



Rich sea loch life, brittlestars, sea squirts and sea loch anemones (Calum Duncan/MCS)

Calum Duncan

proves there is

plenty to be seen in

our muddy sea

lochs with a run

down of recent

Seasearch activity

in autumnal Loch

Nevis ...

Heaven Sent

MUD GLORIOUS mud! A theme I am warming to after a Seasearch trip aboard the *Mary Doune* in Loch Nevis. Other than to a few keen underwater photographers and naturalist divers, when I extol the delights of diving mud habitats in sea lochs the response is often a blank look or a wry comment about 'missing the wreck/reef' (*delete where applicable). However, as you'll know if you read these missives from MCS, Seasearch is all about slowing down, getting a feel for and valuing every marine habitat.

As divers, the sea lochs we are most familiar with tend to be fjordic. These mini fjords are characterised by deep mud-filled basins that were originally carved out of mountainous bedrock by glaciers during the ice age. On meeting the sea, the glaciers melted, leaving moraine that became the sills visible on charts today, restricting tidal movement between basins and between loch and outer sea. Tides ebbing and flowing carry nutrients and oxygen to a rich mosaic of marine life that can grow on these sills, such as horse mussel, brittlestar or maerl beds; flammophore reefs; sea-oak and kelp and dense growths of sea anemones, sea fans and sea mosses. In the sheltered deep muds behind the sills, sea pens, burrowing mud-runner crabs and langoustine abound, whilst sheltered reefs host distinctive communities of tubeworms, anemones and brachiopods.

Sea loch reflections

The sea lochs on our doorstep are a treasure trove of marine biodiversity. Available 24/7 for year-round diving, we lucky divers in Scotland perhaps have a tendency to, dare I say it, beyond some open water training, take them for granted. Over the years, MCS has done a lot of Seasearch survey work in sea lochs the length and breadth of Scotland, Lochs Ryan to Roag, Etive to Eriboll, Shira to Sunart. 7 years earlier, an MCS dive trip to Loch Nevis had given my first glimpse of tall sea pens thanks to marine biologist and Inverie resident Mark Woomb's, and with much of the loch yet to record, there was ample scope for a Seasearch return in October 2008.

Loch Nevis is divided into two deep basins, exceeding 100m in places, separated by the narrows at Kylesknoydart where there is a sill at about 4m depth. Another sill lies across the mouth of the outer loch at a depth of 10-20m. Sandwiching Knoydart with the 'loch of hell' (Loch Hourne), the 'loch of heaven' is sheltered from prevailing westerlies by the Isle of Skye and from elsewhere by surrounding mountains, including the distinctive cone of Sgur na Ciche.

Shortly after a Mallaig embarkation, the lee of Sgearan Dearga in the outer loch was an ideal shakedown dive, where sugar-kelp covered boulders descended to a gentle slope eventually revealing clawed, fleet-footed rectangles

– okay...mud-runner crabs (*Goneplax rhomboides*) - at the deeper end. After unloading our gear at the spacious bunkhouse 'The Gathering' in Inverie, and of course lunch, our next dive was on the scenic, sea-squirt covered walls and boulders near Longaig corner on the north coast of the outer loch. Dinner that night at The Old Forge, mainland UK's most remote pub, fortified us for the needling drizzle the following morning.

Rainbows and fireworks

Encouraged overboard by the horizontal rain, Eileann Alasdair near the mouth of inner Loch Nevis didn't disappoint: a rocky pinnacle stepping up from the depths, its sheltered faces packed with filter-feeding sea squirts (*Ciona intestinalis*), black brittlestars (*Ophiocomina nigra*) and the occasional peacock worm (*Sabella pavonina*). What a uniquely Scottish dive, 15 metre visibility in calm green water, lumping, life-bedecked sheltered bedrock, vertiginous steps dropping off beyond 35m and, on return to the surface, blue sky, rainbows, hot coffee and whitewater pouring down the hillsides.

