

Stop! Galway Goes Green To Red

words & pictures JANE BURNETT



red tubeworms



crab with red worms

Scottish divers don't need to travel too far to see some very exotic marine life. A quick trip across the Irish Sea will do and what you will encounter there may come as a surprise ...

IT'S POPULAR at the moment to head off to South East Asia for a little 'muck diving'; to seek out the many weird and wonderful creatures that make their homes in the less attractive areas of the tropical reefs. It's a fantastic experience. The animals you meet are truly amazing; many are rare, bizarre and hugely photogenic. The seas are warm, the skies blue, the weather calm (well, some of the time!). But you don't have to go halfway round the world to 'muck dive'. It is possible to find the exotic right here on our doorstep.

Take Kilkieran Bay, for instance. On the wild and remote west coast of Ireland, it sits just to the north of Galway Bay. On first arrival in the area, I have to admit I thought it didn't look like much. It's flat, bleak, and desolate. Most of all, it's wet; wet from the high rainfall and wet due to the myriad of small bays and inlets, sea lochs and lagoons that make up this archipelago.

Kilkieran Bay is recognised as an exceptional environment. A Special Area of Conservation, it is deemed to be of particular significance in terms of wildlife conservation not only to Ireland but to Europe too. Both above and below water, its habitats are of outstanding value. On land, the machair grasslands support many wild flowers that thrive in the wet and windy conditions. Round the coastline runs a thin strip of saltmarsh and rare saltwater lagoons are fed by the tides through narrow channels and accentuate the area's watery impression. The islands and surrounding area attract large colonies of seabirds.

Underwater, it is equally distinctive. Fragile beds of live maerl, a curious calcified pink seaweed, can be found in the shallow channels between the many islands. Submerged reefs, bedrock, boulders, dead maerl gravel, sand and soft mud occur along with forests of kelp, areas of seagrass and seaweed and expanses of oyster beds. Each distinctive habitat is home to an extraordinarily diverse and, in some cases, rare assortment of creatures.

Diving in Kilkieran last June, we didn't encounter any other divers apart from a few locals. We visited a range of sites, each very different and boasting a huge variety of species. At the beginning of the week the weather was a little on the inclement side, so we headed a short distance up the coast to Killary Harbour where we could shore dive.

Our objective was to find *Serpula vermicularis*, the red tubeworm. Once underwater, we crossed a small bed of maerl and entered an area of bootlace weed. A large compass jellyfish momentarily distracted us from our mission. Suddenly we realised we were almost on top of the reef with the worms we'd come to see.

These were no ordinary worms. Fabulously coloured in bright red, orange and yellow, they were stunning. I'd only ever seen solitary tubeworms before - these were in tower blocks.

To photograph them we had to be both swift and patient. These guys were very light sensitive and quick to retract their delicate tentacles leaving us with just a picture of empty white tubes. They would come out again if we waited long enough.

As the wind hadn't decreased on our second day, we went shore diving again. This time our target species was *Pachycerianthus multiplicatus*, the fireworks anemone. Previously, I'd only seen these in warmer seas such as around El Hierro in the Canary Islands where you occasionally come across individual specimens. They have a liking for a muddy bottom and so Roskeeda at the northern end of Kilkieran Bay was ideal.

We walked in near the quay and descended a shallow slope onto the mud. There weren't just one or two anemones; they were everywhere. Each one was only a few feet from its neighbour and, interspersed with slender sea pens, they could be seen stretching into the distance in every direction.

With a maximum depth of only 10-11 metres, buoyancy control was crucial. One ill-judged flick of a fin could send up a cloud of sediment to engulf you and everything around you. The anemones were a spectacular sight. Burrowing deep into the mud, their tubes can be a metre in length. But, it's their tentacles that give them their common name. Spanning up to 30cm and shimmering with colour in our torchlight, we could almost hear Handel.

