



Those Seasearchers never rest! Calum Duncan reports on recent surveys around Mull which recorded a number of rare habitats. While Seasearch's man in the West Owen Paisley has a busy 2008 scheduled ...

Biodiversity Bonanza

Calum Duncan

BIODIVERSITY IS in the eye of the beholder! Yes, it is jargon - for 'all living things' - but it is also hardwired into significant international commitments that Scotland is signed up to for looking after nationally rare, scarce, vulnerable or regionally important species and habitats, including those underwater. The Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) process throughout the UK is all about government, environment organisations and business all voluntarily working together to look after such treasures.

But what has this got to do with diving? Drifting in 10m of water with the flooding tide over a brittlestar bed for half a nautical mile may not sound like every diver's idea of fun. But, being a Seasearcher, it is mine, particularly when all is not what it seems. Leaving aside the fact that the oft-

maligned brittlestar is actually a rather beautiful animal - often with radiant yellow, purple or orange markings - what was hiding beneath was the reason for this particular dive. We were on a Seasearch expedition out of Tobermory on the *MV Peregrine* with Alan Livingstone, hoping to get to under recorded sites on west Mull and the Treshnish Isles. Of course, the reason they are under recorded is their exposure to prevailing swell and wind,

and the weather scuppered our efforts at the more exposed sites on this trip.

Flameshell narrows

However, in Scotland we are blessed with sea lochs for year-round diving and the back-up plan for poor weather was Loch Sunart, a gem among gems. After a cracking first dive at Auliston wall, with red sea fingers, sea fans and dormant football

Image right: Seasearch divers on MV Peregrine in Loch Sunart (photo - Alan Livingstone/MCS) - Back: (l-r) Chris Wood, George Brown, Calum Duncan, Gordon Swann, Roy Restell; & Front: (l-r) Ruth Sharratt, Susie Whiten, Emma Whinfield, Mary Restell, Bob Pitman

Image at top of page: Sponge and coral garden at Sligneach Mor (Calum Duncan/MCS)



sea-squirts galore, we headed for a shallow second. Loch Sunart is among the most surveyed sea lochs, but the narrows host the most extensive flameshell (*Limaria hians*) beds in Britain, a habitat taught on Seasearch courses but rarely seen.

Although flooding, the tide wasn't running too fast and we were able to get to the bottom in 10m or so without drifting too much. On first inspection, a carpet of brittlestars, but a careful lift of a corner of the spongy seabed revealed the startling flame-tentacled molluscs beneath. After gently replacing the small bivalves, my buddy and I enjoyed a leisurely drift eastwards over the undulating seabed into deeper water. Cover was patchier in some areas, but when we finally ascended to a clear blue sky and autumnal oak hugging the banks, Alan pointed out that we had drifted for half a nautical mile, quite an expanse of flameshell warrens.

Others were suitably enthused by the marvellous molluscs and we headed back to the Neapolitan frontage of Tobermory and the spacious lounge of the Park Lodge Guest House for underwater photo comparisons and a McCaig's Folly or two! All agreed (author's licence!) that it was not before time that flameshell beds had been added to the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) list of species and habitats.

Coral gardens

Another Scottish speciality that has now been recognised in the BAP process, which can provide a particular focus for Seasearch, is the northern sea fan (*Swiftia pallida*), a spindlier coral than the pink sea fan, but one equally worthy of protection. Found on deeper reefs at the mouths of sea lochs and the less exposed coasts of offshore islands, *Swiftia* has been the focus of Seasearch activity in the past. On this occasion, we did not measure individuals but a spectacular site was recorded at 25m depth on the well-known Sligneach Mor wall at the mouth of Loch Sunart. The deep sheltered rock was a wonderland of vase and tendril formed sponges, sea fans and red sea fingers.

Unrecorded sites at Big and Little Stirks in the mouth of Loch Sunart and east of Ardmore Point and Bloody Bay in North Mull were also ticked off our itinerary. However, Seasearch need not always be about recording new sites but augmenting information for those already recorded. It was great therefore to have Chris Wood, UK Seasearch co-ordinator and author of *Sea Anemones and Corals of Britain and Ireland*, and



Branched sponge and red sea fingers soft coral at Sligneach Mor (Calum Duncan/MCS)



Horseman's anemone and shore crab in Loch Sunart narrows (Calum Duncan/MCS)



Bob Pitman enjoying the Seasearch learning experience (Calum Duncan/MCS)

Biodiversity Bonanza

continued from Page 35

George Brown along; their eagle-eyes spotted the small anemone *Hormathia coronata* on the Risga pinnacle. An intriguing site, this pinnacle is an unusual patchwork of habitats - rock with dense plumose anemones, sea fans and sponges on deeper reef and muddy gravel patches with slender sea pens and burrowing anemones.

Global to local

Elsewhere in Scotland, Marion Perutz organised a weekend with more records from the Moray Firth whilst Owen updates below with his plans for 2008. If you have Google Earth downloaded, log on to www.seasearch.org, click on the file under latest news to see Seasearch coverage in 2007, including any records that you have submitted. With funding gratefully secured from Scottish Natural Heritage, we look forward to an active schedule in Scotland over the next three years. From St Abbs to Shetland, Seasearch can now continue helping to map marine biodiversity, BAP listed or otherwise, to help protect it for the future.



Calum Duncan
MCS Scottish Conservation Manager
Seasearch Scotland Co-ordinator

w: www.mcsuk.org
e: scotland@mcsuk.org
t: 0131 226 6360



Flameshells in Loch Sunart (Calum Duncan/MCS)



Snakelocks anemone on kelp at Sligneach Mor (Calum Duncan/MCS)

West Scotland Seasearch in 2008

THERE ARE exciting plans for Seasearch on the west coast in 2008. For those who like exciting and challenging dives there are expeditions planned to Sanda Island, Gigha, Jura and the Firth of Lorne. We also plan to return to Loch Shira, a deep dark place that really does require advanced diving skills.

Those who prefer gentler diving aren't forgotten as there are plans to carry out native oyster and eel grass surveys around Kintyre.

To start off the year I will be running an Observer course in Dunoon in February which will hopefully be attended by divers from a number of clubs setting them up for participation in what promises to be a great season's diving. All in all 2008 promises to be a special year for Seasearch in the West of Scotland.

West Scotland Contact:
Owen Paisley
t: 01546 600209
e: seasearch.west@btinternet.com.

Northeast Scotland Contact:
Marion Perutz
t: 07745 656978
e: seasearch_nescotland@yahoo.co.uk.

Owen Paisley

