

LUNDY WARDEN'S REPORT FOR 2002

My first year on Lundy has been fascinating, challenging and thoroughly enjoyable from the start. It has been a steep learning curve, having to find my way around both the Island and job with the summer season starting only a few weeks after I arrived. An Assistant Warden, Susie Ballerstedt joined the team from July to September and proved to be invaluable help, making a great contribution to the interpretation and conservation work carried out over the summer.

The legal protection of the Marine Nature Reserve (MNR) has received a welcome boost, with the designation of a 'no take zone' off the east coast running northwards from the Sugarloaf to the North-east Point and extending approximately 1km offshore. This finally clears up a grey area in which potting was not banned but "not encouraged" within 200m of the east coast. No objections were received during the statutory consultation period and the byelaw was officially approved by parliament in January 2003, meaning that all fishing is now banned in this area. This is the first no take zone designated in UK waters for nature conservation reasons. It has been supported by local fishermen who hope to see an increased catch outside the area, demonstrating how commercial and conservation interests can work together for mutual benefit.

It has been a busy summer for diving although bad weather did lead to a number of cancellations at the beginning and end of the season. The publication by English Nature of a dive guide for the MNR, sold on and off the Island has proved a hit with divers and does much to promote both the Reserve and the code of conduct. There have been reports of further decline in some of the species in the MNR, notably pink sea fan (*Eunicella verrucosa*). The reasons for this are unclear but monitoring of the no take zone and Special Area of Conservation, for which funding has been secured will, I hope, help to shed some light on the subject.

Basking shark sightings were low this year, as they were across the south-west, although one small (3m) individual was seen on several separate occasions in the Landing Bay. There were also several sightings of animals all around the Island in the second half of August with a peak count of 8 from an RAF helicopter off the North-west Point. Common dolphins provided much excitement through the summer, with a school of about 15 seen regularly from the Island and Oldenburg from late June, building up to about 60, with several young in August and September. A very decayed dead whale was seen from the Island on 4th and 5th June and tentatively identified as a pilot whale.

Other marine sightings include large numbers of by-the-wind sailors stranded on the south and east coasts at the end of May, followed by large numbers of comb jellies, hydroid medusae and the jellyfish *Aurelia aurita* and *Cyanea lamarckii* in the water. There have also been several sightings of sunfish through the summer including one breaching – quite a feat for such a heavy and lumbering fish. Grey seals have as usual

been seen all around the Island and several individuals have joined in with snorkel safaris. A low tide seal count by boat in September gave 76 individuals including one pup, with several others seen through the autumn.

Monitoring of intertidal cup corals in Devil's Kitchen showed similar numbers to previous years and the presence of some very small individuals suggests that recruitment is good. A new patch of the nationally scarce scarlet and gold cup coral *Balanophyllia regia* was found nearby with over three times the number of animals as the main monitoring site.

Lundy cabbage had its worst year on record, particularly towards the south of its range, with grazing by rabbits, goats and domestic sheep largely to blame. One goat that became resident in Millcombe Valley presented a particular problem and when driving it out of the area failed, it had to be culled. Removing the more adventurous Welsh mountain sheep and new fencing planned from Bramble Villa to the far side of Millcombe pond should do much to keep the domestic flock out of this stronghold of cabbage in the future. The rabbit numbers are extremely high with a very rough estimate of 20,000+ and no sign of myxomatosis or RVHD. As well as damage to the cabbage these animals are exerting a huge grazing pressure on the Island, reducing many areas to a bowling green short turf and causing localised soil erosion around the Castle, St Johns Valley, the Ugly and the South Light. A team of three marksmen took out around 2500-3000 rabbits over four days in November 2002 and will return in March 2003.

A team from the National Trust and English Nature along with the farmer and myself conducted a classified count of the feral mammals in April with overall totals of 147 soays, 43 goats and 62 sika deer. The counts are due to be repeated in April 2003. This gives an opportunity to observe any natural population changes from one year to the next and for that reason no cull has been carried out this autumn. I do expect that a cull will be necessary in the autumn of 2003 and the counts will provide valuable data in planning this.

An estimated eight pairs of puffins nested this year, using the St Phillip's Stone and Jenny's Cove sites although there was no evidence of any chicks being fledged. 2002 will, I hope, see the end of the catastrophic decline on Lundy of the puffin and that other burrow nesting seabird, the Manx shearwater. 2002 saw the start of the much debated Seabird Recovery Programme, AKA the rat eradication. A partnership of the RSPB, English Nature, National Trust and Landmark Trust was formed to take forward the project to remove these accidentally introduced predators. In November a team of specialist contractors set out a 50m grid of bait stations across the entire Island in preparation for the cull (timetabled to be carried out between January and March 2003 using Difenacoum impregnated grain held in wax blocks).

A survey of potential storm petrel sites was also carried out in the summer, with no sign of any breeding birds – useful baseline data before the eradication of rats. It is not

just the seabirds that are expected to benefit – other ground nesting birds, insects and large seeded plants would also expect to see an increase and this should be a fertile area for future study. The loss of the black rat from Lundy is not without controversy – the population is an interesting quirk of history but the cost of doing nothing would almost certainly have been the extinction of two native species of seabird on the Island for the sake of non-native predator that is exceptionally common worldwide.

Volunteers have continued to carry out essential conservation work including footpath maintenance, dry stone walling and the ever necessary Rhododendron control amongst a multitude of other tasks. In all, 208 volunteers carried out 922 work days in 2002 – a massive amount of work made possible thanks to accommodation paid for through the Lundy Fund and I would like to thank the LFS and all volunteers for their hard work through the year. All footpaths through the Rhodies have now been opened up so that sunlight and air can dry the surface, removing most of the boggy patches. The cliff side Rhododendron work continued in November with professional rope-access contractors dangling over the edge to clear the invader from known cabbage sites. Volunteers planted 50 trees in upper Millcombe Valley, with tube guards and mulch mats providing the saplings with some protection. A mixture of silver birch, oak, ash, hawthorn and blackthorn was put in and it will be interesting to see if this extra protection gives better success rates than previous plantings

Despite the exceptionally dry summer, vegetation has looked good, with grasses and heather returning to areas where bracken has been rolled, the heathland put on a fantastic show in the late summer and the display of heath spotted orchids, bog asphodel, sundew and cotton grass at Pondsbury has been superb. As for the future, with the no take zone in force and Seabird Recovery Project underway, 2003 should be another important year for conservation on Lundy and a bumper year for field studies.

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