

Planning a visit to the Shore

This information applies mainly to visits to rocky shores, although some of it applies equally to sandy beaches. It is not directed at a specific location or season. The take home advice is to treat any visit to the shore with respect for the sea and the overall conditions and to apply common sense.

Planning

It's not only safer but more fun to go with a companion or in a group - they'll see some of the animals you miss. Before setting out it is assumed that you have checked the tides, probably a day or two earlier, to determine the time and height of low water (LW). (See our separate sheet about the tides). The night before (if not earlier) you need to check the weather conditions: is it going to be sunny and hot, or will it be cloudy or cold? How strong is the wind forecast to be and will it be onshore or offshore? Is it going to rain and if possible what's the water temperature likely to be? The websites listed separately should provide answers to most of these questions and recourse on the day to a neighbouring beach webcam, and website radar rainfall map, can be helpful.

The nature of the wind along a coastline can also be very local, especially in summer when the difference between sea and land temperature in the morning, as the land heats up faster than the sea, can create a cool onshore sea breeze that can reach 10 or even 20 mph. Watch for cumulus clouds formed by air rising over the land (for example over Dartmoor) in the morning - other air is being drawn in from over the sea to replace it. Although a similar reverse wind can take place in winter or at night, in practice offshore breezes are less of a consideration.

Footwear

This will depend on weather conditions, but on most occasions wellington boots with a good tread will be worn. Heather Buttivant in her book "Rocky Shore" regularly mentions retreating from a rising tide once the water starts overtopping her boots. If you really want to explore the lowest shores then waders may be more appropriate. In the height of summer all that may be needed are beach shoes and swimwear if you feel agile enough - you sometimes see children running across the rocks (and barnacles) just in shorts and bare feet! It can be very nice to have dry shoes and socks back at base when they are needed.

Clothing

Appropriate clothing should be obvious to anyone used to being outdoors in all weathers. Just remember that shores are exposed places and that the possibility of becoming dehydrated on hot days, particularly on windy days, must be considered. Equally it can be much colder on the shore than inland in early summer with a sea breeze coming off a cold sea. You should also consider the nature of the rocky shore: if it is fairly flat with mainly rock pools and boulders to explore then ordinary trousers will suffice but if you're

kneeling under overhangs near the water's edge waterproof trousers could be useful. Finally knee pads can make peering into rock pools more comfortable, and in winter fingerless gloves can be useful for handling camera and animals.

Provisions

Pretty obvious really. Remember that you may be on the shore for up to 4 hours (depending on your enthusiasm) so plan to take food and plenty of fluid as appropriate.

Equipment

If you can remain skilful in field conditions then you might be able to copy the Victorians and some professional scientists and write down and sketch what you find. These days however, by far the most popular recording device is the camera. Phone cameras can be sufficient as they have a high pixel count, good resolution and wide angle 'fish eye' lenses that can be useful for photographs of the wider setting or weather conditions. Smart phones record date, time and GPS position so there is little else to be jotted down in the field. However, they are not designed specifically with small marine animals in mind and the touch screen can be a liability in the rain. Many amateur enthusiasts opt for a dedicated waterproof compact camera such as the Olympus Tough series which records time and position, and other technical information, and has a macro function which is designed for very close up work. Incidentally it's extraordinary how many times that you see an animal that you missed in the field when you look at a photo back home.

Another helpful tool is a large diameter magnifying glass with a wide field of view and not necessarily high magnification (which can be left for the camera). This can be very helpful for finding small animals under overhangs or on the under-side of a boulder.

Other potentially useful equipment would be a white plastic bucket, sample tray or even empty cream cheese container for dropping an animal into sea water for inspection and photographing. Careful use of a stainless penknife can sometimes be used to prize an animal from a rock but is not recommended. And a general reference book can particularly useful for the novice - it all becomes so much more interesting when you build up a catalogue of knowledge.

Code of practice on the shore

Have fun but respect all life on the shore. If you pick up an animal try to put it back where you found it. Replace any stones or boulders that you turn over. Stay safe and keep an eye on the time and the water level. Have an idea of your escape route particularly if you are not sure of the depth of water between rocks and you don't want to swim. In general tidal water levels drop more slowly than when they rise so allow more time to explore before LW than after it. If, after LW, your wellies start to fill up it's generally past the time to move higher up the shore. On a rising tide always relocate sufficiently far above the water level so that you've got time to investigate anything you find before it gets inundated.