



# Need For Protection

Recent months have seen sustained activity on the Seasearch front around the country. Calum Duncan provides an update on what's been happening ...

DIVING THE Sound of Mull usually brings to mind names like the *Thesis*, *Rondo*, or *Hispania*. But what about the *Limaria*, *Funiculina*, *Lithothamnion* or *Zostera*? Or flame shells, tall sea pens, maerl and sea grass to use their common name. Cue Seasearch of course!

Seasearch is all about recording where species and habitats are found around our coastline, both the ordinary and the special. There are many gaps in our knowledge and the more these are filled, the better-informed management decisions can be. For a stretch of water as busy and important to many interest groups as the Sound of Mull, this is especially true.

The Sound of Mull SSMEI (Scottish Sustainable Marine Environment Initiative) project, one of four pilots including the Berwickshire coast, the Firth of Clyde and Shetland, 'aims to develop and deliver more integrated and sustainable management of the marine and coastal areas of the Sound of Mull through the preparation and implementation of a marine spatial plan.'

#### *A Sound collaboration*

By collaborating with SSMEI Project Officer Sarah Benfield (now Sarah Cunningham – congratulations!) and Jane Dodd of SNH, the Seasearch weekend in June aboard Paul Gallagher's spacious day-boat MV *Silver Swift* helped to confirm some older records of important Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) species and habitats in the Sound. We were also delighted to have not one, but two, top photographers on the trip in Paul Kay and Sue Scott, although Sue was actually having a small holiday from her camera.

In true Seasearch spirit, Paul and Lucy Kay were keen to dive on the muds and sediments, where many interesting critters live, but our first site was Rudha an Ridire, the 'chin' of Morvern where the waters of Loch Linnhe and the Sound of Mull meet and where records from the 1980s declare 'here be flame shells'! No sign on the first dive, although the tides didn't let us get right to the point.

#### *Elusive Atrina*

Our second dive was in the narrows at Eilean Rubha an Ridire behind the SS *Thesis*, ostensibly on a fan mussel hunt, since we had a record from here reported at a Scottish Dive Show some years ago. On descending the shot line, I was thinking how embarrassing it would be if the weight landed on the poor creature, but I needn't have worried since there was no sign of any *Atrina fragilis*. However, as is often the case with tidesept narrows, it was a great wee dive on a rich bed of cobbles and pebbles, critter-heaven with

long-clawed squatties in every nook and cranny, starfish, brittlestars and featherstars galore and hydroids feathering every stone.

Tobermory was our port of call for the night, dining al fresco from the Tobermory fish van on the pier and form-filling and sleeping at the Gallagher's Park Lodge Hotel up the hill. The following day dawned bright and clear and no sooner had Paul cast off from Tobermory pontoon, Jane, Sarah and Sue were kitted up and in the narrows behind Calve Island to confirm existing records of sea-grass and also spotted some maerl, a new record.

Despite some initial misgivings from those not normally enamoured of the idea of mud-diving, Paul Kay in particular jumped at the suggestion to dive a mud slope for which we had a record in west Loch Aline. It did not disappoint with all three sea pens, common (*Virgularia mirabilis*), phosphorescent (*Pennatula phosphorea*) and tall (*Funiculina quadrangularis*), recorded, the latter a new BAP record, as well as Fries' goby in langoustine (*Nephrops norvegicus*) burrows. The initially sceptical admitted it had been an eye-opening dive with the amount of life on show.

#### *A flaming re-discovery*

En route back to Oban, determined to bag another BAP-record, we headed to Rubha an Ridire and were treated to otters frolicking on the rocky shores of Morvern. Beneath blue skies, almost bang-on slack, we had one final search for the elusive flame shells.

Marco, Franca and I had had no joy, when one buddy pair approached and wrote on their slate 'flame shells 25m' and an arrow. Off we went and at the base of a bedrock outcrop, among a loose bed of empty shells and mud, a quick search revealed two nests before we hit deco and had to leave, delighted we had confirmed the record.

Back on board the spacious deck of the *Silver Swift*, Emma Whinfield and Sue Scott also enthusiastically relayed the news of an unusual sponge they had found on their dive. Unlike the other biological treasures we had confirmed, the sponge's name is as yet unknown! As with the other BAP species and habitats, we hope the upcoming Scottish Marine Bill and SSMEI project provide the protection they deserve.

#### *Time and tide*

On the north and east coast, Marion Perutz has been as prolific as ever with a number of Seasearch dives and trips including Kyle of Tongue, where crayfish (*Palinurus elephas*),

another BAP species, was recorded, wolf-fish on the wreck of the 'Moray' off Buckie and wonderful vis diving the MV Pheron. In this her last summer of co-ordinating Seasearch for northeast Scotland, Marion also ran an Observation course in Orkney and dived some fabulous wrecks with local enthusiast Jenni Kakkonen.

