

The search for Red Blenny

(or climatic change or insufficient data?)

by Paul Kay

As underwater photographers we all need to be keen observers of the undersea and its natural history, if for no other reason than trying to identify good subject matter. And being in the marine environment, this more often than not means watching its inhabitants and shooting natural history photographs.

Now I am not a marine biologist (despite having been described as such in various diving magazines), and would much rather classify myself as a marine naturalist. In this role I am the equal of anyone else who dives, as I can make observations of the species I encounter and their behaviour firsthand, and, providing I try to understand what I am seeing, am quite able to see things which are currently unrecorded (or at least impossible to find any existent records of).

This was brought home to me when I got a roll of film back from Glasson Rock of Inish MŪr in the Aran Islands, Galway Bay, Ireland. This is a spectacular dive, You can follow a ledge along a sheer limestone wall until a boulder slope appears below. Many fishes, crustaceans and invertebrates make excellent subject matter (the cuckoo wrasse are tame despite not being diver fed), but it was one pretty red ‘Tompot’ Blenny which caught my eye.

I was using a Nikon 28~105



Red Blenny Aran - The yellow-fringed, dark-blue spot on the dorsal fin of the blenny is very distinctive and identifies it as a male in breeding colours. Aran Islands, Galway Bay, Ireland. Subal with Nikon F100, 28~105 AF Nikkor at 105mm, single SB105 Flash on TLC/Ultralight Arm using Fuji Provia 3.

zoom lens on by Subal encased F100 and two Nikonos SB105 strobes. This acts as a 50~105 macro lens capable of focussing down to just a few centimetres, and whilst not giving quite as close focus as either a 60 or 105 micro-Nikkor, it makes up for this in terms of versatility. Well, to get back to the ‘Tompot’, it was sitting on a rock and allowed me to zoom to 105 and compose. I took a couple of shots.

As with many pictures, it isn’t until they are back and on the lightbox that anything ‘special’ is revealed. This was the case here. Under the loupe, the Provia transparency showed a fascinating but strange feature of the ‘Tompot’. It had a yellow fringed, very dark blue spot towards the front of its dorsal fin. Now I’ve seen a lot of

Tompot blennies but never one with such a marking, and it looked odd in other ways, as the body was not so ‘stout’ as a normal Tompot’s and the eye did not seem quite ‘normal’ either.

So I sat down with my books (a vast collection made over the last twenty years) and drew a blank. No temperate book contained anything remotely like this. So what was it? Well as Sherlock Holmes would undoubtedly have deduced, when the probably is exhausted move on to the improbable, and I did.

Eventually I located a similar looking fish in Peter Wirtz’s book “Underwater Guide Fish - Madeira, Canary islands, Azores”. this did not show the spot, but the eye and a blue patterning on the fish’s face did



Red Blenny Islay - No spot is visible, but the eye and facial markings show this fish to be the same as the one off the Aran Islands. Subal with Nikon F60, 60 AF Micro-Nikkor, single SB105 Flash on TLC/Ultralight Arm using Fuji Velvia. Photo by Lucy Kay



Tompot Aran - This photo was taken within minutes of the two red blennies at the Aran Islands. This tompot is quite clearly a different fish. Aran Islands, Galway Bay, Ireland. Subal with Nikon F100, 28~105 AF Nikkor at 105mm, single SB105 Flash on TLC/Ultralight Arm using Fuji Provia 3.

look similar (I had thought this just a variation on a Tompot's colouring). I queried the book's author (an expert on Blennies)

regarding my fish by emailing a jpeg file off to him (the wonders of technology) and it was soon confirmed, I had photographed a

Red or Portuguese Blenny.

Not only this, but the fish I had seen was a male in breeding colours (the picture was taken in June this year) and this was the cause of the spot - although in my specimen this was apparently very pronounced.

Now here's where the fun starts; just what does this isolated record mean?

I had some detective work to do. A round robin email to people I thought may be able to answer this revealed one confirmed record in the Scillies, and also that more information was being sought about this fish's distribution in Ireland.

Having now ascertained that I was not looking at a Tompot and having determined the nuances other than the spot which were different to an ordinary Tompot, I started to wade through my many thousand underwater photos from Ireland. I now had a nagging suspicion that I had seen this fish before. And sure enough I found it.

The previous year I had dived in south-west Ireland and had photographed a group of Tompots in a crevice. This was in itself unusual as Tompots don't tend to be very gregarious, but I'd not really thought a lot about this at the time. As I reviewed the photograph it was clear that these too were red blennies. I searched further and then started on my wife Lucy's photos.

Sure enough another photo appeared. This time from St. Kilda! not the world's best phot but one I'd taken when my old SB103s had been playing up (old age - I'm very grateful for Nikopn's recall). This again showed the red clour and blue patterning. Next Lucy's pictures

revealed another, again in a crevice and this time from Islay.

Another friend has a nice photograph of a reddish Tompot that he took framed and on his wall. Next time I called on him I examined it. Another one and from Kil;da again! Recently I found that my searches were not unique. Nigel Motyer (another contributor to UWP) has had the same problem having seen the fish for years - he too finally identified it as the same Red Blenny. He added more records from Kerry to Donegal.

So we now know that the Red or Portuguese Blenny can be found all along the western Irish and Scottish Coasts. But what does this mean?

Well it is tempting to think that it is an indicator of that in-concept Global Warming. Now whilst scientific evidence backs warming thoroughly, there is very little reason to believe that its effect will be the shift of 'southern' species northwards especially in the short term. In fact there is as much discussed about alterations in the Gulf Stream and what they might mean (it could cool down our own (temperate enough) seas. So the occurrence of one unusual fish in an area that it has not been recorded from before, is not an earth-shatteringly important event!

It is though a fascinating glimpse into what we are able to see for ourselves, something unusual enough to be overlooked by the academics and authors of many books. Perhaps it is something that should reinforce what we already know - that the marine environment is still a poorly understood place where observational skills can still reveal the unexpected, and where



Red Blenny Kerry - Again the eye and facial colouring identify their owner as a Red Blenny hiding behind a lump of boring sponge. Scarriff Island, County Kerry, Ireland. Subal with Nikon F100, 60 AF Micro-Nikkor, single SB105 Flash on TLC/Ultralight Arm using Fuji Velvia.



Red Blenny Kilda. - This fish too is obviously another Red Blenny, but this time the photo is from far to the north off St. Kilda, NW Scotland. Subal with Nikon F801, 60 AF Micro-Nikkor, single (worn out!) SB103 Flash on TLC/Ultralight Arm using Fuji Velvia.

the camera is still coming into its own. Without a photograph, I would not have identified this fish as anything other than a Tompot and it is quite likely that it would have been far longer before anything went into print about its distribution as it is here

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