HELFORD
Voluntary Marine Conservation Area

Newsletter No. 29 Autumn 2004

The Helford River - a Haven for Bats

Many British bat species have declined drastically in the last 100 years. Although we do not have clear figures for the number of bats present historically, it is clear that they are now much less common than they used to be. Often people say 'There used to be hundreds round here but now I never see them'.

There are several reasons for this general decline in bat numbers. Some of these are to do with the loss of roost sites such as can happen when barns are converted, when building work blocks access to a roost, the use of certain chemicals to treat wood in roof spaces and old trees with rot holes or other roosting opportunities being felled. There are other changes, mostly connected to changing practices in agriculture, which have affected the bats ability to find food. These include the loss of flight paths with the removal of hedgerows, lines of trees or other linear features; the use of insecticides and herbicides that directly or indirectly reduce the supply of insects on which the bats feed; and the use of chemicals to treat livestock that persist in the dung, thereby affecting the natural cycle of decomposition carried out by dung fauna.

Illustration by Fiona Gwynne-James

But being on the Helford can sometimes seem rather like turning the clock back with a concentration and diversity of bats not commonly found. So why are we so fortunate on the Helford? It is likely to be due to a number of factors such as the myriad of leafy, sheltered lanes with splendid Cornish hedges and the large areas of semi-natural ancient woodlood. Several small rivers lead into the Helford and all areas of open or running water where clouds of insects gather will be good places for bats to feed. There are still cattle and other stock grazing the fields that maintain the vital dung fauna. There are old decaying trees that are valued in their own right. Also there are properties where the presence of bats has been known for years and the owners or occupiers of those properties are rightly proud of their trouble free and fascinating tenants.

The Helford River is a special place for many reasons and the presence of a good population of bats indicates an ecosystem where the important balance of nature is still largely intact.

Dr Carol Williams

HELFORD RIVER POETRY COMPETITION 2005.

Are you a budding poet? Can you make pictures with words? If so, enter our poetry competition using the Helford River as your inspiration. Further details can be obtained from:
Mrs Gia Shaw, Little Treworval, Constantine, Falmouth. TR11 5JW. Tel. 01326 250769 or
www.helfordmarineconservation.co.uk. Please send a stamped and addressed envelope for an entry form.
Categories:

1) Children - age as at 1st September 2005 7 years and under, 11 years and under, 16 years and under
2) Adults. Entries should be sent to the above address by the 20th November 2005.

Results will be announced at the 2006 General Meeting which will be held in Gweek Village Hall.

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, Awelon, Colborne Avenue, Illogan, Redruth, TR16 4EB. Tel: 01209842316
Website: www.helfordmarineconservation.co.uk *Chairman*: David Muirhead *Co-ordinator*: Pamela Tompsett
Design: Sheila McCann, Cornwall Wildlife Trust *Illustration*: Sarah McCartney, Cornwall Wildlife Trust

Seacore - a success story from Gweek

Seacore was founded in 1976 by the Goodden brothers who were both Camborne School of Mines graduates. The Gooddens were joined by an Australian, Joseph Dunne, and John Gleadowe from Calamansac. The Company originally set out to be mineral exploration core drillers that would work at sea.

For the first four years the company undertook any work anywhere to keep alive and it just about kept afloat until in 1979 British Gas awarded Seacore a contract to do some specialist core drilling in the Irish Sea. The cores demonstrated that British Gas had problems with their foundations on a proposed offshore platform and Seacore ended up having to perform far more work than originally thought. The resulting cash flow was highly beneficial to the young company but the job also attracted attention and gave the Company a much higher profile. The reputation gained led Seacore into a contract with an offshore drill ship that eventually lasted 20 years and was the "Cash Cow" the Company needed for growth. The Company today is still an expert in offshore exploration drilling but has added other expertise, particularly in the drilling of large diameter holes in the seabed which routinely have diameters of over 4 metres and have been up to 7 metres diameter.

Large diameter drilling now accounts for 2/3rd the Company's business which totalled over £20 million in 2003.

What does Seacore do?

