



2021 Annual Report



Sally Chamberlain
Seasearch Northern Ireland Coordinator
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About Seasearch

The aim of Seasearch N.I. is to gather information on seabed habitats and associated marine wildlife in Britain and Ireland through the participation of volunteer recreational divers. The scheme is coordinated by the Marine Conservation Society (MCS) and organised regionally by a number of coordinators. As well as recording marine life and habitats, volunteers record litter and other anthropogenic impacts. The objectives of Seasearch N.I. are:

- To encourage the participation of volunteer recreational divers in marine conservation through gathering data, particularly for areas where little data exists or where there is a conservation need.
- To provide training in recording skills to enable volunteer recreational divers to participate in Seasearch.
- To make quality assured Seasearch data available to partner organizations and the general public.
- To raise public awareness of the diversity of local marine life and habitats through the dissemination of information gathered and the identification of issues arising from it.







Through training and organised dives, Seasearch recreational scuba divers are able to survey large areas of the seabed for which species and habitat information may not be otherwise available. All Seasearch Northern Ireland data is held by the local environmental records centre, CEDaR (www.nmni.com/cedar) and the Marine Conservation Society and is made available to view and download on the NBN Atlas Northern Ireland (<https://northernireland.nbnatlas.org/>).

2021 Summary


With the ability to run boat diving again, and so much to catch up on, the programme for 2021 was a busy one! The momentum from 2020 continued and we had no issues filling places on boats, online talks and Observer training. The original schedule was moved around a little with some dates and locations changing but generally the weather was kind to us and only one boat day was postponed to 2022. The Whatsapp groups continue to be popular and a great way for both Seasearchers and non-Seasearchers to keep in touch and arrange shore dives and other activities amongst themselves. The number of forms submitted has increased for the second year running to **124**, our second highest year, just 30 forms shy of 154 forms in 2012.

In summary:

We ran:

-  1 Seasearch Observer course (online)
-  1 Seasearch Refresher course (online)
-  1 Nudibranchs course (online)
-  1 Seaweeds course (online)
-  1 Sea Deep Sharks, skates & rays talk (online)
-  13 dives


We trained:

-  12 new Seasearch Observers (and 'refreshed' 26)





We certified:

-  1 Seasearch Observer

We received:

-  124 forms

A big thanks goes to:

-  Our funders this year, Ulster Wildlife Living Seas and Sea Deep teams and the Sea-Changers charity. This support is vital for surveying marine habitats across a wide spread of the Northern Ireland inshore region and maintaining a core group of enthusiastic Seasearchers!
-  Our dive charters used this year, Aquaholics and DV Diving, for being so accommodating and taking us to new and exciting dive sites!
-  The Marine Conservation Society who continue to facilitate Seasearch across the UK and Ireland.
-  The Seasearch NI divers, snorkellers and supporters. Our special inshore marine environment is better understood and healthier thanks to your outstanding passion and commitment.

Sally Chamberlain

Seasearch Northern Ireland Coordinator

Photo credit Claire Goodwin



2021 Programme

Date	Event	Location
22 nd March	Seasearch Refresher Course	Online
22 nd April	Nudibranch Course	Online
22 nd – 23 rd May	Seasearch Observer Course	Online
23rd May (pm)	Shore dive	Kearney
5 th & 6 th June	Sea Changers Sea Squirt Safari	Skerrie (Portrush)
17 th June	Seaweed Course	Online
4 th July	Seagrass dive survey	Kearney
8 th July	Sea Deep talk	Online
18 th July	Sea Deep Sharks, skates and rays	Grants Causeway (Portballintrae)
29th July – 1st August	Living Seas Blue Carbon BioBlitz	Skerries (Portrush)
15 th August	Sea Deep sharks, skates and rays	Killough
5th September	Sea Deep sharks, skates and rays	Maidens (Glenarm)
19 th September	Sea Deep sharks, skates and rays	Outer Ards (Bangor)

31st-1st

Skerries
Rathlin

For more information or to book a place please contact us at seasearchni@gmail.com or via Facebook: 'Seasearch NI'.



Additional dates due to programme alterations:

10 th October	Sea Deep Sharks, Skates and rays	Strangford Lough
16 th October	Living Seas Blue Carbon BioBlitz	Ballycastle

Training

Online Refresher Course

22nd March

26 Seasearchers dialled into a 1.5 hour long session online where we ran through the basics of filling out an Observer form, highlighting some frequent mistakes and confusions as well as particular species which have changed name recently or which should not be recorded at species level.

