

Seasearch

Newsletter 5 - June 2005

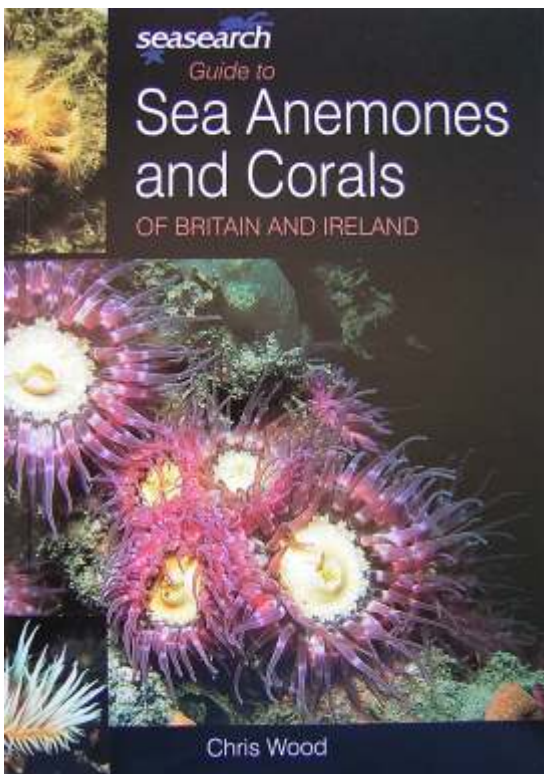


Welcome to the fifth National Seasearch Newsletter. This newsletter is being circulated, by email or post, to our database of almost 1,700 Seasearch participants and interested organisations. In it we want to bring you up to date with what has been happening with Seasearch so far during 2005, in what has been our most active year to date.

Seasearch is a volunteer underwater survey project for recreational divers to enable 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 Guide to Anemones & Corals

This month sees the publication of the first of what we hope will be a series of photographic identification guides.



Sea Anemones and Corals features all the British and Irish species and is illustrated by photographs from many well known Seasearch contributors, as well as those of the author, National Seasearch Coordinator Chris Wood.

The book is modestly priced at £9.95 (£11.00 incl P&P) and can be bought from the Marine Conservation Society's online bookshop (www.mcsuk.org) and at many Seasearch events. We also hope to run an anemone specialist ID course later in the year.

Seasearch records now on line

You can now browse Seasearch data online on the national Biodiversity Network website, www.searchnbn.net

The dataset includes all of the pre Seasearch surveys carried out by the Marine Conservation Society going back to 1977 and most of the Seasearch data collected between 1987 and 2004. There are records from 2,392 sites covering 1,742 different species. You can search for species records using an interactive map, and browse through records from other surveys including the MNCR and *MarLIN* datasets. The site also includes a huge number of terrestrial datasets covering everything from ants to yellowhammers.

There are gaps at present as we have not yet been able to include data from a couple of areas and some of the recently received data for 2004 is still to be entered. There are also some problems with translation of the data which has led to some very strange dates appearing in the Scottish records. The dictionary of common names being used is very limited too which restricts access unless you search using the scientific name. We are discussing all these issues with the JNCC but even now it is an impressive dataset and reflects the huge efforts put in by volunteer divers of the years.

Data for 2005

Observation and Survey forms for 2005 are coming in very fast. The current conservative estimate (mid June) is 229 forms received (162 Observation and 67 Survey) as well as 32 pink sea fan forms with details of 287 sea fans. The biggest number comes from Devon with 60 forms of all sorts. Thanks to you all and especially our recorders there. Please keep the forms coming. Don't hold onto them whilst you collect a pile which gets hidden away somewhere!



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, English Nature, 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 2005 - where its all happening

Rathlin, Northern Ireland 1

June saw Seasearch divers enjoying fine conditions for a liveaboard survey around Rathlin Island which lies between the Antrim coast and the Mull of Kintyre. Highlights were dives on the famous north wall which drops to 200m, especially when we were joined by diving guillemots. Its not often you can record birds on a Seasearch form!

Rathin is also famous for the range of sponges. Just one is shown below, *Axinella infundibuliformis*, which we have now named the prawn cracker sponge.