We are fundamentally drilling contractors who work at sea to do two things:

- Investigation of the seabed by core drilling.
- Construction of foundations for offshore structures by drilling large holes in the seabed.

We also do marine construction where knowledge of the sea bed is important:

- Pipelines
- Ship berthing facilities
- Navigation marks

Recently we have expanded significantly in the Marine Renewable Energy Industry building offshore wind farms and marine tidal energy turbines.

Our customers are various:

- Oil Companies
- Public Authorities
- Government Institutions
- Public Utilities
- Industrial
- Mining companies
- Light House Boards
- Harbour Authorities

In order to carry out our work we own various equipment:

- Drill rigs.
- Jack-Up barges.
- Vessels.
- Specialist drilling and testing equipment.

We design and build a lot of our own equipment at our Gweek workshops. Our Head Office is at Gweek and from there we co-ordinate operations around the world. We have another office in Warwick and a representative in Cape Town. New 6 acre premises in Falmouth are at the planning stage. There we will build a new office with several new workshops. The current facility at Gweek may become our manufacturing facility.

Seacore works in nearly all areas of the world with about half of its business in the UK. This year we will be carrying out scientific drilling for global warming studies at the North Pole, Lake Malawi and the Antarctic. We are considered the number one specialist in offshore core drilling and get selected for the more prestigious jobs.

Robert Goodden - Chairman, Seacore Limited

Annual Report October 2003 - September 2004

Networking

One of the main aims of the Helford VMCA Group since its inception in 1987, has been to link community, commerce and conservation in a common goal to improve and protect the sensitive marine wildlife of the Helford River. Four thematic meetings have provided a forum for members, guests and specialists to exchange ideas on topics such as water quality issues, catchment management studies, shellfish culture, control of mechanical harvesting of scallops, the implications of local AONB designations, Cornwall Biodiversity Action Plan update, oil spills and significant business changes such as those within Falmouth Oil Services. Planning issues have ranged from small jetties and foreshore changes to a new quay for fishermen or excessive foreshore in-fill highlighting the importance of the sensitive use of the river and its shores. Reports are circulated widely.

A major cause for concern has continued to be the deleterious effect of off-shore pair-trawling not only on the target species - sea bass - but also on other fish and particularly cetaceans. Group members have had a significant input to governmental deliberations. Various aspects of protection through seasonal banning, No Take Zones and participation in the "Finding Sanctuary" project have brought members into the front line. Linkage to the Strandings Hotline has highlighted the continued carnage amongst the local dolphin population.

Publication of the HVMCA Strategic Guidelines and Work programme 2004-2009 has given an updated framework for the Group's concerns and help with student projects has continued.

Financial support for this work has been forthcoming through substantial grants from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation (2002) with welcome additional support from most of the Associate Members. The Environment Agency has kindly sponsored the 2004 events programme. Sincere thanks are offered to all our supporters.