The weather improved throughout the rest of the week so we were able to get out on the hardboat and visit



hermit crab



"jammie dodger"

several of the more inaccessible sites. Our skipper, himself a diver and extremely knowledgeable about the local marine life, could drop us on all the most interesting sites with accuracy and advise us of the key species likely to be seen.

Each site was different and had its own attractions. Diving the maerl beds was especially memorable. Never more than five metres deep and perfectly suspended a few inches above the beds, we let the current take us with it. The brown-tinted water contrasted well with the bright pink of the maerl and we were mesmerized by the secret world of activity that unfolded beneath us.

An astonishing variety of crab species went about their business - hunting, catching, eating, turning over chunks of maerl, chasing off other crabs, and making brave threatening displays towards the big dark shapes that passed over their heads. They

were all so busy. Pipefish and butterflyfish slinked through the maerl, either on the lookout for their next meal or trying to ensure they avoided being on someone else's menu. I spent a few moments eyeball to eyeball with a thornback ray before the current whisked me off across oysters, scallops and some rather strange free-floating orange sponges.

On some sites we came across rare burrowing anemones including *Aureliania heterocera*. Immediately dubbed the 'jammy dodger anemone' by one of the wits in our group, we found it on at least two sites. Other highlights included dogfish, scorpionfish, walls of fan worms (*Bispira volutacornis*), various nudibranchs, sea squirts and sponges and several different types of goby.

Oh, and we saw a wrasse. A wrasse? Yes, but this was no ordinary wrasse. Around our islands we can expect to see five common species of wrasse -

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ballan, cuckoo, corkwing, goldsinny and the little rock cook. Throughout the week, we kept seeing that we thought were corkwings. Wherever the habitat was suitable, there they were, busily nest building.

As the week went on, some of our more marine biologically aware divers were questioning what we were seeing. These fish displayed the main characteristics of the corkwing but something was not quite right. The habitat was correct for corkwing, the behaviour was correct for corkwing, but by Friday evening people were voicing the opinion that perhaps they weren’t corkwing. How intriguing! If they weren’t corkwing, what were they? The identification books were strewn across the kitchen table and the debate raged on. Eventually, it was decided that they might be Baillon’s wrasse, a rare visitor to these shores and one that generally has a preference for much warmer water. Apparently, it was last fleetingly recorded in Ireland in 1992. But, we didn’t just see the odd one, we saw them in substantial numbers on every dive on wrasse-preferred habitat. They were there in force and they were nest building. We’re still awaiting official confirmation but could this be yet another sign of climate change?

Before I give the impression that this usurper had ousted all the resident species, I should say that we did see our more familiar wrasse as well. I had one rather surreal moment when a very large, golden ballan wrasse shot past me with what looked like a big crab attached to its nose.

Who had caught whom? As ballans dine on them no doubt it was the crab that came off worst in the encounter, but just for one moment I almost believed it was the other way round!

Something that struck me quite forcibly on this trip was the role that divers have to play in reporting any changes they notice. If climate change is happening as rapidly as we are led to believe, then it is likely that more and more species will turn up where they are not normally expected. As divers, we are the only people who regularly go under water and look closely at what for everyone else is a hidden and unknown world. We are the ones who will notice if the water temperature changes, if we see unusual species or if normally common species disappear.

Many divers now carry cameras and can photograph, and report, any anomalies. If we do see something unusual, we shouldn’t keep it to ourselves but let someone know. The Marine Conservation Society (www.mcsuk.org) is often a good starting point.

So could Kilkieran Bay be the Lembah Straits of northern Europe? Well, perhaps not quite. But we certainly saw a huge variety of fascinating and rare creatures. It’s worth remembering that you don’t have to go as far as South East Asia to see the strange and unusual. We have many wonders right here, right now. And with the climate changes predicted, if we wait a while, like Baillon’s wrasse, the exotic might just come to us!



Goby





bispira volutacornis



who's that wrasse?



pachycerianthus

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