

An underwater photograph of a diver in a cave. The diver is wearing a black wetsuit, a mask, and a large camera. A bright light is attached to the camera, illuminating the scene. The cave walls are covered in various marine life, including sponges and corals. The water is dark and murky, with a bright opening visible in the background.

# **Rathlin Island's dynamic coast and seas**



Department of  
**Agriculture, Environment  
and Rural Affairs**

[www.daera-ni.gov.uk](http://www.daera-ni.gov.uk)

**Rathlin  
Development  
& Community  
Association**

# The rich seas of Rathlin

Rathlin Island is surrounded by notoriously dangerous, fast moving tides which flood in and out of the narrow neck of the North Channel four times a day, at up to eight knots in some locations during spring tides.

*Rue Point Lighthouse. Image: Tom McDonnell, Northcoast Nature.*

Upon meeting the island, waters converge and diverge as they spill over a multitude of jagged submarine reefs, creating eddies and overfalls and enriching the seas. The plankton-rich flood tide, strong mixing of water and consistent water temperatures help create the wonderfully diverse coast and seas around Rathlin Island.

The area is protected as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) for its underwater reefs, sandbanks, submerged or partially submerged sea caves and vegetated sea cliffs and drift lines.

Its designation as a Special Protection Area (SPA) provides additional protection for coastal and marine habitats for seabirds to breed, feed, display and loaf - including razorbills, guillemots, kittiwakes, herring gulls, peregrine falcons and colourful Atlantic puffins.

Recently, the marine area around Rathlin has been protected as a Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ) to safeguard its important deep seabed, black guillemot, underwater caves, sea arches and lagoons.

The Rathlin coast and its surrounding waters are also steeped in cultural

*Atlantic puffin feeding on sandeels*







*Beautifully coloured red cushion star*

history; there are many historic buildings, maritime archaeological sites and submerged wrecks which are popular with visitors and help to reinforce a unique sense of place.

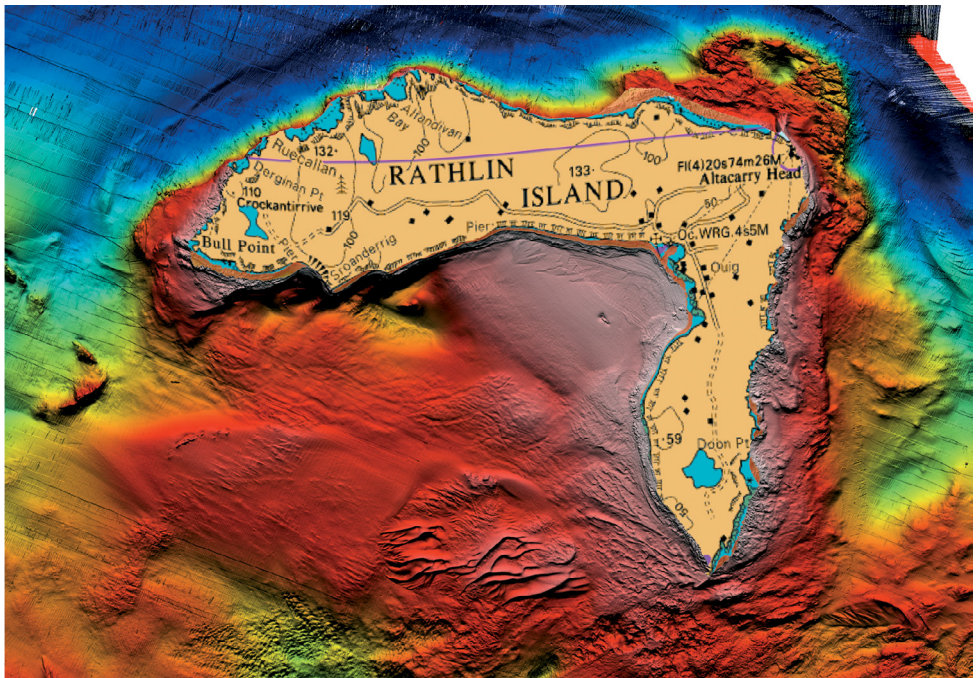
The historic wreck of HMS Drake has been statutorily protected.

The rich marine biodiversity around Rathlin Island also supplies a fresh local resource for sustainable pot fishing, sea fishing and aquaculture.

In recognition of Rathlin Island's importance as a European Marine Site, an active management group now oversees the protection of its coastal and marine environment.

## Underwater Marine life

Rathlin Island is widely recognised as a special location for divers because of its clear, clean waters, broad range of marine habitats and high species diversity. In fact, more than half of the island's biodiversity is found beneath the sea.



