

Ruby Free is an award-winning Campaigner, Writer and Conservation Biologist based in County Antrim. Passionate about saving nature and reconnecting people to it, she's worked and volunteered in the environmental conservation sector since she was 16 and has been named one of the 100 most influential Environmental Professionals in the UK on the ENDS Power List.

Since living on Rathlin Island and moving to Ballyconnelly Farm, Ruby has pursued an MSc in Ecological Management and Conservation Biology, which took her to another island off the coast of Canada where she conducted her research thesis.

Back home in Ireland, Ruby has been working away at Ballyconnelly Farm with her partner Craig, setting up a community growing space and rewilding areas of the farm for nature. Alongside her passion of nature-writing, these days any spare opportunities to unwind are spent adventuring with her dog Isla, surfing, growing food or illustrating.

**John Barry, Professor of Green Political Economy and
Co-Chair Belfast Climate Commission**

An honest account and unapologetic appreciation of the beauty of and necessity for us to care for nature.

With childlike joy and curiosity, Ruby Free brings a fresh pair of eyes and an open heart to Rathlin Island. I have been going there for twenty years but Ruby brings to life its vitality, vibrancy and unpredictability in all its natural glory. The book can be read as a 'love poem' to the island in gratitude for all it provided her. But more than that, the book not only offers an eloquent and unaffected experience of the more than human world, but it is a young woman's experience.

The book charts how in 'digging where she stands', and in connecting with people and place, she also connects with herself. She looks at nature and knows the scientific name and ecological function of what she sees, but what makes this book unique is that she also feels what she sees, as well as knowing the stories and meaning of nature. *Rathlin, A Wild Life* conveys the how and what of nature, but also the why.

The book is a tremendous achievement and all the more welcome for being a small but important ray of local light in the dimming and globally turbulent times we live in. If what we need to do in relation to our planetary crisis is to 'save the whole by saving the parts', Free's *Rathlin* is a beautifully written example of a place-based way to start. After all, we cannot save that which we neither know about nor love, and *Rathlin, A Wild Life* shows us how to do both.

For peace, people and planet.

Claire Barnett, RSPB NI Area Manager (East)

Rathlin Island is a very special place. Every corner turned you encounter something magical – the views, the wildlife, the history, the people. It's a place where I feel grounded. Ruby's writing, her storytelling, brings the essence and beauty of Rathlin direct to the reader.

I so enjoyed reading this book. Ruby's energy, passion and charm is, and always will be, contagious.

She is an incredible advocate for nature, a reasoned, knowledgeable and poetic voice and I can't wait to see what she does next.

Rathlin

A Wild Life

Island Living, Seabirds
and Extraordinary Gifts
from Nature

Ruby Free

Introduction

In 2021, I was offered a dream job with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), which meant living and working on Rathlin Island, a Special Area of Conservation, renowned for its diverse wildlife, beautiful scenery and rich heritage. With internationally important seabird populations, I was immersed in the colony's smelly, busy, brilliant world for one season and through this book, I hope to take you there with me.

Positioned off the north coast of Ireland, Rathlin is the wildest, most biodiverse place I have ever lived; the first place with a larger biomass of wild species than human life. What a beautiful, rare thing. But for most of human history, our species lived amongst the natural world, not against it nor apart from it. Ten thousand years ago – which in the scale of earth's history is just a speck of time – animal biomass existed as 1 per cent humans and 99 per cent wild animals. Today, it's 32 per cent humans, 1 per cent wild animals and 67 per cent livestock. Earthly systems are out of kilter, we are disconnected from wild places and are suffering as a result.

I came to Rathlin to protest against this reality. To not just love nature but reside alongside it. I wanted to wake up every day and know I was contributing to something good. I longed to inhabit wild spaces, alongside endangered species experiencing steep decline, and live in a way that would not hinder their existence but help to conserve it. I'm so glad I did, because it changed me forever.

Nature underpins all of us – the healthier it is, and the closer we can live to it, the more we thrive. Through the process of evolution, because of our close relationship with nature, human brains formed positive chemical reactions to the sights and sounds that signposted survival. The dawn chorus signals that the harsh winter is over and the reassuring sound of trickling water brings us comfort because it tells us we aren't to dehydrate. This is one of the many reasons that nature gives us such joy – it belongs in our lives because we are nature, not some separate entity.

Rathlin Island gave me so much; amazing nature encounters, but more than that, it connected me to a way of living and thinking I'd not experienced before.

It taught me important truths that remain with me now.

Truths we cannot and must not suppress.

