

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** Large boring sponges *Cliona celata* were present. The branched sponge *Axinella dissimilis* was present. This is a warm water species, rare in Northern Ireland.

**Bryozoans** Potato crisp bryozoan *Pentapora foliacea*, a Northern Ireland Conservation Priority Species was present at one site.

**Anemones, Corals, Hydroids and Jellyfish** Squirrel's tail hydroid *Sertularia argentea* was common on the inside of the Skerries.

*Halecium muricatum*, a branched hydroid with a thick yellow stem, was also present. These hydroids are associated with tide swept areas.

The anemone *Peachia cylindrica* (pictured below) was associated with the seagrass bed.

**Crustaceans** Spiny spider crabs *Maja brachydactyla* were present (pictured below). This is a one of the first records from Northern Ireland for this southern species.

Phylum/sub-phylum	Common name	Number of species	Total records	Common species (number of records in brackets)
Porifera	Sponges	9	30	<i>Cliona celata</i> (11) – Boring sponge
Cnidaria	Anemones, corals, hydroids, jellyfish	22	143	<i>Caryophyllia smithii</i> (15)– Devonshire cup coral <i>Alcyonium digitatum</i> (15)– Dead men's fingers <i>Nemertesia antennina</i> (23) – Antenna hydroid
Annelida	Segmented worms	7	26	<i>Chaetopterus variopedatus</i> (7) – Parchment worm <i>Lanice conchilega</i> (8) – Sand mason worm
Crustacea	Lobsters, crabs, barnacles	16	107	<i>Cancer pagurus</i> (14) – Edible crab <i>Necora puber</i> (15) – Velvet swimming crab <i>Liocarcinus depurator</i> (13) – Harbour swimming crab
Mollusca	Shells, sea slugs, cuttlefish, octopus	42	89	<i>Calliostoma zizyphium</i> (14) – Painted top shell <i>Mytilus edulis</i> (6) – Common mussel
Bryozoa	Sea mats	63	9	<i>Flustra foliacea</i> (17) – hornwrack <i>Alcyonidium diaphanum</i> (10) – Jelly finger bryozoan
Echinodermata	Starfish, urchins, sea cucumbers	15	88	<i>Echinus esculentus</i> (21) – Edible urchin <i>Asterias rubens</i> (19) – Common starfish
Tunicata	Sea squirts	3	3	<i>Ascidia virginea</i> (1) – Pink edged sea squirt
Pisces	Fishes	27	127	<i>Callionymus</i> sp. (13) – Dragonet <i>Pollachius pollachius</i> (11) – Pollack <i>Scyllorhinus canicula</i> (11) – Lesser spotted dogfish
Aves	Mammals	2	2	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i> (1) – Grey seal <i>Phoca vitulina</i> (1) – Harbour seal
Algae	Seaweeds	25	81	<i>Rhodophyta</i> (11) – Red seaweeds <i>Dictyota dichotoma</i> (9) – Brown fan weed <i>Laminaria saccharina</i> (8) – Sugar kelp
<b>Total</b>		<b>177</b>	<b>759</b>	

**Molluscs** Two empty shells of fan shell *Atrina fragilis*, a BAP species, were found on the inside of the Skerries. No live specimens were found, but it is believed they may be present – one of the shells found was young. No horse mussel *Modiolus modiolus* beds were found, despite revisiting sites in which they were previously present, but a few individuals were found, together with much dead shell. A single specimen of the beautiful wentletrap *Epitonium clathrus* was found, the first live record from Northern Ireland.

**Echinoderms** Several sightings were made of the cotton spinner sea cucumber *Holothuria forskali*, a warm water species. The Skerries is the only place in Northern Ireland where it is found.

**Fish** The red blenny *Parablennius ruber* was recorded. This is the first record from Northern Ireland. A large number of pipefish were also recorded.

**Seasquirts** Very few sea squirts were recorded – only three records were made.

**Seaweeds** An extensive seagrass *Zostera marina* bed was present on the inside of Great Skerrie.

**Worms** *Megaloma vesiculosum*, a fan worm, was present in the seagrass beds.



# Skerries Survey 2006



Some of the Skerries survey team



Snake pipefish *Entelurus aequoreus*



Boring sponge *Cliona celata*



Diver examines pipefish



Spiny spider crab *Maja brachydactyla*



Anemone *Peachia cylindrica*



Fan shell *Atrina fragilis*



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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](http://www.seasearch.org.uk) for more information). Financial support for the project was given by the Environment and Heritage service Northern Ireland. This report was written by Claire Goodwin (thanks to Julia Nunn and Chris Wood for editorial comments). Photos are by Claire Goodwin.



