

'Tidal treasures'

Finalist – Vanessa Wright

The fury of a storm is captivating: the wind howls and the sea screams. When it passes, nature leaves behind her treasure. Beachcombing in the aftermath uncovers mysteries and surprises: fauna, flora and flotsam are all washed ashore.

As the sands shift and the tide turns, the shoreline is ever-changing. There is a Gaelic saying: 'What the wind brings, the current takes away.' No two days are the same walking on these South Uist beaches. Every tide brings a new discovery. Each skeleton of the storm has its own story.

Mermaid's purse

Head down, battling the wind and rain, I wasn't expecting to walk into a childhood dream. Tucked among the debris and detritus was an olive-yellow capsule, which I almost mistook for an air sac of brown bladderwrack. This leathery pouch was as translucent as a tile in a stained-glass window. Holding it up to the dusky light, it resembled a precious piece of amber entombing a creature thousands of years old.

This was a mermaid's purse.

As a child, I had a book of fairy tales with stories of beautiful half-women, half-fish creatures. They were adorned with shimmering silver tails and flowing red hair. And they carried pearls in their handbags. I wanted to be one.

In stark contrast to these idols of my youth, maighdean na tuinne or 'maids of the waves', appear in Hebridean folklore as harbingers of doom, symbolising disaster. A South Uist story dating back to around 1830 tells of a fishing boat crew who set eyes on one in the water. Tradition had it that if a mermaid was seen, everyone had to throw her a fish. On this occasion the skipper threw her a knife and she disappeared. It was a bad omen as the following spring the captain drowned.

A sailor's life is fraught with danger, so it's little surprise they turn to charms and superstitions for comfort.

While I was never going to be one of these mythical creatures, not least due to my inability to swim, I had always wanted to find a mermaid's purse. But in all of my 50 years, I had never seen one. Until now. These tiny pockets are where the embryos of sharks and skates begin their life before emerging and leaving their case behind.

Unravelling the long curly tendrils from its bladderwrack ballast, the purse's pale hue and diminutive size identify the former inhabitant as a small-spotted catshark. I peer through the exit hole, now empty, and look out to sea. Mine is now out there somewhere, swimming in the Atlantic. It gives me hope.

Jellyfish

Given the exponential rise in plastic pollution, I assumed I was looking at discarded carrier bags. But as I drew closer, I realised this was a bloom of jellyfish lying at my feet. On this half-mile stretch of shoreline, I counted more than a hundred sea jellies.

The most numerous looked like bubble gum bubbles, adorned with pink or purple four-leaf clovers. These colour flashes are the gonads of moon jellyfish and can also occur in blue or white. Its pigmentation, like a flamingo's, depends on its diet and the variety of plankton it eats.

Further along, I come across another jellyfish lying upside down: a pork pie with a burnt crust. Peat-coloured tentacles tangle in the middle, and I was certain this wouldn't survive for long. Unsure of the toxicity of its sting, I turned it over using ribbons of seaweed so it landed the right way up, waiting for the waves to take it out to sea again. To me, it was as if a child had scrawled a sun on its back with a felt tip pen. But this is the compass jellyfish, named due to its radial pattern.

I was stumped when I came across a jellyfish that looked like my Nan's cut-glass fruit bowl, tinged in pink. Comparing my photographs with those on the Marine Conservation Society's website, it didn't look like anything featured on the identification guide. Puzzled, I took to social media to help me classify my specimen.

Experts confirmed I had spotted a crystal jellyfish. I was looking at a rarity on our shores; this is usually found in the North Pacific. It was an entire ocean away from its natural home. This was the first sighting recorded in the Outer Hebrides this year. What on earth was it doing here?

Some scientists believe that the smacks of jellyfish washing up on our shores in such large numbers are due to oceanic warming, whilst others believe it's a consequence of overfishing. The loss of natural competitors and predators from a disrupted food chain has enabled these gelatinous creatures to thrive.

An out-of-balance ecosystem has the potential to impact livelihoods too. Following winter storms in 2014, a bloom of mauve stingers invaded fish cages off the coast of North Uist, killing 300,000 young salmon valued at more than £1 million.

Over a few short summer weeks, discovering these otherworldly creatures has intrigued and captivated me. It seems I am fast becoming a jellyficianado.

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F I N A L I S T S

The beginning of 2022 saw the launch of the The Outer Hebrides Climate Beacon project. Speaking to climate scientist Dr James Pope, who analysed and modelled past and predicted winter storm data, concluded that the islands should expect storm frequency to increase by as much as 40 per cent by the end of the century.

These changing weather patterns, while potentially damaging, could leave exciting and eclectic finds in their wake. It's astonishing that on this single 20-mile shoreline, storms and serendipity have delivered me so many treasures. It's not just the discoveries themselves that are precious, but the stories they each have to tell.