

Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



Our own northern albatross

Rum has the second biggest Manx shearwater colony and provides the greatest show never seen on TV, writes **Roger Morgan-Grenville**

It is 2am high up on an escarpment on the mountainside of Hallival on the Isle of Rum. Across the water, night has fallen on Ardnamurchan, and Mallaig stands out brightly against the hills with its orange glow of street lights, and its restless fishing vessels riding on their anchors. For an instant, we think we can see the Northern Lights, but we can't.

Quite suddenly, the quiet of the night is punctuated by a series of cackles and screams, as if someone has opened the door to a Victorian asylum. They come from the right and left, from above us and below; they are close and far away, still and yet moving at speed across the night. This is the wildlife spectacle they never showed you on TV, perhaps the greatest and weirdest show of nature in the British Isles. By the time it reaches its crescendo an hour later, the noise is maybe coming from 2,000 separate mouths.

For these are Manx shearwaters, our own 'northern albatross', and they are choosing the safety of the darkest part of night to fly up to their mountain top burrows to feed each solitary chick that awaits them. Those howls and cries are their mechanisms for locating their chicks in the pitch dark. Rum is the second biggest shearwater colony in the world (the first is Skomer, in West Wales), and it is home to maybe one in three of every Manx shearwater on earth.

Centuries ago, marauding Vikings came to the island, and they heard those noises, too, but from their ships. Seeing that this was all the proof they needed that the island was haunted by evil trolls, they climbed back in their boats and left it well alone, leaving only the name Trolleval, a

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Rum, main; a Manx shearwater, Puffinus puffinus, in flight, above

neighbouring mountain that is still home to thousands of the birds.

I am on Hallival in late August with a research team from Oxford University, intercepting the adult shearwaters as they come into their nests, and recovering, and replacing, the tiny geolocators that they have been carrying round the world with them for the last year. Once we know they are in the burrows, we carefully pull them out, weigh them, check their condition, and then work on the geolocator. And what stories those geolocators will tell, when we plug them into the base computer and establish where they have been.

For Scotland's noisiest bird is also Scotland's best travelled export, and her journey will stretch your credibility to its limit.

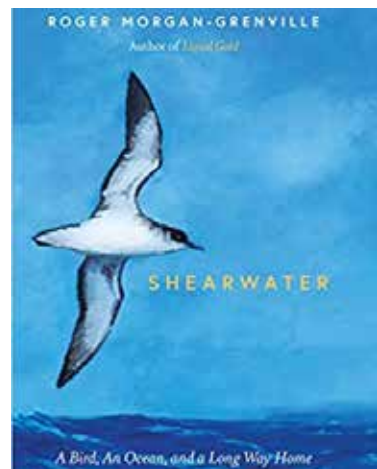
I am holding one in my hand. Shearwaters only come to land in the darkest of nights, when the predators have turned in for the night. She is fit and healthy, weighing about 450 grams, and she is calm while I work on her. Down in the burrow, when I replace her, is a chick that is right now 50 per cent bigger than her, made so by the rich and half-digested diet of sand eels and crustaceans that she has been catching. Any day now, the mother and father will leave, and begin their long journey down to the rich waters off Argentina, a full 8,000 miles away. Ten days later, and starving, the chick will pull himself out of the burrow, up the surface, and he will paddle his inelegant body along the hillside until he finds a rock just high enough to catch a bit of extra wind. After much flapping, he will suddenly fly up into the night sky. It will be the last time he touches land for over a thousand days, maybe four years. No one tells him where to go, he just

goes. South past Mull, past Islay, past Cumbria, Wales, Cornwall and France. South past Spain, Morocco and Senegal, every now and then stopping to feed, but always moving on. South past the fishing vessels and oil rigs of Sierra Leone.

