

Beasties and Flora of North Haven

The objective of this Fair Isle Wildlife Club expedition, on Sunday evening 5th August 2007, was to see something of the marine and terrestrial variety of the site. The onset of rain after an hour and a half of endeavour curtailed the terrestrial part but, before that, five adults and five bairns enjoyed investigating the life of the open sea off the old and new slipways. In addition to some pond-dipping nets we also had at our disposal three fine mesh plankton nets, each attached to a long chord. A quick lesson in technique, including safety for person and net, and everyone was having a go at launching the net into the water then pulling it back to the slip on its chord.

In years past at this time of year, North Haven has been full of jellyfish, slaters and other beasties large enough to be appreciated by all without resort to magnification. We were not so lucky this time. Despite a survey from slips, jetty and pier there was not a jellyfish to be seen. This phenomenon of the last few years is probably an indicator that the jellyfish, like the sandeels *Ammodytes* and seabirds, are now struggling to find food in our waters.

Back to the captures: the largest beastie caught, and the one which attracted most attention, was a fifteen-spined stickleback *Spinachia spinachia*. Other beasties that caught the eye were notable more for their strange shape than their size. A twig-thin crustacean with eyes on stalks, a tiny “tadpole” shaped invertebrate with huge head and ultra slim curved abdomen, two small slaters (isopods), a very pale crustacean we called “the boxer” because of its big black eyes and an array of small and smaller shrimp-like crustaceans. We did at least recognize a small periwinkle *Littorina neritoides* and a juvenile common whelk *Buccinum undatum*.

The plankton nets also intercepted some floating pieces of seaweed, sea lettuce *Ulva lactuca* and some finer red and brown seaweeds. Amongst them were more shrimps and some tiny snails.

Most of the captures were made from the old slip but we eventually transferred to the new slip where 5 shore crabs *Carcinus maenas* were found amongst the tangles of kelp *Laminaria* and other seaweeds. Pat Thomson and I paused to consider the vegetation at the top of the beach. This is Fair Isle’s only dune system. It was good quality dune grassland some twenty years ago but has since been a regular holding site for building materials, heavy plant, vehicles and flocks of overnighing sheep – all of which have taken their toll. Disturbance, coupled with eutrophication from dunging, has allowed silverweed *Potentilla anserina* to dominate the coastal fringe and spear thistle *Cirsium vulgare* to establish on top of the dune. A small portion at the eastern end has remained in good condition – its location below the road embankment and on a slope saving it from parked vehicles and worse – but here the recently arrived creeping thistle *Cirsium arvense* is invading. The dune was formerly a site for sea sandwort *Honkenya peploides* but I have not seen it for 15 years or more and it may be extinct. This would be a shame because every other “special” flower species on the isle is doing well. As some recompense, Pat did find a knotgrass, almost certainly small-flowered knotgrass *Polygonum arenastrum*, poking through the silverweed just above the beach.

With the coming of the rain we retreated to our homes. However, the event was not fully at an end. I took some of the captures home and the following day peered at them down a microscope. Some of the bairns, and Tommy, joined me and were able to appreciate how amazing and spectacular these beasties look at 40 times their normal size. The crustacean with eyes on stalks was the chameleon shrimp *Praunus flexuosus*; so named because of its ability to match its background, it was one of several of the captures which changed colour during their detention. The “tadpole” was the crustacean *Bodotria scorpioides*. The larger and broader of the slaters was the isopod *Idotea emarginata*, the smaller, slimmer one *Idotea chelipes* – sporting a stunning black and white chequered body. The “boxer” was also an isopod, though much more thick-set. Its name is *Eurydice pulchra*. “Pulchra” means beautiful, and it lived up to its name. The patterns on its upper side were a series of black spots from which ran thin wavy threads like a crazy spider’s web; these were interspersed with elliptic white marks banded thinly with black. I had neither the time nor the courage to identify the entire array of shrimps. I managed to track down two of the most distinctive as *Jassa falcata* and *Calliopius laeviusculus* – both common crustaceans of UK waters; and the sharp eyes of Martha, Harry and Abby picked out a couple of species of copepods, one a classic “Cyclops” with its solitary red eye staring up from its forehead.

We also had a look at the seaweeds. The red seaweed, with frond tips curled over like pliers, was *Ceramium shuttleworthianum* and the mass of pale brown weed was *Dictyosiphon foeniculaceus*. To my shame, I failed to put a name to the dark brown weed that had also been taken. The *Dictyosiphon* hosted two tiny snails, less than 1 mm high. They were active even under the microscope and I determined them as *Coriandria fulgida*. The most fascinating find, for me, was first seen as a piece of “debris” waving from a seaweed frond. Again, it was less than 1 mm long. Under the microscope it revealed itself as the flatworm *Convoluta convoluta*. This amazing beastie rolls its “skirts” over as it swims so that it looks for all the world like a floating open-sided ice cream cone. It was covered in little brown spots, which the books inform me are algae incorporated into its body!

So, no numbers, no large spectacular beasties – but some stunning finds at higher magnifications. It was well worth the effort.

Nick Riddiford
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