

Marine Worms

Many different kinds of worm live on the seashore and in the shallow waters around our coast. They can be found all over the shore - in mud, in sand, on or under rocks, and on other animals. Some swim or crawl in search of food. Others stay in one place for most of their lives, filtering food from the sea or collecting debris on which to feed. The worms that live freely are called errant and are usually active predators or scavengers. They often have well developed eyes, tentacles and jaws for locating and catching food.

The worms that live in the same place for the whole of their lives are said to be sedentary. These worms live in a protective tube that may be buried in soft sand or mud, or cemented to a hard surface. This tube may be made of sand or mud grains stuck together with mucus, or may be formed from a limy or chalky substance secreted by the worm's body.



Coiled Tube Worm *Spirorbis* spp. Tiúbphéist chorntha

A very common worm on our shores, the Coiled Tube Worm, is often overlooked because of its small size. It builds a tiny calcareous coiled tube up to 4mm in diameter, which may be coiled clockwise or anticlockwise, depending on the species. The head bears a minute crown of green or white gills, which are used for breathing and filter feeding. This worm will settle on a variety of structures, but particularly favours the fronds of the Serrated Wrack.



Keel Worm *Pomatoceros triqueter* Cílfhéist

The Keel Worm lives permanently attached to hard structures, such as stones or rocks, living inside a chalky tube that it makes itself. The tube narrows to a point at the tail end and has a prominent "keel" or ridge along its length. At high tide, it puts out its head and opens out a small crown of colourful tentacle-like gills to catch the tiny animals and plants it feeds on. When the tide goes out, or when danger threatens, it retreats into its tube, plugging the opening with a cork formed from one of the gills.



Lugworm *Arenicola marina* Lugach

Often the only sign of life beneath a sandy beach is the presence on the surface of spaghetti-like casts. A type of bristle worm, the Lugworm spends its life in a U-shaped burrow, feeding on the sand and extracting anything edible from it. As it feeds, a pit is formed above its head while the undigested sand is ejected as the cast. As in all bristleworms, the body is segmented and looks similar to that of the earthworm. The front of the body is swollen and bears bristles, and the narrower end bears red gills, which are used for breathing.



Honeycomb Worm *Sabellaria alveolata* Péist mhilteogach

Honeycomb Worms live in a group, or colony, often on a half-buried rock on exposed beaches. These colonies may be so big as to form large reef-like structures. They build tubes by gluing together sand grains, gravel or shell pieces, and arranging them rather like a honeycomb in a bee hive. The worms are fairly small, up to 4cm in length, and emerge only at high tide to feed. At low tide they shut themselves in their tubes, with tentacles adapted to form a plug-like structure.