MaCCOLL

(Marine & Coastal Conservation of Loch Linnhe)

Summer Newsletter

July 2026

Welcome!

In this latest Summer edition of our newsletter, we'll be hearing how Vicki, our Biodiversity Baseline Project Coordinator, got on monitoring Flapper Skate, and we'll also be turning the spotlight on chaetognaths, finding out what adventures Duror Nature Club have been on, and catching up with our bird group, Seabirds & More!

Flapper Skate Monitoring by Vicki Last

I recently had the pleasure of being invited aboard the Etive Explorer on a fishing charter with some visiting members of the Corinium Sea Angling Club to see first-hand how NatureScot is working with recreational anglers and charter skippers to improve our understanding of Scotland's critically endangered flapper skate.

The day's fishing off the coast of Kerrera saw five flapper skate caught on a strict catch-and-release basis. Each fish was played carefully before being brought alongside the vessel, where the experienced skipper and Jane Dodd, the NatureScot shark and skate specialist took over. Using the boat's dive lift, the skate were lifted aboard and processed quickly and efficiently, ensuring handling time was kept to an absolute minimum.

Each skate was measured from snout to tail tip and from wingtip to wingtip, with these measurements used to estimate weight rather than weighing the fish directly, minimising handling time. Surprisingly, the largest skate of the day, an 185lbs (84kg) female, was still some way short of the area record of 227lbs (103 kgs).

The skate was then scanned for an identification tag. Similar to a pet microchip, these tiny tags are inserted beneath the skin of the skate towards the front of the pectoral fin by trained skippers and researchers, allowing individual fish to be identified if encountered again in the future. All but one of the day's skate had already been tagged, with records showing that flapper skate exhibit a high level of site fidelity—one of the reasons local protection measures can be so effective. Any visible parasites were also removed before release. Most were leeches, although one skate was carrying a giant isopod that looked especially uncomfortable.

A photograph was then taken to record the unique spot patterns on the skate's back. These markings act much like fingerprints, enabling individual skate to be recognised even when they are not tagged. This is the same approach MaCCOLL's Flapper Skate team hopes to use to identify any skate recorded on our Baited Remote Underwater Video (BRUV) system. Finally, a DNA sample was collected under Home Office licence by Jane before the skate was gently lowered back into the water on the dive lift. All in all, it was a remarkably slick process that had each skate back in the sea within just a few minutes.

The photographs and associated information were then submitted through the SkateSpotter app. SkateSpotter allows anglers and members of the public to contribute valuable records and

recaptures to NatureScot's long-term monitoring programme. Together, mark recapture, photo-identification, acoustic and satellite tracking and genetic analysis are helping researchers build a much clearer picture of flapper skate movements (including residency and site fidelity), growth rates, population structure, and the importance of key habitats around Scotland's coast.

The day highlighted the genuine partnership between anglers, charter skippers and scientists. The anglers were clearly interested in the research and conservation work being undertaken, while their skill, enthusiasm and time on the water, combined with the knowledge and experience of the skipper, provided a platform for collecting valuable data that would otherwise be extremely difficult and costly to obtain.

The experience also highlighted the value of citizen science and collaboration—an approach that sits at the heart of MaCCOLL's own aspirations. Together with NatureScot, Edinburgh Napier University and community groups including Friends of the Sound of Jura, CROMACH and CAOLAS, MaCCOLL has recently submitted a funding application to expand community involvement in flapper skate monitoring through BRUV and drop camera surveys. If successful, the project will help local volunteers develop survey and data analysis skills while generating valuable new information on flapper skate distribution and habitat use within the Argyll Coast and Islands Hope Spot.

A fascinating day on the water, in excellent company, and a great reminder of what can be achieved when citizen scientists (anglers and charter skippers) and researchers work together to better understand and conserve one of Scotland's most iconic marine species.

Species Spotlight: Arrow worms (Chaetognaths)

A chaetognath (arrow worm), one of the ocean's most abundant bu least noticed planktonic predators. Source: Zatelmar, CC BY 3. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>, via Wikimedi Commons

Monthly Species Spotlight by Vicki Last

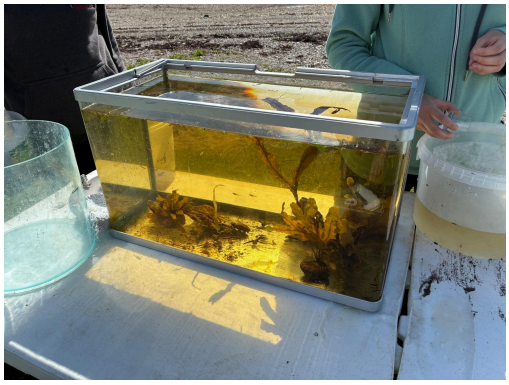
This month's species focus is on chaetognaths, more commonly known as arrow worms, inspired by a recent BRUV (Baited Remote Underwater Video) deployment by the MaCCOLL Flapper Skate team at a depth of 103 metres beyond the Corran Narrows — the deepest BRUV deployment carried out by MaCCOLL to date. The footage revealed large numbers of strange, fast-moving creatures drifting through the water column, variously described as "lots of alien-looking swimming worm things", "weird", and "crazy-looking jellyfish things". You can watch the footage on our social media pages (they make various appearances: 2mins & 15 secs, and 3 min 30s; 7min 30s).

Despite their unusual appearance, chaetognaths are neither worms nor jellyfish. They are a distinct group of marine planktonic predators found throughout the world's oceans, including Scottish waters. Most species are transparent, torpedo-shaped animals ranging from a few millimetres to several centimetres in length.

Chaetognaths are important predators within marine food webs. Using the grasping spines around their head, they capture small zooplankton such as copepods and other tiny drifting animals. In turn, they are eaten by fish, jellyfish, and other marine predators, forming an important link between plankton and higher trophic levels.

Interestingly, researchers from the Scottish Association for Marine Science (SAMS) have suggested that chaetognaths may be important predators of sea lice larvae and are hoping to test this hypothesis further. If confirmed, this could improve our understanding of marine food webs and the natural processes that help regulate parasite populations in coastal waters.

The recent BRUV observations serve as a reminder that even surveys targeting species such as flapper skate can reveal fascinating glimpses into the lesser-known inhabitants of Loch Linnhe's waters. While they may initially resemble miniature alien spacecraft or "high-speed jellyfish", these remarkable predators are an important part of the hidden biodiversity that helps sustain healthy marine ecosystems.



Duror Nature Club by Jennifer Bodde

For our final session of the year Duror Nature Club welcomed back Pete and his team to guide us on a beach safari at Cuil Bay.

To our grateful surprise, the sun was shining and we had a wonderful time searching for living creatures and treasures along the shore.

Being able to see some of the tiny animals in a glass tank let us watch them up close and appreciate the web of life that normally goes unnoticed. All the fish, crabs, shrimps, and insects were of course carefully returned to where we found them, so hopefully didn't mind too much!

Big thanks to the Heart of Argyll Wildlife Organisation and Argyll Hope Spot for supporting our club and looking forward to more exciting visits next year!

Seabirds & More Group

Our Seabirds & More Group have been meeting up on the first Sunday of each month to identify and record birds in the area 🦅

The highlights as we've transitioned from Spring through to Summer have been Eider ducks with their young, and a rather hungry otter, our cover star this season! ⭐

The group's next meet up will be on Sunday 2nd August at 9.30am in Cuil Bay, and everyone is welcome, no matter what your level of experience 🦆

Photo credit: Natasha MacCallum Millar

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