

A Superabundance of Rarity

By David W McKay



fig. 1

Idas simpsoni (J. T. Marshall, 1900) [fig. 1], because of its very specialized habitat, is one of the most difficult to collect bivalves in British waters. Apart from a short period at the beginning of oil exploration in the North Sea, when it was found on diesel contaminated tailings (Oliver et al.), it is only found on the skeletons of dead cetaceans. Unlike most other molluscan habitats, which can be located from maps and charts, finding a dead cetacean skeleton is a pure chance, and even when one finds a piece of whale bone it may not have been colonized by *Idas*. In almost 50 years of collecting I have only found this species on three occasions, despite spending many weeks at sea on research and commercial fishing vessels.

T h i s

species was first described in 1900 from specimens collected from a whale skull landed in Aberdeen by a trawler that was fishing off the Orkney Islands. Tebble (1966) describes it as being found on whale skulls and says that when one is found the species may be abundant.

The first time I found *Idas* it was on a single vertebra about the size of a half pint mug: I got 40 small specimens nestling in the neural arch. On the second occasion I got 4 specimens from a 12ft long section of jaw bone. In the context of the difficulty in finding this species I would have described the 40 specimens on the vertebra as being abundant.

That was until 25th October 2013 when I was on a trip to Rockall Bank on board the fishing vessel Venture II [fig. 2], when we caught a part of a whale skull that was covered in thousands of specimens of *Idas*. It was one of those rare occasions that shell collectors dream of.

This was not my first trip on the Venture II so the crew knew that I was interested in any pieces of debris that came up in the net. A small piece of the skull had broken off [fig. 3] so one of the deckhands brought it to me and asked if it was of any interest. I saw the *Idas* immediately



fig. 2



fig. 3



fig. 4

and said 'Yes'. He said that there was a bigger bit [fig. 4] and asked if I wanted it brought on board and I repeated 'Yes'. It was when he went for the angle grinder that my interest level really perked up.



The skull was stuck crosswise in the bag of the net and was too big to pass through the gap in the rail that allows the nets to be hauled. The normal practice would simply be to cut a hole in the net and let the skull fall free to return to the sea bed and I would never have been any the wiser, as the gear handling area is out of bounds to a supernumerary like me when the gear is being hauled or shot. (Indeed on another boat when I had found *Idas* on the whale vertebra, they had snagged a much larger part in the net and simply cut it away. That time had been at night and I could not see the net handling area from where I stood during hauling and shooting). So I did not see how large a piece of skull we had caught until it was brought on board, placed in a safe location and secured. Once the net was shot again and it was safe to move around, I could see just how extensive the clumps of mussel were that I realized what a good find this was. The crew

were rather underwhelmed until I explained the biology of this small mussel and how difficult it was to find. I still ask myself: 'What if there had been no small piece broken off- would I have even seen it.

Once I had got over the sheer excitement of the find [fig. 5] I had to decide just what to do with it. My first reaction was that I had to take the whole piece of whale bone home as intact as possible and present it to a museum. Then common sense kicked in. We were only seven days into a ten day fishing trip; I had no way of properly preserving or housing such a large object. I could not put it in the fish hold in case it contaminated the catch, so by the time I could get it to a museum it would be fairly smelly. So I took photographs of the mussels in situ [fig. 6] and filled all the jars I could with preserved specimens, trying to get as representative of a sample of the populations as possible.

I was left to contemplate the paradox of collecting such a large number of specimens of what still remains a very difficult bivalve to find.



References

- Oliver, P. G., Holmes, A. M., Killeen, I. J. & Turner, J. A. (2016). *Marine Bivalve Shells of the British Isles*. Amgueddfa Cymru - National Museum Wales. Available from: <http://naturalhistory.museumwales.ac.uk/britishbivalves> [Accessed: Dec. 2017].
- Tebble, N. (1966). *British Bivalve Seashells*. The British Museum (Natural History). London. pp.212.