Over the last few years, Marion has been a terrific asset to the project, organising numerous trips and leaving a wonderful legacy of hundreds of Seasearch records, and colourful reports, for a hitherto undersurveyed stretch of coast. We wish her all the best and welcome her continued involvement as a tutor when available. Welcome on board now to Chris Rickard of Macduff Marine Aquarium who has many excellent suggestions for picking up the reins in the northeast!

Records have also been coming in from Lochs Ryan, Fyne, Leven (including new flame shell records), Creran and Carron for which many thanks to all who contributed. Owen tells of an interesting trip to Inchmarnock below.

The other exciting news is that Cabinet Secretary for the Environment Richard Lochhead announced that the Community of Arran Seabed Trust (COAST) have successfully achieved their goal of a No-Take Zone in Lamlash Bay, and only need await the Regulating Order to manage the rest of the bay. As regular readers will know, COAST divers put their Seasearch training to good use in helping to map the fragile maerl and other habitats in the bay that helped underpin their successful proposal. Well done COAST!

As you read this, the Scottish Marine Bill consultation will also have closed and over 3,000 postcards will have been presented to Richard Lochhead, many sent by

**SCOTTISH DIVER** readers, to show the huge support that this once-in-a-lifetime legislation must have the marine environment at its heart. Results from Seasearch, our joint Save Scottish Seas campaign, the SSMEI projects and elsewhere can help make sure we get the law that we owe our long-suffering seas. Interesting times indeed!



Image above: (L-R) Seasearchers Sarah Cunningham, Jane Dodd, Emma Whinfield, Calum Duncan, Richard & Jonie Guest, Franca Pugnaghi, Paul Kay, Sue Scott & (in front) Lucy Kay (SNH) & on Page 34 (top): Diminutive Goby (Paul Kay); and (bottom): MV Pheron off Spey Bay, Moray Firth (Chris Wood/Seasearch)

# Shell Mystery For Searchers

Owen Paisley  
Seasearch Co-ordinator  
West Scotland



LAST YEAR I organised a survey to look at the waters off Inchmarnock in the Clyde. The weather was glorious and the vis excellent. We found amongst other things a flameshell reef and a huge maerl bed and were accompanied by porpoise and basking shark. This summer the Argyll seasearch divers returned to Inchmarnock to look at more sites but things were a little different.

For a start it was grey and raining, the water was murky and in place of basking sharks we had to contend with a plague of Lions Mane jellyfish. Undeterred the survey went ahead and the first divers dropped in about 500 metres from the spot where we recorded a maerl bed last year. The divers did find a few scattered clumps of live maerl at the southern edge of the site but the biggest surprise lay in the north.

In place of maerl the seabed was covered in a mass of empty shells lying several deep. There was a mixture of species from razor shells to clams and by the look of them they had been there for a long time. The divers dug down into the shells and were surprised at the sheer numbers involved, many thousands at least.

Closer inspection showed that the empty shells were home to amongst others, brittle stars, juvenile squat lobsters and, interestingly, numerous tiny starfish, the young of several species. Had we stumbled upon the Clyde sea starfish nursery or just a good place to be a young starfish? Why there were so many shells at this site

remains a mystery. Was it simply that water currents carried the dead shells from all over the Clyde and dumped them there or had something happened in the past that led to a mass die off of these animals leaving only their shells behind to puzzle the divers?

Pondering the mystery afterwards I realised that Inchmarnock was an example of why Seasearch is important. Sports divers have the time to visit these sites which otherwise would only be investigated if some major development was planned. With the new Scottish Marine Bill on the horizon perhaps areas like the maerl bed off Inchmarnock will finally receive the protection it deserves but our best marine wildlife sites cannot be protected if nobody knows they are there.

If you don't know what maerl and flameshells are or why Lions Manes are a problem perhaps it's time you attended a Seasearch course! I'm hoping to run an Observer course in late November and if you are interested I can be contacted via e-mail on [seasearch.west@btinternet.com](mailto:seasearch.west@btinternet.com). Tel: 01880 730262

For general Seasearch enquiries visit [www.seasearch.org.uk](http://www.seasearch.org.uk) or contact Calum on 0131 226 6360, email [scotland@mcsuk.org](mailto:scotland@mcsuk.org) or visit. Our new Seasearch Northeast Scotland co-ordinator Chris Rickard is on [seasearch\\_nescotland@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:seasearch_nescotland@yahoo.co.uk)

Image above: Dogfish on shells, Inchmarnock (Owen Paisley)

## FACTFILE

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Further information:

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- [www.savescottishseas.org](http://www.savescottishseas.org) > reports > Finding NIMAs
- [www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/content/planning/developmentprojects/marineandcoastaldevunit](http://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/content/planning/developmentprojects/marineandcoastaldevunit)
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