



A NEW LOOK AT HELFORD'S BIRDS

What a difference five years can make... and not always for the worse.

It was only in 1998 that Brian Cave's superb report on the birds of the Helford River was published in which he made the not-too-startling prediction: "Should the Little Egrets ever attempt to breed or begin breeding they would immediately become of national importance as a Rare Breeding Bird..."

Well, we all know what happened next (or, to be more accurate, not so much "next" as between Brian finishing his survey fieldwork and the Report being published!). The egrets did breed, starting in 1997; the rest is history.

Also in that same information-packed publication came the all-too-true comment that "...the birdwatching fraternity has not given the Helford River the attention it deserves." This year that situation is going to change for the better, too.

This spring and summer, the RSPB is running a tetrad-by-tetrad* breeding birds survey on the Lizard peninsula, including the Helford area.

It won't be easy. Helford remains, as Brian remarked, a difficult place to work from the birdwatching point of view: too many secret corners, difficult viewing points, restricted accesses.

This year's survey, though, will involve boatwork as well as foot-slogging, and the focus in the Helford complex will be on specific species.

They will include Little Grebe, Cormorant, Grey Heron, Little Egret, Mute Swan, Canada Goose, Shelduck, Mallard, Tufted Duck, Water Rail, Coot, Moorhen, Kingfisher, Grey Wagtail, Cetti's Warbler and Reed Warbler.

These are species that can, if necessary, be targeted for help from special programmes like those, for example, that are already being used on farms throughout the county.

To mention just three, the breeding status of Cormorant, Grey Heron and Little Egret (of course!) will be of particular interest. So - here comes the You-Can-Help bit.

If you have old records, special knowledge of the locality or think there is something the surveyors ought to know, get in touch with Claire Mucklow at the RSPB's regional office in Exeter. The address is Keble House, Southernhay Gardens, Exeter EX1 1NT. Telephone: 01392-432691.

You may be wondering how this all fits in with a certain other breeding birds study... Cornwall Birdwatching and Preservation Society launched an ambitious 10-year plan in 2000 to produce an atlas of all Cornwall's breeding birds. This year's one-off survey will in no way compete with that. All the records and information gathered will be fed into the CBWPS effort to make sure that nothing is lost or duplicated unnecessarily.

The new survey aims to establish a baseline for future monitoring and to produce an accurate, repeatable measure of the abundance and distribution of our birds.

So, by the beginning of next year, the hope is that the pioneering work of Brian Cave's "Birds of the Helford River" will be augmented and updated. And the birds of Helford River will have the attention they deserve.

Mike Lord

Editor - Brian Cave's "Birds of the Helford River" is still available at cost £5.50 + pp from me at Awelon, Colborne Avenue, Illogan, Redruth TR16 4EB (01209 842316)



* a tetrad is an area 2km x 2km selected within 10km OS grid squares to give representative sampling coverage

Aim: To safeguard the marine life of the Helford River by any appropriate means within its status as a Voluntary Marine Conservation Area, to increase the diversity of its intertidal community and raise awareness of its marine interest and importance.

For further information relating to the Helford Voluntary Marine Conservation Area please contact the **HVMCA Group Co-ordinator**, PE Tompsett, c/o Cornwall Wildlife Trust, Five Acres, Allet, Truro, TR4 9DJ. Tel. (01872) 240777

Chairman: W L Collins

Co-ordinator: P E Tompsett

Design: Sheila McCann, Cornwall Wildlife Trust **Illustration:** Sarah McCartney, Cornwall Wildlife Trust

People Page Helford VMCA Group



National recognition for Stella Turk, a founder member

HVMCA Group members were delighted to learn that the 2003 New Year's Honours list included the award of an M.B.E. to Stella Turk for her services in the field of natural history in Cornwall and marine work in particular. From the mid-1980s Stella played a major role in the establishment and evolution of the HVMCA Group using her concern for marine wildlife and expertise for the benefit of the Helford River and its shores then and throughout the intervening years. The Group is fortunate to have such a valuable member and we offer Stella our sincere congratulations and thanks.