EVENTS AND PUBLIC AWARENESS

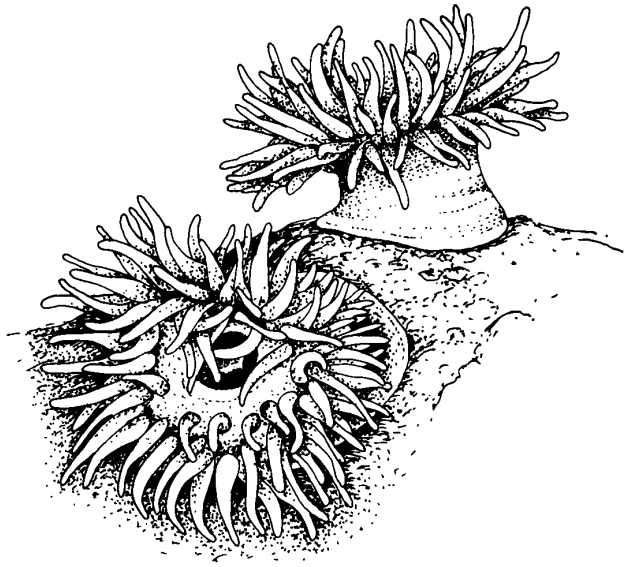
Once again the imaginative series of events offered to the local community during the last year were very well-attended. A film by Vicky and Mark Deeble-Stone "The valley beneath the sea" was shown by special request. In November the remarkable film "Troubled Waters" showed some revealing aspects of the life of an eccentric local fisherman followed in january by the personal conservation experiences of Robin Kewell on the Indian Ocean island of Aldabra. Lizard Choughs and Helford Egrets drew a large audience to the Annual Meeting of the support group HMCS. On the shore Ruth Williams and her volunteers were kept busy with over 100 enthusiasts in April and slightly smaller groups in June and August! Would-be botanists explored the shores of the upper Helford River reaches in May and soon afterwards a weekend Helford River painting competition brought out the artists. Surprisingly little litter was found during Beach Cleans at two sites so the participants could relax at their barbecues. A more energetic 25 took to the water in a snorkelling event assisted by David Ball of the Silver Dolphin Centre. Once more the very popular July Conservation Cruise was blessed with glorious sunshine. An evening talk and search for bats which use the river corridor and adjacent woods attracted 75 people and despite the inevitable noise some intrepid bats were actually heard on the bat detectors. In September, farming and issues of land use in 2004 and historically, drew 70 people to explore a creek-side farm with added geological and mining interest. A group of 18 braved the gales and rain to explore Frenchman's Creek where birds were scarce but fascinating stories abounded. We are very grateful for the enthusiasm of the leaders and volunteers who take part in all these activities.

HELFORD VMCA WEBSITE

With the help of Jayne Herbert, the website has been transferred to a new service provider, updated and extended to include the extracted newsletter, events and news and can be accessed at *www.helfordmarineconservation.co.uk*. During August 2004 there had been some 440 'unique visitors' recorded generating 10,000 hits.

PROJECTS

Since 1994 the Bass Project has been organised by a tireless volunteer Capt. D C Goodwin. This monitoring of the sea bass status within the Helford Bass Nursery Area has risen in importance as the fishing stocks come under severe pressure. There was further evidence to show that the 2002 year-class, expected to breed in 2008, was exceptional, but 2003 was described as a more moderate year.



Simplified Fishing Regulation sheets for use locally have been updated and distributed as requested.

Volunteer divers report that the sensitive eelgrass beds have been flourishing and the warning buoys appear to have been respected by most boat owners. The Truro Port Authority has issued the HVMCA eelgrass bed warning card to all boat owners using its facilities and a further supply has been printed. The teeming life on the beds, including many species of fish, sea hares, anemones, marine worms, molluscs and cuttlefish, demonstrate the importance of the habitat. One concern is the continued spread of the alien Japweed *Sargassum muticum* with a potential smothering effect on other species.

Over the years information has been collected about the Trigging activities on the Helford cockle beds and it is hoped that this may be updated and published if time and resources allow.

The Cornwall Wildlife Trust Marine Officer, Ruth Williams, has used the Helford as part of her Sea search project to encourage divers to record species underwater and retains her close links with the Group.

THE HELFORD MARINE CONSERVATION SOCIETY, the closely linked public membership body (140 strong), has been actively supportive taking a significant role in various events and promoting marine conservation widely.

THE FUTURE

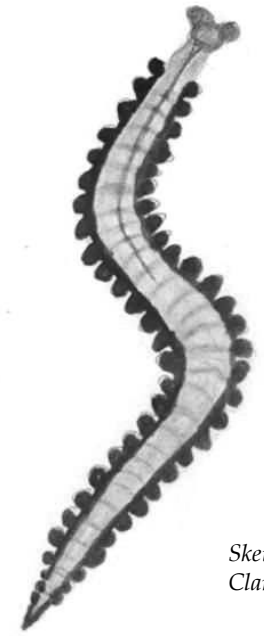
The HVMCA Group aims to promote the widest possible appreciation of the marine wildlife of the Helford River through its networking role and public awareness programme jointly organised by the co-ordinator, HMCS and the help of many individuals and organisations who have generously contributed their time and expertise in a variety of ways for the benefit of the whole Helford VMCA - a real joint effort!.