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Sea grass and banded chink shell *Lacuna vineta*



Snake pipefish *Entelurus aequoreus* hiding in Antenna hydroid *Nemertesia antennina*

[www.seasearch.org.uk](http://www.seasearch.org.uk)

The Skerries are a small group of rocks outside Portlouis point south-east of Northern Ireland. They are considered to have a particularly interesting fauna; the temperature in the Skerries is much warmer in summer than other parts of the Northern Ireland coast, and it is the only place many southern species such as the cotton spinner sea cucumber *Holothuria forskali* are found in Northern Ireland. As well as doing a general survey, and keeping watch for some of these warmer water species, we surveyed areas of seagrass (*Zostera marina*), and tried to locate horse mussel beds (*Modiolus modiolus*). These are two of the protected habitats found here. The area was last surveyed in 1986, but since this time, numbers of warm water species seem to have increased, with many more records of the cotton spinner cucumber *Holothuria forskali* and several records of the spiny spider crab *Maja brachydactyla*, which is new to Northern Ireland. We did not manage to locate the horse mussel beds which were previously present in this area, although we did find some areas of horse mussel shell and a few live individuals. Two fan shell *Atrina fragilis* shells were found during the survey, this indicates that live fan shells may be present in this area.

### Site 3 - Outside of Great Skerrie

Vertical, rugged rocky wall (surface to 18m) on the north side of Great Skerrie. Slope of boulders, cobbles and pebbles present at base (18-19.4m surveyed, but this habitat extends away from the Skerries into deeper water). Kelp forest was present at the top of the wall, with the rock becoming increasingly animal dominated by tall and short animal turf (including sponges and hydroids) with depth. A red blenny *Parablennius ruber* was recorded, sighted in a boulder crevice. This is the first record of this species for Northern Ireland. Several species of sponge were present, including *Cliona celata* and *Axinella dissimilis*. The cotton spinner sea cucumber *Holothuria forskali* was present at the site. Seals were common at the surface, and seen following divers during one dive.



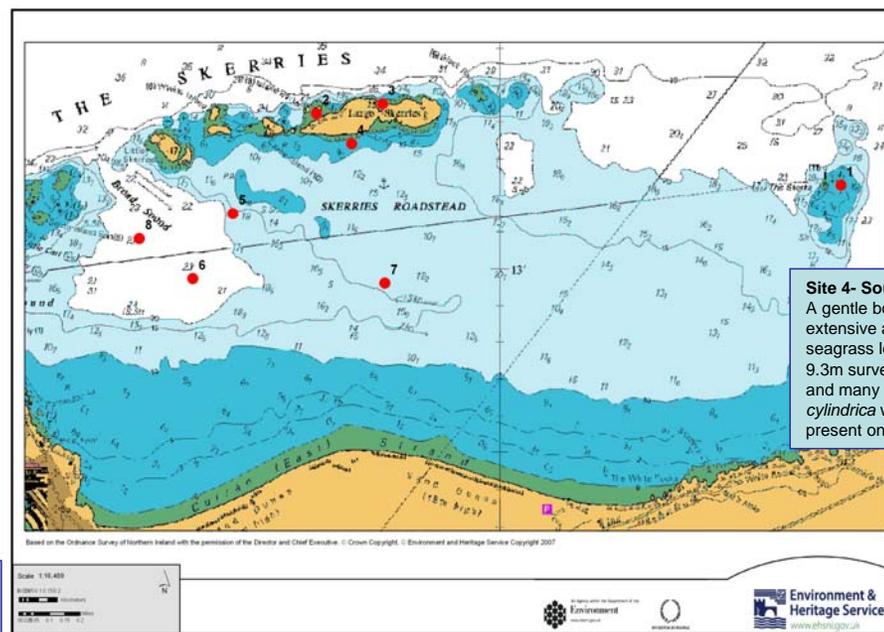
Branched sponge *Axinella dissimilis*



Red Blenny *Parablennius ruber*

### Site 2- North of Great Skerrie

Bay on the north side of Great Skerrie. Depth increased towards the centre of the bay, reaching a maximum of 17m. Sloping bedrock walls were present at the sides of the bay, and the bottom of bay was covered in large boulders. The bedrock walls were covered in kelp forest with bryozoans (3-9m), leading onto animal dominated reef with sponges, foliose red algae and short animal turf (9-15m). Fissures and crevices in the bedrock contained tompot blennies *Parablennius gattorugine* and other mobile fauna. Large boulders were present at the base of the bedrock (15-19m). These were covered in short animal turf and foliose red algae, with some hydroid growth on the algae. Several species of sea cucumbers were present, including the cotton spinner *Holothuria forskali*, the brown gherkin sea cucumber *Aslia lefevrei*, and the white gherkin sea cucumber *Pawsonia saxicola*. A good variety of 'clear water' species were present at the site, including potato crisp bryozoan *Pentapora foliacea*, hedgehog sponge *Polymastia boletiformis* and boring sponge *Cliona celata*.



