

Up Close

Starfish

Starfish and sea urchins belong to a group of animals known as echinoderms – the spiny-skinned animals. As their name suggests, they all have spiny skins, although in some the spines are quite soft and not very obvious.

As well as spines, echinoderms also share another feature; they have bodies which are divided into equal sections, radiating out from a central point – a little like the spokes of a bicycle wheel. This is more obvious in starfish than in sea urchins. However, if you look at the empty shell of a sea urchin, you can see that it is divided into segments, rather like an orange.

Common Starfish



Asterias rubens Crosóg mhara choiteann

This five-armed starfish has a very rough upper surface, with blunt spines that are embedded in its skin. The skin itself can vary in colour from orange to pale brown to mauve. Like many starfish, it has hundreds of tiny tube-feet underneath its arms, each ending in a sucker. These are used for movement and feeding. The tips of the arms are light sensitive and also help find food. Large starfish are uncommon on the shore, but small ones can be found under stones and in rockpools.

Cushion Star/Starlet

Asterina gibbosa Crosóg fhaoinne



Looking like a small star-shaped pin-cushion, the Cushion Star is easily identified by its short stubby arms. It is one of the most common echinoderms to be found on the lower shore, often on or under rocks and seaweed. However, its small size and green to pale-brown colouring make it difficult to find. Even though it rarely grows bigger than 3cm across, like larger starfish the Cushion Star feeds on worms, brittlestars and other small encrusting animals.

Spiny Starfish

Marthasterias glacialis Crosóg choilgneach



This is one of the largest starfish to be found on the seashore. It has five arms and many tube-feet. Its upper surface bears distinct spines which are surrounded by tiny pincer-like organs. These pincers are used to clear debris from the skin surface, which is usually a blueish-grey colour. The tips of its arms are often tinged with purple, and may be light sensitive. Spiny Starfish eat shellfish such as scallops and mussels, prising the shells open with their tube-feet.

Scarlet/Henry's Starfish

Henricia oculata Crosóg Anraí



This starfish has bright blood-red or purple colouring, giving rise to its nickname of "bloody Henry". It has a rigid body and smooth, chalky skin that sometimes feels slimy because of a mucus coating. Its tube-feet can be pulled into grooves which run the length of the undersides of its five arms. These feet are small and have no suckers. As well as feeding on small invertebrates such as sponges and hydroids, this starfish also feeds on tiny food particles that stick to the mucus covering its arms.