

SEASHELLS

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Illustrations and Research
by staff of
Coastal Ecology Research Laboratory
University of Maryland Eastern Shore
and
Assateague Island National Seashore

Shell collecting is one of the many activities you are encouraged to enjoy during your visit to Assateague Island National Seashore. Most shells are washed ashore during winter tides with the aftermath of storms producing optimum conditions. Although shells can be found along the entire beach, the extreme north or south tips of the island are best due to tidal action associated with the inlets. **HOWEVER, CHECK WITH VISITOR CENTERS TO DETERMINE WHAT BIRD NESTING CLOSURES MAY BE IN EFFECT AROUND THESE AREAS FROM MARCH 15 TO AUGUST 31.** Respect island closure signs whenever you find them.

Please limit the number of UNOCCUPIED shells collected to one gallon or less on any one visit to the seashore. **SHELLS COLLECTED MAY NOT BE SOLD OR OTHERWISE USED FOR COMMERCIAL PURPOSES.**

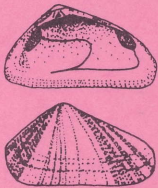
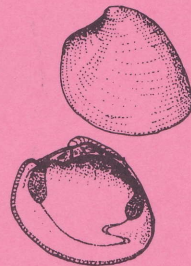
Clams, mussels, and oysters can be consumed. However, legal restrictions and storage or health considerations apply. Inquire at visitor centers for regulations or current information.

Northern Quahog

(Mercenaria mercenaria)

This highly-prized edible clam is also called little neck, hard shell, or steamer clam (when young). The heavy, thick shell has numerous shallow, concentric ridges on the outside. The inside is white with purple muscle scars along the edge. People seen "clamming" along the mudflats are usually trying to find this bivalve.

Habitat: Bay waters. 2 - 6 inches



Florida Coquina

(Donax variabilis)

A small brightly colored shell seen on the beach at water's edge. These attractive bivalves live in colonies just below the surface of the sand. They follow the tides in and out, filtering food from the waves. Live coquina clams can often be observed feeding during summer.

Habitat: Sandy ocean beaches. 1/2 - 3/4 inches

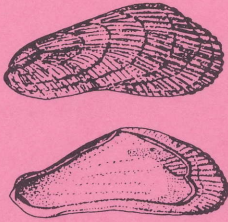
Eastern Oyster

(Crassostrea virginica)

The most economically important shellfish. Each female produces several hundred million eggs. The free-floating young soon settle to the bottom to begin life attached to solid structures. The chalky white shell has a rough bumpy exterior and a prominent purple muscle scar inside.

Habitat: Bay waters. 3 - 7 inches





Atlantic Ribbed Mussel

(*Geukensia demmisa*)

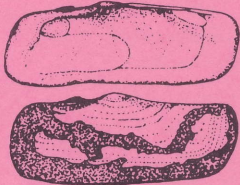
This foot-shaped shell with numerous radiating ribs is found embedded in the mud of salt marshes. The thin shell is yellow-green outside with iridescences inside. The shell is held in place by byssal threads like the blue mussel. Habitat: Salt marsh. 3 - 5 inches

Common Blue Mussel

(*Mytilus edulis*)

This thin shell is shaped like a rounded triangle, and is colored blue-black outside and white inside. The shell is textured by thin concentric lines. The mussel attaches itself to solid surfaces by means of elastic fibers called byssal threads.

Habitat: Intertidal ocean or bay waters. 2 - 4 inches



Stout Razor Clam

(*Tagelus plebius*)

This very rapid burrower lives on bayside mudflats. The smooth rectangular shell is blunt on both ends, with fine concentric circles.

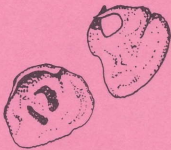
Habitat: Bay waters. 3 - 4 inches

Atlantic Jackknife Clam

(*Ensis directus*)

Similar to the stout razor but narrower, more elongated, and much thinner. Like the stout razor, it is a very rapid burrower. The delicate shell breaks easily and whole specimens are difficult to find.

