

## Five (plus one) go off to Amble by Gaynor Allen

Many veteran Eskmuthe members will remember promises of a row around Coquet Island to see the puffins from way back when. We went to Amble's first regatta in 2015 with a promise of circumnavigating the small nature reserve a mile off the beautiful Northumberland coast. The weather stopped the row on that occasion, as it did the following year, but we were treated to a lovely row up the Coquet River and a stop off at the pub along the way so no one was complaining.

We have always promised to go back and finally set a date of June 3 in our diaries. The weather was looking good all week, but then the rain came with us from Musselburgh almost all the way to Amble. Amazingly it stopped when we were ready to row (half an hour later than planned as we'd forgotten to arrange the precise meeting place).

It's always a joy to catch up with our good pals from Amble, and a lovely surprise to have another three crews from Alnmouth, Blyth and Craster. Great stuff!

So off the excited Eskmuthers set, with wildlife-spotter and photographer Kate in the bow, camera ready to catch puffins. Other than rowing from Dunbar a few times, this was our first



real venture into the proper North Sea, and we had the swell to prove it. Hard rowing was required. As we reached the tip of the island, we began to see the occasional puffin and seal and then more seals, and more seals, and more birds – and rowing went out of the window as shouts of 'over there', 'at 1 o'clock,', 'oh my god this is amazing' to 'can we take one home?'. All very understandable, but not necessarily easy to control a boat in rough seas when no-one listens to the cox!!



It didn't take us long to get into calmer waters and find somewhere to stop to have a better look. We were surrounded by seals, and one of them did actually want to come home with us, but that would have meant turfing Kate out of the boat, which seemed a bit harsh.

And then there were the birds – puffins, terns and guillemots, all around. I thought Pauline was speaking in tongues, but it turned out she was so excited and thought she was on one of her bird counting missions she does every so often along The Grove.



Image by Brian Burke, click to link to <http://roseatetern.org/coquet-live.html>

Now for a bit of history and nature information....

St Cuthbert came to Coquet Island more than 1300 years ago, but now the island is home to 35,000 nesting birds (including 30,000 puffins) and is an [RSPB-managed nature reserve](#) and designated SSSI (site of special scientific interest). Boat landings are not permitted and the only folk to follow in St Cuthbert's footsteps are the RSPB wardens. The island is also home to 98 per cent of roseate terns in the UK, and their numbers are growing.

So we wound our way around the island, stopping to marvel at the wildlife and work out how we could sneak a seal into the boat. Maybe one of the smaller ones could sit on Kate's knee? And just when we thought the day couldn't get any more exciting, Brian and Rob called everyone in and we all rafted up. With a twinkle in his eye and his bushy beard, we all know Brian is capable of anything – sometimes bizarre, slightly cheeky and perhaps a tad spiritual. The mass Steelback ceremony didn't disappoint. We are now Steelbacks, named after the North and South Steels, rocks standing sentinel at the end of the island, which will now guard and give us safe passage on our return.



We did as Brian, a direct descendent of St Cuthbert, said. We all donned seaweed on our head (little did we know of the sea creatures that lived within), and repeated the incantation that provides safe passage around the rocky island. Then things got a bit wet as we all used our bailers to wet as many skiffies as possible and became part of the Steelback Race. There are fewer than 50 of us, so we're all very special.

To find out more about this unique ritual take look at:

<https://www.facebook.com/AmbleCoastalRowingClub/videos/1527102937418289/>

After much hilarity and excitement, we settled down for more wildlife spotting before heading back to the marina. On the way the heavens opened, but we were all soaked anyway so who cares?

So tired and happy, about 50 of us piled into Amble's amazing Fish Shack as we realised we were all starving. Fantastic fish and chips by the way and massive portions!



What an amazing adventure. A brilliant day out with friends, fun and fantastic feasts. We'll be back soon guys...

14<sup>th</sup> June, 2018