



Worth The Effort

Andy Parks explains why the divers of Grampian SAC are more than happy to brave the long journey north and the epic round trips for air to experience the diving on offer at Bettyhill, and it looks like some experiences really are worth that extra effort ...

GRAMPIAN SUB AQUA CLUB has been visiting the north coast for a number of years now to enjoy the remote diving in Tongue Bay and at the fringes of the Pentland Firth. We originally stayed in Talmine, west of Tongue and took our own RIBs and a compressor leaving us completely self sufficient for the trip. The diving was excellent and we enjoyed surprisingly good weather on most of the trips. However, times change and accommodation has become harder to get for a long weekend, fine if you want a week but not simply a weekend. It has also become harder to source a compressor to take with us as the oil companies we hired from were less enthusiastic about letting us have one. This resulted in a few years where we missed out on this popular and well-supported trip.

In the last few years Jerry Sternberg decided to revive this trip based on the glowing reports he had heard from everyone who had been there before. Jerry is a born organiser and certainly up for a challenge as these have proved to be complex to organise and logistically demanding, but undeterred he has succeeded each year. Accommodation is in an Aberdeen University Field Centre in Bettyhill; several members work for

or study at the university. There are a couple of local hotels for those who want something a little more up-market.

As always in Grampian Branch we self-cater, and the standard of food is invariably outstanding. We take three RIBs which allows us to support about 16 or 17 divers. Air we get from the dive club in Thurso and their assistance is well beyond the call of duty.

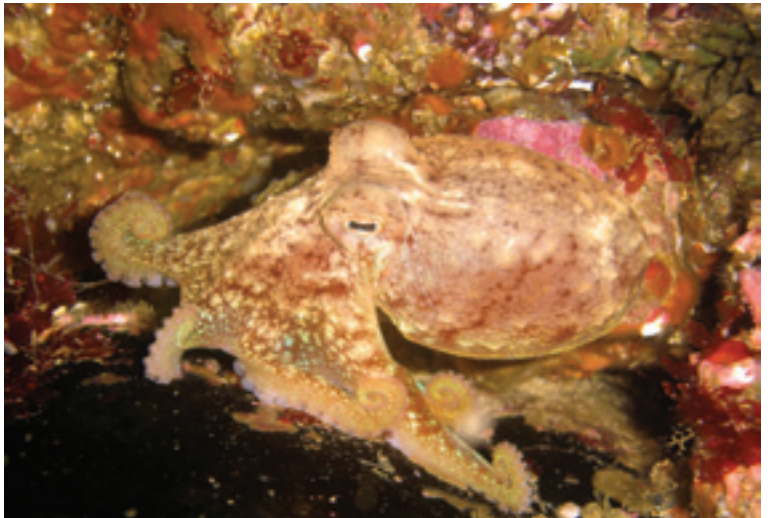
This year everyone met on Friday evening and either went to the pub or planned the next day over a couple of drinks at the field centre. The boats were launched at Skerry about five miles west of Bettyhill and the closest point to some of the best diving. A narrow single track road leads to the harbour and we have learned through experience to be coordinated in the launching of three RIBs. The slip is steep, narrow and has a bend in it, it is nice to have a challenge and having the use of a short wheelbase Landrover certainly took some of the stress out of the launching. The locals are quite tolerant of us all and the boats can be moored safely in the harbour for the weekend.

The weather on Saturday was fabulous with sunshine and calm seas (not what was forecast at all) so we headed

out across the bay to a small rocky islet called Dubh-sgeir Mhor. How many Dubh-sgeirs are there in Scotland? This rocky outcrop holds the wreck of the *Ashbury* which sank on January 8, 1945 with the loss of the entire crew of 42. The boilers sit at the northern end of the island and the main wreckage field lies on the western side, a large section of chain runs along the edge of the reef leading the way. The wreck is flattened but sections of hull and masts are still recognisable and there are several winches and a large anchor that are easily identifiable. With a max depth of 20m and quite good viz this proved to be an enjoyable start to the trip.

The rest of the trip saw us on Eilean Nan Ron, the biggest island in the area with some great diving. Most dives are around 20-25m and the sheer 50m cliffs fall vertically underwater. The diving is varied and fairly safe but there can be some strong currents near the ends of the walls and the headlands of the island.

