

## Spider Crabs

A few weeks ago my husband Peter noticed that the beach in Dale seemed to be strewn with dead crabs – they were even floating in the shallow water. Asking advice from Kate Lock, our local expert in all things marine, she explained that they were not dead crabs but simply the moulted shells of Spider Crabs. (All Crabs, having an external skeleton, need to moult this hard skeleton in favour of a new softer one in order to grow) Apparently, Spider Crabs moult in a big group all piled up together, and they do this in different places each year. This year it was the turn of Dale Bay, and searching the web it appeared that a similar thing occurred at New Quay in 2003 and even made the local press!



Spider Crabs (or Spiny Spider Crabs, *Maia squinado*) are quite common around our coast but are not often seen as they keep to quite deep water. They moult in much shallower water, however, and often carry out a long migration to get to a suitable place. When in shallow water such as Dale they are sometimes caught by the youngsters on the pontoon - much to their surprise and panic (The youngsters that is, not the crabs, and apparently extra points are awarded for a Spider Crab) They are quite a fearsome creature and can grow quite large though curiously are not often eaten in the UK. This compares with France where they are a delicacy known as *araignée*. (I have very pleasant memories of a lunch near Paimpol consisting of a Spider Crab and Kronenburg 1664 when on a sailing trip in Brittany, but I digress....) I guess they might be quite tricky to cook, needing a large pan, and I understand the meat is a bit fiddly to extract

Here in west Wales we are actually near the northern limit for spider crabs – most are caught from Cornwall southwards to France and Spain. Those caught in the UK are mostly exported to France so that British tourists can eat them .....

Spider Crabs should not be confused with King Crabs – these are truly monstrous beasts which are native to the north Pacific but have been introduced to the Barents Sea off Northern Norway. They can easily be 5ft across from toe to toe and make good eating. They are starting to appear in huge numbers and it is possible, like many introduced species, that they are seriously damaging the Barents Sea eco-systems, being voracious predators and scavengers, but the details are still sketchy at present.