



Rich habitats

The presence of sills and basins in the loch complicates the water movement. These different conditions produce a rich variety of habitats *dachaidhean* and marine life *beatha na mara*. The high diversity of marine life is also enriched by the mixing of species normally found in colder *nas fuaine* more northerly waters such as small spiky snow-white anemone *Parazoanthus anguicomus* and those found in warmer *nas blàithe* more southerly waters such as the red sea finger *Alcyonium glomeratum*, leading to a fascinating combination of species *seosaichean* rarely found together.

Loch Sunart is one of several areas on the west coast of Scotland which support otters *dòbhrain* and is believed to have one of the highest concentrations of otter activity on the mainland *tìr mòr*. The extensive rocky shoreline *cladach*, isolated islands and coastal woodlands provide a safe and suitable habitat for otters to forage *spuill*, rest and breed in. They search the shallow waters of the shoreline, hunting *sealg* down their prey of fish *iasg*, crabs and other animals which shelter *fasgadh* within the protective fronds of the seaweed *feamainn*. These kelp beds are a favourite hunting ground of the otter and are a good place to watch if you want to spot an otter.



Oystercatchers.

Otter feeding.

Common mussels, Loch Sunart.



A bird's-eye view

Once persecuted to extinction *cur as*, the magnificent sea eagle *iolair mara* was re-introduced to Scotland in 1975 and may again be seen in the Sunart area. Their numbers are gradually building up and their range is extending along the west coast *cladach an iar* from their release areas. These spectacular birds hunt fish and sea birds, and take carrion *bhionach*.

Many other birds nest or visit Loch Sunart. Herons *corra - ghriodhaich* can often be seen stalking *sealg* fish at the water's edge, oystercatchers use their long orange beaks to pierce mussel shells, while mallard and teal dabble in the sheltered inlets *caolais fasgach*.



Squat lobster



Cuckoo wrasse male



Fireworks anemone



Flame shell

Rocks and reefs

Along Loch Sunart's rocky shore different species can be found in clearly defined zones. There are colourful lichens *crotaid dathail* on the upper shore, wracks dominate the middle shore, with red seaweeds, barnacles *bàirmich* and kelp on the lower shore. To maintain their position amongst the constantly swirling waters *uisgeachan luasgach*, seaweeds attach themselves to rocks, pebbles or shells *sligean* with a holdfast. However, in very sheltered sea lochs *lochann mara* a rare free-living form of egg wrack *Ascophyllum nodosum ead mackaii* is found.

Beds of seaweed are a popular hunting ground for otters and this egg wrack is an important nursery habitat for juvenile fish.



Knotted egg wrack.

In the exposed outer part of the loch, two towering underwater *fo - uisge* pinnacles, Risga Pinnacle and Broad Rock, create vertical and overhanging bedrock cliffs *sguran* that plunge sharply to the depths. Along with steep boulder and bedrock slopes, these provide a home to a myriad of organisms which thrive in the strong currents *struthan làidir* there. Massive grey elephants' ear sponges

Pachymatisma jobnstonia jostle for space with red sea fingers, dead man's fingers *Alcyonium digitatum*, cup corals *Caryophyllia smithii*, northern sea fan *Swiftia pallida*, crimson anemones *Corynactis viridis*, and the rare deep water candy striped feather star *Leptometra celtica*.

In the deep muddy *salach* basins all three species of British *Breatunnach* seapen occur, one of which reaches over two metres tall! This sea pen is aptly called the tall sea pen *Funiculina quadrangularis* and has been found in waters 2000 metres deep! Other treasured *luachmhòr* sealoch species are the sealoch anemone *Protanthea simplex* which is only found in Scottish sea lochs and the Northern Hatchet shell *Thyasira gouldi* which is a protected species and is thought to be a relic from the last ice age *àm na deigh*.

As well as the rocky reefs *sgoirean creagach* and sediment dwelling communities there are special reefs formed by animals *beathaichean* with hard shells or tubes. Loch Sunart is home to one of the best populations *aireambean* of flame shells *Limaria lians* in the UK, these shells aggregate together forming a hard biogenic reef to which other reef animals and plants, such as the nationally scarce *gann* spoon worm *Amalosomea eddystonense* attach. The flame shells in these reefs may occur at densities of up to 400 per square metre in Loch Sunart!



Brittle star

Between the islands of Oronsay, Risga and Carna, tides *làin* move over shallow *eudomhain* rocky areas. Here, light bulb sea squirts *Clavelina lepadiformis* and erect organisms such as 'snow covered' hydroids or frozen calcareous tubeworms with bonnets of bright colours all filter-feed particles *smàirnean* from the water. The upper surfaces *uachdair* of rocky boulders are covered by beds of the spiny brittlestar *Ophiobrix fragilis* and the black brittlestar *Ophiocoma nigra* raising their arms into the water column in rhythm with the passing currents.