Sarn Cynfelyn, Cardigan Bay 2

Sarn Cynfelyn is a predominantly cobble/pebble bank that extends from the coast to around 7 miles offshore and lies within Cardigan Bay Special Area of Conservation. Friends of Cardigan Bay have been completing cetacean surveys over the last few years in the area and have found that bottlenose dolphins are foraging for food around the Sarns. They are interested to find out what is on the seabed and possibly what is attracting the dolphins.

Local Seasearch divers made the first of a number of planned Seasearch dives here in April. The seabed was a mixture of cobbles and pebbles with a few boulders and some areas of sand. There were numerous hydroids and bryozoans and mobile life included masked crabs as well as other more commonly recorded species. Fishes included butterflyfish, sea scorpions and greater pipefish.

A pod of bottlenosed dophins were seen from the surface at one of the sites.

Isles of Scilly 3

A team of 12 Seasearch divers spent a week on St Mary's with the aim of recording little visited sites and looking out for some of the special marine life around our most south-westerly group of islands. The wind was from the east all week, and though it was rather strong, it did mean we were able to visit a number of sites which are usually too exposed. This, meant that hydroid turf and kelp forests exceeded the more usual jewel anemone walls, though Trenemene Wall amongst the Western Rocks was a stunning example of this sort of wall dive.



Kelps included the smooth stalked *Laminaria ochroleuca*, left, which is very much a south-westerly species. We also looked at a very dense eel grass bed in TreSCO Sound.

Rock cooks were especially bright at this time of year and were everywhere.



Pink sea fan surveys 4

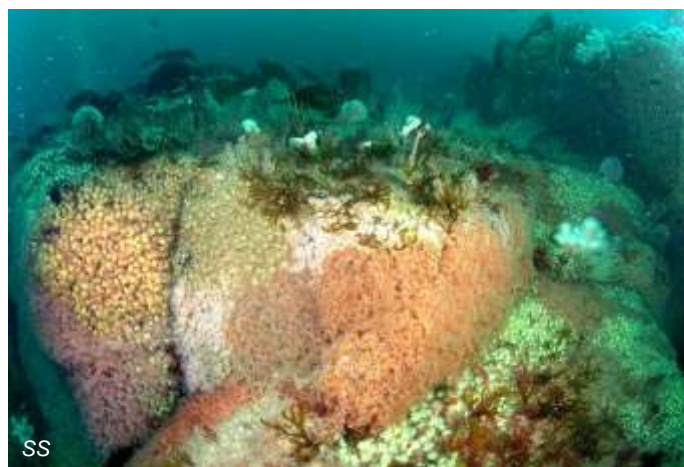
Surveys of pink sea fans in south west England have continued with dedicated surveys in the Isles of Scilly, the Manacles and Bigbury Bay.

There are relatively few sea fans in the Isles of Scilly but more of them are white than elsewhere, a southerly influence.

The Manacles and nearby Pencra reef are a known hot spot for pink sea fans. We have an ongoing project to record the movements in sea fan anemones here and we also trialled a method of seeing if colony growth is related to the strength of local microcurrents.



In Bigbury Bay we were looking at a site formerly densely covered with sea fans. Sadly almost all have gone, probably as a result of the disease which has affected populations elsewhere, such as Lundy. The effects seem to be very localised as a nearby wreck and reef have thriving populations.



Offshore Reefs - Plymouth 5

The Eddystone is about 10 miles offshore south of Plymouth and easily recognised by the lighthouse. A couple of miles to the west are Hand Deeps, a five pinnacled reef which doesn't reach the surface and further to the south west is Hatt Rock (above), an isolated pinnacle rising out of deep water to within 20m of the surface.

We were fortunate to visit all three sites in June in absolutely perfect conditions with glass calm seas and underwater visibility of 20m. All three sites offer brilliantly jewel anemone covered walls with soft corals and sea fans and we carried out sea fan recording as well as making general Seasearch records. Hatt Rock is perhaps the most dramatic as there is very little seaweed and both vertical and horizontal surfaces are carpeted in jewel anemones.

The most surprising record of the weekend was the red cushion star *Porania pulvillus*, much more commonly encountered along the west coast of Scotland.