Chairman changes.....

W L Collins, Chairman of the HVMCA Group 1987-2002

I first met Leslie Collins in his capacity as a Land Agent. His knowledge and competent advice, quietly but confidently given, was welcomed by many farmers and landowners around The Lizard Peninsula and beyond.

Much of Leslie's spare time was spent sailing in his Bermudan sloop, "Frith of Furzeham". At that time the Helford River Sailing Club ran a series of pursuit races on various Sundays through the summer. These were great occasions with up to 50 boats of all sizes taking part from 25 feet folk boats to magnificent ocean going yachts like 'Skal' and 'Tern IV of Bar'. Leslie was a regular competitor in these races.

A new Chairman for the HVMCA Group

David Muirhead has been Vice Chairman of the HVMCA Working Group for some years and is now taking over the leading role.

His boyhood was spent in the Falmouth area with interests in sailing and fishing and, on completion of his formal education, he decided to follow his inclinations and go into full time fishing. This he did successfully for 10 years and became a spokesman for the local inshore fishermen and later, Chairman of the Cadgwith, Helston and District Fishermen's Society.

At the end of this period, he decided to make a change of occupation and read Law, duly became a qualified Solicitor and joined the local firm of Hancock and Lawrence but continued to fish in such spare time as was available.

He has, for some years, been Chairman of the Cornwall Sea Fisheries Committee and has served for 9 years on the National Trust Regional Committee for Devon and Cornwall.

In addition to all these activities, he has found time to play Rugby Football, chair the Cornwall Pilot Gigs Association, lead the Cadgwith Singers in their popular presentations of Cornish songs and carols and to part own and sail the late Toby West's famous Working Boat, 'Victory'.

David's experiences have given him a great insight into the aims and practicalities of Marine Conservation and a sympathetic understanding of the needs of the local community.

We are confident that the Group will be well served by its new Chairman.

W L Collins

Despite having one of the smaller yachts he frequently finished well up the fleet and on one great occasion achieved like honours holding several modern "racing machines" at bay.

With his family firm, having used the Helford River for its business, and his own knowledge of the river and those who lived on it Leslie was the perfect choice as the first Chairman of the HVMCA. Leslie has the great art of being able to deal with problems in a firm yet kind way when necessary. He was able to guide our group through changing times and help us to reach solutions to difficult problems in his own quiet unflappable way. Leslie has set high standards for me and future chairmen to follow.

David Muirhead

Calcified seaweed or maerl

Those of us who have, at one time or another, gazed into rock pools, may have noticed that some have a coating of pinkish-purple 'icing'. Sometimes this is rather knobbed or crinkled, but it always adheres tightly to the rocks or stones. This growth is in fact a seaweed - a calcified red seaweed and there are a number of different species. Others grow on fronds of unrelated seaweed. Those that concern us here are a few that form unattached nodules (rhodoliths) of varying shapes and sizes, beds of which are known as 'maerl'.

Such beds are not common, and ones large enough to be harvested are to be found only off the southwest coast of Brittany and Ireland, whilst in this country they occur off western Scotland and Cornwall. A measure of international protection is afforded under the European Habitats Directive. A small quantity, mainly of *Lithothamnion corallioides*, has been found in the Helford River, but is not easily located, whilst in the Fal, off St Mawes, there is famous bed of living calcified seaweed, mainly *Phymatolithon calcareum*.

I call it famous because it has been the subject of much study and debate over the past three decades. In 1975 MAFF staff carried out a survey that revealed a wealth of species living in its interstices and on its surface. This survey was extended to cover the very large beds of 'sub-fossil' deposits in Falmouth Bay, and they were likewise found to have a richly diverse associated fauna and flora.