Pamela E Tompsett
Helford VMCA Group Co-ordinator

An episodic epitoke

Many marine creatures become more mobile or congregate when breeding, often travelling considerable distances. Such behaviour stimulates reproduction and increases genetic diversity. Examples are brittlestars, cuttlefish and spider-crabs. This behaviour is also seen in some species of polychaete worms, a well-known example being the swarming behaviour of the palolo worms in a single night over the reefs of the Caribbean and South Pacific (*Eunice* spp.) This is triggered by the light of the moon in its last quarter and local medicine men have historically gained much respect by their predictions of this spectacular event, perhaps the worms supplemented a dull diet?

In the UK swarms are short-lived and it is a matter of chance that they are observed.



Sketch of worm
Clare Page

In the afternoon of 23 May 2004, about an hour after low tide, such a chance fell to Chris, Clare and Tamsin Page whilst swimming at Prisk Cove, south of Rosemullion Head near the entrance to Helford River and within the HVMCA. They found themselves surrounded by a swarm of hundreds of deep pink coloured worms, measuring up to 18 cm long all swimming frantically at the edge of the water or wriggling amongst the rocks and seaweed. Each worm was dorsally rounded but flat below and paddled vigorously using a row of deeper red projections along each side. One unfortunate individual was seen to be clipped in half by a hungry crab although one part escaped!

As no specimen was collected, we can not be sure of the species but we know that some polychaete worms including members of the ragworm family (Nereidae) have a reproductive swimming stage. Either most of or just the hinder end of the body of both male and female develops paddle-like processes enabling the worms, which normally crawl amongst weed and rock, to swim freely. These are known as epitokes and were even described originally as a separate species - Heteronereis). The ripe sexual elements - sperm and ova - erupt from the adult epitoke body which then dies leaving numerous larvae to start life in the plankton.

Both the lower shore rocky habitat and the description of the worm given by the Page family suggest a ragworm *Nereis pelagica* which is known to swarm when breeding at about 3 years old. The larvae are mainly free-swimming and laboratory studies suggest a pelagic life of some 18 days before settling. A similar occurrence at Exmouth in about 1993 had been reported to Dr Tegwyn Harris, a national polychaete expert, but although he visited the site soon afterwards, he was disappointed to find nothing. Neither Drs David George or Peter Olive, both national experts on polychaete worms, had ever come across witnesses to this spectacular event and the literature is unclear as to the frequency of such social spawning. This shows the value of observations and recording - we are lucky to have this report from our local shores.

Stella Turk and Pamela Tompsett

Helford Conservation Cruise 2004

Although the 18th July 2004 dawned under grey skies and rain the sun had returned by the late afternoon as the 15th Annual HVMCA Cruise set off on an idyllic Helford River. The "Enterprise" boat skipper with his intimate knowledge of the channels and mud banks took us high up into the creeks, the haunt of shelduck, curlew, redshank, heron and little egret.

Whilst the 100 passengers were charmed by the beauty of the trees above the shining water, they also enjoyed tea and coffee as they learnt more about the birds, the fish, management of the land and woods, local history and industries and most importantly the whole marine web of life.

As the evening shadows lengthened sailors and landlubbers alike could appreciate the timeless beauty of the glassy waters, woodland tapestry and rocky shores and the importance of protection for this vulnerable sheltered arm of the sea.

Andrew Tompsett

Many congratulations to Enterprise boats in their 50 years of operation

Taxi!!

The new Helford River Passenger Service was launched along with the new ferry in early July. By the 12th of September when the service finished for the winter the ferry had carried some 2000 passengers to and from the Gardens of Trebah and Glen Durgan, as well as picking up Budock Vean Hotel customers from the hotel quay. The concept was borne out of a need to reduce vehicular congestion on the country roads around the Helford River and the ferry service now acts as a water taxi service to and from boats as well as transporting passengers all around the river. A lifting ramp at the front enables passengers to enter and exit from beaches easily. This is a resounding success story of a Rural Transport Partnership between the Gardens, The Hotel, Cornwall County Council and Helford River Boats, the ferry operators.

