

Bird Life



Courtesy of Robbie Murphy

FACT FILE

Colour: White, with pale yellow head, black tips on the wings.

Breeding: On coastal cliffs and remote islands.

Length: Wingspan 165-180 cm.

Diet: Fish.

Call: Loud, grating call when nesting.

Egg: One bluish-white egg.

Gannets



Scientific Name: *Morus bassanus*
Irish Name: Gainéad

The Gannet is a common seabird around the Irish coast. A large ocean-going bird, it only returns to land to breed. While at sea it often travels in a small group, where it glides in the wind and searches for fish in the waters below. The Gannet's long body and tail, huge narrow wings and funnel-shaped head and beak, help to make the Gannet's body streamline, enabling it to move more efficiently. The long, dagger-like bill is also ideal for catching fish. Once it sees its prey it dives, often from a height of 40m, folding back its wings and hitting the water (at speeds up to 100km per hour) to catch it.

Family Matters

Gannets nest on cliffs and rocks in a colony (or group) called a gannetry. In a gannetry, space is often very limited and from a distance it can look like the cliffs are covered in snow. In Ireland there are five breeding colonies on the islands off the coast, though one of these colonies is very small. The largest is on Little Skellig, Co. Kerry and it has over 26,000 nests. The other main colonies are at Great Saltee, Co. Wexford and Bull Rock, Co. Cork, with a smaller one on Ireland's Eye, Co. Dublin.

Once a bond is formed at the nest, a pair of gannets will remain together for years, returning to the same nest year after year.

A gannet chick is very well cared for by its parents and will usually leave the nest about three months after hatching. While at the nest, the chick is fed on regurgitated fish. The parent catches food at sea and swallows it. When it returns to the nest it brings the food back up again and allows the chick to reach deep into its throat to feed on it!

Left: An adult feeding its chick.

Colouring

Gannets are very distinctive. Most of its feathers are bright white, except for black tips on its wings and buff (yellowish) colouring on its head and the back of its neck. Its eyes and beak are icy blue and its large webbed feet are black. In its first year, a gannet has brown plumage, with white dots. It will

take over four years before it acquires its adult plumage.



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