

In the wake of the Guga Hunters

by George Stoye and Richard Shucksmith

Descending to 25m onto a kelp-covered rocky slope, we made our way north before stumbling upon a spectacular wall plastered in an extravagant profusion of life. Covered from top to bottom in delicate, multi-coloured anemones, soft, vibrant sponges, radiant golden tunicates and luxuriant swathes of dead-men's fingers, wispy hydroids and matts of bryozoans, macro life was in such abundance not a centimetre of bare rock could be seen.

41 miles north of the Butt of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides two rocks rise out of the north Atlantic. One is North Rona, the other Sula Sgeir, and together they are arguably the most remote islands in the British Isles. Battered by massive Atlantic storms, Lewismen used to row the 41 miles in an open six-oared boat, without compass, to collect juvenile gannets for the meat known as 'guga'. These men are known as the Guga Hunters and still make the trip to these remote islands every year in search of this delicacy.

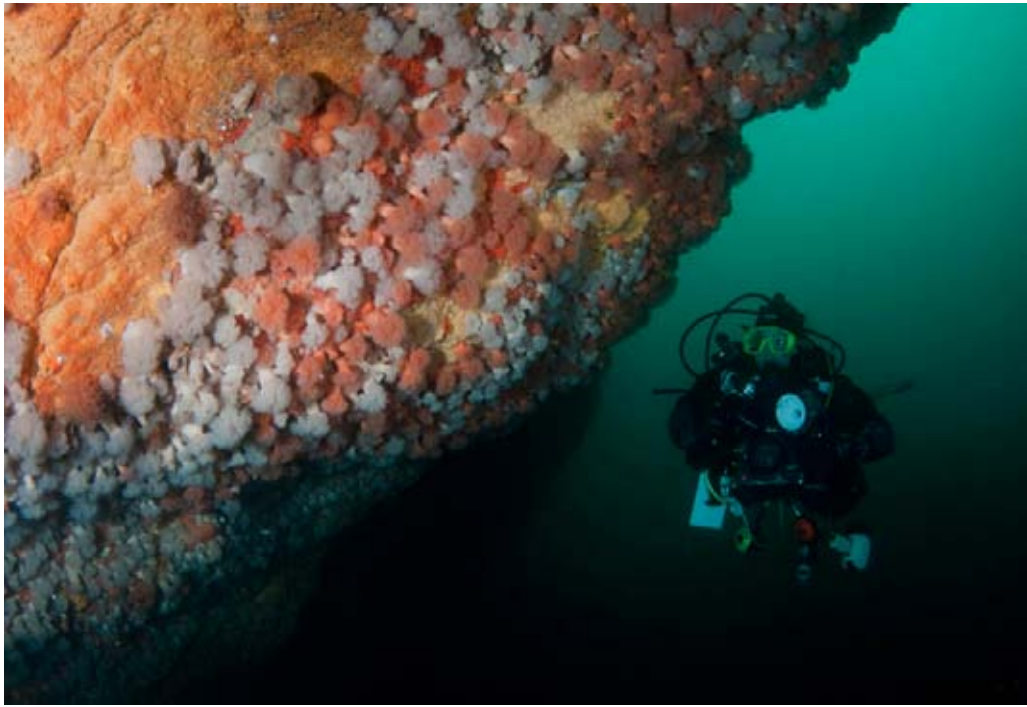
Twelve divers met the M/V

Halton on a calm Saturday evening in Scrabster on the north coast of mainland Scotland. A 70ft converted trawler, the Halton is a rugged vessel built to withstand the worst weather, with a modern-day navigation system, spacious galley (including an oil rayburn) and 6 comfortable twin-berth cabins. Our skipper for the week was Bob Anderson, a seasoned and experienced operator and diver around the northern isles. Supported by Seasearch, one of the aims of this expedition was to record the marine flora and fauna around North Rona and its neighbouring island 11 miles north-east known as Sula Sgeir.