"Secrets of the Sea" for the Cornwall Audio Visual Archive

The Cornwall Audio Visual Archive (CAVA) was created in 2000 for the study and preservation of the oral history and visual culture of Cornwall. It advocates an innovative and interdisciplinary approach and is keen to encourage wider participation in the research and recording process.

CAVA Conference
The theme for its first conference, held over 2 days, was "The Power of Place" and developed ideas on the question of how oral and visual perspectives can offer fresh insight into the relationship between locality and identity.

In my new role as Cycleau Facilitator for the Fal & Helford, I was asked by Pamela Tompsett if I would present the HVMCA CD ROM, "Secrets of the Sea" at the first ever conference of the Cornwall Audio Visual Archive (CAVA). This wonderful educational tool for all ages was developed by Ruth Williams when she was the HVMCA Ranger.

I work on the Fal and Helford river catchments as part of the huge European Cycleau Project covering France, Ireland and the UK. "Cycleau" means "water cycle" and the project aims to improve the environmental water quality of a whole river catchment. For the Fal & Helford this means land on which rain water falls, which will then end up in the estuaries as shown on the map.

Cycleau Philosophy
The Cycleau project is there to help increase the involvement of local communities in the environmental management of their rivers and estuaries and wants to find out what people think. The HVMCA is already demonstrating this by linking different groups within the community and creating consensus.

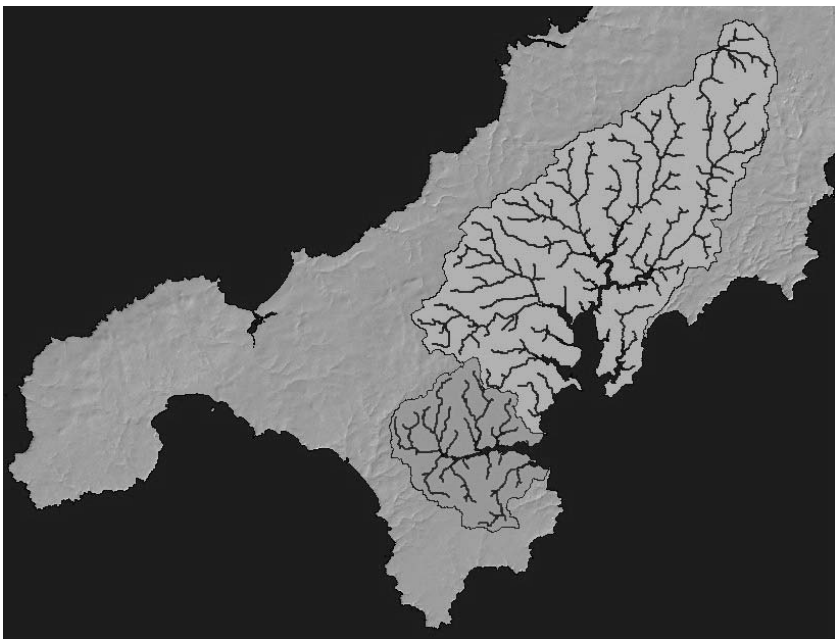
Cycleau & CAVA working together
Since the conference, we at Cycleau have had a meeting with CAVA to discuss ways in which the two projects can work together. We are currently exploring the possibility of CAVA recording oral archives with an environmental theme. For example, if there are memories of rivers that were cleaner or just different, or occupied by different plants & animals than they are now; whether the sand & dunes or the beaches have changed; whether there were habitats and animals / plants that used to exist that have been developed upon now, or are just no longer there. How land use has changed / whether there are different fish caught now by local fishermen in the village. This is just a taster of the memories that we are trying to record.