Eventually, he will turn south west across the shortest bit of the Atlantic, and then fly down the coast of South America until he gets to his feeding grounds. At the equivalent age of a six month old human baby, he will have flown those 8,000 miles on his own, teaching himself to fish by sensing the little eruptions of gas that come from krill when they are being eaten near the surface. For the next three or four years, he will ply the seas, learning to fish and creating mind-maps of the best areas to go, but never coming to land. Then one day, the restlessness of every breeding animal on earth will get to him, and he will start once again for Rum, and will be guided by a miraculous mix of magnetic fields, stars, sun, sight, smell and the imprint of the exact location of his birth that he absorbed at the mouth of the burrow all that time ago.

I saw my first shearwater as a 12 year-old boy on holiday with my Mull grandmother, and, over the years, it spoke to my soul, and became a metaphor for the wildness I wanted in my life, and shone a spotlight at the things that we have done to this planet we call home. Since 1960, we have killed off 66 per cent of all the seabirds on earth, so it is a miracle that our little half kilo Celtic survivor is actually growing in numbers at the moment. It is its intense good fortune to breed mainly on an island where rats have been cleared, (Rum is an exception but not many rats make it up to the heights of the colony), to fish above the nets but below the hawsers that other birds get caught up in, and to avoid humanity wherever it can.

Recently, for a full year, I followed those shearwaters. I spent days and nights on their breeding sites, and watched them out at sea fishing. Then I went to Argentina and wandered the coasts to find people prepared to take me out to sea to find them. I welcomed them back to their



breeding grounds from an Irish Peninsula, watched them making a comeback in the Scilly Isles, and spent a magical evening off Eigg watching maybe 15,000 of them rafting. Finally, I returned to my childhood haunt of Mull, and went back to Staffa, Iona and Lunga, where I had seen them first.

At the end of the journey, I lay on my own on a cliff side on the deserted island of Lunga and watched the shearwaters flying out at sea where I had first seen them nearly 50 years before. In a year of social distancing, I was miles away from anyone, just being among the fulmars, the gannets, the guillemots and the puffins that produce the soundtrack to the shearwaters' lives.

And, as I did so, two things dawned on me. The first is that the shearwater is a lucky bird; they will survive, and maybe even thrive, as we lurch uncertainly into tomorrow. But the second is the poignant thought of just how much poorer our world will be if we don't reverse the gathering extinctions of our other ocean going seabirds. "Biological diversity is messy," said American environmentalist, Paul Hawken. "It walks, it crawls, it swims, it swoops, it buzzes. But extinction is silent; it has no voice other than our own."

Roger Morgan-Grenville's new book, *Shearwater: A Bird, an Ocean and a Long Way Home* is published by Icon Books on 8 April at £16.99



Roger Morgan-Grenville, above, and his new book, top

STAYCATION



Our top UK

With lockdown easing you can still book a break if you're quick, writes Claire Spreadbury

It's been a tough 12 months. Lockdown, loneliness and loss has been hard hitting thanks to the pandemic, and most of us are desperate for a holiday.

The politicians' roadmaps have given us a little light at the end of the tunnel, but foreign escapes still feel out of reach for many, and anxiety inducing to others. So, it's likely we'll be holidaying closer to home this summer.

But is it worth the stress? If last summer is anything to go by, all the best places were snapped up before we even started Googling, and the ones left seemed bang average (at best) yet absolutely extortionate. So, is there anything left, where do we want to escape to, and when should we book?

Family holiday experts Vrbo surveyed more than 7,000 parents and discovered, unsurprisingly, we're all keen to head to the beach this summer.

Cornwall topped the list of UK destinations its customers are interested in this summer, mirroring last year's popularity of Cornish seaside destinations, such as St Ives. Its neighbouring county of Devon, home to The English Riviera, is also proving to be a popular staycation destination, while Norfolk, Dorset

and Caithness round off the top five. Still not sure where to book? These top locations are still available to book if you're quick...

Cornwall
There aren't many Cornish coastal locations we wouldn't like to escape to, but St Ives really is a jewel in the crown. With an average nightly fee of £211 and availability in the summer holidays, The Stones Luxury Apartment has uninterrupted sea views across a four-storey former sea Captain's house.

Devon
Famous for its stunning landscapes, Devon is a great choice for families wanting to escape to the countryside this year. A break at Old Stable Cottage sleeps up to six people and is all about embracing the fresh country air and spending quality time together. Located in Okehampton and within reach of Dartmoor National Park, this cottage is a great base for anyone wanting to explore Devon. Average nightly fee £287. Minimum two-night stay.

