

Deep Rock To Shallow Shores

ANY DIVE CAN BE A SEASEARCH DIVE

MCS's Calum Duncan provides an update on the Seasearch project around Scotland...

CRUMBS! LIKE miniature bulldozers, the 'chocolate-chip cookie' sea slugs were rasping barnacles off the bedrock slabs everywhere you looked. Among the grey boulders into which the slabs sloped, bright orange starfish stood out, a bigger find than you might think. *Stichastrella rosea* is an uncommon northern starfish, yet with two or more recorded per short non-decompression dive, they were at a comparatively high density.

Following a successful April weekend, we had returned in August to dive out of Lossiemouth on the *MV Top Cat*. Skipper Bill Ruck suggested Hopeman Reef would be good for Seasearch, since it is rarely dived, lying as it does 30m beneath the Moray Firth with no wreck or shallow reef in site. To the uninitiated it may appear relatively barren, but with the knowledge there is always something to see, the army of thumbnail-sized sea slugs and clutch of rare orange starfish revealed by torchlight brought it alive.

Piscopolis

Following the infamous curried spuds, we headed for the kelpy shallows of Queen Street Reef, which over the summer had become a teeming aquarium. A whopping 18 species of fish were recorded, from ling lurking in crevices and striped bib camouflaged in kelp to cuckoo, ballan and goldsinny wrasse patrolling their (algal) turf. Not to mention the butterfly, gobies and best of all, prompting a Mediterranean double-take, a trio of red mullet. Although found all round the British Isles, the latter are generally uncommon, with numbers in the English Channel and North Sea swelling in summer perhaps due to migrations from southerly regions like the Med.

Despite inshore white horses on the Sunday, Bill's experience in cruising *Top Cat* through them paid dividends, since offshore the sea was manageable. Two

miles north of Lossiemouth, the fishing vessel *MV Unity* lies upright on clean rippled sand at 30m, creating a textbook wreck dive.

Descending the shot, the largely intact boat was plainly in view through the 15m visibility. Closer inspection revealed a hull covered in plumose anemones, dead mens fingers, *Sagartia* anemones, hornwrack, barnacles and more of our choc-chip friends (*Onchidoris bilamellata*) munching away. Looking up revealed the piece de resistance, a shoal of golden codlings circling the wreck, hopefully a view that divers will be able to enjoy for years to come.

Seasearch Sula

Elsewhere on the Moray coast, a July weekend's diving organised by Northeast Scotland co-ordinator Marion Perutz with 58 Degrees North was also a great success. Records were returned from Redhyne Point, Collie Head and Troup Head, Scotland's oft-overlooked yet only mainland gannet colony, bringing the total from Northeast Scotland this year to over 70. On the same weekend beneath a gannetry that has received rather more limelight, and its fair share of guano, an excellent MCS members' trip to the Bass Rock organised by Fiona Crouch elicited another 15 records from Scotland's east coast.

Fyne weather

Whilst a Seasearch weekend to Fife Ness had to be postponed due to inclement weather, sheltered Loch Fyne posed no problems for Owen Paisley. With Oban ScotSAC and Dunstaffnage Marine Lab staff members, the Seasearch west coast co-ordinator organised a weekend *Pachycerianthus* search in the upper reaches of our longest sea loch. The spectacular fireworks anemone (*Pachycerianthus multiplicatus*) is a Scottish specialty, 'exploding' from burrows deep in the sheltered muds of some sea lochs.

In contrast, Owen's Seasearch weekend to Kilbrannan Sound revealed a surprisingly lush garden of red and brown



Photos from top:
The uncommon northerly starfish Stichastrella rosea (Fiona Crouch); *Red mullet on Queen Street Reef* (Calum Duncan); *A mass of Onchidoris bilamellata and their eggs* (Alison Fish)

seaweeds sheltering dragonets, dogfish, crabs, starfish and, for Beatles fans everywhere, octopus.

With almost 200 Seasearch Observation and Survey forms returned from throughout Scotland in 2005, it looks set to be another bumper year. Having Marion Perutz in Aberdeen and Owen Paisley in Tarbert has certainly increased local support for Seasearch. Since the last article, Marion has run courses in Cumbria and Inverness and Owen in Oban, both subsequently qualifying as Seasearch tutors. Most of the data up to 2004 can be viewed at www.searchnbn.net

If you want to get involved with Seasearch, call Calum on 0131 226 6360 or email him at scotland@mcsuk.org


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