

Where are the Rum shearwaters?

A daytime visitor to the high hills of the Rum Cuillin will quickly notice the vivid green, rich grasslands, pock-marked with huge numbers of underground burrows. These may appear to be large rabbit warrens, but there are no rabbits on Rum. The architects of the burrows will become

apparent if you stay on the Cuillin until well after dark. This is when strange and eerie noises come from the burrows and hundreds of black and white shapes whoosh low overhead. You should remain seated or else these shapes may strike

you with a thump. As you sit, all around you black and white birds sit and call or disappear down tunnels with an ungainly shuffle – these are the ‘Manxies’!



The entrance to a shearwater nest burrow



Rich green ‘shearwater greens’ result from shearwater droppings!

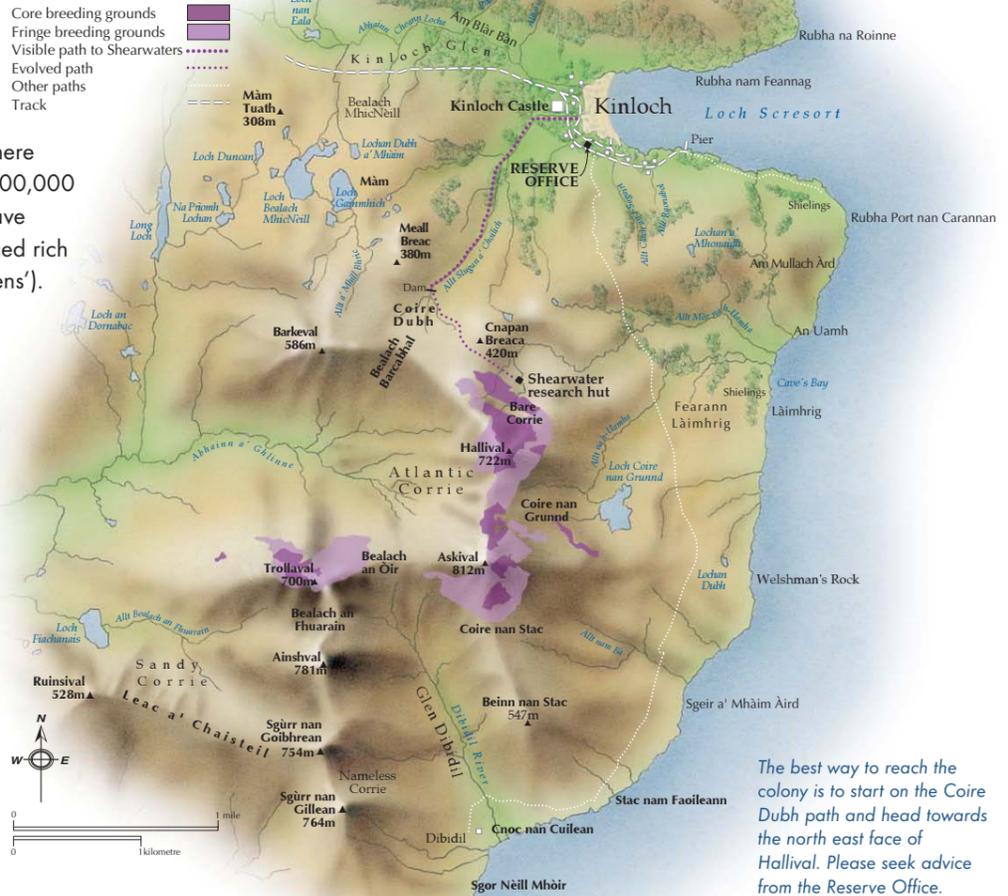
How many shearwaters visit Rum?

Around a third of the entire world population of these splendid seabirds make their home on the Rum Cuillin every summer. There are so many birds (around 100,000 pairs) that their droppings have fertilised the hills and produced rich grasslands (‘shearwater greens’).

Shearwaters are expertly kitted out for life at sea but they are wide open to attack on land. These specialised seabirds therefore only dare to be above ground at the colony on dark nights.



Get close to shearwaters on a night-time visit to the colony



The best way to reach the colony is to start on the Coire Dubh path and head towards the north east face of Hallival. Please seek advice from the Reserve Office.

Visiting the colony

The noise, smell and activity as tens of thousands of Manx shearwaters make their night-time return to the high Cuillin is an amazing seabird experience. However, you should note that the colony is remote, high on the mountain, and will involve crossing difficult, wet and uneven ground in darkness. Please seek advice from a member of staff at the Reserve Office, or look on the notice boards to see when a staff-led trip is planned.



What is a Shearwater?

Manx shearwaters are true seabirds, roaming over vast stretches of ocean like their close relatives the albatrosses.

As they glide efficiently on stiff, outstretched wings they manage to find food over these huge areas by using their keen sense of smell.

The reason for the name ‘shearwater’ is immediately obvious when you watch them at sea. They almost cut through the water as they plane low along wave slopes and briefly disappear into the deep troughs.

They’re known as ‘Manx’ shearwaters because they were first recorded at the Isle of Man. In 1014, a Viking fleet suffered three nights of massed ‘attack’ as hundreds of shearwaters swarmed back to their colony. The tough, battle-hardened Vikings had to defend themselves with sword and shield against what they called ‘iron-billed ravens’.



Scottish Natural Heritage is a government body responsible to Scottish Executive Ministers, and through them to the Scottish parliament.

Our mission statement: Working with Scotland’s people to care for our natural heritage.