Norfolk
Known for its long, sandy beach, Great Yarmouth is always a hit for families, and this Luxury Family

destinations

Caravan at Hopton sleeps up to eight people, with three bedrooms and a sofa bed in the lounge. Close to the sea with the Pleasure Beach and Fritton Lake Outdoor Centre and Country Park just 5km away, it's the perfect escape. Average nightly fee £73. Minimum three-night stay.

Dorset
Poole is a bustling tourist resort in the east of Dorset, and is well known for Europe's largest natural harbour and award-winning blue flag beaches, including the world famous Sandbanks Beach. The Grey House is a family-friendly property which sleeps up to six guests and is

Where do we want to escape to, and when should we book?

situated in the heart of Poole, with Westbourne and Bournemouth within walking distance. Average nightly fee £214. Minimum three-night stay.

Caithness
Caithness is one of the most northerly areas in Scotland and home to rolling farmland, moorland and scattered settlements. This apartment located in Keiss, Wick, comfortably accommodates up to six, and includes two double en-suite

Cornwall's hidden coves, main; explore Scotland from Caithness, above right; St Ives, above
bedrooms. Average nightly fee £149. Minimum three-night stay.

Cumbria
Cumbria is known for the alluring Lake District National Park, home to stunning views and some of England's biggest lakes. Combgill Cottage is a recently refurbished, beautiful historic cottage in the heart of the pretty village of Tirril. Sleeps up to six. Average nightly fee £289. Minimum three-night stay.

Pembrokeshire
If you fancy becoming a treasure seeker, you might want to head to the Pembrokeshire coastline. It's a nature lover's haven and a Cosy Log Cabin is just 5km from Tenby beach, and 1.5km from Tenby Dinosaur Park. It sleeps up to four and is also pet friendly. Average nightly fee £221. Minimum three-night stay.

Northumberland
This converted bank property in Belford has a rooftop garden for private outdoor dining and is just 7.6km from Bamburgh Beach. Average nightly fee £122. Minimum three-night stay.

To book any of these properties and to search more, visit vrbo.com

48 HOURS IN

Perth



Friday, midday
Check into the trim, well-run Mercure Perth Hotel (from £47 a night, all.accor.com) a historic bolthole on the site of the old City Mills—look out for the water wheel in reception.

1pm
Enjoy a light lunch at Effies of Perth, leaving room for their legendary carrot cake.

2pm
The hulking Museum and Art Gallery explores Perth's history and culture; delving back as far back as the Pictish days and prehistory.

4pm
Stroll along the promenade on Tay Street imagining Viking longships and Hanseatic traders on the river.

5pm
Cross the Tay on the Perth Bridge, built as the gun smoke from the Jacobite rebellions was still clearing. A landscaped park eases you downstream to a more functional bridge back across Scotland's longest river.

7pm
Dine at 63 Tay Street. This legendary restaurant has Perthshire's renowned fresh, local produce at its heart.

Saturday, 10am
This year Perth became the first UK city in 400 years to have resident

beavers. Look out for them on Moncrieffe Island and opposite North Inch park.

Midday
Savour a picnic in either North or South Inch.

1.30pm
Perth's historic core is a pleasant place to browse with independent gems in amongst the chains.

4pm
The Fergusson Gallery's interior is dedicated to the works of the seminal Scottish artist J.D. Fergusson and is also home to the archive of his lifelong companion, Margaret Morris, an influential modern dance figure.

7pm
Modern Scottish cooking stars at North Port Restaurant. It's characterfully set in an 18th-century building - kick off with Perthshire pigeon breast, before lighter Loch Eive sea trout.

Sunday, 9am
Piotr of Outdoor Explore takes you paddling on the Tay to the more established beaver communities downstream. It's a unique way to see Perth and helps you appreciate how it first thrived on river trade.

Robin McKelvie

Scotrail (www.scotrail.com) trains run to Perth from numerous stations.

