

Seasearch

Newsletter 8 - January 2007



Welcome to the eighth National Seasearch Newsletter. This newsletter is being circulated, by email, to our database of over 1,400 Seasearch participants and interested organisations. In it we want to bring you up to date with some of the things that have been happening with Seasearch during the second half of 2006 and our plans for 2007.

Seasearch is a volunteer underwater survey project for recreational divers, enabling them to contribute to protecting marine wildlife through recording underwater habitats and the plants and animals they support. Seasearch provides training for volunteer divers and organises dives and survey expeditions.

NEW Seasearch Observer's Guide

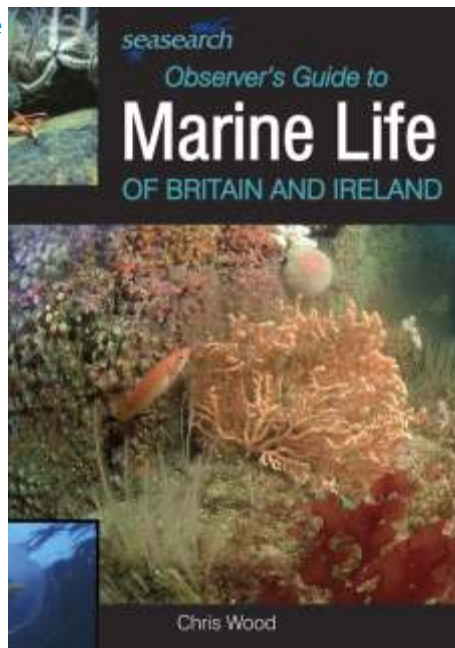
At the London Dive Show on 10th March we shall be launching the new Seasearch Observer's Guide to Marine Life.

At many of our courses people ask what book they should buy to expand on their knowledge of our marine life. Now we have the answer!

We hope the book will lead to an increase in both the number of records we receive and the confidence we can place in them.

The recommended retail price will be £14.95 but Seasearch divers can get their copies for £10.00 at Seasearch events, or order online from the MCS shop at £11.50 incl. P&P.

Be amongst the first to have a copy by visiting our stand at the Dive Show. You can even have a signed copy if you want one. You will find us on Stand 553 which is near the Try Dive pool. Head straight on from the entrance towards the back of the hall.



The Guide includes over 200 species illustrated by underwater photographs from Seasearch contributors, and also provides habitat, distribution, size and depth range for each species, as well as telling you what other species you might confuse it with.

We chose the animals and plants to include by starting with the 180 species most commonly recorded in the Seasearch database and then added some more that we particularly want records of, or which are locally important.

At the end of the book you will find two useful lists of common and scientific names. These include many more species than we could find room for in the guide but we hope they will help you use the correct name for what you see. Look out for some new ones!

The Seasearch Dive-In 9th - 10th June

For the first time this year we are planning a Seasearch Dive-In on the weekend of 9th-10th June. What we are looking for is for divers to get their clubs and dive centres to join in on a mass weekend of recording. So far we have had a club offering their hardboat weekend to do Seasearch recording, a dive centre providing a special rate for their boat for the weekend, and we are organising Seasearch dives ourselves in Dorset, Devon, South and West Wales.

You could get your club to dive and record new sites, make deep wreck sea fan records, carry out fish recording on your favourite sites or devise your own survey to add to our knowledge of UK marine life.

If you want to join in contact National Coordinator Chris Wood or the coordinator for the area in which you want to carry out your dives. We will help with information, forms, training, and may be able to provide one of our experts to join you on your dives.

Join the Seasearch Dive In!



Courses and Dives in 2007

We are planning an exciting programme of courses and dives for 2007 and the best place to get an up to date picture of what is planned is to visit our website and follow the Training and Diving links. Places on Seasearch dives and courses book up very fast so contact the organiser as soon as you can to reserve your place.

Some of the things we have in store are surveys from North East Scotland to the Channel Islands and Specialist courses in seaweed, fish ID and underwater photography.

Check the website for the up to date lists.



