

The table to the right shows how many species in each phylum were found and what the most common species were. Listed below are records of particular interest.

Sponges the most common species was the sea orange *Suberites ficus*. This tends to be associated with sand and mud habitats. **Bryozoans** *Vesicularia spinosa* was recorded from Red Bay. This is not known from many sites in Northern Ireland. **Anemones, Corals, Hydroids and Jellyfish.** The anemone *Peachia cylindrica* was recorded from seagrass beds at the Skerries. **Crustaceans** records were made of the spiny spider crab *Maja brachydactyla* from near Portrush and one record from Red Bay. This is a southern species, one of the first NI records was from a Seasearch dive in 2006. It may be increasing in number due to climate change – the Red Bay record is the furthest north it has been recorded in the Irish Sea.

Molluscs the sea slug *Crimora papillata* was spotted off Ramore head, Portrush. This is another southern species with very few Northern Ireland records. **Echinoderms** beds of brittlestars (*Ophithrix fragilis* and *Ophicomina nigra*) were recorded from areas of maerl in Red Bay. The seven armed starfish was seen in several areas – this species feeds on brittlestars.

Fish A large, very well camouflaged, Brill *Scophthalmus rhombus* was recorded from the seagrass bed in Red Bay. This is just on of the fish species which may be found hiding in seagrass beds. **Seaweeds** Knotted Wrack *Ascophyllum nodosum*, a priority seaweed, was recorded. Although this species is common in Northern Ireland it has undergone rapid decline and is at risk for over harvesting. Seasearch records can help monitor its status.

Phylum/sub-phylum	Common name	Total records	Number of Species	Common species (number of records in brackets)
Porifera	Sponges	25	12	<i>Suberites ficus</i> – Sea Orange (5) <i>Sycon ciliatum</i> – Purse sponge (5)
Cnidaria	Anemones, corals, hydroids, jellyfish	117	28	<i>Cerianthus lloydii</i> – Burrowing anemone (12) <i>Actinothoe sphyrodeta</i> – Fried egg anemone (12)
Annelida	Segmented worms	38	12	<i>Chaetopterus variopedatus</i> – Parchment worm (7) <i>Arenicola marina</i> – Lug worm (6)
Crustacea	Lobsters, crabs, barnacles	130	22	<i>Cancer pagurus</i> – Edible crab (21) <i>Necora puber</i> – Velvet swimming crab (16)
Mollusca	Shells, sea slugs, cuttlefish, octopus	91	36	<i>Calliostoma zizyphinum</i> – Painted top shell (9) <i>Pecten maximus</i> – King Scallop (9)
Bryozoa	Sea mats	36	11	<i>Securiflustra securifrons</i> – Lesser Hornwrack (7) <i>Flustra foliacea</i> – Hornwrack (7)
Echinodermata	Starfish, urchins, sea cucumbers	124	21	<i>Echinus esculentus</i> – Edible urchin (21) <i>Asterias rubens</i> – Common starfish (23)
Tunicata	Sea squirts	47	13	<i>Clavelina lepadiformis</i> - Light bulb sea squirt (9) <i>Botryllus schlosseri</i> - Star sea squirt (8)
Pisces	Fishes	114	32	<i>Pomatoschistus spp.</i> - Sand/common goby (12) <i>Callionymus lyra</i> – Common dragonet (9)
Algae and Seagrasses	Seaweeds and Seagrass	64	27	<i>Laminaria saccharina</i> – Sugar kelp (17) <i>Ulva lactuca</i> - Sea lettuce (11)
Total		989	253	



Brittlestar bed on maerl, bed Red Bay



Brill *Scophthalmus rhombus*, Red Bay Seagrass bed



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Seven armed starfish *Luidia ciliaris*, Red Bay maerl bed



Red Bay survey participants



Edible Crab *Cancer pagurus*, Ramore Head, Portrush



Boring Sponge *Cliona celata*, Ramore Head, Portrush



Seagrass Survey participants, Strangford Lough



Hermit Crab *Pagurus bernhardus*, Strangford Lough



Thanks to all Seasearch NI participants: Neil Armour, Jonathan Beattie, Russell Black, Kenny Bodles, Charmaine Blake, Seamus Campbell, Sharon Fallows, Brendan Fitzpatrick, Claire Goodwin, Dave Goodwin, Deirdre Greer, Dave Harrison, Darren Johnston, Fionnuala Lambert, Gary Maguire, Adrian Marshall, Stephen McClelland, Brian McLroy, Paul McLlwaine, Melina McMullan, Adrienne Mockler, Michael O'Kane, Daniel O'Neill, Frances O'Sullivan, and Ronnie Snyder.



Thanks to Aquaholics, who were used for boat cover and supplied site information, Dolphins and Queens University Belfast sub-aqua clubs for use of their boats, and Maia Taylor, Nicolas Lane and Ronnie Snyder for towing and boat handling.

Seasearch is a volunteer underwater survey project for recreational divers to actively contribute to the conservation of the marine environment (see www.seasearch.org.uk for more information). Financial support for the project was given by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency.

This report was written by Claire Goodwin (thanks to Chris Wood for editorial comments). Photos are by Claire Goodwin.

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www.seasearch.org.uk



Diver on fossil maerl mega-ripple, Red Bay



Live (pink) and dead (white) maerl, Red Bay maerl bed

Seasearch Dives

In total 62 Seasearch records were collected from Northern Ireland (29 Observer and 30 Surveyor forms and 3 seagrass survey forms). Dives indicated by red dots on map below. Many participants have now completed their training forms meaning that they can jointly complete a survey form, this means form numbers are slightly down on previous years but the quality of data has improved.



