the stop. We chose the second. This tour lasts two hours. The boat has an open deck at the prow, where most of us sat, as well as an enclosed area with big windows below, and has clean restrooms to boot. Note that a small boat of this kind is known as a *vedette*, and it leaves from the *gare maritime*, or maritime

station, in at Trestraou beach in Perros-Guirec.

The naturalist on board our vessel provided an interesting running commentary in French, detailing the history of the archipelago as a bird sanctuary and the types of birds that can be seen at different times of year. From this and subsequent research we learned that the French bird protection organization, the *Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux* (LPO), formed in 1912 and began efforts to protect the islands. At that time, there were no gannets on the archipelago—yet—but hunting had led to the local near-extinction of Atlantic puffins. The LPO redoubled its efforts to protect the birds and their habitat in 1967, when oil from

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the stranded supertanker Torrey Canyon reached the archipelago. In 1976, the French government formally designated the archipelago a National Natural Reserve. Two years later, the LPO went into high gear again, organizing the local response to the even more disastrous spill from the Amoco Cadiz.

As we headed out, the first birds we saw were gulls: greater black-backed, yellow-legged, and herring. As we approached Ile Rouzic, the gannets began to glide silently past our boat and to soar in great circles above it, giving us great views of their long black-tipped white wings—up to 2 meters or 6 ½ feet in span—and their yellow-tinged heads, with what looks like a heavy applica-

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tion of mascara around the eyes. To our surprise, some of the birds flying purposefully toward the island held wads of seaweed in their bills. We learned that they use the seaweed to build up their nest sites, which are in constant need of maintenance.

As the boat pulled up alongside the island and idled, we heard the din from the densely covered rock faces. One member of each mated pair is always with the egg or immature bird, while the other collects fish or seaweed, and, apparently, the home-staying partner feels the need to call to the roaming one, like an impatient patron trying to catch a Parisian waiter's attention.

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Our guide drew our attention to a relatively flat rock atop the island, where a small number of birds had congregated. “*Le club des célibataires*,” he called it—the singles’ meet-up. Gannets mate for life, but occasionally a mate fails to return for the yearly mating on Rouzic from wintering sites in the Mediterranean or along the coast of Morocco. Those left hanging gather in this spot and sometimes form new partnerships.

As we pulled away from Rouzic, we noted the sharp contrast between the side occupied by the gannets, which was completely white, and the remainder, which looked invitingly green. The green side had flatter terrain, and this accounts for the difference: The gannets can’t take off from the gentle inclines, because there is no room to beat their wings.

We motored to the next island, and the guide explained the origin of the French name for the gannets, “*fou de Bassan*,” which translates to “fool of Bass.” The gannets were known to form a large colony on Bass Rock off the coast of Scotland. Fishermen, we are told, thought the gannets were crazy from the way they behave when feeding.

Starting from a height of up to 98 feet above the waves, they abruptly tuck their wings and dive headlong into the water at speeds up to 62 mph. The impact from their dive stuns fish, which the gannets then swallow before surfacing. From the fishermen’s perspective, it looked like folly to attack the fish so forcefully and yet come up with nothing in the bill!

The second island we visited afforded good views of European shags. These look like our cormorants but stay almost entirely at sea, rarely venturing inland. The shags dive deeply, like the gannets, but in a different way: They take a little leap from the surface of the water.

The return to shore included some non-bird attractions, including views of an island inhabited by monks from the 14th to the 15th centuries and a fort built upon orders of Louis XV, to protect the coast from Anglo-Norman corsairs. Just before we docked, we took in a view of the distinctive pink granite rocks of Ploumanach, just north of the *gare maritime* where we had boarded the boat. The rocks here have been eroded into weird shapes and some look precariously balanced. Also interesting is a distant glimpse of a tidal mill built in 1764.

If our boat trip experience has left you curious for more details



The rugged coastline, cliffs, rocks, and isolated islands of Brittany attract colonies of cormorants, gulls, razorbills, northern gannets, common murre and Atlantic puffins—as well as birders and nature-loving tourists.

about the Sept-Iles, you can visit a public education center operated by the LPO in L’Ile Grande, about a 25-minute drive west of Perros-Guirec. If you’re hungry for sustenance of a more prosaic kind, you’ll find many restaurants in Perros-Guirec serving Breton delicacies such as sweet *crêpes* and savory buckwheat *galettes*. Either way, you’ll leave Perros-Guirec with a delightful memory of the birds of the Sept-Iles—and the guilty pleasure of having escaped the crowds and queues of Paris in the summer.

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More information:
Boat tours are offered by

Armor Navigation and also by the *Ligue pour la Protection des Oiseaux*. For more information on Armor Navigation, call 02 96 91 10 00 or visit armor-navigation.com/en. LPO offers loans of binoculars and bird-identification brochures. For more information call: 02 96 91 91 40, visit lpo.fr/les-7-iles/reserve-naturelle-nationale-des-sept-iles-22 or email ile-grande@lpo.fr.

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