

Wildlife of the Welsh Indian Ocean Territory

Strung out over millions of square miles of the Indian Ocean are a collection of islands, reefs, and atolls that comprise the Welsh Indian Ocean Territory. Their total land area however amounts to less than 10 square miles. Originally discovered and claimed by Welsh explorer Marci Trebor on his voyages to find the lost tribes of the Welsh, they became popular in Edwardian times with members the professional classes, who lacking a Welsh equivalent of Eastbourne to buy a retirement cottage in, set sail here. These became a home from home with chapels, gorsedds, and gift shops selling tea-towels, dragons carved from lumps of coal, boxes of fudge (cocnut flavoured of course) and carved wooden lovespoons. Not all of them stay the course. They miss the mist and the rain, the valleys and the pit heads, the sheep, and the little railways. The inhabited islands include Abracadabra Island, the Ff'ffarquar reef, Presumption Island, Dai Gogogoch Atoll, Third Sunday Before Lent Islet and the desolate Clarach Group. The local currency is the Wupee. The Abracadabra Island became famous worldwide when it housed the base for the Welsh Space Program, but otherwise these islands remain obscure and this is just to the liking of the both the true islanders and Welsh settlers. The wildlife of this territory has many (well some) unique and unusual creatures that have baffled scientists for 200 years. If The Beagle had moored here Darwin may have torn his beard out. This set of stamps was issued in 1969 and illustrate some of the better known animals.

50c The Knitted Crab is one of nature's most remarkable creatures. Like the well known hermit crab it is soft shelled, but unlike its cousin it does not highjack a mollusc shell to live in. Instead it collects bits of seaweed, palm leaves or even old rope and carefully strips them into individual fibres, and painstakingly knits itself a protective shell. Their claws have evolved specifically with this task foremost. Some of these knitted carapaces, especially those of the older more experienced crabs, are very ornate and colourful. As soon as one knitted shell is completed the crab discards its old one, scrambles into the new shell and starts about making its next larger one. The discarded shells may be re-used by the False Knitted Crab, but since the arrival of the settlers they have been collected and turned into table mats and doyleys which are sold in the gift shops all over the Territory.

The stamp shows a famous crab known as Old Crochet, who got his name not for anything to do with crocheting, but because of his bad temper and being very crotchety. If you disturbed him and caused him to drop a stitch you could receive quite a vicious nip.

1W The Very Big Fly is the world's largest flying insect, and don't believe any claims by any other insects. Luckily their size restricts them to Clarach Island group because they get puffed out even flying from one bush to another. You certainly know when one has bitten you; doubly so if you swish it as it bites. There will be a big squojjy mess. Its bite can transmit a number of diseases including yellow fever, blue nose, the greens, brown legs (don't ask), and the pink sweats. If you catch all of these you have what's known as Rainbow Syndrome. But by far the worst disease it carries is Insomnia Sickness transmitted by Trypanosoma nocterasera. Sufferers gradually sleep less and less each night before going literally as mad as a box of frogs. In modern times this is exacerbated by watching late night TV for hours on end.

As far as insects go the Very Big Fly has brains rather than brawn, despite its size. So far it outwitted all attempts to eradicate it. The use of insecticides strong enough to kill them would decimate other wildlife, an open hunting season failed to reduce numbers (though numbers of hunters did fall), and introducing wild dogs trained to catch them was fruitless. Hence visitors to the islands are advised to wear head to toe rubber suits or chain mail. Whose blood they suck when there are no humans is one of the last mysteries of the natural world.

