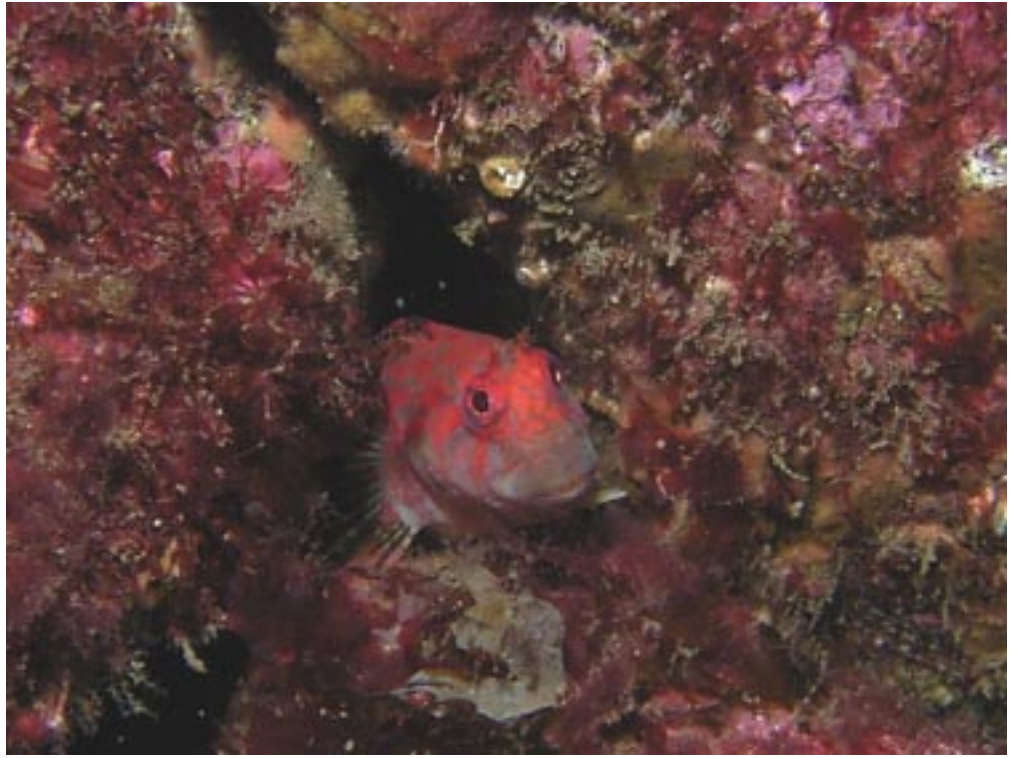


The last few months have been a busy and productive time for the Seasearch project in Scotland. In the Hebrides, the North Sea and at Sanda, intrepid searchers have recorded dozens of sightings that help to build up a fuller knowledge of what's happening in Scottish waters. MCS's Calum Duncan provides an update ...



# Search Party

ON SURVEYING the site, a narrows in Loch Boisdale, South Uist, one of our group later confessed they thought the dive would reveal 'gloopy mud'. Since the tide sweeps back and forth through the shallow channel four times a day, bringing food particles and oxygen in abundance, it actually turned out to be one of the richest sites during our excellent long weekend in the Sea of the Hebrides aboard *MV Peregrine*, an MCS trip organised by Mike Bramham.

*Diversity is in the eye of the beholder*  
Over 50 species were recorded in the narrows including spider crabs, dragonets, spiny squat lobsters, lush seaweeds, red cushion stars and massive bright yellow boring sponge (oxymoron of the Porifera group). Giant white mobile sea cucumbers (*Parastichopus tremulus*) - a deepwater species known

only in shallow water from Canna, Sanday and Loch Boisdale - iced the cake of a great gravel and bedrock dive in only 10m of water, following which our buddy proclaimed it the best dive of the day!

The Small Isles and South Uist trip also included a big slice of more typically scenic dives: kelp-crowned reef overhangs carpeted in kiwi-fruit-green and electric purple jewel anemones; soft-coral clad walls with expansive patches of white cluster anemone (*Parazoanthus anguicomus*) beneath overhangs; sunlit canopies of furbelows kelp (*Sacchoriza polyschides*) up to 3m tall and a rarely dived pinnacle off Muck, patrolled by a large, fearless crayfish (*Palinurus elephas*).

Walls, pinnacles and tideswept reefs undoubtedly make for exciting, dramatic dives, to borrow a hackneyed expression,

they certainly have a 'wow' factor. However, as we clock up the dives, setting the bar so high can be a recipe for disappointment, since many of the 'famous' sites get ticked off, we have to go farther afield to find more dramatic sites, our 'wow' threshold increases and perhaps we lose sight of subtler rewards.