Our aim: Scotland’s natural heritage is a local, national and global asset. We promote its care and improvement, its responsible enjoyment, its greater understanding and appreciation and its sustainable use now and for future generations.



For further information please contact:

Scottish Natural Heritage
The Reserve Office
The White House
Isle of Rum
PH43 4RR

Tel: 01687 462026
Fax: 01687 462805
www.snh.org.uk



SCOTTISH
NATURAL
HERITAGE
DUALCHAS
NADAIR
na h-ALBA

Manx
Shearwater
The Wandering
Mariner

The Shearwater Season On Rum

RETURN TO THE COLONY

The hills are alive!

In March the Rum Cuillin comes alive with the loud calls of returning birds. Vikings believed that the eerie calls of shearwaters were the sounds of hairy, ugly trolls. They even named one of the Rum hills Trollaval - Hill of the Trolls. Despite the fact that these birds have travelled all the way from the coast of South America, the colony is full of frantic activity.



The angel-like print of a shearwater landing on snow

Squabbles, romantic reunions and a whole lot of digging

Shearwaters squabble and fight over nesting burrows, reunite with long-term mates and set about spring-cleaning the burrows. The shearwaters are so attached to the place of their birth that they return year after year to the same part of the colony where they were raised as chicks. This was possibly over 50 years ago! Many manage to use the same burrow year after year - even finding it by digging through thick snow.



EGG AND OLD-TIMERS

Women scoff while men scuffle

Despite the adult's early arrival, the egg is not laid until Mid-May. After mating, the females leave the colony and feed out at sea. This is because the egg she produces is a relative whopper, up to 15% of her body weight, so she needs to stock up fast! The males, however, continue to scrap and squabble over burrow ownership. The female returns and lays the egg and the pair change over duties on the nest every six or seven days.



Manx shearwaters lay only one egg

Why only one egg?

Only one egg is laid because shearwaters must travel huge distances in order to find food for their chicks - a round trip of 300km is not unusual. The energy demands of such long-distance travel means the adults can only provide for one hungry mouth.

Ancient mariners

Because they breed at such a slow rate, shearwaters live to be among the oldest-living birds. At present, the oldest recorded is at least 53 years old. The oldest known from Rum was 26 years old, but it probably just a matter of time before researchers discover a real old-timer here.



This chick is a few days old

CHICKS, CHICKS, CHICKS!

The struggle to freedom

After a long period of 50 days in the nest, the chicks slowly chip their way through their eggshell. This has been known to take the tiny chicks up to a week. Even before they hatch, and for the whole 70 days or so before fledging, a constant squeaking call can be heard from the burrows. What does this mean? Feed me!

Oily, fishy soup - the ultimate high energy diet

As the adults spend so long foraging at sea the food has become an oily glob of partly digested fish, crustaceans and squid by the time it reaches the chick. This means that, despite the low delivery rate of food, the chicks manage to pile on weight at a terrific rate. At their heaviest, the chicks weigh a third more than their parents and look like happy grey blobs!

Big fat chicks and the original puffin

The scientific name of the Manx shearwater is *Puffinus puffinus*. The word 'puffin' refers to big fat chicks that were cured for human eating. People would pluck large chicks for the pot from both shearwater and puffin burrows, so there was some confusion in the name. Eventually, the name puffin was given to the comical wee bird with the parrot-like bill, although the shearwater kept it as its scientific name.



Shearwater chicks grow fast!

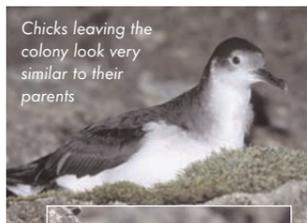
LEAVING THE COLONY

Left home alone!

As the chicks approach the end of their 70 days in the nest burrow their parents leave them. For about 10 days the chicks are not fed and are tempted out of their burrows to exercise their wings.

Beware the killer deer?

This can be a dangerous time for the chicks, as they can be picked off by birds of prey, such as eagles, if they stay out too late. Uniquely, red deer on Rum have been seen feeding on the bones of shearwater chicks, to gain highly-sought after calcium. Nobody knows whether the deer actually kill chicks.



Chicks leaving the colony look very similar to their parents



Shearwaters are important summer food for Rum golden eagles

First flight - just nipping to South America...

Despite the fact they're not fed for a few days, the chicks have plenty of reserves to see them on their maiden flight from the colony. On one of these flights, a young shearwater was found on the coast of Brazil 16 days after being ringed as a chick in a Welsh burrow. It was estimated that this young bird travelled 740km a day in its maiden flight!

...see you in three years

The young birds are unlikely to return to the colony for at least three years, when they visit in August as non-breeding birds. During this time they learn the essential skills required to successfully breed at the colony at age five to six years. This basically means that they sit about calling, with the occasional plunge into a burrow, followed by the inevitable squabble. August can be the best time of year to experience the colony at its liveliest!



A lost young shearwater is helped out to sea

...or maybe later in the village

Some birds require a helping hand as they can become confused on their first flight and fly towards the lights in the village. As you can see,

the birds are soon sent on their way but this allows the opportunity for some visitors to meet Rum's most important visitors without climbing the hill!



Safeguarding the Manxies

Rum is a Special Protection Area for its Manx shearwaters. In order to protect such an important colony, SNH staff and volunteers regularly check the colony to ensure that it's in a healthy state. The entire colony is counted every six years to make sure it's not declining - not an easy task! Every year the breeding success is monitored by following the progress of certain study nests. By following the fortunes of eggs and chicks we can see whether there are any problems, such as lack of food or brown rats preying on the birds.



The Rum boat trip is great for watching shearwaters