3W The Ff'ffraquar Elephant Shark. When early mariners and explorers returned from their voyages they brought home stories of fantastic and unbelievable creatures - usually in the

alehouse for the price of an evening's drinks. The Elephant Shark was an invariable subject of these stories and the teller would not hesitate to relate his bravery facing this fish in the ale houses of Swansea or other ports; for the teller knew that his audience would assume that this shark was named for its size. It was not, for fully grown it will measure 2 foot (60cm). In fact it gets its common name from its unusual anatomy. Its elongated prehensile nose very much resembles a trunk, and the similarity is added to by the enlarged pectoral fins which bear an uncanny resemblance to elephant's ears. Though it is capable of giving you a nasty nip, should you encounter one of these whilst lazing in a tropical lagoon just grab its trunk, swing it round and let go. Notice how it uses its big fins to glide back down into the sea.

5W The Predictable Tortoise lives on Predictable Island and is one of the largest giant tortoises. It gets its name from each one's habit of following its own set route around the island at the same time each day. This has led to disputes as to whether the tortoise is named after its predictability or after its native island; or if the island is named after the tortoise. Marci Trebor's logs of his voyage are half illegible, half nibbled by rats and a mass of inconsistencies and crossing-outs. However the Welsh settlers to the islands put this to predictability to good use. Knowing exactly when a giant tortoise is going to pass your dwelling meant you had a reliable transport system. Jump on as it passes, and ride to the other side of the island. They said the service had better time keeping than the Blaenavon, Pontypool and Brynmawr Railway. The stamp shows a vintage sketch of Mr Ifor Roberts, one of the colonial administrators, and his wife about to board a tortoise on their way to Sunday Chapel. Don't worry Mr Roberts; there'll be another one along in a minute. Sadly no Predictable Tortoises survive today. A storm in 1927 caused flooding across the centre of the island and the tortoise's predictability became their downfall. Being unable to change their routes they continued on their way regardless and all drowned. But waste not, want not; the islanders all agreed that they were indeed very tasty.

The little bonuses with this issue are not strictly stamps - more postal decoration, but they deserve a place in your collection. When the Welsh Space Program was in operation there was a lot of activity at the Pentre Bychan Awrodrome with planes dropping off food, supplies and other goods for the workers and scientists based there. Before this the islanders had little contact with a technological society and they rationalised their own religious stories with the seemingly miraculous appearance of gifts from the skies. When they pointed to the delivery plane and asked who was bringing the goods they were told it was Siôn from Abergavenny. The islanders naturally reckoned that they "deserved a bit of that" and so a Cargo Cult evolved and they made shrines to Siôn Ffrum where they prayed for gifts of chocolates, radios and Cuppa Cawl. Sometime in the late 1970s the cult brought Christmas into their ceremonies and they wrote their letters to Siôn Ffrum as a Santa Claus figure; making their own stamp paper from leaves and stuff, and putting these on their letters. These letters were left in the shrines or put atop the palm trees for collection. That they never were did not disillusion the islanders at all. Most of the stamps were made by an islander by the name of Aloysius, whose artistic skills were greater than his spelling. The cult still operates today, but the modern world has caught up with them. They now text their messages to Siôn Ffrum.

As a postscript to this the Abergavenny Advertiser in 1993 reported the death of a Siôn Ffrum who lived alone in a house full of all sorts of consumer goods neatly packaged in boxes and crates. Neighbours said he had been waiting for some letters from abroad for nearly 20 years. This may just be coincidence

2W This stamp was found to be a prank played by the designer knowing he was about to start a new job. He slipped this in and no-one noticed until just before the stamps were about to be announced. He included the following write up about the stamp.

Few creatures are the subject of so many legends as the Bearded Clam. Many a sailor has never been seen again after going in search of this elusive shell. Native only to the reefs of Ff'ffarquar the islanders have regarded it as an aphrodisiac since they first landed there. Each one is said to contain a pearl that will fill men's hearts with desire and they lose the sense of reason. Today the clam is a protected species and hunting for it is strictly controlled by the island administration. However this has led to a rising number of applications for permits for clam spearing holidays.

When the hoax was rumbled as many of the specimens as could be located were destroyed, but luckily a few part sheets of perforated examples survived and have found their way into collections.

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