

In the second and concluding part of her feature on diving in New Zealand, Jane Burnett introduces us to some remarkable underwater life ...



# Finding Fiordland

words & pictures JANE BURNETT

ARRIVING AT Bluff Harbour at the southern end of South Island, we boarded our home for the next 8 days. *Breaksea Girl* is a 65' motor sailing yacht; designed as a charter vessel with room for 12 passengers plus crew, she is superbly equipped and extremely comfortable. Lance Shaw, the skipper/owner, runs Fiordland Ecology Holidays with his wife Ruth. They specialise in providing natural history cruises with minimum impact on the environment. Their brochure promises 'an unforgettable experience where you will become involved with nature'. They mean what they say.

Before heading for Fiordland, however, we wanted to dive Stewart Island. The 32km-wide Foveaux Strait, which separates it from the mainland, can be a wild place and we were unable to cross that evening. However, the boat's engines started up at dawn and when we surfaced from our bunks we

found ourselves in Paterson Inlet for breakfast.

Stewart Island is unspoilt and bush-clad. Oban, its only settlement, has a tiny population that makes its living from tourism and fishing. The island is home to a variety of native birds and is one of the few places where the endangered kiwi and kakapo (the world's only flightless parrot) still survive in the wild. Both species are nocturnal and protected, we didn't see either but we did come across another flightless bird, the weka, as well as bellbirds and black NZ robins.

Underwater, Stewart Island was fascinating. We dived in the marine reserve around Ulva Island. It is distinctly different from North Island both in water temperature (at 14°C it was time to put our gloves on) and in habitat and species. In some ways reminiscent of British diving, yet at the same time, quite different.

The first character we came across was the blue cod. New Zealanders don't leave much to the imagination when it comes to giving common names to creatures. The blue cod is so named because it is extremely blue (although it isn't actually a cod). As soon as we arrived, hovering above the seabed, these delightful fish gathered round to greet us. Propped up on their pelvic fins, they looked up at us with curious eyes. "What are you? Where do you come from?" their expressions seemed to say. After having its photo taken, each fish would shuffle aside so that the next one could move in for its turn. (Later, in Te Anau, Geoff ate one for supper – how could he!).

Not all the natives were quite as friendly. Initially, we were delighted to

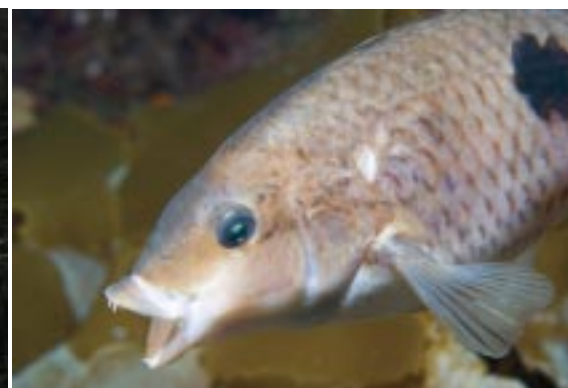
*photo top of page - brachiopods are also known as lamp shells, although they look superficially like bivalve molluscs, the resemblance stops at their shells as inside they are very different*



*banded perch - amid yellow zoanthids at the gut, doubtful sound*



*Breaksea Girl*



*spotty wrasse - they may have big teeth but these wrasse are not aggressive, it was the girdled wrasse that bit us*

find ourselves the centre of attention of a sea lion. On the morning dive, it was not too boisterous and we were thrilled by its speed and grace as it swept past. After lunch, walking on Ulva's beach, we came across our new friend sound asleep and looking as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. Yes, it was a rather large young adult male.

Out on his own and maybe feeling lonely, he thought we would make an ideal harem. As we entered the water for the afternoon's dive, so did the sea lion – and this time he was less shy. A nudge from such a powerful animal, even playfully given, can be a little alarming and we were all quite glad to escape his attentions by the end of the dive.

Following the next day's morning dive, Lance asked us to secure all the dive gear on deck as we were going to sea. The weather was closing in once more and, if we were to keep to schedule, we needed to start the trip back to the mainland immediately after lunch. It was some crossing. We left Oban about 2pm and, with wind and

Where else can you see deep-water black coral trees, reputed to be over 300 years old, at 15-20m? Some can even be found as shallow as 4-5m. Each tree has at least one snakestar (a type of brittlestar) wrapped round its branches. This symbiotic relationship provides the snakestar with titbits of food and a safe lodging.