Northern sea fans in the Firth of Lorn 6

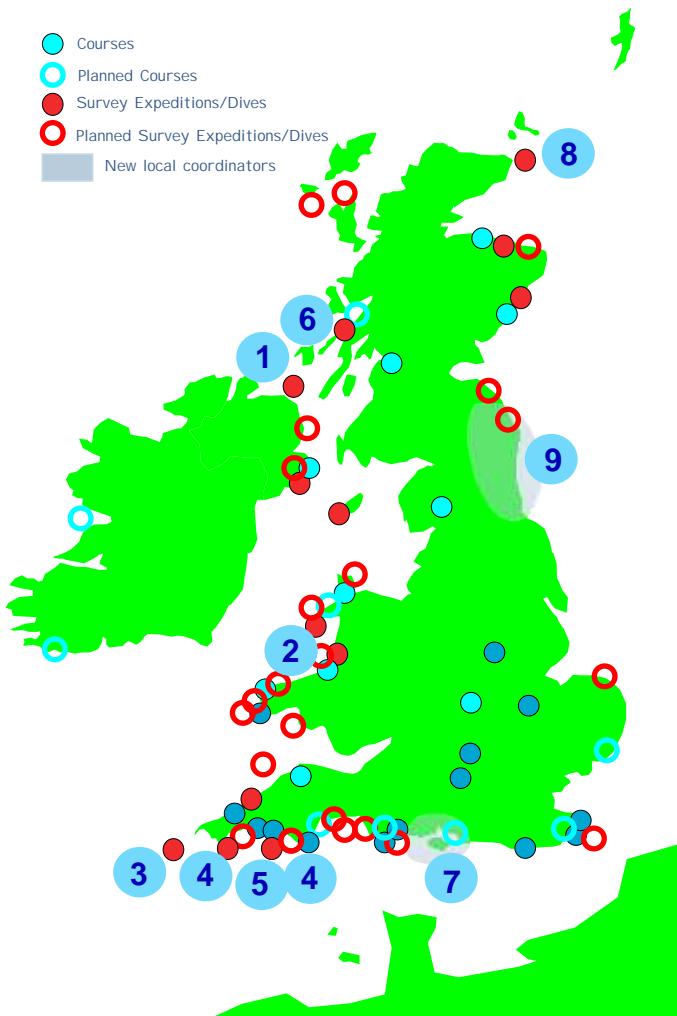
The northern sea fan, *Swiftia pallida*, is one of only two sea fans found in British and Irish waters and is restricted to the west coast of Scotland. Unlike its southern cousin it is not included in the government's Biodiversity Action Plan though the tiny rare sea fan anemone, which lives on both species, is included.

In April 8 Seasearch divers counted and measured northern sea fans at three sites in the Firth of Lorn, just south of Oban, one of which had not been surveyed before. A total of 195 colonies were measured and the anemone, *Amphianthus dohrnii*, was re-recorded and photographed at the two previously surveyed sites.

The picture shows a sea fan with an anemone present in the white ring.



A summary report of the survey is on the Seasearch website - follow the Achievements link to see it.



Hampshire and the Isle of Wight 7

We now have a local coordinator for Hampshire and the Isle of Wight. He is Jolyon Chesworth who is based at the Hampshire Wildlife Trust. You can contact him at jolyonc@hwt.org.uk or by phone on 01489 774445 (office hours).

Wild & Wonderful - the Pentland Skerries

In May Seasearch divers from Inverness and Caithness SACs, accompanied by local coordinator Marion Perutz seasearched the Pentland Skerries and the spectacular cliffs at Duncansby Head. 8

With up to 15m visibility, caves and cliffs containing weird and wonderful sponges and ascidians and walls blanketed in jewel anemones this was a rare treat and will be an important contribution to our knowledge of sites along Scotland's north-east coastline.



Seasearch coordinator for North East England We now have a local coordinator for north east England. She is Cora Cloughley who is based in Newcastle. You can contact her at coracloughley@blueyonder.co.uk or by phone on 07779 031624. 9



Spring fever

Spring is the best time to see nudibranchs as this year has been no exception. Most species do not survive the winter and in the spring there is an explosion of hydroids, a primary food source, followed by an explosion of nudibranchs eating their way through them and mating and egg laying along the ravaged stems.

Above are a pair of *Coryphella browni* in the midst of mating. They are hermaphrodites and can fertilise each other simultaneously.

