

A Blizzard Of Life At St. Abbs



Calum Duncan reports on Seasearch activity that's (not so far) off the beaten track but keep that Latin grammar handy!

AS ONE OF the most popular diving destinations in the UK, you might think that every square inch of the reefs off St Abbs Head would have been pored over and Seasearched by now. Not so. There is (now was!) a particularly big gap west of Horsecastle Bay, probably because the diving in that section is not quite as dramatic as elsewhere, ideal territory for Seasearch. Under the water here is a giant boulderscape where seaweeds crawling with nudibranchs crown the rocks, soft corals, elegant anemones and hydroids cling to the sides and fish dart among the kelp.

Searching Soutar

We were the submarine contingent participating in a 'Bioblitz' organised by St Abbs and Eyemouth Voluntary Marine Reserve Ranger Laura Smith for 5 October 2013. The aim - to get a snapshot of as many terrestrial, coastal and marine species as possible. Seasearch divers converged from Angus, Edinburgh, Carlisle, Newcastle and County Durham to make our underwater contribution.

Our first site was off Souter Point, almost as far as Fast Castle at the north-easternmost edge of the Berwickshire and North Northumberland European marine Special Area of Conservation (one of the existing network of European

marine sites - see below). My buddy Seasearch Observer Roddy Hay (down from Montrose) and I enjoyed a drift dive over urchin-grazed upward facing bedrock that gave way to gullies lined with soft corals (*Alcyonium digitatum*) and a few elegant anemones (*Sagartia elegans*), that were grazed on horizontal surfaces.

A grey seal (*Halichoerus grypus*) followed us for most of the dive although, as happened in Loch Goil (see **SCOTTISH DIVER** Nov/Dec 2013), it sped off every time this cordura-clad interloper tried to take a picture. Other species noted included the colourful nudibranch *Flabellina pedata* and Horseman's anemone *Urticina eques*.

Between six of us, a total of 68 species were recorded at what appeared on first sight to be not too rich a dive, revealing just how much life there is when you take a closer look. Once back aboard *Silver Sky*, aided by the luxury of the stern diver-lift, all enjoyed the hot tea, coffee and delicious home-made shortbread provided by Jim Easingwood of Marine Quest.

Species bonanza

Shortbread devoured, Jim then interspersed five buddy pairs west of Horsecastle Bay, where an impressive 14 species of seaweed (brown, including

cuvie (*Laminaria hyperborea*), brown fan weed (*Dictyota dichotoma*) and egg wrack (*Ascophyllum nodosum*), and red, including feathered wing weed (*Ptilota gunneri*), red rags (*Dilsea carnosa*), Sea beech (*Delesseria sanguinea*) and northern tooth weed (*Odanthalia dentata*); 13 species of fish (including three wrasse species, gobies, cod, lemon sole, butterfish and that St Abbs speciality, the wolf-fish *Anarhichas lupus*); just the one seasquirt species (*Botryllus schlosseri*); nine echinoderms (starfish, including the spiny starfish *Marthasterias glacialis* and the northern or purple sunstar *Solaster endeca*, brittlestars and urchins); six bryozoa (including hornwrack *Flustra foliacea* and the orange mound-forming *Cellepora pumicosa*); 12 molluscs (six of which were nudibranchs, including *Tritonia hombergii*, *Polycera quadrilineata*, *Limacia clavigera* and *Archidoris pseudoargus*); nine crustaceans including the black squat lobster *Galathea squamifera*; one polychaete worm; 10 corals, anemones and hydroids (including Dead Mens Fingers *Alcyonium digitatum* and the Devonshire cup coral *Caryophyllia smithii*) and four sponges, including the small stalked sponge *Scypha ciliate*, were recorded.

That's an impressive 79 species total. So it is quite a species-rich little embayment that could make a change as a

second dive for any underwater photographers reading.

Over the day then, we recorded an impressive 97 species (many species seen at both places of course), more than half of all the 179 species spotted that Bioblitz day both above and below the waves. It just goes to show how much there is still to learn under the sea at even the most popular dive sites and the value of Seasearch as 'citizen science' (excuse the buzzwords!).