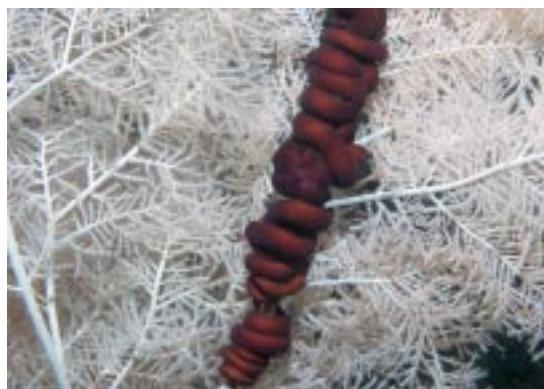
The quid pro quo for the black coral is that it is kept healthy and free from falling debris (that could smother the colony) by the sweeping movements of the snakestars' arms when feeding. Black coral is eerily white; it is the black inner skeleton that earns it its name and from which jewellery is made. It is an endangered species and in NZ protected by legislation. Preservation Inlet is one of the most southerly fiords and is rarely dived due to the difficulties in getting there. But it is worth the trip. It has the best site to see black coral, at Awash Rock, and what a sight it is!

It was also at Awash Rock that I first came across another of New Zealand's fishy characters. The sea perch's local name is, rather mysteriously, 'Jock

are mainly known from their fossils. However, in Fiordland and Stewart Island, they can still be seen in all their glory. They cover many of the cliff-faces and produce a weird sensation as you pass over them. All the shells snap shut as they detect your presence. It's as if the rocks move and very unsettling when it first happens. They may not look like much but they were a reminder to us that we were diving in a very ancient place. Fortunately for the brachiopod, it tastes foul so attracts no commercial interests.

Lance, our skipper, thought we were rather narrow in our interests. We wanted to dive too much. (Only morning, noon and night. What's wrong with that?) He was determined to widen our horizons and periodically tipped us off *Breaksea Girl* into the 'car' (dinghy) and whisked us off to walk on deserted beaches or to experience the marvels of the rainforest.

One of Fiordland's key conservation campaigners, Lance was keen that we should leave knowing something of the area's wider environmental issues. To



the snakestar is only found on black coral, it wraps itself round the black coral stems during the daytime, only moving about and spreading its arms out to feed at night



red coral - another normally deep dwelling species that can be viewed by divers throughout the fiords



crayfish - at the gut, doubtful sound, they are the reason most new zealanders go diving

tide against us, didn't reach safe anchorage in Preservation Inlet until 4.30am the next morning. We let the exhausted crew have a lie-in.

Fiordland National Park is a marvelous wilderness. Situated in the southwest of the South Island it is vast, remote and uninhabited. The mountain slopes are covered in dense rainforest. It rains here something like 200 days a year ensuring the lush growth of beeches, podocarps (native hardwoods including rimu), tree ferns, mosses and lichens. The coastline is deeply indented and the steep-sided mountains continue to plunge down underwater, forming fiords that go to depths over 400m in some areas.

The rain run-off forms a sheet of freshwater several metres deep on top of the denser seawater. This tea-coloured layer, together with the mountain shadows, darkens the water and tricks many deep dwelling species into thinking that they are at about 45m when they are really only at 15m or so.

The diving is, therefore, quite unique.

Stewart'. Why? Who was Jock? I've been unable to find out. Should anyone be able to shed any light on the origins of the sea perch's common name, I'll be most grateful. He's a rather serious wee soul; you could perhaps describe him as dour (have I just put my finger on the trait that gives him a Scottish name there?). He watches your every move and glares at you hoping that you will leave him in peace.

Other deep dwelling species to be seen include five species of sea pen, various types of corals including the spectacular, photogenic red coral, strawberry-coloured holothurians (sea cucumbers), numerous hydroids, anemones, and zooanthids. The water may be dark enough to make seaweeds relatively uncommon but the clarity of the water was superb.

Fiordland is considered to be about the best place on the planet to see brachiopods. 600 million years ago these bivalves dominated the sea but most species were wiped out at the same time as the dinosaurs. Today, they

the casual observer the rainforest looks fabulous. Difficult to get to and vast, what could be the problem? But all is not well, and the forest is under threat from alien species that strip out all the fresh, young shoots (deer and possum) or kill the native birds (stoats).

In Doubtful Sound, we met a team from the NZ Dept. of Conservation (DoC) who were implementing a stoat eradication programme on one of the islands. The stoats were introduced to deal with the rabbit problem. But rabbits are big, fast and on their guard. Far easier, the stoat reasons, to munch your way through the nice plump flightless birds who have no idea what a predator is. The effect has been devastating. In a land that was renowned for its bird life it is somewhat eerie to stand in the rainforest and hear ... silence. DoC has a tough challenge but the Kiwis are rather less coy about eradicating introduced aliens than we are. So perhaps there is hope yet.

We left the calm waters of Preservation Inlet to journey north to Dusky

# Finding Fiordland

Sound. The four-hour trip was bouncy but less exhausting than the trip from Stewart Island. Along the way we were joined by the ubiquitous muttonbirds (sooty shearwaters) as well as various species of albatross that skimmed across the waves around us.