Bathed now in sunshine we headed for the head of the inner loch, Sgur na Ciche baking above its reflection. Suggest to most a 16m dive on mud and they may look at you askance, yet this was our destination: a field of sinuous tall sea pens (*Funiculina quadrangularis*), growing unusually shallow bathed in green-



Plumose anemones (*Metridium senile*) and divers at 4m pinnacle (image courtesy of Neil MacInnes)



Mud-runner crab (*Goneplax rhomboides*) (Calum Duncan/MCS)



Sheltered sea loch reef wall with peacock worm (*Sabella pavonina*) (Calum Duncan/MCS)



Thornback Ray (*Raja lavata*) at Bogha an Tachard (Calum Duncan/MCS)

filtered sunlight. Low torchlight down numerous burrows eventually revealed the orange claws of a langoustine (or 'prawn' *Nephrops norvegicus*), another characteristic mud-diving species. In the eerie calm, silt had settled across rounded bedrock hummocks rising seamlessly from the burrowed mud, their steeper sides thick with sea squirts and sea loch anemones (*Protanthea simplex*).

Clutching coffee back aboard, we learned that Mel and Bob had also seen a fireworks anemone (*Pachycerianthus multiplacatus*), a first for Loch Nevis and another sight unique to sea loch diving.

Easy like Sunday morning
Relaxed after Angie Williams and Mark Woombs excellent hospitality the previous night, the scene was set for a Sunday morning pootle in search of more tall sea pens in Inverie Bay. Mark had seen dense

growths at sites off a rocky outcrop and, to get this important Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) species 'on the biodiversity map' for this area, Andy Tibbets deployed buddy pairs at intervals along the shore. Bob Pitman and I struck lucky. After quite a swim down a gentle slope to 35m, we found a dense patch of *Funiculina* - a pen every few metres - in deceptively bright conditions. The good vis allowed a grasp of scale and context, scattered boulders with sea-squirts and squat lobsters contrasting with the regular arc of white tall sea pens rooted in the fine mud.

Reefs and rays

Our final sites in Loch Nevis were Bogha an Tachard near the mouth of the inner loch on the Sunday afternoon and '4m pinnacle' on the south side of the entrance on the Monday morning.



Tall sea pen (*Funiculina quadrangularis*) with specialised isopod crustaceans living at the tip (Neil MacInnes)

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Bogha an Tachard is an underwater citadel of walls, gullies and boulder chunks with black brittlestars on most surfaces, sea squirts, cushion stars, peacock worms and sea loch anemones. Separate encounters with two thornback rays on coarse sandy shelves added an exciting dimension to this rugged site and brought home vividly how special our sea lochs are. Capping an excellent trip was a dive on the eponymous pinnacle, which drops to 80m on the northern side and a coarse sandy plain full of burrowing anemones (*Cerianthus lloydii*) on the south side. Orange, green and white plumose anemones (*Metridium senile*) sprouted all over the rock in brassica-like profusion, whilst pie-crust brown crabs (*Cancer pagurus*) clung to nooks and crannies and young saithe shoaled above the amber kelp. Okay, it wasn't mud, but it was still a great dive!

Many thanks to all Seasearch recorders and co-ordinators for over 200 Scottish records submitted in 2008, all of which will go into the National Biodiversity Network to help inform marine nature conservation decisions. By recording habitats in the lesser-known sites around our coast, including the unsung riches of mud, Seasearch can help get Scotland's seas out of limbo and on the road to recovery.



(Back, l-r) Calum Duncan (MCS), George Brown, Neil MacInnes, Helen Simcox, Ben Panter, Melanie Harding (front, l-r) Bob Pitman, Vicki Billings, Mark Woomb, Lin Baldock (Image courtesy of Andy Tibbets/MCS)

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MCS is grateful to Scottish Natural Heritage for support of the Seasearch project in Scotland.

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