A considerable tonnage of the subfossil deposit is hoovered from the seabed of the estuary by the Calcified Seaweed Company. This Company operates under a licence originally issued by the former Dept of the Environment and recently re-issued for another year by DEFRA. A bed in the Bay has been 'worked out' and permission is sought for dredging in a new site in the Bay. However, English Nature has been seeking a ban on all extraction of this valuable resource with its array of species - including worms, crustaceans, and molluscs as well as many juvenile forms. These are valuable in their own right apart from the fact that it is a production area for species low in the food chain.

Maerl is a rather rare very slow-growing plant, needing conditions with gentle movement of water that will prevent it being covered by fine sediment. Conversely vigorous water current would roll and fragment it. It is not known why so much of maerl is dead, but I am told that there some alive and growing in the Bay and it is reasonable to suppose that warming water may encourage this growth.

Stella Turk

Dolphin Disaster

The dolphin bycatch issue has had a lot of publicity recently due to the huge numbers of dead dolphins and porpoises that have been washed up on our beaches over the winter months. In January alone there were 79 dolphins and porpoises washed up on the shores of Cornwall. Most have shown the kind of damage that we have come to associate with fisheries bycatch. This damage includes broken or dislocated beaks and damaged fins, and has been attributed to entrapment in large trawl nets, particularly those trawled between two boats moving at speed and kept in the water for hours at a time in the pursuit of bass.

This fishery is a European one and nothing to do with our local inshore fishermen. As such these trawlers can only be regulated and stopped at a European level.

The Wildlife Trusts have recently launched a petition and campaign to ban the pair trawling fishery until appropriate measures are put in place to prevent cetacean bycatch and these horrendous deaths. You can help by signing the petition, or by writing to your local MP, MEP or direct to Franz Fischler, EU Fisheries Minister to call for action (draft letters available from CWT). For more information on the campaign or to sign the petition, please call Cornwall Wildlife Trust on 01872 273939.

Also, if you do find a dead dolphin on the beach, please call us immediately on (01872) 273939 so we can record it and help gather the evidence we need to see action taken now.

Ruth Williams, Marine Conservation Officer, CWT



New Byelaws have been passed to protect the humble cockle

Cornwall's cockles are now safer thanks to a series of new byelaws designed to protect them from over fishing.

The byelaws, applying to all of Cornwall's larger estuaries, are the result of over four years of negotiations between the Environment Agency, landowners including the Duchy of Cornwall, local and national fishermen, conservation bodies including HVMCA and legal experts.

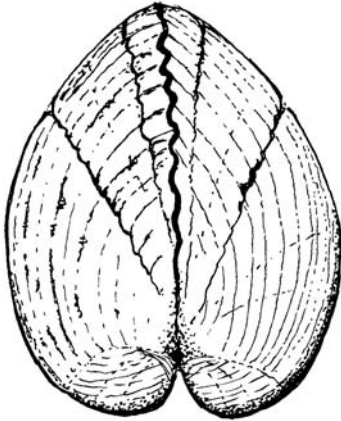
The five new byelaws, recently approved by DEFRA, will protect cockle stocks on the Camel, Helford, Fal, Fowey and Looe estuaries where only non-mechanical hand harvesting will be permitted. The legal minimum cockle size is now 20mm to protect stocks of the young shellfish.

Under the byelaws, the Environment Agency has powers to temporarily close cockle beds to harvesting if the stocks fall below critical levels. It also has powers

to give permission for cockles to be collected for scientific purposes or to develop and improve local shellfish populations under special exemptions.

Cockles are an important natural resource that are a valuable source of food for estuary birds and humans. The new byelaws will help us ensure Cornwall's cockles are harvested sustainably so that present and future generations can enjoy them.