Habitat: Bay waters. 2 - 6 inches



Atlantic Jingle Shell

(*Anomia simplex*)

A thin, translucent shell with a waxy surface. The concave upper shell is usually found separate from the flat lower shell, which has a hole where the live jingle attaches itself to solid surfaces.

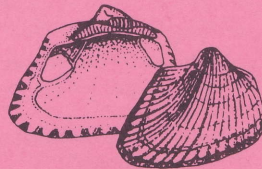
Habitat: Ocean waters. 1 inch

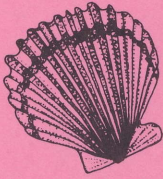
Ponderous Ark

(*Noetia ponderosa*)

This is a very sturdy, heavy shell with a round dome shape. The color is white and the shell has 27 to 31 deep, square ribs and prominent teeth on the hinge.

Habitat: Ocean waters. 2 - 4 inches





Atlantic Bay Scallop

(*Argopecten irradians concentricus*)

This well known shell is the emblem of a large oil company. Unique among bivalves, scallops have a series of light sensitive blue eyes and jet-propelled locomotion. The highly variable colored shell is fan-shaped with 20 elevated ribs.

Habitat: Shallow bay or ocean waters. 2 - 3 inches

Angel Wing

(*Cyrtopleura costata*)

A thin, fragile shell found all along coastal beaches—usually as fragments. A real prize if found whole. This bivalve feeds on algae, which may discolor the otherwise chalky white shell.

Habitat: Shallow ocean waters. 4 - 7 inches

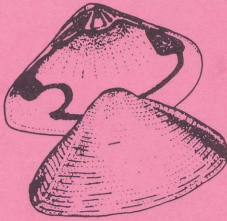


Surf Clam

(*Spisula solidissima*)

This is the largest bivalve in the North Atlantic. It inhabits the zone from low tide to 100 feet deep and is dredged up by trawlers for use in commercial clam chowders. The large, very sturdy shell with fine concentric growth lines is easily identified.

Habitat: Ocean waters. 4 - 10 inches



Channeled Duck Clam

(*Raeta plicatella*)

This pure white shell is best identified by the deep, concentric growth rings. Commonly washed ashore, the thin delicate shell is usually found broken.

Habitat: Ocean waters. 2 - 4 inches



Channeled Whelk

(*Busycon canaliculatum*)

A large snail similar to the knobbed whelk, but lacking the knobs. Instead, shallow grooves border the top of the 5 to 6 whorls. The aperture is brown. Both whelks make long spiral egg cases that are often found on the beach.

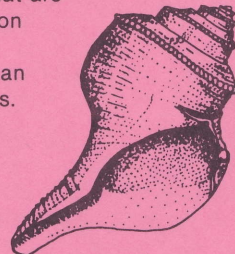
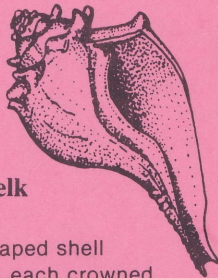
Habitat: Ocean or bay waters. 5 - 8 inches

Knobbed Whelk

(*Busycon carica*)

A large pear-shaped shell with six whorls, each crowned with a series of prominent knobs. The large oval aperture is colored cream to brick red. This large snail feeds on clams, which it opens with a muscular foot.

Habitat: Ocean or bay waters. 5 - 9 inches

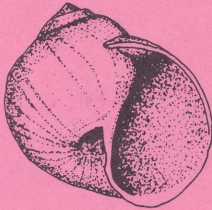
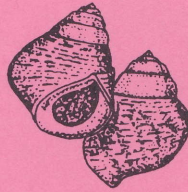


Marsh Periwinkle

(*Littorina irrorata*)

A heavy shell with fine spiral whorls and a heavy operculum. An inhabitant of salt marshes, the periwinkle climbs marsh grass to avoid salt water at high tide and descends to the mud to feed on algae at low tide.