### *Sandy cerianthid surprise*

For example, having made the effort to get to Canna, few perhaps would opt to dive a steep sand slope with boulders on its northeast shoulder, rather than Sgeir a' Phuirt or the Sanday Wall, but there at 33m Mike found the beautiful but rarely seen burrowing sea anemone (*Arachnanthus sarsi*). Although typically, as with the big white sea cucumber, the photographers present didn't get a picture of it, the knowledge we had surveyed a new site with such an exciting

Image at top of page:  
Red blenny in a crevice on a pinnacle off Muck (Chris Wood)



Burrowing anemone *Peachia cylindrica* in sediment at mouth of Loch Eynort, South Uist (Sue Scott)



Wall with *Parazoanthus anguicomus* at mouth of Loch Eynort, South Uist (Sue Scott)

find was ample reward.

Similarly, the Muck pinnacle harboured in nooks and crannies the eponymous Red Blenny (*Parablennius ruber*), rarely recorded and previously oft-mistaken for a Tompot; nestling beneath common dead men's fingers at the mouth of Loch Eynort, were tiny Pink Sea Fingers (*Alcyonium hibernicum*), a rare Scottish sighting (although see the Sanda article); protruding from maerl gravel waves at McKenzie rock were specimens of the solitary hydroid *Corymorpha nutans*; elsewhere unusual anemones like *Peachia cylindrica* and *Edwardsiella burrowed* into muddy gravels; and on rock steps beneath a wall off Loch Boisdale, northern sea fans (*Swiftia pallida*) thrived.

Seasearch is all about helping divers 'get their eye in' to what lives where and getting something out of every dive, no matter how modest. Having said that, on an unforgettable trip we were also treated to a minke whale breaching, common dolphins bow-riding and snorkelling with an 8m basking shark!

#### *Handa bonanza*

Following a Seasearch Surveyor course run in Tarbert in June, which was followed by a dive on the flameshell nests off Port Ann, Loch Fyne, two more trainee Surveyors signed up for Mike's MCS trip to Handa Island. It is to Alan Livingstone's credit that he will skipper his *MV Peregrine Aquastar* to such unexplored territory, travelling all the way from Lochaline to Kinlochbervie in this case.

Wherever he ventures, astutely applying his knowledge of wind and tide assures divers a safe, relaxed, enjoyable trip: 'excellent - great diving, great boat, great company' was a typical account. Captured on film or film were the reliably scenic jewel anemone (*Corynactis viridis*) walls; three John Dory, including two on one dive, spiny lobster, anglerfish, sea fans and 'masses of pipefish'.

In fact, during 2006 many anecdotal reports of pipefish aggregations, along with many other Seasearch observations, have been sent in from St Abbs to Skye. Of course, we also have had plenty of activity co-ordinated by our dedicated west and northeast Scotland Seasearch co-ordinators ...

# Seasearch Sanda

Owen Paisley - Seasearch West Coast Co-ordinator

WHEN I first took on the role of Seasearch co-ordinator in 2005 the name of Sanda Island came up frequently. Sanda sits at the south end of the Kintyre peninsula, eleven miles by sea from Campbeltown, with several holiday homes and, surprisingly enough, a pub looked after by the only full time residents.

Ferocious currents run around the island perhaps explaining why there have been no Seasearch surveys carried out there. However, in early July the weather looked good so a small exploratory expedition was organised.

Whilst I set sail from Tarbert on board the elderly *Ketch Faxi*, Dave Butcher set off from Girvan in *Eastern Dawn*, which had served as dive platform for the Tarber Surveyor course, picking up Howard (who had also attended Tarbert), Don and a RIB from Arran along the way.

Within half an hour of meeting at Sanda a team of four divers set off to dive the south side of Glunimore

Island in the company of grey seals, puffins, guillemots and large shoals of pollock and saith. Visibility was a good 10 metres and the rocky seabed was a maze of gullies and cliffs covered in soft corals, hydroids and anemones. One exciting find by Howard was a rare colony of pink seafingers, the third species of dead mans fingers found in UK waters, and one of very few confirmed sightings in Scotland.

The next morning we started at the ungodly hour of 7am in theory to catch slack water. As it turned out the hour wasn't ungodly enough and although the first pair of divers enjoyed another excellent dive I saw lots of things in passing including my buddy as he was swept along by his SMB.

The plan was to carry out a fourth dive during the afternoon slack water but a forecast NE wind blowing straight into the anchorage put an end to that.