To the right is *Doris sticta*, the sponge nudibranch. It's a nationally scarce species with a southerly distribution and was regularly seen in May on the Isles of Scilly where the picture was taken.



To the left is *Dendronotus frondosus*, another hydroid eating nudibranch, here seen working its way through *Tubularia larynx*. Picture from Rathlin Island, Northern Ireland.

Seasearch Training in 2005

At the time of writing there had already been 24 Observer and 4 Surveyor Courses in 2005 ranging from Macduff in the north to Newquay in the south, involving another 250 divers in Seasearch. We were especially glad to expand into new areas such as Cumbria, with a course in Kendal and the West Midlands, with two courses in Birmingham.



There are more courses planned with the first Observer courses in Suffolk (June), Oban (June), West Cork (July) and the Isle of Man (September). All of these are areas where there is huge scope for more Seasearch recording.

Observer and Surveyor courses are also planned in Devon, Kent and North Wales but the position is continually changing with more courses on offer. To find out the latest list of courses dates and locations visit the Seasearch website at www.seasearch.org.uk.

Meet the Seasearch Tutors

The Seasearch Tutors are all keen divers and experts in underwater life and marine recording. We have a team of 24 active tutors at present and 4 more assisting so, wherever you are, we can arrange a course to suit you if you have a group of divers who want to do it.

Just contact your local coordinator or National Coordinator Chris Wood to set the ball rolling.

Right: Another photo from the tutors Rogues Gallery Vicki Howe is one of our newer tutors and is based in South Wales where she is also the local Seasearch Coordinator. Vicki is a marine biologist and diver and is organising dives both locally in south Wales and a couple of liveaboard weekends in Pembrokeshire.



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. You can also contact Seasearch by telephone on 07776 142096 or by email at info@seasearch.org.uk



The Seasearch Qualifications

When you attend a Seasearch Course you'll be given a Qualification Logbook to record your Seasearch Qualifications.

To become a **Seasearch Observer** you need to attend the course and then complete 5 Observation Forms on your dives. Two of them need to be on dives where there is a tutor in attendance. We now have 71 qualified Observers, 22 of whom were signed off in the first half of this year. Congratulations to them all.

The **Surveyor** qualification requires you to attend and pass the course and complete 6 Survey Forms, one on the course, 2 with a tutor present and 3 on other dives. We are very keen to get more records at this level this year and there are a number of people who are near to completion. Most recent successful Seasearch Surveyor is Joanne Porter from Aberystwyth, who is actively organising and supporting recording in her patch.

If you haven't taken part in Seasearch before or want a refresher course try the one-day Observer course. Diving isn't an essential part of it but there are often dives linked with the course to enable you to practice your skills.

If you think you know enough about marine life and habitats then you don't have to attend a course. Just download the forms and guidance notes from the website and get on with it! Don't wait for someone else to organise a Seasearch dive for you - ANY DIVE CAN BE A SEASEARCH DIVE.

Specialist Courses - taking your skills a step further

The popular series of Marine Life Identification Courses continues this year with courses already held in Northern Ireland, Kent and Dorset. More are planned in Dorset and a week long course/dive in Galway.

We have also run a successful Seaweed identification course in Pembrokeshire and a course on Crustaceans and Molluscs is planned in Kent. Other plans are for courses on fish and anemone and coral ID. All of these courses are aimed at people who want to look in more depth at marine life and survey skills and are a part of the Seasearch Specialist qualification.

July also sees the first Observer Course run jointly with the Nautical Archaeology Society in Portsmouth aimed at divers who want to record marine life they find on wrecks.

Dates and contacts for all of the courses are on the website and will be regularly updated as new ones emerge.

This Newsletter is the fifth of a series. Its being produced to send both by email and by post and is going to almost 1,700 individuals and organisations. If you haven't received it directly and want to do so in future, or if you would prefer to receive the other version do telephone or email National Coordinator, Chris Wood and you'll get on the database.

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

www.seasearch.org.uk

email: info@seasearch.org.uk

phone: 07776 142096

Text by Chris Wood, Kate Lock & Marion Perutz. Photographs by Chris Wood, Marion Perutz, Mike Flavell and Sally Sharrock