

Crawfish Conservation Report 2024

by Sue Daly



One of the larger specimens recorded, measuring approximately 30cm (12 inches) in length, seen at the Vingt Clos reef on 16th August 2024.

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Background information

The crawfish *Palinurus elephas* occurs in the Eastern Atlantic from Norway to Morocco as well as in the Mediterranean. It feeds by night on a wide variety of small animals and carrion but lacks the large front claws of lobsters and crabs. Like all crustaceans it sheds its shell to grow, reaching maturity at between four and five years old. (Research by the UK's Marine Biological Association shows that in British waters crawfish reach breeding condition at five years old or later.) Males are generally larger and can grow up to 60 cm long and weigh over 8 kilos. Both sexes can live for more than 15 years.

Crawfish are classified as 'Vulnerable' on the International Union of Conservation for Nature's red list of endangered species with a decreasing population trend internationally, and in the UK they are a Biodiversity Action Plan species.

In the 1960s crawfish were plentiful here in the Channel Islands and were an important commercial species but over-fishing by both divers and fishermen led to the point where the stock was virtually wiped out and the species became commercially extinct by the end of the 1970s.

In 2014 good numbers of juvenile crawfish began appearing in Channel Island waters as well as around the adjacent coasts of France, southwest England, Wales and the west coast of Scotland – all areas where they had been common in the 1960s. The reason for this unusually large increase in the breeding success of this previously rare species is still unknown but crawfish continue to be present in these areas.



An juvenile crawfish approximately 7cm (2.4 inches) long recorded at Guillaumesse, 29th July 2024. Measurement is from in front of the eyes to the end of the tail and is estimated. At this size crawfish tuck themselves away in crevices and only sit out in the open when they are quite a bit larger.

Previous Surveys

In 2017 and 2020 I undertook a snapshot survey of eight reef sites around Sark. The dives lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and were carried out to a maximum of 30 metres.

After the first survey I suggested that crawfish were fully protected within Sark's three-mile limit and in January 2018, following a proposition by the Agriculture, Sea Fisheries and Environment Committee to Chief Pleas, an amendment was made to the Fishing (Sark) Ordinance and crawfish were protected for three years. This was extended for another three years in 2021.

2024 Survey

This year's survey was carried out in August with help from marine biologist Fiona Crouch and boat cover provided by Andy Cook. Dive times and depths were the same as those on the first two surveys and we were able to visit seven out of eight of the survey sites.

Compared to the 2020 survey, numbers were down at all of the sites apart from at the Vingt Clos reef. We recorded a total of 17 individuals this year while there were 29 recorded in 2020. Of those 17, just 4 were at or above the legal landing size defined as 23cm when measured from in front of the eyes to the end of the tail. Of the remaining 13 most were very small, 7cm or less, such as the individual seen on the previous page. Therefore, in comparison with the previous survey a much greater proportion of the specimens recorded were small juveniles.