James Burke

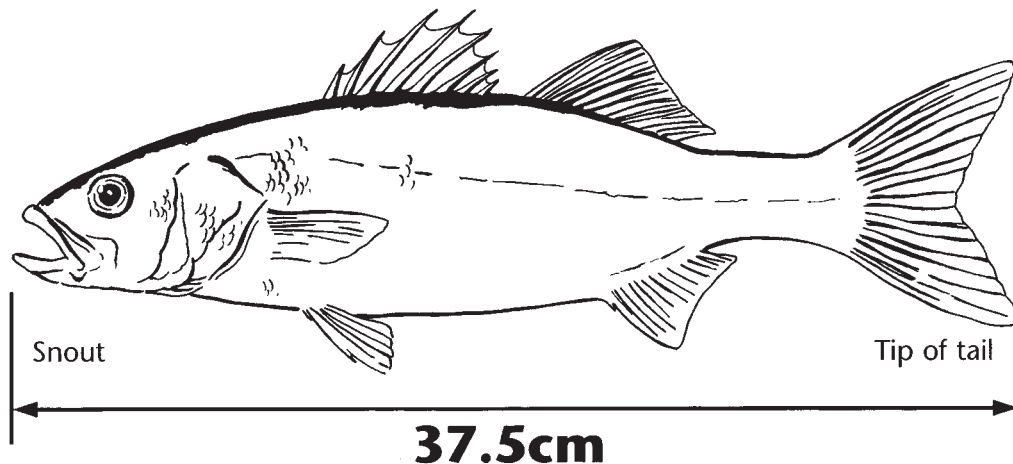


A reminder to all fishermen - bass protection measures - byelaw changes

The bass size limit has been rationalised and is now the same for catches off the coast and in estuaries. It is now illegal to retain any bass caught anywhere off the Cornish coast out to the six-mile limit if it is under 37.5 cm in length.

Bass are a slow-growing, long-lived fish and the protection will help protect the breeding stock. The 37.5cm length specimen would be about 6 yrs old and they can live up to 30 years but these older fish are few and far between these days!

Minimum Bass Size



The minimum size limit for bass in Cornish estuaries and on the coast out to a six mile limit is 37.5cm. It is an offence to retain any bass under this size from either an estuary (Environment Agency byelaw, 6 November 2002) or from the coast out to six miles (Cornwall Sea Fisheries bass byelaw, 7 April 1997)



**ENVIRONMENT
AGENCY**

Making the "Jaws of Helford" video

Addiction is something we all share when the subject, Helford River is mentioned; my quest to spend as much time as possible underneath that river was strengthened in the winter months of 1978. The 'jaws' or mouth of that river quickly took hold of me once more.

Diving mainly from the shore at Grebe Beach, the word 'swimming' must often be prefixed by 'olympic' to describe how far one must travel to see the true beauty of the river's life. Please don't attempt that unless you have full knowledge of the tides and are capable of accurately reading an underwater compass.

Three years ago I decided to capture that underwater life on video, a DV (digital video) camera. Initially I had no script, no funding, I went to the Lloyds bank and told them how my bursting energy to explore a new project, deserved their attention.

I began to shoot my first 'roll of film' during the winter months of 2000 (mini DV tapes at first), often pointing the camera to subject surrounded by blackened leaves from the coppice oak trees. Through the eye-piece of that camera, hermit crabs, old crab pots, anything that I saw became even more interesting. Back home on the editing screen - all new to me after three decades of still photography - I re-lived that dive, seeing things I hadn't actually seen underwater. The camera had trawled-up a fascinating 50 minutes of moving image. Forty minutes into that shoot I had captured a thornback ray, a flat shark positioned far in the distance. Searching my own memory, I never truly saw that ray and was shocked that the camera was more piercing than my eyes. I never thought I would 'miss' anything after 30 years of diving. How wrong I was. That's when I decided to chase the Helford 'shark' and find out more about a creature I have always overlooked (or fished for).

At times I found them elusive, yet at other times extremely idle and openly lying there with no intent to move.

As I was used to marching up and down the hill at Grebe Beach, diving to view the eel grass beds I did not use a boat. Swimming further south, much further and quickly 'switched-on' my inner 'sonar' eventually getting used to finding and approaching the ray I later found that at times, those flat animals are spread over a very wide area and react almost immediately to weather variations.

