



Seasearch divers at Eyemouth - image courtesy of Calum Duncan



Snake pipefish in hornwrack, Ross Carrs off Burnmouth (Calum Duncan/MCS)

Diving In For Pipefish

Calum Duncan

WOLF'S CRAG is a great name for a dive site, although of course Sir Walter Scott wouldn't have known it at the time! During a busy June, Seasearch divers were taking the plunge the length and breadth of Britain to gain a snapshot of pipefish numbers, including beneath Fast Castle, Berwickshire, immortalised with the lupine pseudonym in Scott's 'Bride of Lammermuir'. Deep beneath the 'Crag', the occasional snake pipefish was spotted hiding in kelp littered cobble hollows, but in shallower waters they entwined among the sea oak, sea beech and kelp stipes in abundance.

Berwickshire bonanza

Local divers at St Abbs talk of pipefish being an unusual occurrence, rarely if ever seen 'in 20 years diving'. Until recently that is. Sea surface temperature

increases are thought to have enabled pipefish to produce more generations per summer, resulting in an explosion in numbers inshore (see also Nov/Dec 2006 issue). Anybody diving the east coast in the last year or two will have seen snake pipefish (*Entelurus aequoreus*) everywhere, so the Seasearch Dive In on June 9-10 set about getting this on record.

Shrugging off occasional North Sea haar, two Seasearch weekends on the *MV North Star* expertly skippered by Iain and Jim Easingwood of Marine Quest in Eyemouth, were a great success. Their diver accommodation, complete with drying room, common room with teas and coffees and all-wet shower rooms are clean, comfortable and modern, the perfect base for Seasearch. Over the four days, divers from Glasgow, Edinburgh, Newcastle and MCS colleagues from our Ross-on-Wye headquarters on a field-trip, all contributed.

Fast Castle, The Brander to its east, Petticowick, The Horn off St Abbs harbour, Conger reef seaward of Weasel loch, The President near Eyemouth and Ross Carrs off Burnmouth were all rarely surveyed sites ideal for Seasearch and pipefish spotting. At most of these excellent dive sites, close inspection of bushy seaweeds in shallower waters, and among loose kelp scraps and clumps of bryozoan hornwrack in deeper waters, revealed one or more beguiling stripe-eyed faces curiously peaking out at the cordura-clad interlopers.

But of course our Seasearch dives were not just about pipefish, also recording soft-coral clad reefs, kelp parks and other interesting species, including Berwickshire favourites such as wolf-fish, octopus, huge horseman anemones (*Urticina eques*) and an impressive stand of bottlebrush hydroids (*Thiuaria thuja*) at The Horn.

Moray reefs 'n' wreck

Moving north, flat calm conditions and good visibility rewarded Marion Perutz and a contingent of northeast Seasearch divers during their Moray Firth Dive In on the *MV Top Cat* with the dependable Bill Ruck. A first dive on Queens Street reef, Lossiemouth revealed a mass of boulder and rocky outcrops covered in dead men's fingers and patrolled by a wealth of fish species, including abundant wrasse, ling, Pollack and flatfish.

From reef to wreck, Marion and her team surveyed the very well preserved *MFV Pheron* off Spey Bay, covered in filter-feeding soft corals, hydroids and seasquirts and haven for fish aplenty, including pollack, poor cod, various juvenile gadoids (cod, saithe, pollack etc), wrasse, gobies, scorpion fish and, star of the weekend, snake pipefish. Not to be outdone, a pod of bottlenose dolphins approached the catamaran on the way back, swimming right under the bows. A great end to a successful Seasearch trip.



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Snake pipefish again - this time in Cecil Beaton setting (Calum Duncan/MCS)



Ross Carrs reef, off Burnmouth, with sea gooseberry (Calum Duncan/MCS)



Colourful starfish

ON THE Saturday of the Dive In we descended through beautifully clear water around Inchmarnock, west of Bute and were surprised to find the seabed carpeted in maerl. A type of red seaweed, maerl lays down a hard calcareous skeleton forming nodules on the seabed up to 10cm across. Alive it is a beautiful deep pink colour but when the seaweed dies it leaves behind a bleached white skeleton similar in appearance to tropical coral, hence the alternative name of 'Scottish coral'.

Maerl is very slow growing, about 1mm a year so a fist sized nodule may be over a 100 years old. Maerl beds are found in several places on the west coast including the Sound of Arisaig and the entrance to Lamlash Bay in Arran. A live maerl bed is one of the most beautiful

and it must have been there for a long time as the maerl deposits were at least 30cm deep in places. At first glance most seemed dead but closer inspection revealed numerous live twiglets hidden amongst the masses of white skeletons. It may be a coincidence but Garroch head lies not far away. Until recently sewage from Glasgow was dumped just off Garroch Head and the currents would have washed a plume of muck right over the maerl bed. The small twiglets we saw may be signs of recovery as the maerl begins to grow again but it will be a slow process.

On the Sunday we dived Shearwater Rock at the south end of Inchmarnock where another surprise awaited us, a living reef of flame shells. Flame shells are amazing little animals with a fringe of bright orange tentacles which cannot

Flying Flameshells of the Clyde

sights in Scottish waters with bright pink twiglets covered in brittle stars, peacock worms, juvenile fish and shellfish and masses of juvenile crabs. The bed off Inchmarnock was one of the largest ones I've ever dived on

be drawn back into the shell. These tentacles are full of acid, making the flame shells a very unpleasant meal for any hungry fish.

That would be weird enough but the flame shells also build nests on the seabed binding lots of fragments of shells, dead maerl and pebbles into a protective mass. The end result is an apparently normal seabed but the presence of the flame shells is given away by a 'spongy' feel.

Equally strange, the flame shells can also swim like a scallop though why they should need to when they spend their lives hidden in nests and have acid filled tentacles to deter predators is a complete mystery to me. Sadly the acid, nesting habit and swimming ability are no protection at all from a scallop dredge and these strange little animals only survive in areas protected by rock or some other natural feature. Just to the north of the reef, beyond a rocky area the seabed changed from living reef to ploughed field.

Owen Paisley
Seasearch West Scotland co-ordinator

PIPEFISH - WEST UPDATE

Although Owen's group didn't find large numbers, one or two snake pipefish were also recorded on almost every Seasearch dive in the Clyde over the Dive-In weekend. All the Seasearch pipefish information from across the UK will be compiled into a report to complement

offshore research and build a snapshot of this fascinating population explosion. Apart from the Dive In, Seasearch records have been coming in this year from the Firth of Lorn, Scapa Flow and the Isle of May. Whether or not divers have attended a Seasearch course, we of course welcome all records, from mythic crag to living reef!

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