



Seasearch Scotland: Atlantic to North Sea

Calum Duncan reports on a very productive first six months in 2005 for the Seasearch initiative and is pleased that locally based coordinators are ensuring that the project is active around Scotland

ONLY HALF-TIME and 2005 is shaping up to be yet another bumper year for Seasearch in Scotland. Already we have over 50 records from St Kilda to Stonehaven and historical data is now on the National Biodiversity Network at www.searchnbn.net. With help from our new regional co-ordinators, courses have been run in Glasgow, Stonehaven and Macduff, and weekends to the Moray Firth (last issue), Argyll sea lochs, Pentland Skerries and Aberdeenshire coast organised. Seasearch was also fine-tuned for more detailed work measuring and assessing the condition of northern seafans (*Swiftia pallida*) in the Firth of Lorn.

Seafan safari

On the lip of the wall at 28m *Swiftia* thrived among cup sponges and Devonshire cup corals, whilst holding court on lower ledges were two spectacular spiny lobsters, surveying the 40m depths from their rocky balconies. We had Graham Bruce to thank for sharing this dramatic unrecorded site with us during a trip to the Firth of Lorn in April.

Found mainly on the west coast of Scotland, northern seafans are slender branching colonial corals living on rock and boulders at moderately

exposed sites between 18 and 60m. Although not protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act, unlike their more glamorous southerly cousins the Pink Seafan (*Eunicella verrucosa*), *Swiftia* are still an important species that play host to the tiny sea fan anemone (*Amphianthus dohrnii*), itself subject of a UK Biodiversity Plan.

Although much work has been done measuring and assessing the condition of pink sea fans, the April trip was the first to use such techniques on *Swiftia*. Eight Seasearch divers in RIBs coxed by George Brown and Graham Bruce measured 195 colonies at three sites, whilst *Amphianthus dohrnii* was re-recorded and photographed at the two previously surveyed sites. If you would like to help assess the condition of northern sea fans throughout Scotland, please get in touch.

Owen Paisley now provides an update on other Seasearch activities in the west.

Diving the Edge

The west of Scotland lies not only on the edge of Europe but also on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean. Clear water, oceanic wanderers, islands and sea lochs give a vast scope for Seasearch with the biggest problem being choosing where to go! A Seasearch Observer course held at Glasgow University in early February included shore diving at good old Ardgarten reef in Loch

Long, where one participant recorded the fireworks anemone, *Pachycerianthus multiplacatus*, on the gravel slope just south of Conger Alley proper.

In May, the same small but enthusiastic group of Glasgow University divers organised another weekend of shore diving based in Oban. They had some great diving in Lochs Creran and Melfort. In Loch Creran the team recorded rare serpulid reefs in two locations while in Loch Melfort, after a terrifying drive along a tortuous single track road, they recorded a surprising amount of life on a gently sloping gravel shore, including dogfish, sea pens, burrowing anemones, squatties, scallops and crabs.

Future west coast projects include a Seasearch Observer course in Oban and diving planned for Loch Fyne, the Firth of Lorne and Kintyre peninsula. I am especially keen to hear from any divers able to dive Loch Fyne during the week rather than at weekends.

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North Sea news

Seasearch on Scotland's North Sea coast has never been busier! Local co-ordinator Marion Perutz organised a Seasearch weekend out of Stonehaven and Rosehearty with Alan Bellerby. Thanks to Ken and Alison Farrow and Grampian Sub-Aqua Club, we managed a day's RIB-based Seasearch diving at Stonehaven, accessing sheltered sites around Dunnotar Castle where weird conglomerate reefs provided haven for anemone, hydroid, crab and seaweed. After two aborted weekends in 2003, this was a great result!

Escaping a predicted thunderstorm, we headed north on the Sunday and dispersed divers between Portsoy and Sandhaven. Entranced by the numbers of snake pipefish among the sea oak and having only begun to explore in 12m vis the many swim-throughs, I now also appreciate what a great shore-diving site nor'east divers have in Rosehearty.

■ Marion PERUTZ now reports on an even more spectacular trip.

Pentland Skerries

When Inverness Sub-Aqua Club invited me to join them in a survey dive expedition to the Pentland Firth off the northeast tip of Scotland I was kind of dubious at the thought of jumping into a stretch of sea renowned

for being one of the roughest in the British Isles. However, summer came early on May 14-15 when 11 divers led by George Brown from Inverness eagerly ventured in. Surprisingly, for being so close to Scapa Flow, one of the world's most famous dive sites, very little is known about the habitats and species of this stretch of coastline. Therefore, this Seasearch weekend was venturing into exciting new territory.

We arrived at Duncansby Head to find thousands of seabirds hailing us into their city. The spectacular cliffs, stacks, arches and tunnels are home to an abundance of avian life. Diving down with the birds, we entered an equally amazing world beneath the waves. The impressive rock formations continue underwater with caves penetrating far into the side of the cliffs.

On first glance the wave-swept walls appear devoid of life but more careful examination reveals a remarkable blanketing of colourful sponges and ascidians. In the caverns, the darker faces are lined with a covering of eerie looking bryozoans called Alcyonidium. Where the sun can penetrate, it illuminates a brilliant display of the flower-like hydroid, Tubularia indivisa. A bright red sea scorpion lurked in a crevice near the entrance of a tunnel. Rounding the corner onto the seaward side, we found the walls sparkling with countless numbers of jewel anemone in fluorescent pink, yellow and purple.

On crossing the Firth over to the islands of the Pentland Skerries we found ourselves in the midst of terns, puffins, skuas, porpoise, and a vast colony of grey seals piled up on the rocks. These seals curiously followed us as we explored the underwater environment, equally diverse here as across the Firth. After breaking through a kelp

forest, we found walls of soft corals dotted with anemones and, offshore from the islands, sand eels darting out of a sand bank being bombarded by the terns and puffins.

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With Seasearch weekends planned for Rosehearty on July 2-3, Lossiemouth on MV *Top Cat* on August 6-7 and space available on a Seasearch trip to Skye (August 20-23), the second half of the year should be even busier. If interested in the Rosehearty weekend contact Marion and for other trips contact myself on scotland@mcsuk.org or 0131 226 6360.

The MCS Scottish Officer post is supported by Scottish Natural Heritage, SEPA, The Russell Trust, The Hugh Fraser Foundation and Tay Charitable Trust.

Seasearch is co-ordinated by the Marine Conservation Society (MCS) on behalf of the Seasearch Steering Group which comprises MCS, Scottish Natural Heritage, English Nature, Countryside Council for Wales, Joint Nature Conservation Committee, the Environment Agency, The Wildlife Trusts, Marine Biological Association, British Sub Aqua Club, Scottish Sub Aqua Club, Professional Association of Diving Instructors, Sub Aqua Association, Nautical Archaeological Society and independent marine life experts.



PHOTO CREDITS P34 top: University of Glasgow divers completing their Seasearch qualification forms by Conger Alley (courtesy Calum Duncan); P34 bottom: A sunstar starfish crawls slowly across the sandstone cliffs below Duncansby Head lighthouse (courtesy George Brown); This page: Northern Sea Fan at Sgeir Mhogalach, Eilean Dubh Mor, Firth of Lorn (Chris Wood).

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