Cape Wrath

Before heading to the islands we took the opportunity to 'warm-up' at a couple of sites just off the north-west Scottish mainland, a short 2 hour steam from Scrabster not far from Cape Wrath. Diving here is well-known for its rich marine life, clear Atlantic water and dramatic scenery. Dolphins and basking sharks were seen along the way and we





(Above) Entering the archway covered in colourful life. Nikon D300, 2x Inon Z240 Strobes, Ikelike Housing, Tokina 10-17mm f/9, 1/200Sec, ISO200. RShucksmith

(Top right) Dead man's fingers line the walls. Nikon D300, 2x Inon Z240 Strobes, Ikelike Housing, Tokina 10-17mm f/8, 1/100Sec, ISO400. RShucksmith

(Right) Jewel Anemones (Corynactis viridis) Nikon D700, 2x Inon Z240 Strobes, Nauticam Housing, Nikon 105mm VR Macro f/32, 1/100sec, ISO500. G. Stoye



weren't disappointed as we explored a series of big gullies lined with large, healthy kelp and a colourful profusion of life. Multi-coloured jewel anemones, bright yellow and orange sponges, white and golden tunicates, wispy hydroids, rough mats of bryozoans and abundant psychedelic elegant anemones. The swell in these gullies causes a fairly

constant flow of water allowing this myriad of organisms to flourish. These sedentary creatures live most of their lives in one spot waiting for food to be brought to them in the current. For photographers it is macro heaven. Numerous mobile species are also in abundance such as small spider crabs decorated in yellow sponge, tiny but elaborate nudibranchs, large, healthy

lobsters, red-eyed swimming crabs always on guard and swirls of Saithe swimming gracefully over and around the swaying kelp. The relentless pendulum-like motion in these gullies, caused by the swell, makes it tricky to stop in one place for too long, let alone take photos. Gripping on in a fight against the current presents a fun challenge but the struggle soon becomes futile and it's easier to just go with the flow.

North Rona

After a decent night's sleep and substantial breakfast (cooked and served by Mary, our gracious hostess, deck-hand and general all-rounder) we got the news we were anxiously waiting for – the conditions were good for our attempt to strike out to the islands. The North Atlantic swell was fairly forgiving for the five hour crossing and soon we began to see North Rona looming on the horizon. The island is steeped in history, inhabited, on and off, for 700 years right up until the early 1900s. A small population survived on the island during the 1600s, but were quickly wiped out after an infestation of rats, likely from a visiting ship, ate most of the island's produce and possibly introduced the plague. Since then North Rona has occasionally been occupied by shepherds up until the mid 1800s after which it has remained

largely uninhabited. Continuously farmed by the folk of Lewis, nowadays North Rona is owned by Scottish Natural Heritage who manage it as a nature reserve, primarily for its grey seal and seabird colonies.

The small, natural harbour on North Rona offers relatively good protection from the wind and swell and is the best chance of a safe anchorage. Each evening as the light was falling we'd go out on deck and marvel at the dramatic cliffs towering above us covered in seabirds all in a constant state of motion flying to and fro. Rafts of puffins sat on the water with hundreds more overhead flying in their typical frenzied fashion, and above them cruised the evermore graceful gannets.

Although the majority of our dives would be around Sula Sgeir, the neighbouring island 11km north-east, we had the opportunity for a few dives around North Rona. Diving here is relatively easy and presents the classic scenery one would expect from a wild and exposed Scottish island – clear water, abundant healthy kelp, large boulders covered with pink encrusting algae and mussels, and frequent patches of colourful jewel, dahlia and elegant anemones. A lasting memory of diving the kelp forests of North Rona will be the huge numbers of tiny but charming iridescent blue-rayed limpets clinging to the kelp fronds,



Jellyfish (Pelegia noctiluca). Nikon D300, 2x Inon Z240 Strobes, Ikelite Housing, Tokina 10-17mm f/8, 1/100Sec, ISO200 RShucksmith

and also the sheer number of snow-white and bright yellow Polycera nudibranchs at times forming clusters of twenty or more.