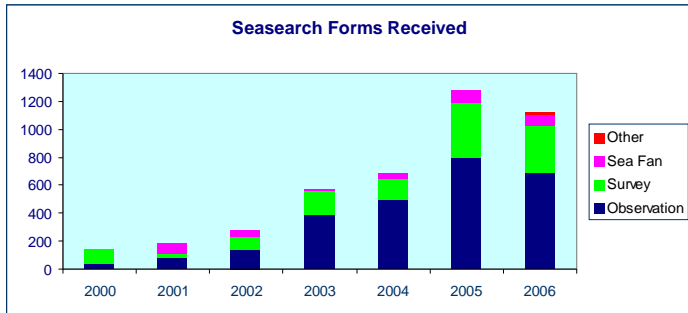
Seasearch is co-ordinated by the Marine Conservation Society on behalf of the Seasearch Steering Group which comprises the Marine Conservation Society, Wildlife Trusts, Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Natural England, Countryside Council for Wales, Scottish Natural Heritage, Environment and Heritage Service Northern Ireland, Environment Agency, Marine Biological Association, Nautical Archaeological Society, British Sub Aqua Club, Sub Aqua Association, Professional Association of Diving Instructors, Scottish Sub Aqua Club and independent marine life experts.

Seasearch 2006 - Surveys and Results!

2006 has been another great year for Seasearch with over 1100 forms received from dives all around the UK, and a few in the Republic of Ireland. Thanks to all of our keen surveyors, and especially the regular volunteers listed below who have all filled in at least 10 forms.

Steve Bound	24	Gower & Pembrokeshire
Colin Robson	22	Cumbria, Isle of Man, Sutherland
Katherine Burns	19	Pembrokeshire, Skye
Alison Allan	18	Pembrokeshire, Dorset, Yorks, St Abbs, Skye
Gemma Brice	13	Devon
Lin Baldock	13	Lyme Bay
Brian McIlroy	12	Northern Ireland
Sheena Davies	11	Pembrokeshire
James Lucey	10	Dorset
Paul Spurgeon	10	Devon
Ruth Brennan	10	Northern Ireland, Eire
Trevor & Yvonne Davies	10	Argyll

The graph below shows how Seasearch recording has increased in the last few years. Whilst 2006 did not reach the huge total achieved in 2005, the overall picture is of a rapid increase in data collected and made available for conservation.



Here are some highlights of the second half of the 2006 diving and survey season

Deep wreck - deep coral?

We received a report from deep wreck divers of deep-water coral on a wreck off Fraserburgh in north-east coast of Scotland. The wreck is about 60m down, but much shallower than other deep-water coral records around Scotland, so we were excited by the prospect of a real find. We organised a Seasearch dive to visit the wreck in September.

As soon as the samples and photographs were looked at it became clear that we were not looking at deep-water coral but massive entwined encrustations of worm tubes. The worm concerned, *Salmacina dysteri*, has the common name of coral worm so no wonder the original diver was mistaken. *Salmacina* has been recorded from all around England, Scotland and Wales but, as with so many species there were none previously from this part of Scotland.



AG

Seagrass beds surveyed

At the other end of the spectrum to deep wrecks, Seasearch divers have also been surveying seagrass beds in a number of locations around the UK. Seagrasses are flowering plants, with a root system and act as a habitat for many other species, including of course seahorses in some locations. Because they only occur in shallow, sheltered areas, they are prone to damage by moorings and harbour and coastal developments. This year we have looked at seagrass beds in a number of estuaries in south-west England, re-surveyed beds off Portrush in Northern Ireland and discovered new beds in various locations, including on the Kintyre coast of the Sound of Jura. The picture shows a smallspotted catshark (yes we used to know it as dogfish too but apparently dogfish are a different group of deeper water sharks these days!) in a seagrass bed on the Skerries off Portrush.



CW

Sadly we also have evidence of a single fisherman trawling through a seagrass bed in Torbay. We will be diving the site this year to assess the damage but it does demonstrate the impotence of our marine conservation legislation that a Biodiversity Action Plan habitat identified by the government as important to our marine biodiversity can be destroyed at the whim of a single individual and there is no redress.

A Seasearch seagrass specialist course is planned in the Isle of Wight in April.

Dropping Off in Plymouth

Another Biodiversity Action Plan species is the sunset coral, *Leptopsammia pruvoti*. With its bright colouration and relatively large size, it is a perfect species for volunteers to record. But it is still known from only a handful of places in the UK - Lundy, Isles of Scilly, Plymouth, Lyme Bay and the Channel Islands. This year we have looked at the Lundy and Lyme Bay sunset corals and found a new site in the Isles of Scilly. However most of the sunset surveying has been south of Plymouth on a site known as the Drop Off.

Devon Seasearch has now dived five different sites along this 35-40m ledge south of Plymouth and found sunset corals at all of them. The plan is to gradually work along the reef and get an idea just how many thousands of these 'rare' corals there are in the one area.

