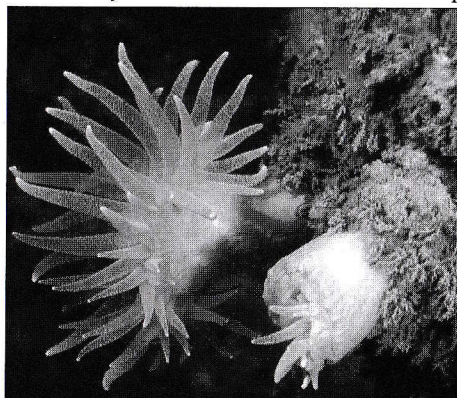


Finding the Sunset Coral at Lundy

Keith Hiscock

It was the 'icing on the cake'. My first dives on Lundy were in July and August 1969 and the last one was to be on the Knoll Pins. At the time, the diving concession around the island was granted to Bristol Channel Divers and I had negotiated a price, if I remember correctly, of £11 with Don Shiers for three days diving. The last dive was on the Knoll Pins, and that is where I found a coral not previously recorded in Britain, and a very spectacular one at that.

Having been exploring shores at Ilfracombe as a schoolboy, I was familiar with two of the three known species of shallow water coral and, as an undergraduate, was undertaking a project on the biology of the Devonshire cup coral. So, it was inevitable that I was going to learn to dive and Lundy was a logical place both to pursue my fascination with marine life and the study of corals. Diving was an expensive hobby but subsidised training at the University of London students union helped. Nevertheless, a lot of gear was



Sunset coral.

The body of the coral is the size of a thimble.

Photo, Keith Hiscock

So, with Howard Wills and Richard Millner as diving buddies, we left for Lundy on 30th July. The diving facility on Lundy was based in a concrete hut above the old jetty and was well-equipped including with a very solid-looking locked 'bunker' that held the explosives for extracting non-ferrous metal especially from HMS Montagu which was part-owned by Don Shiers. We were taken by inflatable boat to Brazen Ward, Gannets Rock and, finally, to the Knoll Pins.

I still have my scientific log books (who knows, one day someone might find them interesting) and the following is how I recorded finding the sunset coral on 4th August 1969:

"Dived off Zodiac on inner Knoll Pin. Reached sandy bottom at 50' then stayed on rockface. . . at 60' level. Similar fauna to other places dived. No *Eunicella* [sea fans] observed until reached outer Knoll Pin E. side, then zone of very large pieces. Under slight overhang on E. side Outer Knoll Pin at 60' (c. 55' below chart datum) found brilliant orange & yellow coral not *B. regia* [scarlet & gold star coral] in a colony. . . and no others seen afterwards. Sample of coral was taken and photographs were taken." A more precise account of the numbers and density was included in correspondence where I noted: ". . . a group of about 300 was observed at a depth of 17m under a slight overhang, the density of the coral was about 80 per m²".

So, armed with samples and images, I set about trying to discover what the species was. It certainly was not in the only reference available at the time on British corals: P.H. Gosse's *Actinologia Britannica* dated 1860! And, for the younger readers especially, do bear in mind that species identification keys and guides were few and far between in 1969. My first and most obvious contact was with the Natural History Museum in London and, on 11th August, I sent specimens to Mary Rowe in the relevant department there. Unfortunately she had to admit that "we have no expert working on coral and I have very little experience in this field". So, the mystery had to wait until I spotted some recently published papers on Mediterranean corals by Maya Wijsman-Best of the Zoological Museum in Amsterdam. Dr Best was very helpful and, with the specimens and images that I sent her, was able to identify the coral as *Leptopsammia pruvoti* Lacaze-Duthiers 1896, a species common in cave habitats in the Mediterranean but only known from Roscoff outside of the Mediterranean. I duly notified the Natural History Museum and the specimens that I had sent them became Number 1970-7-29-1-4. Of course, I should have published an account of the find in a scientific journal but wasn't then and still am not very 'publication savvy'.

Only a few days after the Lundy find, on 7th August, I located a group of 12 individuals of the sunset coral at a depth of 8m at Smallmouth Cove in North Devon (although it has not been found there in recent years) and showing images to colleagues it was declared as having been seen in the Isles of Scilly. Lundy remains the first location where the sunset coral was first positively identified in Britain and is one of only six known locations around our shores making it a 'nationally rare' species.

As for the 'sunset' name, well, that was the invention of Ric Oldfield who came over to Lundy in the 1970s on various expeditions to take photographs. Ric was not a biologist and so struggled with some of our gobbledygook.

The sunset coral remains a 'special' feature of Lundy. Numbers have declined in recent years but it is still a spectacular 'surprise' for a diver coming around the corner on the Knoll Pins or down the cliff at Gannets Rock Pinnacle.