### 6-500m South of Little Skerrie

Gently sloping seabed, upper part (to 22.4m) sand and gravel with occasional boulders which were covered with short animal turf and encrusting pink algae. In deeper areas (>22.4m), the seabed was coarser; made up of cobbles, pebbles and gravel with very occasional large boulders. Hydroids and bryozoans were abundant throughout site (especially the bryozoan *Eucratia loricata*). Many nudibranchs were present on the hydroids, including *Doto fragilis* and *Lomanotus marmoratus*. Pipefish (both snake pipefish *Entelurus aequoreus* and greater pipefish *Syngnathus acus*) and spider crabs (including the spiny spider crab *Maja brachydactyla*) were present in large numbers.

### 7- South of the Skerries

Gently sloping seabed, 15.5-22.3m, mainly composed of shell gravel formed from intact horse mussel shells (up to 80% of seabed) with about 5% boulders. Tall and short animal turf was on boulders and growing on shell gravel, including hornwrack *Flustra foliacea* and antenna hydroid *Nemertesia antennina*. The hornwrack appeared to be spawning. The habitat seemed relatively poor in life, with only crabs (edible crab *Cancer pagurus*, harbour swimming crab *Liocarcinus depurator*, velvet swimming crab *Necora puber*) and common starfish *Asterias rubens* frequently sighted. Some live horse mussels were present, but these were rare and scattered.



Hydroids and bryozoans south of Skerries



Cotton spinner sea cucumber *Holothuria forskali*

### Site 1- The Storks

Dive on NE side of the Storks, a small group of rocks south-east of the Skerries. Steep, almost vertical, bedrock leads from the surface, with the depth at its base varying between 10.4 and 16.4m. The bedrock was dominated by kelp forest for the first 10 metres, then animal turf including white striped anemones *Actinothoe sphyrodeta*, dead men's fingers *Alcyonium digitatum*, bryozoans (*Securiflustra securifrons* and *Bugula plumosa*) and hydroids, including antenna hydroids *Nemertesia* spp. Fish were very abundant, including shoals of pollack *Pollachius pollachius* around kelp. At the base of the bedrock was a slope of boulder and pebbles (depth between 10.4 and 18.4m surveyed). Short and tall animal turf was present on boulders, including boring sponge *Cliona celata*, elephant hide sponge *Pachymatisma johnstonia*, squirrel's tail hydroid *Sertularia argentea*, and jelly bryozoan *Alcyonidium diaphanum*. A large number of mobile species, particularly crustaceans and tompot blennies *Parablennius gattorugine* were present in boulder crevices. The cotton spinner sea cucumber *Holothuria forskali* was present.



Diver north of Great Skerrie

### Site 4 - South of Great Skerrie

A gentle boulder slope from surface to 5.8m, leading onto flat fine sand with an extensive and dense seagrass *Zostera marina* bed (5.8-6.8m). In deeper water, the seagrass led onto sand, with *Laminaria saccharina* and mixed seaweeds (depths to 9.3m surveyed). The blades of the sea grass were covered with coralline pink algae and many banded chink shells *Lacuna vineta*. The burrowing anemone *Peachia cylindrica* was present in the sand between the sea grass blades. Some litter was present on the site – a cigarette butt and a glass bottle.



Seagrass with banded chink shell

### 8- Inside of Skerries

Coarse, mobile, sand and gravel seabed from 17-21m. The gravel was composed of whole and broken shells, with about 30% whole shells including horse mussel *Modiolus modiolus* and oyster shells. A few, scattered, live horse mussels were present. Ripples approximately 30cm high were present; detritus, drift weed and some litter (sweet wrappers etc.) had collected in the troughs. Occasional boulders were present with both tall and short animal turf such as the bryozoans *Eucratia loricata*, hornwrack *Flustra foliacea*, the hydroid *Hydrallmania falcata*, and sand mason worms *Lanice conchilega*. Crabs (including the harbour swimming crab *Liocarcinus depurator*, the velvet swimming crab *Necora puber*, and spider crabs) were fairly frequent. When dived in the summer, the area had been densely covered in hydroids (see site 6 for description), but few were present on the day of survey (5th November 2006). An empty fan mussel *Atrina fragilis* shell was found by Franklin Riemann. The site was surveyed on a fast drift dive, so it was not possible to obtain much detail on habitats and species.