Currently there's an ecological 'elephant in the room'. While two thirds of the population worry about climate change, most of us do not speak about it, causing a phenomenon called 'climate silence.' This silence has come about for several reasons, with one of the main drivers being how politicised and polarising the conversation surrounding the climate and ecological crisis has become. But it's so important we have these conversations because the more informed and empowered we all feel, the better collective actions we can make.

We do not need any particular qualification to understand what's happening to the natural world. Conservation doesn't have to be our vocation in order for us to discuss it with those around us. There's a misconception that we have to do 'environmentalism' perfectly or fit into a label or category – be a scientist, green-fingered hippie or young person – to be vocal and care. This isn't true, not least because it's in all of our interests to live in a safe and habitable world. It's going to take a wealth of diverse individuals to save nature, and also to get

the transition from where we are now to where we need to be right. But of course, being a human right now can be mentally exhausting. The size of the burden that we consciously or sub-consciously take on to do right for our planet has often made it easier to disengage. It's hard to know where to start – or begin again – to care for nature and, even better, make a positive impact to it, but I hope this book can help.

Whether you're a nature nerd struggling with eco-anxiety or a nature novice not yet aware of the issues facing biodiversity, the best first step is to take a physical one into a wild landscape; to understand it, to feel fascinated by it and to cherish it. Once you have renewed that connection with nature – whether it be the mushrooms lining your garden path, the geese at your local pond or a pod of dolphins dancing off the coast – then advocating for it will come much more easily.

Changing your neighbours' hearts and minds is of equal value to a scientific paper that predicts nature's decline. Knowing the facts is great, but what good are they if we don't use them? We have the power to make a difference and communication is our greatest tool. On Rathlin, narrating the nature in front of me to visitors was my day-to-day job, and I soon found it was an incredibly important one. I had a duty to educate others about wildlife, to make visitors fall utterly in love with nature, to encourage them to pay closer attention to the intricacies of the natural world; the little, the large, the soil, the seaweed. Because to protect something with all our might, we must love it.

I hope that this story – not of my life, but of a period of time that changed my life – gives you hope but also highlights the need for action on the nature and climate crisis and empowers you to find your role in this movement.

Chapter 1

Arriving

Not all those who wander are lost.

Late April: milky sea mist, blue skies, summer on the tip of everyone's tongues. With my feet planted on the concrete slipway of Ballycastle harbour, I looked across to Rathlin Island. The smell of seaweed made my nose tingle as nerves knotted in my stomach. It was time to board the *Spirit of Rathlin*, the ferry to my new life.

A smiley ferryman guessed I was the new RSPB person and guided me to the level on the boat that was the best for seeing cetaceans and seabirds. 'Right, I'm in a rush, have to be off. Enjoy!' he said. 'Thank you very much,' I called as he left, noticing how embarrassingly English I sounded amongst the surrounding crowd.

Not long after we left Ballycastle harbour, Fairhead started to dominate the horizon and gannets swept past my eyeline. It felt as though the moaning seals at Rue Lighthouse were drawing us closer to Church Bay and the enamel white cottages on Rathlin started to shine in the sun. A forty-five minute, relatively wobbly journey across the sound was alleviated by the scenes that surround me. I clung to my suitcase and clutched my camera as we neared the turbulent waters surrounding the island; so green, ragged and rocky. We docked.

Rachele, my soon-to-be manager and occasional housemate, was standing by the harbour wall frantically waving. I had only met Rachele through a Zoom call and I wanted to make an

excellent first impression, so I let the boat empty before me. A deep inhale, exhale, one foot in front of the other – and I had arrived. I had made it to Rathlin. Wow.

Rachele greeted me warmly and led me to our cottage, situated at the heart of Church Bay. After a walk of no more than a minute, we arrived to a garden of overgrown rapeseed that looked as though it had sown itself some time ago. It was clear we were the first inhabitants in a while. The RSPB had recently bought the property to house whoever would be willing to stay for a six-month stint, working as an officer at the West Lighthouse Seabird Reserve. The rippling teal water was so close to the cottage that it reflected glassy light patterns onto the cracked yellowy walls. There was a window shaped like a porthole in the centre of the building – it was a house built like a ship, ready for anything Rathlin's weather could throw its way. Inside there was no furniture, not even a bed. The emptiness felt daunting. It was just Rachele and me, a mattress and a ridiculous amount of tinned food.

