

THE ROLE OF SERENDIPITY IN SHELL COLLECTING

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I have long been of the opinion that a good shell collector also has to be lucky. This was confirmed for me when I was involved in the discovery of three species of molluscs previously unknown to science from waters to the west of the Scotland.

When I took early retirement from the Marine Laboratory, Aberdeen I felt that it would be an abuse of my friendship with my former colleagues to ask them to continue collecting shells for me, as they had done when I worked in the Laboratory. Also I had started my own business and put shell collecting on the back burner. In 2010 having retired for a second time I had occasion to visit the Laboratory to use its Library as I had been asked by the skipper of one of the fishing boats I had been out on if I could get some more information on the biology of the common squid *Loligo forbesii*. While I was waiting for the Library staff to photocopy an article on squid for me I met one of my former colleagues with whom I had spent a lot of time on routine trawling surveys. He asked me why I had not asked him and other members of staff to collect shells and when I explained my reasons he told me not to be silly.

As he was now in charge of organizing the staff on the routine surveys he told me to come along to his office after I had finished in the Library and we could work something out. This I did and at the meeting once we had sorted out what material I would like kept from the routine surveys he said that I should go and see Jim Drewery who was part of the team working on the fauna of the continental slope. The project was mostly concerned with fish but Jim had developed an interest in the benthic organisms they were catching, but was having some problems identifying the molluscs.

Jim and I rapidly came to a mutually beneficial arrangement to the effect that Jim would give me the shells to keep and I would tell him what they were. I picked up some shells from the surveys they had already done and took them home not expecting to find much of interest. I could not have been more wrong. That batch of shells contained a *Galeodea rugosa* (Linnaeus, 1771) from NW of St Kilda, some odd looking *Beringius* and a beautiful purple *Volutopsius*, as well as *Colus islandicus* (Mohr, 1786), *C. gracilis* (var *glaber*) (Verkuzen in Kobelt, 1876), *Pseudamussium septemradiatum* (O. F. Müller, 1776), etc. In 2011 the survey produced another purple *Volutopsius* and some other buccinids whose identities I wished confirmed. So I arranged with Koen Fraussen that he would look at them at the 2011 October Shell Show. We met up on the Friday night and Koen agreed with most of my identifications but identified the *Beringius* as *Beringius bogasoni* Warren & Smith, 2006 and expressed the opinion that the *Volutopsius* were a species unknown to science. After the show he took the specimens back to Belgium for more detailed study and a few weeks later he confirmed his view that the *Volutopsius* was a new species and invited me to give it a name. As the specimens had been collected on the Fisheries Research vessel Scotia, the fourth of that name, I thought it appropriate to call it *scotiae*. The paper describing this new species was published in the Journal of Conchology in December 2013 (Fraussen, McKay & Drewery, 2013).

When I collected the material from 2012 Jim said as well as the usual frozen material he had some specimens of small white bivalves preserved in alcohol that had come from a foul haul, a haul when the trawl does not fish properly. On this occasion the trawl had sunk into some soft mud after it had been shot and the haul had to be abandoned. When the trawl was recovered there was a large amount of mud still in the net. This Jim carefully sifted through with the aid of the deck hose and collected about forty small white shells. On getting them home I looked at the contents of the pot and saw that there were 5 specimens of a small round globose bivalve and about 30 of a more elongate one. I identified the globose ones as some sort of *Thyasira* but was entirely mystified by the others. Over the next few weeks I examined the specimens from time to time, consulting the National Museum of Wales's website on Northeast Atlantic Bivalves (Oliver et al, 2010). I was still mystified. As it was coming up to the time for the 2012 October Shell Show and I had some specimens to deliver to Graham Oliver and his team for DNA studies I decided that I would travel to London via Cardiff, deliver the samples and consult Graham Oliver on the identity of these two puzzling bivalves. Graham was away at sea so I left a specimen of each species for him to look at after he came back. A few weeks later I had an excited e-mail, if you can get such a thing, from Graham asking if I had anymore specimens of these mystery bivalves as in his opinion they were both species unknown to science. I carefully packed the remaining samples and put them in the post. A few days later I had another e-mail confirming that the elongate shells belonged to the genus *Issoporodon* and that the round one was indeed a *Thyasira*. I put Graham in contact with Jim as he was in a position to provide all the necessary information on the collection of the shells. The paper describing the two species was published in the JMBA in



Volutopsius scotiae



Thyasira scotiae

Issoporodon mackayi

Oct 2013, naming them *Thyasira scotiae* and *Issoporodon mackayi* (Oliver and Drewery, 2013).

When I started collecting shells in 1967 little did I think that I would be involved in the discovery of three species unknown to science. I feel like an interloper in the whole process. I never actually found the shells in the field. All I was, was a conduit between the collector, Jim, and people more expert than I, Koen and Graham, but I have had a huge thrill from the whole experience which has been the highlight of my shell collecting. My involvement was pure serendipity.

References:

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PS: Luck works both ways and in taking the photographs for this article I went to pick up the only specimen of *Thyasira scotiae* I have, and one valve simply exploded into fragments. I could have wept.