*Faxi* set off for Arran whilst the hardier souls on *Eastern Dawn* carried out another dive before scuttling back.

Community of Arran Seabed Trust diver Howard anticipates doing many more Seasearch dives in the Clyde throughout the summer.

Future plans include some combined diving/sailing expeditions on board the ketch *Sealgair*, a return visit to Sanda, mapping out fire-works anemone (*Pachycerianthus multiplicatus*) distribution in Loch Fyne and looking for native oysters in a west coast sea loch.



Pink sea fingers (*Alcyonium hibernicum*) at Sanda Island (Howard Wood)



John Dory at Handa Island (Laura Withers)



White cluster anemone, *Parazoanthus anguicomus* in outer Loch Boisdale (Calum Duncan/MCS)



Flame shells (*Limaria hians*) off Port Ann, Loch Fyne (Calum Duncan/MCS)

# Seasearch North Sea

Marion Perutz - Northeast Scotland Co-ordinator

THE MORAY Coast is exploding with life this summer, the waters having cleared following the end of the spring bloom. Capel Rock just west of Cullen is a pinnacle rising from 18 metres at the seabed to near the surface. Vertical rock faces and overhangs are festooned with soft corals and anemones and haven for large fish; shoals of saithe, free-swimming conger eels, wolf fish, ling, monkfish, lumpsuckers, cod and bright blue and red cuckoo wrasse.

The many wrecks on the Moray coast are also a magnet for fish including large schools of juvenile gadoids, such as cod, saithe and poor cod. Inshore around Roseheartly and Sandhaven unusually large schools of sandeels have been seen and almost

everywhere you look you see the long, spindly snake pipefish in great abundance.

Watch out for the smaller, more camouflaged crea-



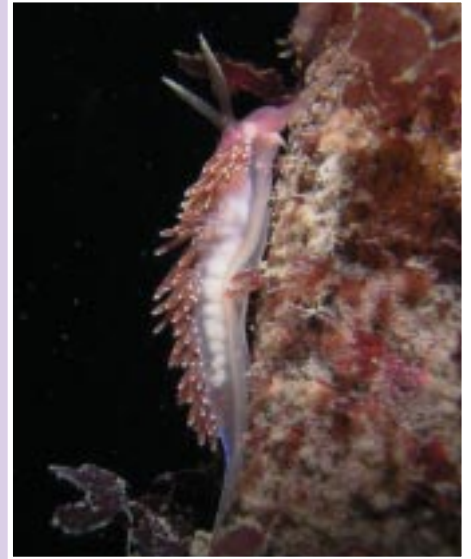
tures too. The sea floor is alive with seahares and seaslugs; the small white and yellow *Polycera faeroensis* and carpets of the sandy coloured *Onchidoris bilamellata*. Look closely on the algae and the hydroids and you may notice the preying mantis-like caprellids or skeleton shrimp.

And the excitement doesn't stop above water. At Trouphead the cliffs are crowded with seabirds at mainland Scotland's only gannet colony, whilst cetaceans are also out in force with many sightings of minke whales and large pods of dolphins.

The Moray coastline presents a huge diversity of habitats and species and yet very little, if any of this had been recorded before last year. A spiny lobster and northern stone crabs, the latter a fairly common sighting, were

for the first time recorded by Seasearch surveyors here in 2005.

Seasearch is uncovering the hidden beauty of this under-recorded



*Above: The sea slug Facelina auriculata off South Uist (Chris Wood) and left: Spiny lobster (Palinurus elephas) on pinnacle west of Muck (Calum Duncan/ MCS)*

coastline, including dives out of Portsoy and Portmahomack already this year. Fascinating rock formations were surveyed offshore from Tarbat Ness yet there are many more places left to explore. A trip to Helmsdale on *MV Top Cat* on September 23-24 is set to reveal more of this underwater world.

So once again, 'any dive can be a Seasearch dive' bringing its own rewards, scenic or microscopic. For details of west Scotland trips and training contact Owen Paisley on 01546 600209, or [seasearch.west@btinternet.com](mailto:seasearch.west@btinternet.com).

For Seasearch Helmsdale and northeast Scotland, contact Marion Perutz on 07745 656978 or [seasearch\\_nescotland@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:seasearch_nescotland@yahoo.co.uk).

For all other enquiries, contact Calum Duncan on 0131 226 6360, email [scotland@mcsuk.org](mailto:scotland@mcsuk.org) or visit [www.seasearch.org.uk](http://www.seasearch.org.uk).



*Seasearch divers returned from South Uist. Alan third from left at back. (MCS)*