From the eel grass beds close inshore, out over the sandy/muddy ground, across a strip of coarser sand to reach what I call - "the broken shell ground" - I hit a true run of thornback ray. The fish were everywhere.

Broken shell ground is nearer the centre of the river, where invertebrate life also abounds. (I have seen whelks laying eggs there, mounds of white capsules, clumps of eggs being twice the size of the poor whelk positioned precariously on top.)

At first clear seas were kind to me, providing ample opportunity to master a whole new technology of DV camera work. No underwater film lights were necessary, since new DV cameras thrive on low light conditions. Often there was too much light; I used neutral density filters to compensate. One orange filter was supplied with the camera housing, a CCF - colour correction filter - one that must be clipped over the wide-angle lens and converts blue/green underwater light, back to daylight. The colours then become outstanding to the human eye.

By late spring I had shot many rolls of tape (34 hours in all) and the ray were so obliging, I had named several of those fish. Many ignored me, one in particular was always very 'friendly' and found near the first mooring block on the western end of Grebe Beach near Durgan. I regularly fed him, but every time I presented him with mackerel (fresh of course) and moved the camera into 'shot' he chose to ignore it.

I tried to imagine myself as a flat predator, simply behaved as they would, finding 'food' wherever I could. I uncovered reams of subjects, 'boring' animals that in the past I had simply swam over, but close-up they were fascinating. I now look upon the Helford River in a different way.

Just prior to Christmas I returned from a late afternoon dive from Grebe Beach.

I swam on the surface, passing over eel grass until I submerged heading south, passing over the open sandy/muddy patch - nothing much present - to the coarser sand, where there were many hermit crabs scuttling about, fighting with each other for the sake of it!

Crystal clear conditions after a run of bad weather, a rarity I must add, I reached the broken shell ground and saw two dogfish; several dogfish eggs nearby (mermaid's purse) were attached to broken weed fronds. Slow moving, small humps of sand were in truth, sizeable whelks, moving along under the substrate rather than above it! Nearby there were other groups of whelks, a lot of small fish (less than 5cm in length), many small spider crabs seated firmly in sand depressions and small female edible crabs in a similar mode. I saw a big oyster and thought, "that's quite rare, it must have come from the Port Navas hatchery a few years ago."

Broken shell ground appeared after I swam over a mid-river batch of eel grass patches, small clumps of eel grass, the fronds of which are short. I saw many more oysters and my (diving cylinder) contents gauge was almost at 120 bars (half full). Finally I had found my favourite place. Astounding is the appropriate word.

On land it was ten degrees centigrade at the start of winter, yet down there it was 15 degrees centigrade, animals scuttling around like people in an outdoor street market. Where have all those oysters come from? Small spat oysters were there too. No wonder I found a small ray nearby looking well fed. The "broken shells" from small clams (no commercial value!) remain firmly locked within a bed of living calcified seaweed, maerl, acting like cement to crazy-paving. Decorator crabs were few in number but whelks were plentiful, I just didn't want to go home. The biology text-book in my head was flicking through page after page, testing my 50 year old brain to the full; what's this and what's that? North was soon calling (80 bars left). I set my compass and later surfaced just off Durgan moorings. Head up I finned back to Grebe beach.

It was raining, how absurd, I couldn't get any wetter. Those rain droplets formed a magical pattern upon a flat, glassy surface around me. Three cormorants swam closer to inspect me. A noisy group of oyster-catchers flew overhead, I began to swim harder for the beach thinking work was also calling, had I stayed too long away from the office. I immediately stopped. "You are always rushing," I thought. I looked around, there was no-one in sight, just birds singing and a beautiful aroma of decaying old coppice oak leaves.

The air was so still, perfect silence blended by rippling waves I heard caressing that beach 50 yards behind me. Once more I had been a guest inside the finest natural aquarium I have ever seen. I stayed on the surface for ten whole minutes, 'drinking' that precious air that covers the Helford River. Truly I was the luckiest man alive. Addiction? I guess you can call it that.

