

Les Sept îles

IN ENGLISH



TRANSLATION

An exceptional place you're going to visit the largest seabird reserve in France.

The archipelago (40 hectare) is called "The Seven Islands", but there are actually only five: (from east to west) Rouzic, Malban, Bono, l'île aux Moines, l'île plate. The others (Le Cerf and Les Costans) are only group of rocks.

This mistake in the name is due to a bad translation from Breton to French.

This archipelago has been classified as a nature reserve since 1976 only. It was granted this status thanks to the PUFFIN. This bird nearly disappeared at the beginning of the century when the French Railways advertised for the hunting of PUFFINS on the islands. Tourism in Brittany was developing at that time, and this advertising campaign unfortunately worked!

Before the arrival of hunters, the PUFFIN was the most common bird on the archipelago, but in 1912, there were only 400 couples left.

The League for the Protection of Birds, which had been created at the beginning of the century, decided to react by renting the islands, and turning them into a protected game reserve: hunting was banned. In 1976, it was classified as a nature reserve by the minister of environment. Since 1912, many other species have chosen these islands to come and lay their eggs. Yet, some species are still bound to disappear on the archipelago: the PUFFIN (250 couples left), the RAZORBILL (10 couples), the GUILLEMOT (less than 10 couples): these three species (of the family of auks) are weak and suffer a lot because of pollution. Yet, there are still many of them in the north (this archipelago is their most southern colony).

The owners of the islands are the National Hunting Council and the Coast Conservation Council and the managers are the League for the Protection of Birds.

GANNET/ LE FOU DE BASSAN

Wingspan: 1meter 80 (6 feet) / Weight: 3 – 3.5 kilos /

Bill: 12 cm (5 inches)

The biggest seabird of the Atlantic

Very pale blue eyes – An immaculate white colour with a yellow neck, a black tail and black wing tips

The only colony in France: a unique sight! Other colonies in Ireland, Scotland, and in other northern countries. This colony is the most southern one in the world.



The colony where they come from is Bass (a rock near Edinburgh); hence, their French name “Fou de Bassan” (the madman of Bass).

Why “madman”? Because of its fishing technique: it flies about 20 or 30 meters above the water, spots its preys (it mostly feeds on sardines, mackerels...) and falls on them at a very high speed : it lets itself drop like a stone, with its wings tucked along its body . It reaches the speed of about 80 km/h, and this speed enables it to go very deep (5 or 6 meters).

They eat about 500 grams of fish a day, which represents 15 tons of fish per day for the colony! Fortunately, they don't fish only around the archipelago: they can go as far as the south of England and come back in one day to find food!

Why they settled on this side of the island:

- They need a very steep cliff because of their long wings. Taking off on land is hard for them : they have to be able to jump in the air without hurting their wings
- it is the northern side of the island, with a north – north-east wind : they face the wind on this part of the island, and it's easier for them to take off facing the wind (it's the same for planes)

Something wonderful about them: they are faithful birds. They are migratory birds, arrive here in January or February, find their spouse and they part in September. They will meet again in February, and occupy the same nest year after year!

Each female lays only one egg a year, in April or May. Both parents incubate it for about 6 weeks, by covering them with their feet, which are full of blood vessels, and thus keep the egg warm! They lay their first egg when they're 5: we say they are adults at this age.

After hatching, the chick is bare, blind and black. It is soon covered with a white down.

It is fed for about 12 weeks and gets heavier than its parents (4 – 4.5 kg) that's why many sink and die when they go to sea for the first time: they're too heavy and are often eaten by gulls: half of them don't survive.

Then, they migrate for 3 years, and can go as far as Mauritania.

They reach their adulthood in their 4th year. At this age, they're white with a few black spots. They come back to the colony and go to what we call the “singles club” (or the nightclub of the colony!) to find a partner. Once they've formed a couple, they can settle in the colony. They reach the age of 20.

PUFFIN / LE MACAREUX MOINE

Small bird: 30 cm. Weight: 1 pound.

Family of auks (same family as the guillemot and the razorbill)

Nicknames: “sea parrot” or “sea clown” because of - the bright colours of its bill (orange, yellow and blue): to seduce others during reproduction time, its red legs, the blue triangle over its eyes, its funny way of waddling on land, like a duck: it's not used to the land, it comes on the islands only to nest

It's first and foremost a seabird: it's very skilful on and in the water: it can both swim and fly at a very high speed (about 70 km/h).



It has very short wings, and it beats them very quickly in the air as well as in the sea: it uses its wings as fins to swim. It can dive very deep.

The PUFFIN is also a migratory bird, and it arrives at the end of March here. The parents build a nest, which can't be seen by us: it's an underground chamber that you reach by a long tunnel of about 1-meter.

It lays one egg only. They can keep a dozen fish in their bill and continue fishing, to bring food to the chick.

THE FULMAR PETREL / LE FULMAR BOREAL

It's white with greyish-blue wings, it's smaller than the herring gull, with black eyes and a smaller bill.