All the information goes into the huge database that has already been used to help identify potential Marine Protected Areas in Scotland (see below) and throughout the UK. It is worth viewing <https://data.nbn.org.uk/Datasets/GA000194> and clicking on Map link to search for areas you could be the first to record!

Thanks to Sam Balderson, Peter Bardsley, David Coates, Nicola Faulks, Gary Gubby, Roddy Hay, Lucy Martin, Chris

Newton and Simon Smith for coming along and contributing to the Bioblitz on the day and to Laura Smith and the St Abbs VMNR for helping subsidise the diving.

Images on page 36; left - Seasearchers at St Abb's Bioblitz - image Jim Easingwood; and right - Seasearch observer Roddy Hay surfaces by Silver Sky from a drift dive off Soutar Point - image Calum Duncan



Rostanga rubra in the silt - image Nicola Faulks



Orange clubbed sea slug Limacia clavigera takes a climb - image Nicola Faulks



Violet sea slug Flabellina pedata prowling for hydroids among soft corals - image Nicola Faulks



An edible crab (Cancer pagurus) off Soutar Point - image Calum Duncan/MCS



Dahlia anemone (Urticina felina) west of Horsecastle Bay - image Calum Duncan/MCS



Sea lemon Archidoris pseudoargus looking for sponge to eat - image Nicola Faulks

Vocal MPA Support 10,000 Strong!



MANY THANKS to the hundreds of you that used the dedicated MCS web-pages to send a clear signal of support for the emerging Scottish MPA network in response to the Scottish Government's Autumn 2013 consultation. The 2,510 campaign responses gener-

ated by MCS made a major contribution to the 10,000 or more generated by all the environment groups on the MCS-chaired www.savescottishseas.org coalition (MCS, Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust, National Trust for Scotland, RSPB Scotland, Scottish Ornithologists Club, Scottish Wildlife Trust, Whale and Dolphin Conservation and WWF Scotland).

We are confident that this collective response sends a loud and clear message to the Scottish Government that a network of MPAs is popular, and that many thousands of people want to make the seas better for wildlife and for this and future generations to use and enjoy.

As I type in February, we await the Scottish Government's official report of the Marine Protected Area (MPA) consultation. Due April 2014, it will help Environment Secretary Richard Lochhead decide on which MPAs to designate, an announcement which won't be made until later in 2014. We hope

that the best 29 sites, which we have clearly stated must include Firth of Forth Banks proposed MPA, are designated in line with our recommendations and are managed to ensure an improvement in the health of our seas.

Even when adding these 29 to the existing suite of 30 plus European sites (such as Berwickshire and North Northumberland SAC), that will still not be enough, and we will continue to press for the four remaining MPA search locations to progress to four or more MPA proposals, and thereafter to make the case for further MPA sites needed to ensure a mutually-supporting, self-sustaining coherent network of MPAs.

Pledge your continued support for MPAs at www.mcsuk.org/mpa/scotland and we will keep you posted as to how to keep up the pressure in future.

Image shows Eigg which is within the Small Isles MPA proposal (credit: Calum Duncan/MCS)

Join Us On The Sound of Mull



WOULD YOU like to discover more about marine life and put a name to those red squidgy things you keep seeing on your dives? Fancy a week's diving in the world renowned Sound of Mull? Like to use your diving skills to carry out some practical marine conservation?

We are looking for volunteers to join us on two diving expeditions to the Sound of Mull this coming summer. Over the course of six days volunteers will learn how to carry out underwater surveys, produce survey reports and discover a whole new world of marine life.

The dates we have planned are 8-13 June and 13-19 July. The first day of

each expedition will cover the theory of surveying underwater and filling in the seasearch Observer form while the next five days will be filled with some brilliant diving from the hard boat *Sound Diver* putting all that theory into practice.

By the end of the expedition volunteers should all qualify as Seasearch Observer divers and have contributed valuable information to the future conservation of the marine life in the Sound.

For more information on costs, diving qualifications needed, Observer course contents etc. contact Owen Paisley the Seasearch Coordinator for west Scotland at seasearch.west@btinternet.com.

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Owen is always looking for help with Seasearch projects and can be contacted by e-mail or via the facebook page Seasearch Argyll.

For details of Seasearch activities - www.seasearch.org.uk

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