Jaws of Helford can be obtained @ £18.95p direct from By-Water Productions (01326 374957).

Phil Lockley

'SEA-SEARCHING' FOR MARINE LIFE

In Cornwall, the sea is all around us and plays a part in all our lives, whether it's through work or the pure pleasure we find from pottering in rockpools, walking the coast paths or taking part in watersports. It is also home to a wealth of wildlife and as such needs protecting and looked after as much as any terrestrial habitat.

Cornwall Wildlife Trust has recently employed Ruth Williams as their first Marine Conservation Officer, thanks to funding from English Nature, The Naturesave Trust and the Wildlife Trusts' Marine Appeal Fund. Ruth, who previously worked as Education Ranger for the Helford Voluntary Marine Conservation Area, is a qualified marine biologist and diver.

Ruth is looking forward to her new role in developing this side of the Trust's work and helping to conserve the coastal and marine habitats that makes Cornwall so special. "There is a rich diversity of sealife that lives around our shores, from the humble limpet to colourful anemones, basking sharks and dolphins. But we often take this habitat for granted and ignore the many threats that it faces - pollution, development, overfishing and bycatch problems, to name a few. Hopefully this new project will help raise awareness of these issues and get everyone working together to do their bit to actively conserve and manage our seas." Ruth will still be an active member of the HVMCA working group and is leading several events for us during the coming year.

Helford has a strong history of biological survey around it's shores and under the waves, but generally we still know very little about what lives around the Cornish coast. One of Ruth's priorities will be to set up 'Seasearch' surveys using volunteer divers to record the habitats and species they see underwater. The data collected can then be used to highlight any problems, raise awareness and direct future work.

Seasearch can be undertaken by anyone who dives. Forget those wrecks, start looking around at the beauty of the underwater world and take an active part in conserving it for the future! Ruth will be running training workshops throughout the year and hopes to build up a network of enthusiastic divers to monitor the sea life found around the county.

If you are interested in finding out more about Seasearch, getting involved, or anything else to do with marine conservation in Cornwall, please contact Ruth on: 01872 245520.



Percuil Oil Pollution Control Boom Deployment

Holidaymakers and residents of St. Mawes enjoying the last of the summer weather at the beginning of October, were intrigued by the sight of a large orange floating pipeline stretching across the River Percuil. One suggestion of what this could be for was the transmission of treacle from the last operating mine in this part of Cornwall across to the pumping station at St Mawes.

In fact, this supposition was far from the truth and the facts were a little more esoteric: after several previous attempts were aborted due to unusually bad weather - even for a Cornish summer - a team led by Cornwall County Council Emergency Planning Unit successfully placed a shore to shore oil pollution boom across the Percuil River, near St Mawes, as a prevention against oil entering the ecologically valuable estuary should a spill occur.

The Percuil River is part of the Fal Estuary, and, as well as being a Special Area of Conservation, it is one of the Cornish Nature Conservation Sites and has several Sites of Special Scientific Interest. It is also part of the Heritage Coast and an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and therefore was identified as a high priority for protective booming. This led to the County Council selecting the Percuil as one of the ten estuaries that were most worthy of protection around the Cornish Coast.

Conventional booming methods were difficult to implement due to the number of anchors that would be required and also because of land access difficulties on the southern side of the estuary.

The Harbour Master at Falmouth, Mark Sansom, has become an acknowledged expert in the use of the Differential Global Positioning System since demonstrating his ability while laying the pontoons for the Tall Ships event in Falmouth in 1998. He believed that advancements in mooring techniques which he has developed over many years could be combined with the use of the DGPS to provide a practical solution to this problem.

The operation to deploy the moorings, and then subsequently the boom, involved a barge and a number of workboats. A large buoy on a riser identifies each mooring block. When the boom is to be deployed, a set of six chains is attached to each of the blocks. These chains are of individual pre-determined lengths and are colour coded to ensure they are positioned correctly.