*Bathymetric chart of seabed around Rathlin Island*



*Razorbills resting on a cliff edge*

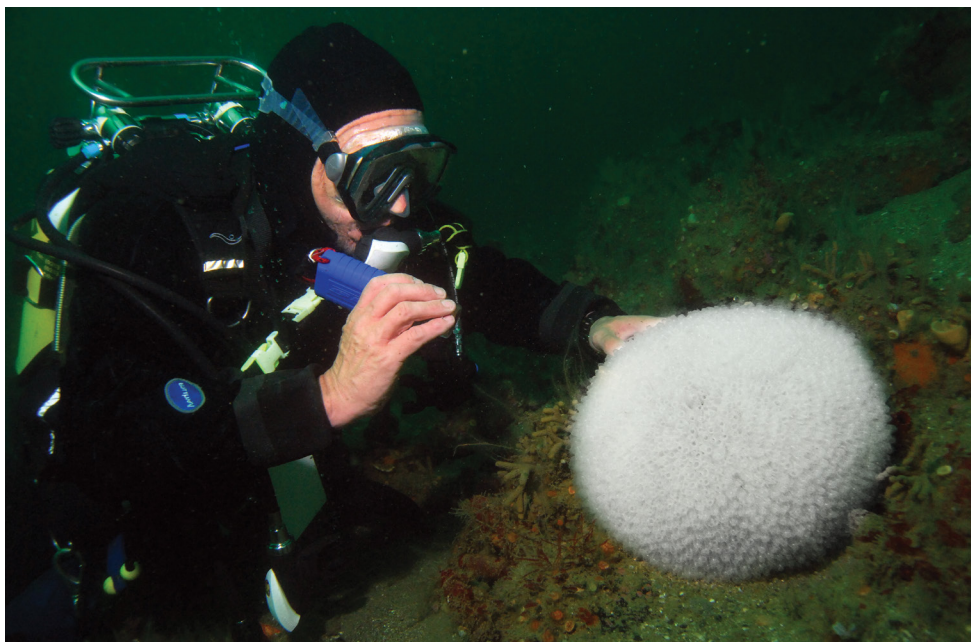
The Joint Irish Bathymetric Survey (JIBS) project used multibeam sonar to produce high resolution bathymetric and seabed maps around Rathlin Island. This gives information on seabed type to one metre accuracy and is a huge improvement on the existing charts for the area which were Victorian in vintage

and compiled from lead line soundings with sextant positioning.

Sea depths to the immediate north west of Rathlin Island are the greatest of any to be found off the coast of Northern Ireland, exceeding 250 metres at their deepest!

Reef habitats include submerged limestone and basalt cliffs as well as the better known rocky outcrops on the seabed.

Sea caves also occur on the north side of the island, to depths of more than 60 metres. Partially submerged sea caves are used by breeding grey seals, safe from human disturbance and predators.



*DAERA diver studying football sea squirt*





*Grey seal pup in white lanugo coat*

In total, more than 530 marine species have been recorded around Rathlin Island, including 26 Priority Marine Species of national importance. In 2005, 28 species of sponge - entirely new to science - were discovered during surveys of underwater cliffs and rocky reefs, out of a current total of 146 species known to occur around Rathlin Island. Scientific research is now

beginning to unlock the hidden potential of chemicals within sponges for the development of new antibiotics and anti-cancer drugs.

Several marine species recorded here are rare (or absent) in the rest of Britain and Ireland.

## Marine Megafauna

The waters around Rathlin Island provide a rich habitat for cetaceans (whales, dolphins and porpoises), seals, basking sharks, common skate and even rare marine turtles. These charismatic marine species are protected from intentional or reckless disturbance, taking, harming and killing under European or national wildlife legislation.



*Yellow staghorn sponge, North Wall*



*Basking shark filter feeding just beneath the surface*

Bull Point provides an exceptional view over the waters to the north and west of Rathlin Island.

In recent years, humpback whales and killer whales have been seen from this headland, in addition to more common harbour porpoise, bottlenose dolphins and minke whales. There have been some remarkable whale strandings close to Bull Point in recent decades, including the deep diving sperm whale.

Basking sharks, once hunted off the Irish coast but now a protected species under the Wildlife (NI) Order, are regularly seen from shore and encountered by divers visiting the island.

Quiet inlets at Mill Bay and Rue Point provide a sheltered habitat for harbour and grey seals to rest, breed and rear

their young. Take great care not to disturb these vulnerable marine mammals as they are also protected by law.

**Seals are protected from intentional or reckless disturbance, injuring and killing. The penalty for these offences can be up to £5000 or up to six months imprisonment, or both.**



*Adult grey seal hauled out to rest at low tide*

## Useful Links

Wide ranging advice on marine nature conservation and the work of Marine and Fisheries Division is available at: **[www.daera-ni.gov.uk/topics/marine](http://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/topics/marine)**

Sightings and strandings of cetaceans can be reported to the Irish Whale and Dolphin Group at: **[www.iwdg.ie](http://www.iwdg.ie)**

For advice on viewing marine wildlife sensitively, visit the WiSe Scheme website at: **[www.wisescheme.org](http://www.wisescheme.org)**

Information on Marine Protected Areas is available at:  
**<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/marine-protected-areas>**

Further information on visiting Rathlin Island is available on the Rathlin Development & Community Association website at **[www.rathlincommunity.org](http://www.rathlincommunity.org)**

The European Marine Site Management Scheme and Local Biodiversity Action Plan for Rathlin Island are available at:  
**[www.rathlincommunity.org/page/nature-land-sea#emsms](http://www.rathlincommunity.org/page/nature-land-sea#emsms)**

The scheduling documentation for HMS Drake is available at:  
**[www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/hms-drake-scheduling-documentation](http://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/hms-drake-scheduling-documentation)**



*Rocky reefs festooned with anemones, hard corals and sponges*

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