Dusky Sound brought us dolphins, fur seals, crested penguins and the attack of the girdled wrasse. The wrasse weren't very big but they drew blood on more than one occasion where divers had left patches of skin exposed. We spent an afternoon snorkelling or diving with the fur seals and then, on the way to Acheron Passage, we were joined by a pod of 20 bottle-nosed dolphins riding our bow wave.

As we slipped below the water at our dive site just south of the wonderfully named 'Wet Jacket Arm', we had the somewhat bizarre and incongruous experience of seeing an enormous cruise ship, several storeys high, round the corner and bear down on us. We sank quickly into the abyss to escape ...

Our final Fiordland adventures were in Doubtful Sound where we did two dives on a small marine reserve that

So clear was the water, we could already see the reef on the other side. Crossing the gully, we could make out huge orange sea pens scattered across the sea floor at about 40m. The reef, swept by currents pushed through the narrow channel, was spectacular. Covered in yellow zooanthids, black crinoids and red coral it was a marvellous sight but, at 30m, we could only stay for a few brief minutes. Our second dive on The Gut, the following morning, was just as good.

The next day, the rain was coming down in sheets. I was sitting in my bunk packing my camera ready to travel when Tracy, the cook, shouted down to me, "you'll want to see this". I grabbed my Nikon and climbed up on deck.

We were heading out of Crooked Arm where we'd spent the night. On either side the mountains towered above us. Last night, as we'd sailed in, the scenery had been fabulous but no more remarkable than at any other time. Now it was transformed. The water cascaded off the mountain tops in torrents. In some areas, the volume of water was so great, we could hardly make out the forest beneath. I don't think I've ever seen so much water, which is perhaps an interesting thing for a Scot to say! No wonder they call it rainforest.

Regrettably, we had to leave the fiords,

the boat had vanished. Fortunately, it was just sheltering until we were spotted on the surface.

The skipper made a couple of passes before he worked out the best way to approach us. Then Lucy proved that she had been paying attention on her rescue skills course and deftly threw us a line that we could catch first time. Once relieved of my camera (get your priorities right), getting on board was actually easier than it looked and we were soon relaxing over lunch, albeit in the rain, in a nearby cove under a memorial to some guy called Cook.

Disappointed with our morning dive, we nearly called it a day. But it was our last chance to get wet, so we gritted our teeth and set off once more for Long Island. We were glad we did. The weather had settled down and, in a sheltered bay, we went paua (abalone) hunting. We'd all seen the shells but never the beastie inside.

The viz was much better and we passed a very happy hour in rocky, sea weedy shallows. And we found some paua. Long Island is also a land reserve and, bobbing about on the surface waiting to be picked up, we were enchanted to hear a bellbird singing its heart out in the forest.

So that was New Zealand. A marvellous trip, over too soon. Even the demise of our plane on the way home,



*jason mirabilis* - a common NZ nudibranch

goes under the charming name of 'The Gut'. Lance, a diver himself, gave us very explicit directions and chucked us in. As we descended through the most obvious freshwater layer yet, our vision became distorted. I thought I'd forgotten to put my contact lenses in. After a few metres, we entered the seawater and normality returned.

We arrived in a rocky area. Sliced by deep crevices, this was crayfish country. But we were going deep for an afternoon dive so there was no time to stop. Heading down the desert road, we met the Kays coming back. They swept in from across the canyon and their enthusiastic grins suggested that we were in for a treat.

but we had one more destination to visit before going home. We headed off to the most northerly tip of the South Island, to Queen Charlotte Sound and Long Island Marine Reserve, for our final day of diving. As we left Picton Harbour, the sky was blue and the sea calm. We kitted up and sank into almost zero visibility. Yuk! We weren't used to this (at least not in NZ). Being folk who feel cheated if we don't get at least an hour underwater, we persevered.

Eventually, we surfaced ... on another planet. Surely some mistake? When we'd gone in conditions were sunny and peaceful ... we'd come up into a maelstrom! The waves were huge and



*jock stewart* or sea perch - a common bottom dwelling species around Stewart Island and throughout fiordland, the origins of his name are a mystery

resulting in an extra six hours in LA airport, did nothing to diminish our enthusiasm. We'll be back!

Our trip was brilliantly organised by MCS member, Vicki Billings in conjunction with First Light Travel ([www.firstlighttravel.com](http://www.firstlighttravel.com)). Fiordland Ecology Holidays has a website at [www.fiordland.gen.nz](http://www.fiordland.gen.nz). In the Poor Knights we dived with Glenn Edney ([www.oceanblue.co.nz](http://www.oceanblue.co.nz)) and at the Aldermen Islands with Dive Tairua ([www.divetairua.co.nz](http://www.divetairua.co.nz)). Great sources of information are the books 'Fiordland Underwater - New Zealand's Hidden Wilderness' by Paddy Ryan and Chris Paulin and 'Poor Knights Wonderland' by Glenn