Online Nudibranch Course

22nd April

Renowned Nudibranch expert Bernard Picton kindly ran an online talk for us covering nudibranch ecology, local species, how to find them, photograph them and most importantly, identify them! This was a very popular event with 36 people, Seasearchers and non-Seasearchers, dialling in.

Online Observer Course

22nd – 23rd May

Delivered online for 12 new Seasearchers, with some existing Observers taking part as a refresher. The course was run over two mornings and one of the participants has since completed their five forms and become a newly certified Seasearch Observer – congratulations Corinna Woerdemann!

Online Seaweed Course

17th June

While on placement with us and helping out with our social media, Adriana Pacesa organised a fascinating online talk on seaweeds provided by Kathryn Schoenrock-Rossiter from the National University of Ireland, Galway. Over 20 Seasearchers and non-Seasearchers dialled into the talk which highlighted the value of kelp as a Blue Carbon Biotope (to be explored later in the summer!).

Online Sea Deep Talk

8th July

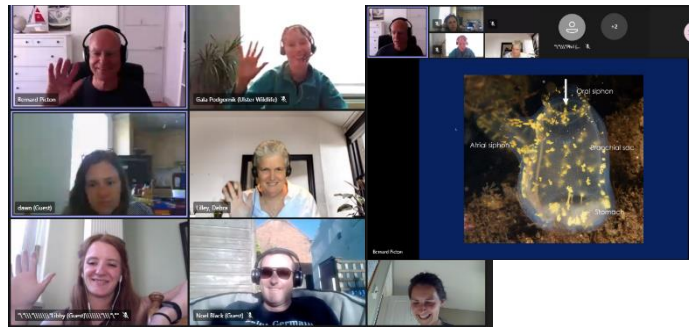
With Sea Deep (Ulster Wildlife) part funding much of the boat diving scheduled for the summer, Erin McKeown (Project Officer) provided an online talk for 31 Seasearchers and non-Seasearchers about local shark, skate and ray species, identifying and recording them. Attendees were also introduced to the new [Code of Conduct](#) for divers and snorkellers to follow when they come in contact with a shark, skate or ray (Annex 1). This was created with input from Seasearch.

Diving and snorkelling

Sea Squirt Safari, Skerries

5th – 6th June

Due to difficulties in spotting and identifying sea squirts, this group is typically under-recorded. To address this and improve ID skills and confidence, in 2019 we secured funding from Sea Changers to run a Sea Squirt Safari around the Skerries off Portrush. We were finally able to run our



safari in June 2021 over the course of 3 days. This kicked off with an online squirt talk, for 15 attendees, provided by local expert and co-author of the Seasearch Sea Squirts and Sponges guide, Bernard Picton.

Having picked up the basics for finding, photographing and identifying squirts, participants took part in a full weekend of diving around the Skerries with Aquaholics. A total of 17 people took part, with Bernard on hand to help with ID and completion of a report from the weekend (see *Skerries Sea Squirt Safari, 2021*).

Overall, 29 species were recorded from 6 locations. 25 of these species had been recorded from the Skerries recently, while 5 were new observations from the area. Of these, *Aplidium* caramel 2-spot (as described in the Seasearch Sea Squirts and Sponges guide), was a first record from Northern Ireland. Since the safari, participants have improved their squirt ID skills and as a result we are seeing more records for this taxon group!



Seagrass Safari, Kearney

4th July

This shore dive and snorkel was organised having been informed by Ulster Wildlife of seagrass blades washed up on the shore. Two snorkellers and three divers met at Kearney Point and split into two teams; the snorkellers who headed east towards the headland, and the divers who headed south west into the bay. The snorkellers were thrilled to spot patches of seagrass amongst the mixed rock and sand substratum and we look forward to revisiting the site in 2022 to better map the density and extend of the bed.



Sea Deep dives, Portrush

18th July

10 divers joined Aquaholics to explore The Storks, followed by Ramore Head. Divers recorded a variety of nudibranch species and put to use their newfound sea squirt identification skills!