Help Needed! Recording Oral Archives / sharing your memories!
If you know anyone who would be willing to share their memories about how the environment has changed within the catchments of the Fal & Helford (see map), or how the land / sea use has changed, please let us know! Similarly, if there is anyone who would like to go out and about asking the questions and recording these important memories then please get in touch! (Travel expenses will be paid for volunteer recorders).

For further information please contact:

Sangeeta Taylor
Cycleau Facilitator for the Fal & Helford

Email: staylor1@cornwall.gov.uk
Mobile:07973 813557



Map of Fal & Helford Catchments
© Dave Watkins, Cornwall County Council

St. George's Island Marine Reserve

Legend and myth are inextricably interwoven with the history of St. George's Island, which lies less than a mile off the south Cornish coast, just south of Looe. Tales of smuggling, buried treasure and shipwrecks abound, and the islanders have become accustomed to the sea bringing them daily surprises ranging from cannon balls to beached whales. But the most important recent history was how two sisters from Surrey came to own the island in the 1960s. Without their vision, determination and love of all that is special about islands, this wildlife haven would not exist. In 2000 Babs Atkins leased the island to the Cornwall Wildlife Trust to be managed as a marine nature reserve and thus conserve its unique character.

St George's is one of only a few inhabited islands off the Cornish coast. A trip across the water from Looe often offers the unexpected, where on occasions you'll be escorted over by a pod of dolphins or watched off the boat by a grey seal.

Human occupation of the island has been recorded as far back as the 12th Century with a Benedictine chapel being built in 1139. A few stones remain on the chapel site which is at the island's highest point of 150 feet. Throughout the ages a small number of people have lived on the island, farming its 22 acres and at times supplementing their income with a spot of smuggling - on the west of the island there are caves that run deep into the cliffs, the perfect hideaway. The main island house was built by customs so that a watch could be kept for any illegal activity.

The island is a quiet haven for wildlife with a variety of habitats including woodland, maritime grassland, cliffs, sand, shingle and rocky reef. In the spring the small woodland has a carpet of wild garlic and bluebells and the cool shade is a welcome resting spot on the trail around the island. Parts of the trail are closed in the late spring and early summer to protect nesting seabirds, the second largest colony of great black back gulls in Cornwall can be found on the island. The cliffs are swathed in pink from the thrift in early summer and this is also the best time of year to see basking sharks feeding around the coast. Winter gales batter the island and make sea-watching spectacular although at this time of year there is no public boat service so we can only watch from the mainland and think of the island inhabitants who can sometimes be stranded for months!

The waters around the island are teeming with marine creatures and a large rocky reef, which is covered and exposed with the rise and fall of the tide, makes for excellent rockpooling. This area of the shore is home to a colourful array of seaweed, sea anemones, sponges, starfish, sea squirts, shellfish and shore crabs. Small fish such as blennies and gobies dart between the stones whilst out amongst the kelp live brilliantly colourful cuckoo wrasse, edible crabs and beautifully delicate cup corals and hydroids. Keep an eye open for the inquisitive head of a grey seal popping up between the waves to have a look, or for cormorants sunning themselves on the rocks.

Conserving the marine environment is an important part of the Cornwall Wildlife Trust's work throughout the county. A crucial element of that work is to monitor any changes in the presence and abundance of different species recorded at specific locations over the years. Studies like this may help to assess the impacts affecting certain sites, such as pollution, tourism pressure or even global warming. St. George's Island is unique among wildlife reserves in the south-west in providing an unspoiled offshore habitat for maritime and marine fauna and flora. Cornwall Wildlife Trust aim to not only protect this marine reserve for the future, but to use it as an observatory where visitors can watch, experience and enjoy this very special place. In managing the whole of the island the Trust's objectives are underpinned by a commitment to sustainability and it is hoped that renewable energy will be utilised to help demonstrate the links between global warming and the consumption of fossil fuels.

Visiting the island

Boats to the island run from Easter to late summer but can only go when tide and sea conditions allow. The island boat usually leaves from East Looe steps and there is a chalkboard with details of crossing times. The trip over takes approximately 20 minutes.

The island is 22 acres in size with a full circuit being approximately one mile, which at a leisurely pace takes one hour to walk.