Our first dive was in a huge natural arch on the south west part of the island. A vertical wall covered in life falls to about 17m onto a sloping seabed with low reefs and sand. Moving into the arch you encounter huge boulders as you



Main image: The others walked down to Farr Beach immediately below the field centre and enjoyed a peaceful and fantastic evening watching the sun go down. Other images (clockwise from above): Heading through a dramatic natural arch; a colourful lobster; and a typically lugubrious octopus

move through into a collapsed cave. On the way out there is a large crack on the right hand side, which leads to a long sloping cave and spectacular views looking out from the back. Do not go there if there is a significant swell running.

Back on shore we were all feeling pretty smug after a good day of diving; given that the forecast was gale force winds we had got off very lightly. Oh well, we would see what Sunday would bring. In the meantime food was prepared and Jerry and I set off on the 30 mile trip to Thurso with a trailer carrying 30+ dive cylinders. Thurso dive club was magnificent and members spent three hours filling bottles on a Saturday night without complaint. Off on the return journey to get food and a couple of drinks before hitting the sack after a long but very good day.

Sunday, forecast gales, was sunny and reasonably calm so we took the opportunity to head to the north west side of Eilean Non Ron to Maell Thailm. Another vertical wall on the corner of the island deeply cut with gullies one of which offers a long and superb swim through the cliff. Unfortunately the slight current made a complete traverse impossible, in a big swell it would be nearly suicidal,

but a couple of pairs did explore the first part of the swim through and the others enjoyed the gullies and walls leading to the north west end of the island. By the end of the dives the sea was beginning to pick up and we were happy to head back to the shelter of Skerryay for lunch.

The afternoon saw the wind continue to rise from the west and we dived in the shelter of the bay on the north east end of the island. I had not dived here before but was rewarded with a series of small walls and gullies with masses of life and a thoroughly enjoyable dive. Between dives we took the RIB out to look at the north side of the island and we were amazed at how much the sea had blown up in three hours. An angry swell of 3-4m was raging down the north side and even the bravest (most foolhardy) boat handlers opted for discretion and not valour.

The journey back across to Skerryay comes into the 'sea state interesting' category. The approach to the harbour is shallow and protected by low reefs and with the wind howling into it the sea was wild. It was as bad as you would want to be out in and the boat handlers did a great job getting all the boats back into the safety of the mooring.

So far the weekend had been that rarest of events, a trip when all three RIBs worked and all of the dives were completed without hassle. We moored the boats sort of accepting that the forecast weather had caught up with us and that we would be pulling the boats in the morning and going home. More food prepared and a lighter load of cylinders sent off to the Thurso boys. Fed and watered most of the group departed to watch the World Cup final in the pub. The others walked down to Farr Beach immediately below the field centre and enjoyed a peaceful and fantastic evening watching the sun go down.

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The last day dawned bright and with little wind so we set off for Skerray, but still expecting the sea to be up from the following afternoon. Astonishingly the sea was pretty docile so we headed off to the western side of the island to an area of deep gullies called Mol Mor. This was a cracking dive with plenty of life and we spent some time swimming through the gullies. One deep gully started to overhang quite dramatically then opened out into another collapsed cave with light streaming down from the surface. What a fantastic place to dive. Back out and eventually we had to surface. The weekend finished with a high speed run back to harbour with the fantastic scenery of Sutherland as a backdrop. The boats were recovered and everyone set off for Aberdeen and I set off for Orkney for another week but that is another story.

Bettyhill is a long way from Aberdeen and towing a boat makes for a lengthy journey. There is a 60 mile round trip to get air, and accommodation has been hard to get in the past. If the weather blows up you may never get in the water and it can blow up very quickly. Why bother?

Well the diving is very good. It is not hugely deep and if you are careful about the currents it is accessible to most divers. There are no big cities, no big rivers, no big industry and potentially the viz can be very good. I have seen 30-40m vis on one September trip many years ago. Eilean Nan Ron never disappoints and with the *Ashbury*, the Rabbit Isles, and Neave Island (a stunningly good dive but too rough this time) there is plenty to do and probably more that we have not seen yet. Sometimes it is worth the effort!



Images from top of page: a striking jewel anemone; RIB at Meal Thailm; crystal jellyfish aequare victoria (bottom left) & reef scene

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