This new method allows a straight-line boom to be deployed utilizing only six anchor points. It relies heavily on 2 precision elements: the accurate placement of the mooring blocks in the river and the subsequent attachment of six different chain lengths to each mooring block, each chain carefully calculated for its position in the system.

Some booming experts had predicted that this new idea - the booming of an entire river estuary to protect it from sea borne oil pollution - would not be possible as the principle of this scheme relies on getting the boom in a straight line on the water. This is a result that has not been previously accomplished with any other system over such a length, although there have been booms placed on other estuaries, and even practice sessions on the Percuil using a few short boom lengths utilising the new principle.

The exercise - or more accurately 'test' - was to prove whether the innovative mooring system being used was practical and, most importantly, would give the boom the required straight line on the water. Although this seems a small step forward in fact it is quite a large one, relying as it does on precision which has only recently become possible with the advent of DGPS. This equipment, used correctly, enables a mooring to be placed to an accuracy of half a metre.

The trial proved to be a complete success; 700 metres of boom were deployed and anchored, in a straight line, across the Percuil.

The great advance made possible by this new system is that more boom layout designs are now possible, enabling more effective protection to be provided. It is hoped that one enormous benefit will be that we can bring the oil together in a position where it is under our control - but still afloat, and from where we can remove it without fouling the shore. This is, in itself, sufficient reason to carry on with the principles and there is an additional, strong, reason to consider this as progress - the spilled oil floating on the water is relatively uncontaminated and can be handled as an oil product, possibly with some value, rather than special waste which costs money to dispose of.

The team that carried out the trial were assembled from many agencies, including A & P Falmouth, Falmouth Harbour Commissioners, Falmouth Oil Services, Oil Spill Response Ltd, Sub Marine Services, Harbour Masters from Truro and St Mawes, and Cornwall County Council. These all supplied equipment, manpower or financial assistance according to their capability.

Now that the system has proved successful the Emergency Planning section of Cornwall County Council intends to offer the principles of this scheme to their partners in Europe who face the same potential oil spill risks on their coastlines which are, in many cases, similar to those in Cornwall.

John James

Although the Helford is as pretty in winter as in summer, the opportunity to jet off to the Caribbean in January was just too good to miss. Thus I packed my T-shirts, shorts, mask and fins and spent ten days as Assistant Engineer aboard the British square-rigged sail training vessel Stavros S Niarchos. I joined the ship in Barbados, from where we sailed first to Grenada, thence to Bequia and finally back to Barbados.

The sailing out there is trade wind stuff- 20-25 knots of warm wind consistently from the east. You sometimes get variations in the lee of the islands but that gives a bit of interest. Such winds do not generally kick up a big sea either, but the waves are high enough to give the flying fish a good take-off platform - it is amazing how far they can fly. Sometimes a boobie would join us, flying off to one side at about topgallant height, diving from time to time to catch a flying fish in mid air.

Grenada is at the southern end of the Grenadines. We moored in St Georges and a short water taxi ride away is a lovely sandy beach with a few bars nearby. The rise and fall of the tide in this area is only about half a metre

and not far off the beach I found beds of sea grass, with several species of fish, large starfishes and lots of urchins. These can be a bit of a menace as they are in shallow water and can easily be trodden on. The spines are not normally poisonous but are extremely sharp and brittle and once embedded in the skin are virtually impossible to remove and can be very painful.

Bequia is almost heaven on earth. On the fringes of Admiralty Bay are several areas of good snorkelling with lovely corals, very brightly coloured reef fish and the occasional large ray. The most common wrasse rejoices in the name "slippery dick fish" which is a bit curious. On the windward side of the island an eccentric American has set up a turtle sanctuary where he rescues and breeds Hawksbill turtles.

If you get the chance to visit the Grenadines do so - and please take your mask and fins. The water is warm and the only constraint on snorkelling is the danger of a sunburnt back (wear a t-shirt), but the rewards in the colour, diversity and quantity of marine life make every moment special.

Robert Hewett