Sula Sgeir

11 miles from North Rona across choppy seas lies the remote outpost known as Sula Sgeir. Approaching the island it soon becomes obvious how it gets its name ('Sula' being



Diver moves between the boulder gullies. Nikon D300, 2x Inon Z240 Strobes, Ikelite Housing, Tokina 10-17mm f/8, 1/60Sec, ISO200

gaelic for gannet and 'Sgeir' meaning rock). During the summer over 8,000 gannets crowd this small but spectacular island making it one of the most important seabird sanctuaries in the UK. Underwater the scenery is equally spectacular, similar to North Rona but with a more dramatic topography and greater diversity of species many of which you would expect from such extreme exposure.

The sheer cliff faces that plunge directly into the cold, nutrient-rich waters provide the perfect habitat for a remarkable array of life. Delicate nudibranchs cling onto algae which cover dense layers of barnacles and other sedentary species. Golden tunicates and beautiful iridescent Devonshire cup corals are scattered here and there. Invertebrate life is at times so dense not a centimetre of bare rock can be seen. The underwater landscape includes many gullies which typically become dominated by thousands of stunning jewel anemones which line the walls feeding in the current. These anemones become so dense through a process known as longitudinal fission whereby they reproduce by stretching their base and splitting themselves in two across the middle producing two identical anemones of the same size. The process only takes a few hours from start to finish and eventually creates huge patches of anemones of a single colour. These spread out overlapping onto other different coloured colonies resulting in sheets of bright luminous green turning to deep purple, bright orange to pink and all the colours in between, rivalling coral reefs for vibrancy.

Sula Sgeir has a number of impressive caves and archways, many of which have rarely if ever been dived. These provide some of the

most exhilarating diving with surging currents and abundant, occasionally unusual marine life. A particularly impressive site, North Thamna Sgeir, includes a massive archway which leads through a large rock just off the north-east of Sula Sgeir. The archway opens up like a black hole with walls heavily lined from top to bottom with softly coloured orange and white plumose anemones. The arch drops down to 30m and forms the entrance to a large cave which leads right through to the rock and out the other side.

The island also provides important breeding habitat for grey seals so encounters whilst diving Sula Sgeir are very likely. However, unlike other better known sites such as the Farne Islands, the seals here are not used to divers and appear very cautious. One memorable interaction involved a wary stand-off between us and 5 seals, each maintaining neutral buoyancy slowly edging closer for a better look. We hung in the water for around 5 minutes staring at one another before something startled the seals and they darted away to the surface. Apart from a couple of similar interactions we would mostly catch a glimpse of one or two seals in the gloom, or beneath us as we were ascending, watching us suspiciously.

Each time we surfaced at Sula Sgeir we were met by hundreds of

gannets circling overhead, apparently curious of the numerous fluorescent SMBs that had popped up. Watching them from the water while we waited for the Halton to pick us up created a sense of dizziness as they circled above, at times coming just beyond arms reach to get a closer look.

This expedition was a reassuring affirmation that diving in UK waters can be just as spectacular and rewarding as many of the far-flung tropical destinations so revered by divers. These wild and exposed islands provide habitat for an astounding variety and abundance of marine life. Places like these feel all the more special because, although

remote and difficult to get to, they are a part of our heritage. We were fortunate to be allowed a glimpse and privileged to be given the opportunity to report back to the world how truly magnificent these places are and how remarkable UK diving can be. We only hope to return in the future for more diving in the wake of the guga hunters and explore more of the underwater wonders of North Rona and Sula Sgeir.

Big thanks go to Paul Holmes for organising the trip and to Bob, Mary & Kenny of the MV Halton for their experience, care and attention to detail.

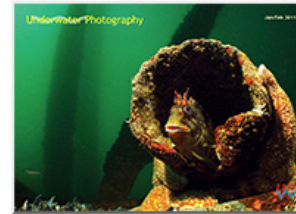
Thanks also to Seasearch and Chris Woods who helped financially support the expedition.

**George Stoye and
Richard Shucksmith**



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