The Plymouth Drop Off site lies outside the local SAC (Special Area of Conservation) and thus receives no protection whatsoever. We will be urging Natural England to act to protect such an important site for BAP species - there are huge numbers of seafans too.



CW

More finds in the Farnes

In 2005 Seasearch recorded jewel anemones from the Farne Islands, Northumberland for the first time. In 2006 an MCS Member's Dives team spent three days around the islands in September/October, exploring new sites and looking out for more rarities. Needless to say seals provided a constant distraction.

We could not re-locate the jewel anemones found in 2005, despite visiting exactly the same gully. Does that mean they were a one-off population that settled but did not survive? We plan to return in 2007 to find out. What we did find was potato crisp bryozoan, *Pentapora foliacea*. Divers used to west coasts will know this prominent bryozoan well, but there are no records on the National Biodiversity Network between Orkney and Kent! It is only a small colony (below left), might it be newly settled and will it survive?



Most of the rock surfaces in the Farne Islands are heavily grazed by sea urchins or covered in brittlestars so they are not as diverse as similar rocky areas elsewhere. However the one exception is Whirl Rocks. This is the most exposed site in the area and has a maze of huge deep gullies which the tide rips through off slack water. The walls are covered in anemones (elegant, plumose), dead men's fingers, sponges and some of the biggest barnacles I have ever seen. If there are jewel anemones anywhere here this is where they will be.

The sad saga of the Lyme Bay seafans

Lin Baldock has led Seasearch surveys in Lyme Bay for the past few years and our records have added to those collected by Devon Wildlife Trust from these low-lying offshore rocky reefs. The conflicts between scallop dredging and seafans in the area have been well known for some years and a voluntary ban was in place which was protecting some of the reefs. That fell apart early last year and widespread scallop dredging recommenced throughout the bay.

A Seasearch survey in July found ample evidence of the devastation caused by the scallop dredging. The survey summary report, which you can download from our website, shows piles of seafans, parchment worm tubes, bits of potato crisp bryozoan and dead men's fingers in mud at the foot of the rocky West Tennant's reef. At the same time a shoreline survey on Chesil Beach reported hundreds of dead seafans and other marine life washed up on the shore.

The government (DEFRA) was not convinced by the arguments of its own conservation advisors, English Nature, and did not ban scallop fishing in the area as they had been advised to do.



Unusual species records from 2006

Here are a few of the interesting sightings which were been made in the latter part of 2006 - either of nationally scarce or rare species, or species new to the area in which they were found.

Cnidarians:

Stomphia coccinea swimming anemone
Islandmagee Co. Antrim, St Abbs
Leptopsammia pruvoti sunset coral Isles of Scilly,
Lundy, Plymouth, Lyme Bay
Caryophyllia smithii Devonshire cup-coral unattached
in shelly gravel, S. Uist

Molluscs:

Doris sticta sponge sea slug Eddystone

Bryozoans:

Pentapora foliacea potato crisp bryozoan Farne Is.
& Pevensy Bay, Sussex

Echinoderms:

Porania pulvillus red cushion star Hatt Rock and
Eddystone - rarely seen in south
Anseropoda placenta goose foot starfish
Islandmagee Co. Antrim

Sea Squirts:

Phallusia mamillata our largest sea squirt! Start Point

Fishes:

Zeus faber John dory Loch Inchard
Parablennius ruber red blenny Isles of Scilly
Gobius cruentatus red mouthed goby Dorset
(previous records only from Ireland)

Eelgrass beds:

Zostera marina NW Kintyre

Snake Pipefish population explosion

One of the most notable findings in 2006 was the huge number of snake pipefish, *Entelurus aequoreus*, which were seen, mostly long the North Sea coast. There are relatively few previous records in the NBN database of snake pipefish, and most of those are from western coasts. Records of significant numbers of pipefishes in 2006 came from Loch Laxford, St Andrews, Fife Ness, St Abbs, Beadnell and North Norfolk. By November one record from Aberdeenshire reported that all the pipefish that had been common there over the summer had disappeared.



A recent scientific paper has reported that since 2004 snake pipefish have been increasingly recorded in the diet of many species of seabirds. The rigid, bony structure of pipefish makes them difficult for young seabirds to swallow and there are numerous records of chicks choking to death (Harris et.al. 2006). There has also been a range expansion for the species northwards to Spitzbergen and the Barents Sea.