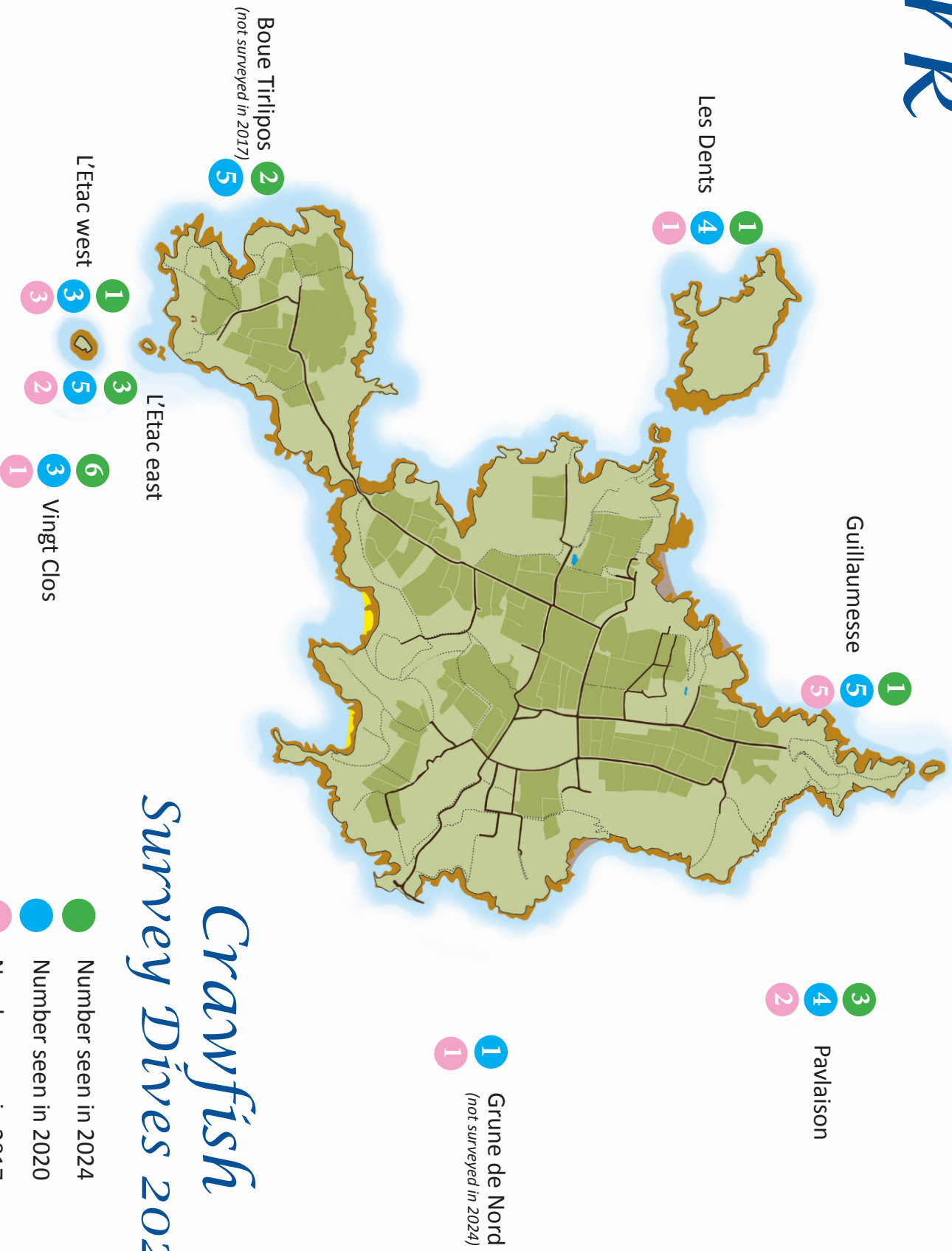
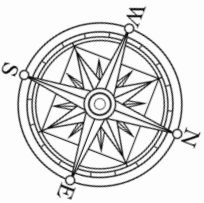
While the good number of juveniles is a positive sign for the future of this species, it is interesting that fewer large specimens were seen this year. It has been suggested that the return of the octopus to Channel Island waters might be having an impact of crawfish numbers as octopus are known to feed on a wide variety of crustaceans. This could be the case although crawfish and octopus both thrived in local waters before the very cold winter of 1962/3 which wiped out the octopus population.

Suggestions

I would like to suggest that the full protection for crawfish in Sark waters is continued. The population does not appear to be anywhere near large enough to support a fishery and, if fishing for it were allowed, numbers of crawfish would soon reach an unviable level and we would once again lose this species from our waters.

Sark remains the only place the British Isles and Europe where crawfish are fully protected, with only one area of the UK now having a temporary ban on fishing for them. This fits in well with Sark's other good fisheries practices with the ban on parlour pots, the closed season, the ban on dredging and the protection of wrasse. These are all things we should be proud of and I believe we should use this as a reason to promote Sark as place where the locally caught seafood has been sustainably fished and is a premium product.

Sark



Crawfish Survey Dives 2024

- Number seen in 2024
- Number seen in 2020
- Number seen in 2017