

## Catch My Drift Mini Talk Transcripts

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### Troup Head - A Seabird City on the Moray Firth

**Learning Level** All  
**Run Time** 11.10 minutes

My name is Claire Matthews and I'm the manager here at Macduff Marine Aquarium.

Our aquarium sits on the shores of the Moray Firth, which is Scotland's largest bay, our exhibits showcase the huge diversity of marine life that is supported here. We tend to focus on marine life under the waves, but the Moray Firth is internationally important for marine birds too.

Just along the coast from the aquarium is Troup Head - dramatic cliffs which, every summer, become crowded with sea birds and is the only colony of gannets on the Scottish mainland. Today I'd like to tell you about this amazing seabird city and introduce some of the residents.

In the summer months we set up a camera at Troup Head that beams live images from the cliff tops back to a monitor in the aquarium. From this we can watch the real time comings and goings from our local wildlife hotspot and immerse ourselves in the drama that is breeding season in a busy seabird colony.

Troup Head is a section of hard metamorphic rock that is over 600 million years old and juts out into the outer Moray Firth. The cliffs are over 50m high and offer the perfect breeding spot for thousands of seabirds that compete for space on the sheer ledges.

Sea birds are brilliantly adapted to living out at sea, feeding on fish, squid and crustaceans and with adaptations for diving and keeping warm in the chilly climate. Oil secretions on their feathers, for example, provide excellent waterproofing and webbed feet make great paddles. But like all birds, they reproduce by laying hard-shelled eggs, and for this they must return to the land.

Cliffs are ideal nesting sites as they are close to fishing grounds yet difficult to access by land predators. As a des res, Troup Head attracts an estimated 38,000 seabirds each summer. The 4km site is famous for gannets, but fulmars, kittiwakes, guillemots, razorbills, shags, herring gulls and even a few puffins all nest here too.

Troup Head's season starts in early Spring when the gannets are first to arrive. They will have spent winter fishing at sea, or many make a huge migration to the warmer seas off NW Africa and back again. Gannets are Europe's biggest seabird, weighing in at around 3kg and with a wingspan of 2m. They are definitely the bosses at Troup.

A few intrepid gannet couples from the Firth of Forth started the colony at Troup Head in the late 1980's. Today there are nearly 4000 pairs of gannets and the colony is expanding. Gannets tend to occupy the highest ledges on the cliff with the best take off opportunities for getting airborne.

Gannets pair for life so the first job on arriving back to the cliff is to find the same spot they had occupied last season and then reconnect with each other – courting behaviour often includes bill fencing and bowing.

The male will build the nest with seaweed, grasses and even debris from the sea and, come April, the female lays a single egg.

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The gannets get a bit of a head start on the season at Troup Head, but the cliffs get busier as other seabird species arrive. Guillemots are the most numerous birds at Troup, nesting in amongst the gannets in dense numbers. They pack tightly together onto the cliff ledge and each couple has a tiny nest area on the cliff.

The female will lay her egg on the bare rock. Guillemot eggs are pear-shaped – the most pointed of all birds' eggs – and this helps with keeping them from rolling off the rock ledge.

Kittiwakes are another summer resident at Troup and are Britain's smallest seafaring gulls and are rarely seen near land except at remote breeding sites. When fishing, they are elegant surface feeders and pick out shoaling fish from the top layers of the ocean. At breeding time, both adults will build a nest together from mud and vegetation and by late May they have a clutch of 2 eggs.

Occupying the lower ledges of Troup's cliff face, Razorbills are relatives of guillemots and are in the same family – the auks. They have a similar shape and small wings that beat rapidly to fly, making their flight seem manic, but are superb for swimming. Guillemots and razorbills dive to great depths underwater – up to 100m, chasing sandeels which are their favourite food.

In amongst all these birds are also fulmars – small members of the albatross family. They are often seen soaring on uprising air thermals on their stiff wings. These birds have a useful trick for deterring any intruders to their nests – they can spit foul-smelling stomach oil at anyone that comes too near. This is how they got their name – which literally translates to foul bird.

At the base of the rocks at Troup, in the splash zone we see lots of long-necked birds that are dark, almost metallic green in colour. These are shags. Like their cormorant cousins, shags go after mussels and crustaceans in the shallower waters, but they are not waterproof as they don't produce oil for their feathers.

This makes them more efficient divers as it reduces their buoyancy underwater, it does mean however that they have to spend time standing about and holding their wings out to dry as they get waterlogged. Shags can lay up to 6 eggs in a nest made from vegetation.

We can't talk about a Scottish seabird colony without mentioning everybody's favourite – the puffin! Also in the auk family, this comical bird is easily recognised by its brightly coloured beak and orange feet. We don't see many puffins at Troup Head itself and rarely spot them from our camera – they nest in burrows and prefer grassy areas that are in short supply on the headland.

There are puffin nesting sites further along the coast and puffins may be seen bobbing in the water in large rafts together as they all arrive back after wintering at sea. Like their relatives, they are excellent divers and catch sandeels – they're famous for carrying up to 12 sandeels crossways in their beak at a time. Puffin parents raise a single chick in their dark burrow – they never actually see the puffling in the daylight!

As the summer wears on, by mid June all the seabird species have youngsters to care for and the cliffs are frenetic with parents coming and going to feed their growing offspring.

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For the gannet parents, the growing chick, initially white and fluffy, soon becomes a demanding monster and space on the nest becomes very tight. Tempers flare between neighbours and gannets especially get very aggressive with each other – we often see some epic fights between them.

July sees the guillemot chicks leaving the safety of the cliffs. Encouraged by the male parent, the chicks taking a flying leap from the cliff into the water and then paddle like mad to get out to feeding grounds. They can't fly for about 3 months, for the first few weeks Dad stays with them, after that they're on their own.

Pressure on the cliffs eases a bit by late-August when all but the gannets have raised their young and left their nests. Juvenile gannets with brown plumage grow to the size of an adult and are ready to fledge as the summer days are shortening. They take their first flights from the nest, but after landing on the water initially are too heavy to manage to take off again. Unable to feed, it takes a few days to lose their 'puppy fat' before they're able to lift into the air.

Gannets feed by plunge diving from heights of 12m or more, and their streamlined shape allows them to get several metres underwater to chase fish. Their bodies are supremely adapted for this hunting method – they have a reinforced skull and long, articulated neck to enable them to withstand the entry impact when diving at 60mph. We often see the juveniles practicing their fishing techniques from the aquarium car park at this time of year.

By the end of September it's all over and the cliffs are mostly bare of seabirds – all back to doing what they do best in the open sea or, in the case of the gannets, starting out on their 5000 mile round trip to overwinter on Africa's Atlantic coast.

We've seen the numbers of gannets increasing year on year at Troup Head, helped by a wide diet of different species of fish and the habit of following fishing boats.

On the other hand, kittiwakes and puffins, those species that are more reliant on just sandeels for food, seem to be under pressure. We humans, along with climate change and the distribution of plankton at the base of the food chain, have a large impact on the populations of these fish, in turn affecting the birds.

Troup Head has been described by Sir David Attenborough as a 'world class' wildlife hotspot and it is designated as a special protected area. It is an RSPB reserve and can be visited on foot – there is a path along the cliff edge, but you do need a head for heights. It's worth the walk though as there is nothing like sitting near the cliff edge, with the Moray Firth stretching in front of you and only metres away from nesting gannets. The sights, sounds and smells of the seabird city is something else and we're lucky to have this fabulous place on our doorstep.

Here at the aquarium we look forward to March every year when we set up our gannet cam and can once again enjoy the incredible seabird spectacle.