Visits to the island normally last two hours, though can be longer depending on the tide. This gives ample time to explore the island, soak up the relaxing atmosphere and to learn a little about the history, wildlife and charm of this fascinating little island.

Ruth Williams, Marine Conservation Officer, CWT

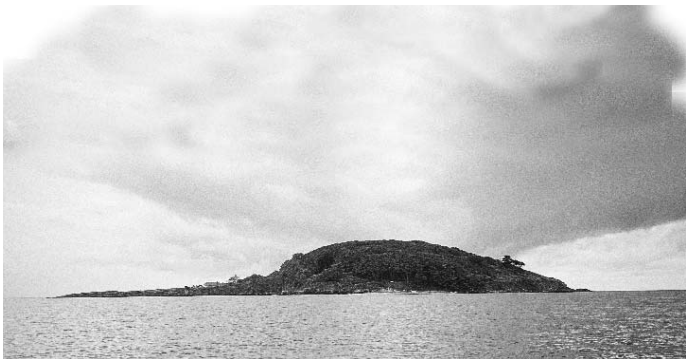


Photo: Stuart Hutchings

"By-the-wind Sailors" Attract attention

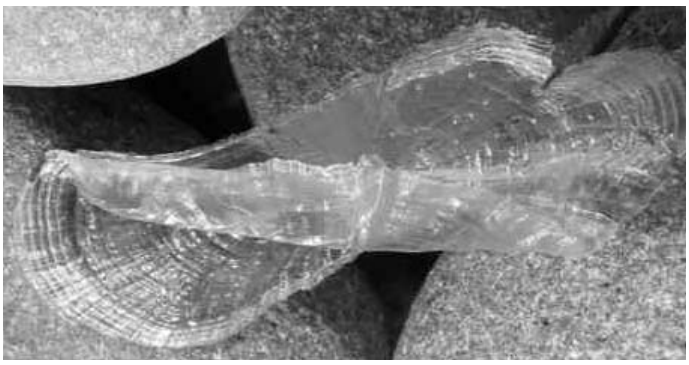
During September 2004 vast numbers of "By the Wind Sailors" have been cast up on the shores of the Scillies, Cornwall, Devon, Somerset and Wales as in 1981 and 2003. We spoke of millions in 2003 but this year we are talking of billions.

What are they - general description
The scientific name, recognized throughout the world, is *Velella velella*. They are tiny blue-coloured relatives of the Portuguese Man-of-War *Physalia physalis*), but instead of the float being an inflatable bladder, it is a flat oblong disc with a diagonal 'sail'. Like *Physalia*, each 'individual' is composed of groups of polyps, specialised for feeding, breeding and catching prey.

What is their life-history
The sexual stage (a diminutive medusa) produces two successive larval stages before changing into the recognisable juvenile form (a mere couple of millimetres long).

Where do they normally live?
On the surface of warm seas world-wide.

What do they feed on?
Creatures in the plankton, relative to their size.



Do they sting?
They do have very low stinging 'batteries' sufficient to help them capture their prey. At most, humans would feel only a tingle if they had sensitive skin, or handled them in large numbers.

What size are they?
Up to 10 centimetres across

What feeds on them?
Violet sea snails (species of *Janthina*) are probably their main predators.

Has this species become commoner in the past few decades
In the 19th Century this species was considered to be rare. Presumably the warmer sea temperatures have enabled *Velella* to flourish and breed further north than the Bay of Biscay. Flotillas occur throughout the warmer seas of the world, blown hither and thither by the vagaries of the wind. Onshore winds blowing continuously over a period always pose a threat of a wreck. On the British and Irish coasts, it is the dominant westerlies combined with the North Atlantic Drift that directs them up into the Celtic Sea/Irish Sea much more abundantly than the English Channel.

Stella Turk

HELFORD VOLUNTARY MARINE CONSERVATION AREA

Esmée Fairbairn Foundation · The National Trust · Environment Agency · The Wildlife Trusts Cornwall · Cornwall County Council · English Nature