Seasearch Training in 2006 and 2007

We ran 48 Seasearch courses in 2006 - 34 Observer, 4 Surveyor and 10 Specialist, with 516 participants.

A number of the Observer courses were in new areas - Chester, Galway, Reading, Tiverton and Sunderland; and we already have plans for courses in new locations in 2007, including Staffordshire, Essex, the Isle of Wight and Alderney in the Channel Islands. As always we can bring a course to your club or dive centre if you have enough people wanting to do it.

Courses in 2006 took place in dive clubhouses, diving schools, universities, schools, field centres, village halls, offices and of course pubs! Very popular were Observer and Fish ID courses held at marine aquaria in Fife, Ellesmere Port, Plymouth and London and two more Fish ID courses at aquaria in Sussex and Cornwall are planned for 2007.

Surveyor courses were less popular and some were cancelled because of lack of participants. If you are one of those people who finds there isn't enough room on the Observer Form any more then its time to move on and the Surveyor course is the best way to do it. We get much more detail from Survey forms so we are keen to help you make the change.



Specialist ID courses are another way to increase your knowledge and skills. If you want to get into seaweed ID, learn how to survey seagrass beds, improve your underwater photography, nudibranch ID, or just ID skills in general we have courses to help you.

We are especially keen to get better seaweed records - and to get you beyond kelp forest (left) into the detail!

New Seasearch Observers and Surveyors

Since July 2006 32 people have achieved Seasearch qualifications. Twenty-nine of them have become Seasearch Observers and come from NE Scotland (1), W Scotland (3), SE Scotland (1), Northern Ireland (2), Eire (3), North Wales (4), West Wales (4), the Midlands (2), Hampshire (1), Devon (5) and Cornwall (3).

The Surveyors qualified since July are:

Vicky Cartwright (Bude), Brian McIlroy (Lisburn), Owen Paisley (Argyll).

Congratulations to them all.

Remember to fill in your Seasearch forms after your dives and send them off to make them count. Only five completed forms are needed for the Observer qualification, and six for the Surveyor qualification - but don't stop there since ANY DIVE CAN BE A SEASEARCH DIVE!

This Newsletter is produced twice a year and is sent by either email or post to over 1,400 individuals and organisations. We prefer to use email as the printing and postage costs are high, but you can receive a paper copy by post if you make a contribution of £5. Please let us know by phone or email if you change your email address.

The Seasearch website is the place to look for the latest Seasearch news, courses, dives & results. You can find it at:

www.seasearch.org.uk

email: info@seasearch.org.uk

phone: 07776 142096

One to watch out for

The red blenny, *Parablennius ruber*, is turning up at a number of offshore sites in west Scotland, Ireland and south-west England. If you dive remote places look out for it. It is a close relative of our old friend the tompot blenny but the red colouration is very distinctive.

At present this little fish isn't listed in the British and Irish species directory, and it was thought to only occur further south. All the recent UK records are from Seasearch dives and it's a great example of what good volunteer observers can still discover.



Meet the Seasearch Tutors and Coordinators

Seasearch activities are organised by our team of 16 Coordinators, many of whom are also tutors, and 13 other Seasearch tutors from all around the UK. Contact details for the coordinators can be found on the Seasearch website and if there isn't a coordinator for your area contact the National Coordinator Chris Wood. Chris also deals with qualifications, the website, this newsletter and Seasearch funding. We now also have a part-time Seasearch Administrator, Jo Beukers-Stewart, who is based at MCS and is dealing with course administration, sales and the database of participants.

All the Coordinators and tutors are active divers. Many of them are professional biologists and conservationists. Others have different backgrounds but are equally keen and knowledgeable about UK marine life and marine recording. In each newsletter we feature one or more of them

Calum Duncan is the Scottish Officer for MCS and is very active in all things marine in Scotland, including organising Seasearch dives and courses and supervising the entry of data.

He is a great publicist and has regular articles on Seasearch in Scottish Diver and other publications.



Meanwhile the National Coordinator, Chris Wood took time off from writing the new Seasearch Observer's Guide to get to grips with marine biodiversity as far away from the sea as Birmingham. The picture alongside comes from Dive 2006 at the NEC - its not all equipment and foreign holidays at the shows these days!



Text by Chris Wood. Images by Chris Wood, David Brookes, Alejandro Gallego, Mike Markey and Vicky Swales

This Newsletter has been produced on behalf of Seasearch by the Marine Conservation Society, Unit 3 Wolf Business Park, Alton Road, Ross-on-Wye, Herefordshire, HR9 5NB.



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