Dr Frances Dipper (centre) teaches on fish identification course, Portaferry.

Ramore Head Survey

In 2006 the sewage outfall pipe on Ramore head (Portrush) was turned off. Between 2008 and 2010 we will be surveying this site to see what effect this has on the species present here. Two days of surveying took place in 2009.

Maerl Survey

Maerl is a coralline seaweed, with an appearance a bit like pink twiglets (the crisp). It can form large beds which are important nursery habitats for species such as scallops. Many Northern Ireland priority species, such as the sand star *Astropecten irregularis* are associated with maerl beds. We did some survey work on fossil maerl beds in Red Bay in 2006.

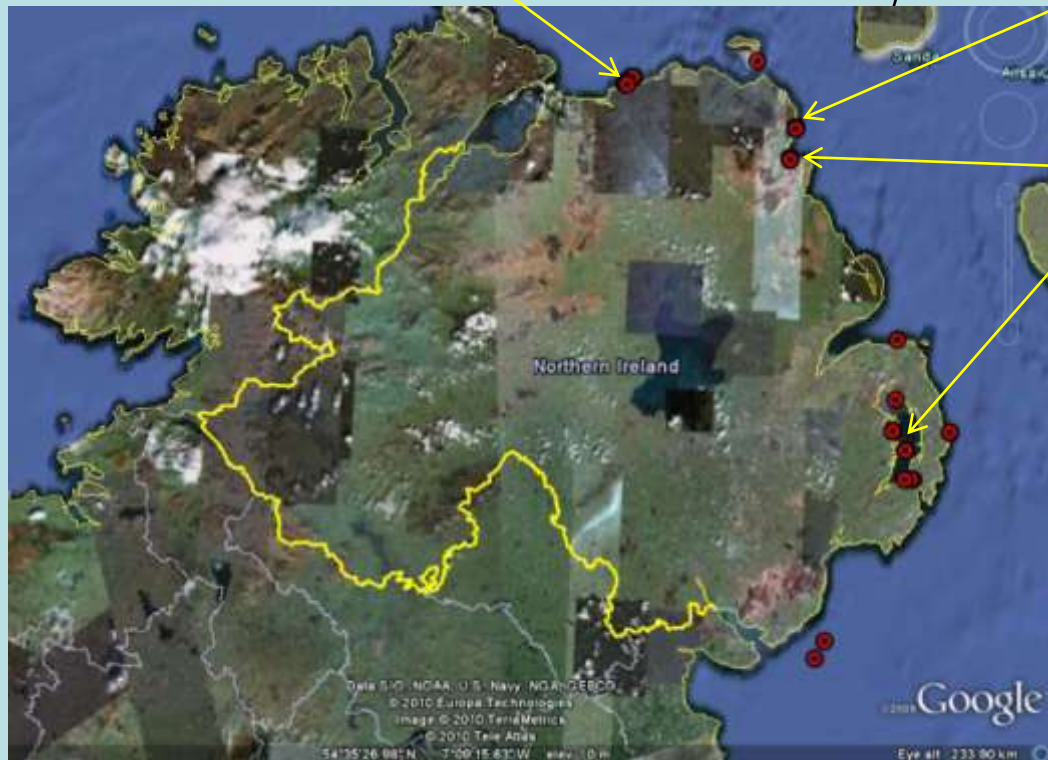
This year we surveyed additional sites in Red Bay and some sites in Strangford Lough. Red Bay was recently (February 2010) selected as a European Special Area of Conservation because of its maerl habitat. As well as living maerl beds there are 'mega-ripples' of fossil maerl present in deeper water. In these the dead maerl piles up to form waves over 1m high. We surveyed areas of live and fossil maerl. This data was used as evidence to help designate the SAC and will assist in its long term monitoring. An additional area of maerl at Sketrick Island in Strangford Lough was surveyed. More areas of maerl in Strangford will be covered in the 2010 programme.

Training

A Seasearch Observer course was held on 4th April in Ballyholme, Bangor. Five people attended.

Seasearch **Surveyor Course** was held on 14/15th March in Bangor. Five people attended.

A **Fish Identification course** was held at Portaferry on 21st March. The tutor was Dr Frances Dipper, author of 'British Sea Fishes'. The day of lectures culminated in a visit to Exploris aquarium so that participants could practice their newly acquired identification skills. Eight people attended.



Seagrass Surveys

In 2009 we continued our study of Northern Ireland Seagrass beds. Northern Ireland has one species of sublittoral seagrass *Zostera marina*, it can form dense beds. Very little was previously known about many of these seagrass beds, with information from only a few spot dives. Seagrass is a UK Biodiversity Action Priority Habitat. Seagrass plants stabilise the substratum, are an important source of organic matter, and provide shelter and a surface for attachment by other species. They are also an important habitat, providing nursery areas for species such as flat fish and habitat for rare species such as seahorses. We surveyed beds in Strangford Lough and in Red Bay on the east coast of Northern Ireland. We continued the work we started in 2008 with more detailed mapping of beds in Ballyhenry and the Quoile in Strangford Lough. The full extent of both these beds has now been mapped and quadrat measurements were taken to assess density. Additional survey was undertaken on the seagrass bed in Red Bay, County Antrim. Despite swimming for over an hour divers were unable to reach the edge of this bed – it is likely to be the biggest in Northern Ireland.



Diver towing GPS maps edge of seagrass bed, Ballyhenry Bay, Strangford Lough