



# Fanshell Found In Lochalsh

**2005 was an other busy year for the Seasearch project with a record number of participants. A highlight was Seasearch stalwart George Brown's recording of a rare fanshell in Lochalsh. Conservation correspondent Calum Duncan reports on the important finds of 2005 ...**

FROM THE Isle of Arran to St Kilda, the Isle of Skye to the Pentland Firth, a record 271 Seasearch records were sent in last year by dozens of dedicated divers. The busy year for the Marine Conservation Society (MCS) coordinated project also included observer courses in Glasgow, Stonehaven, Oban, Lossiemouth, Tarbert (Loch Fyne) and St Andrews, a two-day survey level course in Macduff and the appointment of two new part-time coordinators for northeast and west Scotland.

#### *Giant seashells*

Although scallop divers and trawler fishermen have provided anecdotal accounts of fanshells *Atrina fragilis*, and scallop divers have even transplanted two of these large endangered bivalves into Loch Carron, there had been no verified Scottish sightings of specimens in their natural habitat ... until last year. George Brown, Seasearch stalwart and member of Inverness Sub-Aqua Club, photographed a fanshell in Loch Alsh in March 2005.

As the lead partner for the fanshell Biodiversity Action Plan, MCS launched a national survey to find these endangered seashells in late 2003. As an indication of their rarity,

between 1987 and 1998 professional marine life surveys at almost 9,000 sites around Britain recorded not even one.

In locations where they were previously sighted, two dedicated Seasearch trips involving over 50 dives in 2003 even failed to find a single fanshell. Verified reports are now trickling in, including in 2004 at least five individuals off Plymouth, a short list to which, thanks to George, the Loch Alsh specimen can now be added.

#### *Moray Magic*

As well as recording rare species, Seasearch has the scope to help map those that may be climate change indicators. Records in 2005 of red blenny at St Kilda, John Dory near Achiltibuie and red mullet off Lossiemouth may bear this out, although previous absence of evidence was not necessarily evidence of absence! Regardless, as sea surface temperatures increase, Seasearchers have a key role to play in monitoring possible retreats and advances of respective cold and warm water species.

Other highlights in northeast Scotland, a particular focus last year, included comparatively large densities of the rare northerly starfish *Stichastrella rosea* on reefs off Hopeman, and the first verified records of a spiny lobster *Palinurus elephas* in the Moray Firth.

Thanks to northeast Scotland co-ordinator Marion Perutz, Stonehaven diver Alan Bellerby and George Brown organising a range of trips, an

impressive 107 Seasearch records were returned from Duncansby Head to Dunnotar Castle.

#### *Go West*

On the sunset coast, new records were returned from unsurveyed reefs off Trotternish, Skye and by the Community of Arran Seabed Trust (COAST) from a large area of spectacular anemone-rich gullies off Pladda, south of Arran. In the Firth of Lorn, previously recorded populations of the rare sea-fan anemone, *Amphianthus dohrnii*, were re-confirmed and measurements made for the first time on their hosts, the northern sea-fan *Swiftia pallida*.

The sea-fan anemone and pink sea-fan are both Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) species for which MCS, as joint lead partner with The Wildlife Trusts, coordinates research activities and provides advice on their protection. For consistency with its rosier southern cousin, MCS recommends that the northern sea-fan should also be subject of a BAP.



Photographs -  
above: Spiny squat lobster in Loch Fyne (Calum Duncan/MCS)  
& top of page: A rare fanshell in Loch Alsh with sea loch  
anemones, shore urchin and common brittlestar (George Brown)

*Fyne examples*

On trips organised by west Scotland co-ordinator Owen Paisley, the first records from Kilbrannan Sound were made, some of which recorded scallop-dredge damage to the seabed, and spectacular fireworks anemones were relocated in Loch Shira, an arm of Loch Fyne.

Owen sums it up thus: "Local divers who have been diving the west coast for 20 or more years say that Seasearch gives their diving a new sense of purpose as well as providing the opportunity to be involved in practical marine conservation. It's also great fun!"

Embodying the Seasearch ethos, MCS members Ron Crosby and Gordon Fletcher travel from Cumbria to Loch Fyne and beyond every year. With Preston Sub-Aqua Club they came searching in November 2005 for scores of sea mice, *Aphrodita aculeata*, as Gordon had seen in 2004. Although finding only one, their enthusiasm remains undaunted and they will return again in 2006 in search of the elusive annelids.



*Sea-fan anemone on northern sea-fan*

**Seasearch Scotland 2006**

Why not share the 'diving with a purpose' Seasearch experience. A number of activities have already been organised for 2006:

25-26 March - Fife Ness diving by RIB; 1-2 April - Helmsdale, Sutherland, Moray Firth on *MV Top Cat*; 6-7 May - Seasearch Surveyor Course, Isle of Cumbrae; 20 May - Fish Identification Course with Frances Dipper at Deep Sea World; 19-24 June - Kinlochbervie and Handa Island on *MV Peregrine*; 14-17 July - Barra on *MV Peregrine*.

Introductory Seasearch Observer courses can also be organised on request. If you want to get involved call Calum on: 0131 226 6360 or email: [scotland@mcsuk.org](mailto:scotland@mcsuk.org) Marion can be contacted at: [seasearch\\_nescotland@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:seasearch_nescotland@yahoo.co.uk) and Owen at: [seasearch.west@btinternet.com](mailto:seasearch.west@btinternet.com).

To find out more visit [www.seasearch.org.uk](http://www.seasearch.org.uk) or [www.mcsuk/dives](http://www.mcsuk/dives). Remember - any dive can be a Seasearch dive!



*Seasearchers catch up with administration over a working lunch*

**CALUM DUNCAN**

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