

Creel on seabed – Neil Lilly



SO, IT'S that time of year where you are probably getting pretty fed up with winter and you're dusting down your dive kit ready for that first dive of the year. Now, if that dive is at St Abbs & Eyemouth Marine Reserve then it'll be great to see you. But please do remember that we like divers to look after both themselves and the wildlife when they come and dive in the Reserve. So, please bear three things in mind:

- Safety - make sure you check your kit thoroughly and that it is all in good working order, as, of course, are you! Remember that the water will be a tad bracing so bring plenty of layers for both above and below the waves!
- Conservation - stick to the Reserve Code of Conduct, which can be summed up with the phrase 'take only pictures, leave only bubbles'. You could also help out by recording what wildlife you see either on a Diver Survey Form or by making your dives, Seasearch dives.
- Courtesy - always have respect for other users of the Reserve who have equal rights to the area. For instance, when parking or kitting up at the harbours, or by leaving any creels you come across in the Reserve well alone (see later).

Most importantly of all though, enjoy your diving and the spectacular scenery and wildlife that the Voluntary Marine

IN RESERVE

Liza Cole, Ranger at the St Abbs & Eyemouth VMR reports on events at the Reserve

Reserve (VMR) has to offer. I have heard some divers complaining that there is little wildlife about early in the season. Well, it is true that things are a little quieter wildlife-wise at this time of year, but there are still plenty of creatures that are active all year round whose antics you can observe (see creature feature).

So, what has been going on in the Reserve over the quiet winter months? Quite a lot actually! You may have heard that a study on diving in the Borders was commissioned by Scottish Enterprise Borders (SEB). This showed that diving contributes an estimated £3.7 million to the economy of the region, and that there is room for growth, particularly out of Eyemouth. It is great to see recognition of the positive impact divers have on the area.

The report also said that the main reason people come to dive the area is because it is a Marine Reserve, so recognition of the positive impact of the VMR too. However, we must be very careful to make sure that any growth in the diving industry is not to the detriment of the wildlife in the Reserve.

Work has also been taking place to improve facilities for divers, particularly at St Abbs. The Harbour Trust have replaced some of the ladders down the harbour wall and will soon be installing derricks for loading dive kit and fishing gear, the latter with funding from the Scottish Sustainable Marine Environment Initiative (SSMEI). So there will be no more need for lowering dive gear on ropes, the end of an era, but probably better for the gear (not to mention the skipper's backs!).

There have also been discussions on parking charges at St Abbs, and changes to both the parking arrangements and charges are afoot at the time of writing (late January) but should have been made by the time you read this!

Creel fishing in the VMR

Last year, as in previous years, there were several instances of creels being slashed by divers. Not just one creel in a string, but several being damaged which would involve a concerted effort by the perpetrator(s). I am puzzled by this behaviour.

Creel fishing is a perfectly legitimate activity in the VMR. In fact, the VMR aims to balance nature conservation with recreation and the local fishery. Using creels is probably the most environmentally friendly method of fishing, with no bycatch and minimal collateral damage, and by the number of crabs and lobsters seen in the Reserve (and recorded on Diver Survey Forms) it seems that overfishing is not occurring. So why are people doing this?

Do they imagine that they are somehow helping the Reserve when what is happening is they are causing unnecessary friction between the diving and the fishing communities? Please keep an eye out and an ear to the ground and report any suspicions you may have. Thank you and see you down the harbour soon!

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Image above: Creel on seabed (courtesy Jim Neil Lilly).

Scotland's only Voluntary Marine Reserve would not have a full time Marine Ranger without the generous support of The National Trust for Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage, The Crown Estate.



CREATURE FEATURE

Ballan Wrasse, *Labrus bergylta*



Ballan wrasse - JP Trenque

A FISH that we will all have had close encounters with in the kelp forests or

around the rocky reefs of the Reserve is the Ballan Wrasse. A common sighting, and something that we probably all take for granted, but why not take a closer look, they are beautiful fish with an intriguing life history.

All ballan wrasse start life as females, hatching out of their nests of seaweed jammed into rock crevices. They then take about six years to become sexually mature when they will start spawning, which they will do for a number of years before some, but not all, will turn into fully functioning males. Nobody really knows why this happens and why only some females change sex. And there is no external evidence of the sex change so no-one

knows how they court and mate either.

Ballan wrasse are long-lived fish, they have to be, to fit it all in I guess, with records of 25 year old fish not unusual. They spend most of their lives alone, patrolling their territories looking out for their food of crabs and sea snails, especially mussels. Their penchant for such tough food means they have to have two sets of teeth - the normal ones in the mouth and an additional set in the throat.

So, now you know more about the life story of the humble ballan wrasse, perhaps you might look at them in a different light from now on!