

Seas Less Ordinary

Calum Duncan



Calum Duncan is back on Arran as the Scottish Government decides whether to establish a marine reserve at Lamlash Bay and musing that we can find the extraordinary in ordinary places ...

IF WE value something, we want to look after it. In Scotland, the relative abundance of rich and varied life under the sea, diveable 24/7 in our sea lochs, can sometimes blind us to how special or vulnerable these underwater treasures are. One excellent example that I have often discussed in these pages is on Arran.

Local campaigners Community of Arran Seabed Trust (COAST) put their Seasearch training into practice to prevent proposals to discharge sewage onto probably the best maerl bed in the Clyde, in north Lamlash Bay. Without their local knowledge and determination, the scheme would probably have gone ahead and, other than them, few would be any the wiser. But sewage is not the only possible threat to this fragile seabed.

By the time you read this, I am hoping that Richard Lochhead, the Scottish Environment Secretary has read so many positive responses to the consultation to establish a marine reserve in Lamlash Bay, that he has approved the excellent proposal to protect the maerl beds. Such

a decision would only befit all the hard work that COAST has done over the years, particularly tireless current chairman and Seasearch stalwart Howard Wood.

In May, I had the great pleasure of diving once again with Howard and fellow COAST member and Seasearch diver Sean Ferris. We were there with a journalist from BBC Radio 4 to discuss the contribution Seasearch had made to their proposal, which hopefully will have featured on 'You & Yours' by the time you read this.

Holy hydroids!

As is often the way, the weather had gone from flat calm and sunny on the Friday to easterlies and drizzle on dive day! This meant a bit more logistics for Howard, launching his RIB from Lamlash rather than his doorstep at Whiting; but diving in the lee of Holy Isle in St Mollo's Bay made it all worthwhile. Sean has dived this site often and knew precisely which rocks to dive seaward from to find the richest patch of life.

True to form, descending the gentle slope to 15m or so revealed a mixed ground of cobbles, pebbles and small boulders, unremarkable to the un-attuned eye, but rich in hydroids, starfish and brittlestars, seaweeds, small spider crabs, nudibranchs and 'highland dancers' (*Pleurobranchus membranaceus*).

On returning to the boat, the journalist asked 'what was so special down there?'. St Mollo's is some way from the maerl bed and lacking in priority or protected species or habitats, yet its species richness contributes to the overall

biodiversity of the bay, as do many other 'unsung' habitats. Which is precisely why I hope by the time you read this, the Scottish Government has both: protected the maerl beds within a marine reserve; and is also proceeding apace with plans to make St Mollo's and the rest of Lamlash Bay a fishery management area to complete the COAST proposals.

Ross worm surprise

A great example of finding the value at, on the face of it, an ordinary site followed a Seasearch Observation course run by northeast Scotland co-ordinator Marion Perutz and myself at St Andrews University. Typically, the blue sky and blazing sunshine was on the classroom-based day but, unperturbed, five of us headed for the rocks east of picturesque Elie harbour on the Sunday. Braving more drizzle, we did two Seasearch dives in the six metres of water available over the base of the kelp-covered reef. Peeking beneath the fronds (or 'blades') of the kelp, I was struck by the many bright purple bloody henry starfish of all sizes, enough of itself to make the dive noteworthy.

Even more interesting, at the base of the reef, mounds of tiny mussels covered the rocks. Where kelp had torn chunks away, it was clear that the mussels were embedded in mini-reefs formed by the ross worm (*Sabellaria spinulosa*), a biodiversity action plan habitat found where rock meets extensive sandy areas with some current movement. It illustrated perfectly that valuable species and habitats are right under our noses, even at the most modest dive sites. Here, Owen shares the valuable habitats of Loch Fyne with some continental marine life enthusiasts.