



## Belfast Getaway: Rathlin Island

*Tuesday, August 11, 2009*

By Emilie Harting

After driving up Northern Ireland's dramatic coast to the Giant's Causeway and the Glens of Antrim, hikers, birdwatchers and divers may want to take the ferry to Rathlin Island, a four mile by one mile nature reserve with a population of . . . eighty-two.

Stillness rules here, where all that is between man and the top of the world is the sound of buzzards, ravens, oyster catchers, wrens, snipes, white throats, and other birds. Seals slip on and off rocks in the bays. Yellow gorse, wild orchids, irises, and other wildflowers crop up among the rocks and rough grasses. White hawthorne flows over stonewalls and ruins of farms. Few trees grow on the undulating hills of grass and rock.

From April to August, puffins, guillemots, razorbills, and kittiwakes live and breed together in harmony on the western side, four miles from the harbor. When the young mature, they go out to sea for the remainder of the year. At the bird viewing point, the craggy basalt cliffs and rock columns rising up from the water are covered with thousands of swirling white dots. Mothers have burrowed nests in the cracks and hover about tending their young.



Photo by Emilie Harting

Bike and walking trails lead from the harbor to lighthouses, a cave where the Scottish king took refuge after being driven away by Edward I of England, and south past small lakes to Rue Point, and the open ruins of smugglers' storehouses. There, seabirds cackle loudly overhead, while seals swim about, and views of the Mull of Kintyre, Scotland and the Antrim Coast are seldom far from sight.

An ardent hiker could walk fifteen miles in a day. However, small buses run intermittently to the bird sanctuary area, where it is a mile walk back and forth to the lookout station. B and Bs include Coolnagrock (<http://tinyurl.com/lfazwl>) and the Manor House (<http://tinyurl.com/lve5ew>), a National Trust property whose pub offers a lively evening gathering place.

Paul Quinn, a knowledgeable local guide, gives walking tours.

Information: [www.rathlinwalkingtours.com](http://www.rathlinwalkingtours.com)