

2.3 Habitats and wildlife



Marram grass

The Fife coast has two main types of habitat: the foreshore, and the shoreline with its inshore waters.

Spaced along the Path, several nature reserves show the vital role of the coastal margin in biodiversity and conservation. From south to north these include Torry Bay, Dumbarrie Links, Kilminning, the Eden estuary and Tentsmuir. The Isle of May, an offshore National Nature Reserve, is described on page 24.

Foreshore

The foreshore typically comprises sand dunes and grassland, rich in lime from crushed seashells. Plants are specially adapted to the harsh, salty conditions. Marram grass is common on dunes where its tough, sharp-edged leaves help to stabilise the sand, slowing coastal erosion.

Flowering plants are abundant, especially in spring. Cowslip has a cluster of deep yellow tubular flowers on a slender stem. Bloody cranesbill is a special feature at Carlingnose. Each magenta-coloured flower has several slightly notched petals on a stem growing from bushy clusters of leaves. In late summer and autumn, look out also for field gentian. It has distinctive lilac tubes from which four petals spread out. You will probably hear the melodious, wistful song of the skylark as it soars vertically and hovers high overhead. It's small and streaky brown with white wing edges which are easier to see in flight. On the ground it forages for seeds and insects. Another common sighting, the meadow pipit looks quite similar, though more slender. Its song resembles a sequence of piping phrases ending in a trill.

Bloody cranesbill



Shoreline and inshore waters

The mudflats along the Firth of Forth and the Eden and Tay estuaries, and the salt marshes and sand banks of the Eden estuary are packed with the many tiny creatures on which numerous birds feed.

Among them is the easily recognised curlew. It has a long curved bill and its call sounds like its name. Along the sea shores, the oystercatcher is readily identified by its long orange bill, black head, white chest and loud piercing call. Another common species is the redshank, with its orange-red legs and noisy, yelping call. Sanderlings are less showy but are delightful to watch as they run along the edge of outgoing wavelets looking for food.

Just offshore, eider ducks often float in large flocks feeding on shellfish. The male has a black cap, white chest and back, whereas the female is mottled brown. Along the coast you may sight gannets gliding low over the water. They climb up to 30 m then fold their wings to dive-bomb their prey, reaching speeds of more than 50 mph (80 kph).



Redshank



Eider duck (male)

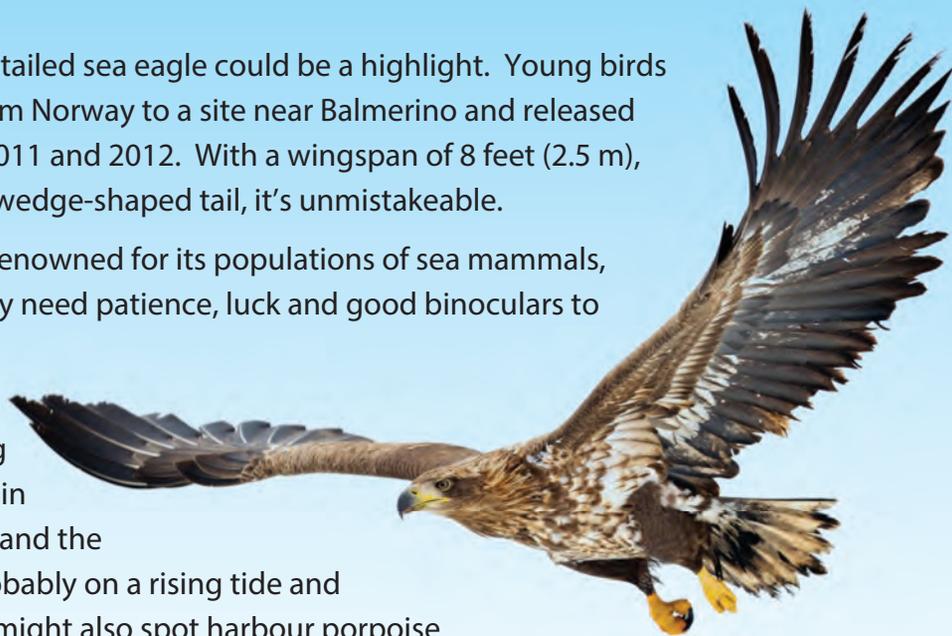


Oystercatcher

Spotting a white-tailed sea eagle could be a highlight. Young birds were brought from Norway to a site near Balmerino and released into the wild in 2011 and 2012. With a wingspan of 8 feet (2.5 m), black wings and wedge-shaped tail, it's unmistakable.

The Fife coast is renowned for its populations of sea mammals, although you may need patience, luck and good binoculars to spot them.

Your best chances of seeing bottlenose dolphin are on Largo Bay and the Eden estuary, probably on a rising tide and in summer. You might also spot harbour porpoise – smaller than dolphins, and more plentiful.



Sea eagle

You are almost certain to see seals if you know how to look. Grey seals frequent Largo Bay and Tentsmuir, whilst the smaller common (or harbour) seal is more prevalent in the Tay estuary – although you may see either kind anywhere on your coastal walk. Binoculars will improve the view, but are not essential. On rocky beaches, if you stare long enough at a rock you may see it arch its back and swim off! Scotland has over a third of the world's population of grey seals, and they are more plentiful here than common seals. Telling them apart is easy if you're close enough to see the head. The grey's head is flatter, with a Roman nose, whereas the common seal has a dog-like rounded forehead and V-shaped nostrils. Greys mate between October and December, whereas common seals breed in June/July.



Grey seal

The Isle of May



Puffins on the Isle of May

Known as the 'Jewel of the Forth', this island lies about 6 miles (10 km) south-east of Anstruther, and is rich in wildlife, scenery and history. Its ferry works from April to September inclusive. Because the harbour at Anstruther dries out, its departure time varies between 09.00 and 15.00, and on certain days there's no sailing. Check times and book online at www.isleofmayboattrips.co.uk.

We strongly recommend you devote an extra day to visiting The May. A typical trip lets you land and explore for about 2.5 hours. You will see and hear an amazing number of seabirds (up to 250,000) and also grey seals, over 100 of whom live and breed on The May.

Especially between April and July, its steep cliffs and ledges teem with seabirds such as guillemots, kittiwakes, gulls, shags, razorbills, eiders, fulmars and terns. Above all, enjoy close views of up to 100,000 puffins, which venture surprisingly close to the marked paths.

This endearing bird nests in burrows all over the island, but by August they have gone to resume their mysterious lives at sea.



Razorbill

The island is owned and managed by Scottish Natural Heritage, whose Rangers conduct research there. Most impressive among the island's buildings is the lighthouse (by Robert Stevenson), which in 1816 replaced the beacon dating from 1636. You can also explore the remains of its 12th century monastery, and discover the island's role in two World Wars.