Whenever it feels threatened, it releases a very evil – smelling oily substance, contrary to other birds that peck, fight with their bills.



GUILLEMOT

Less than 20 couples on the archipelago. It stands on its tarsi, not on its feet, which gives it a comical gait.

RAZORBILL / LE PINGOUIN TORDA

Only 20 couples on the islands.

Same family as the GUILLEMOT and the PUFFIN.

It's white with a black head, and its back and wings are outlined in white. Its bill is large and short and very sharp, hence its name.



THE SHAG / LE CORMORAN HUPPE

It's quite a big bird: one-meter wingspan.

We call it the "sea crow" because it looks back, but it is not! It's green with purple glints, and green eyes. Thus, it cannot be seen easily under the water when it fishes.

The adult has got a yellow spot on the bill.

A bird, which we always see perching on the top of the rocks. Why? Because unlike other seabirds, its wings are not waterproof; water penetrates them.

It's both an advantage and disadvantage for them: like a scuba diver, it can stuff itself with water, and since it's heavy, it can dive very deep and stay long under the water (around 3 minutes) it has to dry before flying properly again.



THE OYSTER CATCHER / L'HUITRIER PIE

It's black and white with a bright red bill and red legs. Its characteristic cry can be recognised easily.

The only bird here, which is not a sea bird. What's the difference between a sea bird and a "normal" one? A sea bird can filter salt water, with a special gland: it swallows fresh water only. All the birds on the archipelago are sea birds, except the oyster catcher, it stays here all year round.

THE HERRING GULL / LE GOELAND ARGENTE

The commonest and best-known ocean bird – The most common gull here. White with grey wings and black wing tips, pink legs. A yellow bill with a red spot on it.

It's a very clever bird, which can adapt to any environment. It's one of the species that has best adapted to man, which probably explains its large numbers. There are two other sorts of gulls: the lesser black-backed gull and the great black-backed gull.



THE GREY SEAL / LE PHOQUE GRIS

There are about 30 seals on the archipelago

One of the biggest seals: around 200 kg for a female and up to 300 kg for a male.

They eat about 5 kg of fish a day.

They're polygamous mammals: each male has a kind of harem: around 4 females.

A female has one baby every two years. A very lazy mammal: we always see it lying on the rocks. It does not climb on the rocks but waits for the sea to rise and then lies on them: the sea is its elevator! It stays on the rocks during one tide and goes back fishing when the tide is high again; that's why we always see them when it's low tide, and rarely when it's high tide.



L'ÎLE AUX MOINES

It is called "The monks' island" because monks settled here in the 15th century. They were the monks from the brotherhood of the "strict observance", which means that they wished to be as unhappy as possible on earth to be happier in heaven.

They did not manage to stay long on the island because living conditions were very hard, and because they were very bad sailors: there were many wrecks when they sailed to and from the island.

After the monks came pirates in the 16th and 17th centuries, and smugglers in hemp. Then a fort was built in 1740, under Louis 15th, and occupied by soldiers who fought against smuggling and acts of piracy.

The lighthouse was first built in 1834, destroyed in 1944 and then rebuilt: it's a very recent construction.

LA CÔTE DE GRANIT ROSE

This coast stretches over 10 km, not 30 like we often hear: it's a local phenomenon. There is a great walk to do along the coast: "Le sentier des douaniers" (the customs officers' path"), which goes from Trestraou to Ploumanach (5 kilometres).

This rock formation dates from 300 million years (it's quite a recent formation). There was a magma eruption was not powerful enough to pierce the earth's crust. Pink granite can be found in many other places, but not this chaotic landscape: it's a very rare phenomenon. At the beginning, it was only one big block; then, little by little, century after century; it split, and turned into a granite chaos. Erosion is very slow: only 3 mm a century. There is a black line on the granite rock formation, which is not due to black tides although many say so! It is a lichen.

The Port of Ploumanach: A small natural harbour, which marks the frontier between two towns: Tregastel and Perros Guirrec. There are red and green posts in the channel for the sailors to sail in between: it's like a road for them;

Château de Costaérès: Costaérès = drying area in Breton, where fishermen dry their nets. A Polish built it at the beginning of the century. Very famous people lived there: Léo Ferré, Téléphone, Eddie Barclay ..., and at the moment, a German comic lives there.

Gustave Eiffel's house: Entirely made of granite. He had this house built at the same time as the famous tower aris. His grandson now lives here

The lighthouse of Mean Ruz: In granite too, not to damage the site. It's not inhabited, it's automatic.

A rail down which lifeboats slide to go to sea. It is managed by the SNSM (National Society of Lifesaving at Sea). Only volunteers are working there, ready to help boats. This rail enables them to go to sea however, the tide is.

A signal Station, which is managed by the navy, where 10 sailors are working. They prevent black tides or accidents by making sure that tankers do not approach the coast: they must stay 40 km away at least.

It is like a control tower for the sea.