Hunt The Pipefish

SEASEARCH IS calling on all divers to look out for and record the pipefishes and seahorses they see on their dives around the UK. They want club divers and others to make a special effort on the Seasearch DIVE IN weekend of June 9-10 but you can record sightings at other times as well.

In the last couple of years there has been a large increase in diver sightings of the snake pipefish and both species of seahorses. Formerly rarely seen, the snake pipefish has become abundant at certain times of year, especially on North Sea coasts, but unusual numbers of juveniles have been seen in the Atlantic as well.

The snake pipefish is easily recognised by its smooth body and vertical light-coloured bands all along it. It reaches about 50cm long and, unlike other pipefishes, is found at a variety of depths. Look out for them amongst large seaweeds such as kelp.

The other large pipefish is the greater pipefish. It can also grow to 50cm but has a more armoured looking body, a long snout with the mouth at the end, and a little hump on the top of the body behind its head. We want to know if the same changes in population density are taking place for this species as for the snake pipefish.

Recent scientific papers have suggested that the increased numbers of juvenile pipefish in the North Atlantic may be due to increased breeding due to warmer seas. There has also been a significant range extension to the north of the UK with snake pipefish now recorded from as far north as Spitzbergen and the Barents Sea. They have become a frequent food for seabirds but their armoured bodies do not make easy eating and they have also been implicated in deaths of young birds because they are so difficult to digest.

Always worth looking out for and recording are our two species of seahorses. They are not easy to tell apart so take a picture if you can without disturbing them. There have also been more reports than ever of seahorses, especially on the south coast of England.

Snake Pipefish at Snake Ness

Seasearch National Coordinator Chris Wood explains: “If we can get a large number of divers looking for and recording pipefish and seahorses we can make a real contribution to understanding the changes in numbers and distribution that seem to be taking place”.

For more information and to record your sightings online visit the Seasearch Website at www.seasearch.org.uk or contact Seasearch at info@seasearch.org.uk.

RNLI Fund Raiser At Kelso

A FUND RAISING evening in aid of the RNLI is being held on Saturday June 2, in Ednam Village Hall (TD5 7QQ) in the Scottish Borders. Photographer Glenn Jones (pictured below) from the British Caving Association will be presenting his award winning audio visual (AV) presentation on Le Vercors National Park in SE France.

The presentation, which uses six synchronised projectors and took several years to construct, shows the beauty of Le Vercors region both above and below ground.

The Vercors National Park is situated in the French Alps, just south of Grenoble. The region is famous for its spectacular limestone scenery, consisting of high jagged ridges, vast remote plateaus and deep sinuous gorges, and is renowned for caving, canyoning, walking and skiing.

Le Vercors has been shown at successive Hidden Earth Conferences and in 2002, won Glenn the Giles Barker award for excellence in cave photography.

The evening starts at 7.30pm and costs £4 each, with all proceeds from the ticket sales going to the RNLI. Tickets are available from Alison Fuller-Shapcott of Kelsac Divers alison@1sweethope.fsnet.co.uk or from Hector Innes Photography, The Square, Kelso.

For more information on Glenn and his AV presentations see: www.andromeda - park.demon.co.uk.

BSoUPs Big Day

WE ALL know that Scotland has its own annual 'Splash In' at St Abbs, where underwater photographers from all walks of life and of all abilities converge over one weekend to showcase their talents (and sense of humour). Now the British Society of Underwater Photographers or BSoUP have teamed up with the National Marine Aquarium to stage the first ever British Splash-In Championships to be held on Saturday July 7 in Plymouth.

The inaugural event is a development of the Society’s highly successful annual underwater photography Splash-Ins first held in the late 1960’s, which established the format for similar events that now take place around the world.

All underwater photographers, including the winners of all the splash-ins that took place in the UK during 2006, are invited to participate in this new event. During the evening of the event the audience at the National Marine Aquarium will be invited to vote for their favourite images from those taken on the day. An independent panel of judges will then choose the best of those images and will decide who is the winner of the top prize - a one week live-aboard holiday in the Red Sea (donated by Tony Backhurst Scuba Travel).

In order to encourage the many new photographers that are using compact digital cameras to take underwater pictures, separate categories have been introduced so that they do not have to compete with more established photographers.