Living Seas Blue Carbon BioBlitz, Rathlin

31st July – 1st August

Further funding was secured from Ulster Wildlife Living Seas to run four days of diving targeting Blue Carbon habitat. The first dives took place with Aquaholics off Rathlin with 10 divers gathering vital information and fabulous photos of kelp, seagrass and maerl within the Marine Conservation Zone.



Sea Deep dives, Ardglass

15th August

We kicked off the first of our Sea Deep part-funded boat dives with DV Diving out of Ardglass, exploring the White Lady, Guns Island and the Ardglass Gullies. Another full boat (12 divers) and plenty of photos and forms. Species of note was the Southern Cup Coral *Caryophyllia inornata* (and bottlenose dolphins!).



Sea Deep dives, Copeland Islands

19th September

10 divers were out again with DV Diving in September to survey the Copeland Islands. This is the first time in a few years that Seasearch had been here and it did not disappoint. We were especially pleased to record live lesser spotted dogfish egg cases alongside a variety of species.



Sea Deep dives, Strangford Lough

10th October

Our next Sea Deep part-funded boat day was with DV Diving in Strangford Lough, on the Outer Lees wreck followed by Skate Rock. Despite the name, no skate to be seen. The lough was once a stronghold for the flapper skate but due to overfishing, this species hasn't been seen here since the 1970s. However, a variety of other species were recorded by our 9 divers in October, including the cloak anemone *Adamsia palliata* which lives almost exclusively on the hermit crab *Pagurus prideaux*.



Living Seas dives, Ballycastle

16th October

Our final boat dives of the year were day 3 of the Blue Carbon BioBlitz with Aquaholics out of Ballycastle where 11 divers surveyed the seabed at Carrick-a-rede and Sheep Island. Plenty of kelp habitat to explore and shot of the day was this juvenile European spiny lobster, for which Carrick-a-rede appears to be a stronghold.



Recording

Forms

Volunteers submitted **124** forms in 2021. This is the second highest year for the group to date and equated to **120.7 hours** of underwater surveying. 110 (89%) of these were Observer Forms, while the remaining 14 (11%) were Surveyor forms. Two Observer forms were submitted by snorkellers, while the remainder were submitted by divers. Congratulations go to Libby Keatley who submitted a total of 37 forms, the highest number submitted by any diver! Libby was awarded with a new MCS hoody for her efforts.

Map of Seasearch forms submitted in 2021:



Interesting records

Red (Portuguese) Blenny

We received this photo of a red blenny from Rathlin Island in October and having shared the image on Facebook with some information for identification, two more records followed within the same week! While this species may be previously under-recorded and/or confused with the Tompot blenny, as a southerly species, increasing records may also be an indicator of climate change related warming waters. One to look out for!



Cephalopod paralarva

An unusual sighting for a diver captured by Libby Keatley - the tiny Cephalopod paralarva. This is the planktonic stage of a squid or octopus between hatching and subadult.



European common squid

While this is a common species in British and Irish waters, the first official sighting from the Inner Leas is the first official *Seasearch* record. They are generally found in deeper waters but migrate to shallower waters in summer, so what this individual is up to!



Pea crab

A fantastic photo of the pea crab *Pinnotheres pinnotheres*, which has only been recorded once previously in Northern Irish waters and just 34 times from British and Irish waters, where it has a southerly distribution.



© Libby Keatley

John Dory

This juvenile John Dory was spotted mucking around in the shallows at the Copeland Islands. It is a common species here but not frequently seen by divers, especially in the middle of the day!