I unpacked my leaking toiletries and then gazed out of my new bedroom window in shock. Although I'd known for months that I was coming, the reality smacked me in the face. The length of time ahead of me seemed overwhelming, but it was reassuring to realise that this breathtaking view would be the last thing I'd see at night and the first in the morning.

Given that I was going to be here a while, mostly on my own, I wanted to make my room feel like home. Beside my mattress, I put a whale tail statue that I'd bought in Cornwall just days after seeing my first humpback whale – it's a little good luck charm. There was also a book – Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* – a sketch pad, and, most importantly, a diary.

Arriving in a new place, most folk would scout it out using maps or books, but I decided to set off and let the island

surprise me. I convinced a tired Rachele to come with me just before nightfall. We headed west, to a hill just beyond where we'd docked. Mesmerised by flickering lights on the mainland, miles away, we contemplated the remoteness of our location. 'What have we done?' joked Rachele.

The sun slipped away past the headland so we headed back. At the cottage I made a vat of curry that would last a week. Before going to bed, I collected my thoughts by the kitchen window, taking in the peace of the harbour. My mum texted to see how I was doing as the waves lapped the shore outside. I usually slept badly so had downloaded an app with wave sounds to soothe me to sleep. Now I had the real thing.

The next morning, I woke with the sun. My plan was to leave my cottage at dawn and walk in a straight line to see where the island would take me. Within the space of an hour, I had walked to the far west of the island, passing the Viking settlements I'd read about, hidden caves, and a wildflower meadow rich in buttercups, foxgloves and clover. Cowlease is rare – I'd seen very few fields beaming with life like this before, which isn't surprising – in the UK, we've lost 97 per cent of our wildflower meadows since 1930.

I started documenting what I saw in my diary. Within a few miles I had noted six habitats and sixteen species I'd never seen before. My list included five kinds of insect, one being a rose chafer, a fluorescent green beetle bright enough to blind someone. There were ten new birds, including a greenfinch that I spotted perched on a planter in a wonderfully wild garden. I also saw a donkey, who gave me lots of attention.

I sat down for a well-earned tea break on a headland just beyond the West Light Seabird Centre, my soon-to-be place of work, and heard a stonechat chatting, as if congratulating me on the completion of my first proper hike. Darts of black

and white shot across the sky – toing and froing, seabirds were collecting beakfuls of sticks, seaweed and grass to make their nests. For many of them, it would be their first year making their precious nest. Seabirds exhibit strong site fidelity and return to the location they once hatched when they reach sexual maturity, three to five years after they first fledge. It blows my mind that they can find their way home to Rathlin after spending so much time away from it.

A raven interrupted my thoughts with a loud squawk. There was a disturbance on the cliffs below, forcing hundreds of seabirds to rocket from their roosts. Another call echoed above, so loud and so different to the raven's that I soon realised I was in the presence of something much bigger ... white-tailed sea eagles!



At first, I was slightly intimidated since these birds' wingspans are much wider than I am tall – but thankfully I wasn't on their menu. After my heart finished racing, I sat in astonishment for thirty minutes as the pair glided around the sea cliffs ahead. For all the years I'd lived in Dorset I'd hoped to see a sea eagle but I never had. I could hardly believe that early on my first day on Rathlin I'd seen two. With brown body plumage and a conspicuously pale tail, it's like this raptor

has been dunked into a pot of white paint. In flight it has broad wings with ‘fingered’ ends that look like a hand waving. This species was driven to extinction in the UK during the twentieth century – the present population is descended from reintroduced birds. Knowing this, I waved to the sky with immense joy.

White-tailed sea eagles are flexible, opportunistic hunters, often stealing food from other birds. The pair in front of me were attempting to snatch the ravens’ catch directly from their claws, hence the almighty display and the disturbance on the cliffs.

If my time on Rathlin was due to play out like my first morning, I was in for a treat.

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Rathlin has a fluctuating population of 150. Many people have a strong family history on the island going back generations, but a large proportion have arrived from elsewhere in search of a different lifestyle. I think the tonic that draws people to the island or makes them stay is the quality of life.

My mum, who is a carer for my younger sister, called to tell me that a friend of hers from a Facebook support group lives on Rathlin. What a coincidence. This friend, Jane, had seen my mum’s gushingly proud social media posts about me securing a dream job on an island and had got in touch to say it was the island she lives on. My mum forwarded me Jane’s number and told me to reach out, so I did. ‘If you ever need anything, don’t hesitate to ask; if your friends want to stay, I have spare accommodation to the east; if you run out of food, my husband commutes on and off the island most days, so, just reach out if you need anything! I can be your island mum.’