BSoUP chairman Martha Tressler: “Our previous events have been a huge success but we are building on them as well as aiming to attract the new generation of photographers. The Splash-In is for everyone with an underwater camera!”

Full details can be found on BSoUP’s web site: www.bsoup.org/splash.

The British Society of Underwater Photographers

Marine Treasure Trove

MARINE TREASURES of two of Scotland's most famous sea lochs have been catalogued in detail for the first time in two new reports by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH). The reports, which document the most comprehensive surveys yet of these marine wildlife hotspots in Scotland, reveal the full extent of a magical underwater treasure trove of brightly coloured reefs, coral-like beds and dense, waving kelp forests.

Graham Saunders Senior Environmental Audit Officer for Scottish Natural Heritage and project manager for both surveys said: "We have always known that Loch Creran and Loch Maddy are internationally important for the vast number of animals and plants which thrive there. However, this is the first time we have really quantified just how rich the reefs and other habitats are.

These lochs really are breathtaking examples of Scotland's marine environment. Very few underwater experiences can rival drifting over the brightly-coloured tubeworm reefs, which look like a vast flower garden, or glimpsing the sheer numbers of animals and plants packed into every nook and cranny of a shallow Loch Maddy kelp forest."

The surveys were carried out with Heriot Watt University, as part of SNH's Site Condition Monitoring (SCM) programme, which monitors the status of the species and habitats protected for their conservation value in Scotland's designated sites. It is the first time that Loch Maddy and Loch Creran, which are designated at a European level as Special Areas of Conservation (SAC), have been monitored as part of the programme. The results will provide a baseline to assess their condition in the future.

Although the lochs were found to be generally in good condition, results using sidescan sonar, a technique that uses the penetrating properties of sound rather than light to build up a photograph-like image of the seabed, showed evidence of reef damage by fishing gear in Loch Creran.

Damage included single and twin parallel tracks on the seabed stretching to around three metres wide and broken reef rubble. Horse mussel beds also showed signs of decline at two study sites in Loch Creran. Research has shown that they are producing young mussels at an alarmingly slow rate, with the majority being at least 11 years old. This had lead researchers to conclude that horse mussels are particularly vulnerable to damage and that these declines will occur throughout the loch if the trend continues.

Jane Dodd, Marine Project Officer for SNH in Argyll and Stirling, who is responsible for the management of Loch Creran said: "Some of the survey results, particularly the apparently slow recruitment of the horse mussel beds in Loch Creran are worrying, but together with the other stakeholders we are working hard to use this new information to protect the special habitats of the loch.

The reef map produced in the report has been particularly useful in helping the Argyll Marine SACs Management Forum, coordinated by Argyll and Bute Council, to zone the loch for fishing. The side scan sonar images have been invaluable for showing stakeholders what sort of damage their moorings are doing. I have already used the images to persuade a number of them to move their moorings to more suitable locations."

Loch Creran

Loch Creran's spectacular red, pink and orange serpulid reefs are an example of an extremely rare habitat, with only three other sites known elsewhere in the world. The reefs are by far the most extensive and are therefore of international importance. Formed by a pencil-sized serpulid worm, they were found to occupy a wide band around the edge of the loch, covering an area equivalent to 100 football fields. The west coast site, just north of Oban, also has large pillow-like sponge colonies attached to tide swept rock walls. Dense beds of horse mussel, sometimes called Clabbies or Clabbie Dubhs from the Gaelic Clab-Dubh meaning large black mouth, were found to be more widely distributed than previously thought.

The red colours of Loch Creran

Loch Creran Serpulid Reef

Loch Maddy

In Loch Maddy, North Uist, divers and shore surveyors recorded 59 different habitat types, supporting over 800 species, such as the rare northern sea fan and the spectacularly colourful jewel anemone. The rocky reefs and rare coral-like maerl beds were found to be particularly species-rich. In the loch's special saline lagoons two nationally rare plant species were found, one a green alga, which forms a thick green carpet and the other, the bird's nest stonewort, which is known to occur in only one other place in the UK. The lagoons also support dense beds of eel grass which look just like submerged green rolling meadows.

Scenic view of Loch Maddy

Loch Maddy Rocky Reef