© Libby Keatley

Other activities

BBC Spring & Autumn Watch

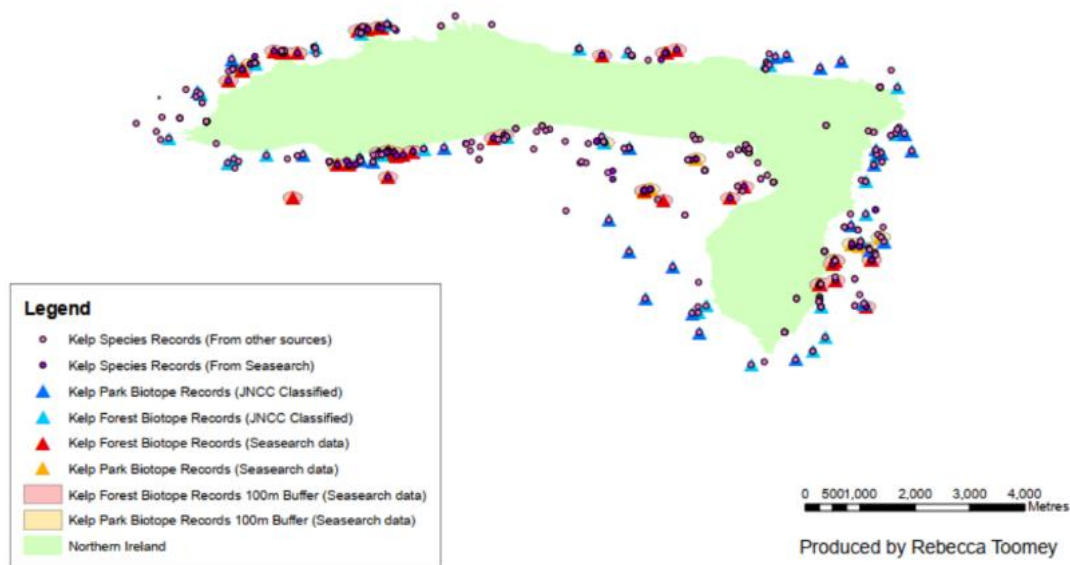
With Springwatch and Autumnwatch based in Strangford Lough this year, we were thrilled to be approached by BBC to include underwater imagery from our divers! Springwatch featured Dave Wall's footage of a curled octopus, while Autumnwatch featured Phil Wilkinson's photos of a candy striped flatworm and Libby Keatley's Tompot blenny! Plus a mention for Seasearch in both series.

Kelp project

With a new focus on mapping and protecting kelp park and kelp forest (blue carbon habitat), we hosted an undergraduate student placement from Queens University Belfast to assess Seafish kelp biotope records. Rebecca Toomey spent 3 months extracting Seafish NI 'kelp park' and 'kelp forest' records and assessing these against key criteria to support redetermination of the Seafish record to a formal JNCC biotope. These criteria were a combination of additional data gathered by Seasearchers alongside former biotope records and imagery collected in a 10 year period from 2010-2020:

- Records for Characterising Species within 100m of the site
- Matching JNCC Biotope classification records within 100m of the site
- Supporting footage from DiveNI
- Supporting data from a Seasearch Surveyor form
- Supporting evidence from a Seasearch Surveyor description

The report identified 21 kelp *park* biotope records, from a total of 58 records assessed, which could be upgraded to a JNCC classified kelp biotope. From 65 kelp *forest* records assessed, 14 were identified which could be upgraded to a JNCC classified kelp biotope.



Rebecca's study demonstrated the power of Seasearch data when analysed alongside other citizen science and government data for identifying and mapping priority habitats. We hope to see the outcomes of this project feeding into a larger scale analysis of the Seasearch biotope dataset and ongoing monitoring of vital blue carbon habitat.

Christmas lunch

Thankfully we were able to celebrate a great year for Seasearch NI and have an early Christmas get-together, with a shore dive at the Inner Lees wreck followed by a 'big feed' in Portaferry to warm up afterwards!



CODE OF CONDUCT DIVING & SNORKELLING WITH SHARKS, SKATES & RAYS



IF YOU HAVE A CAMERA

- Take a photo for identification but avoid using a flash

IF YOU SEE A SHARK, SKATE OR RAY SETTLED ON THE SEABED

- Do not crowd them
- Do not touch them or disturb the sand covering them
- Find an area of barren seabed at the tail end of the animal to kneel

IF YOU SEE A SHARK, SKATE OR RAY SWIMMING


- Do not swim after them or block their path
- Do not feed them

HOW TO SPOT SKATES AND RAYS!

Skates and rays bury themselves in the sediment to ambush unsuspecting prey. They are well camouflaged making them difficult to spot!

KEY THINGS TO LOOK OUT FOR ARE:

- The **EYES** protruding from the sand when they are fully buried
- The **END OF THE TAIL** exposed on the seabed
- A **FAINT OUTLINE** of the skate or ray in the sand



ARE SHARKS, SKATES AND RAYS PROTECTED?
The Common Skate, Basking Shark and Angel Shark are protected under the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985

IF YOU FIND AN EGGCASE

- Do not touch, disturb or remove it
- Take a photo and note the location
- Submit your record to the Sea Deep website



FIND OUT MORE AT
WWW.SEADEEPI.NI.ORG