Habitat: Salt marsh. $\frac{3}{4}$ - 1 inch



Common Northern Moon Snail

(*Lunatia heros*)

Considered to be one of Assateague's most attractive and highly-prized shells, but not often found. More common in New England. Gray to brown in color with purple, blue or red hues. The egg cases are circular ribbons in the sand that look much like an orange peel. Habitat: Intertidal, ocean or bay waters. 2 - 4½ inches

Atlantic Oyster Drill

(*Urosalpinx cinerea*)

The sturdy light-gray shell is roughened by thick vertical ridges crossed by thin lengthwise ridges. Oyster drills feed on oysters with a file-like tongue called a radula.

Habitat: Bay waters and jetties. 1 - 1½ inches



Eastern Mud Nassa

(*Ilyanassa obsoleta*)

This dark snail is seen by the hundreds along the mudflats at low tides. The rounded whorls have weak flattened beads that are well hidden by an algae and mud covering.

Habitat: Bay waters. $\frac{1}{2}$ - 1 inch

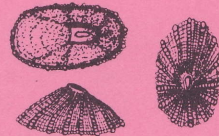


Cayenne Keyhole Limpet

(*Diodora cayenensis*)

A small slit at the top with numerous radiating ribs down the side of this pyramid-shaped shell makes identification easy. While alive, the limpet solidly affixes itself to rocks from which it scrapes algae for food.

Habitat: Ocean rocky areas. 1 - 1½ inches



Slipper Shell

(*Crepidula fornicata*)

This shell varies in color from white to purple. A platform is found on the underside giving it the appearance of a small shoe. Adults permanently affix to a solid object and can often be found stacked 5 or 6 high.

Habitat: Attached to solid surfaces in bay or ocean waters. 1 - 1½ inches

Assateague Island Shell Check List

(Bivalves)

- Transverse Ark
(*Anadara transversa*)
- Ponderous Ark
(*Noetia ponderosa*)
- Eastern Oyster
(*Crassostrea virginica*)
- Bay Scallop
(*Argopecten irradians concentricus*)
- Amethyst Gem Clam
(*Gemma gemma*)
- Atlantic Jingle Shell
(*Anomia simplex*)
- Atlantic Surf Clam
(*Spisula solidissima*)
- Northern Quahog
(*Mercenaria mercenaria*)
- False Angel Wing
(*Petricola pholadiformis*)
- Florida Coquina
(*Donax variabilis*)
- Stout Razor Clam
(*Tagelus plebius*)
- Atlantic Jackknife Clam
(*Ensis directus*)
- Green Jackknife Clam
(*Solen viridis*)
- Atlantic Razor Clam
(*Siliqua costata*)
- Little Surf Clam
(*Mulinia lateralis*)
- Channeled Duck Clam
(*Raeta plicatella*)
- Angel Wing
(*Cyrtopleura costata*)
- Common Blue Mussel
(*Mytilus edulis*)
- Atlantic Deep-sea Scallop
(*Placopecten magellanicus*)
- Atlantic Ribbed Mussel
(*Geukensia demissa*)

(Gastropods)

- Eastern Paper Bubble
(*Haminoea solitaria*)
- Humphrey's Wentletrap
(*Epitonium humphreysi*)
- Common Eastern Nassa
(*Nassarius vibex*)
- Common Northern Moon Snail
(*Lunatia heros*)
- Cayenne Keyhole Limpet
(*Diodora cayenensis*)
- Shark Eye
(*Polinices duplicatus*)
- Common Baby's Ear
(*Sinum perspectivum*)
- Atlantic Slipper Shell
(*Crepidula fornicata*)
- Convex Slipper Shell
(*Crepidula convexa*)
- Eastern White Slipper Shell
(*Crepidula plana*)
- Common European Periwinkle
(*Littorina littorea*)
- Marsh Periwinkle
(*Littorina irrorationa*)
- Knobbed Whelk
(*Busycon carica*)
- Channeled Whelk
(*Busycon canaliculatum*)
- Eastern Mud Nassa
(*Ilyanassa obsoleta*)
- Eastern Melampus
(*Melampus bidentatus*)
- New England Nassa
(*Nassarius trivittatus*)
- Atlantic Oyster Drill
(*Urosalpinx cinerea*)
- Thick Lipped Drill
(*Eupleura caudata*)

For more information refer to *Golden Guide to Seashells* and the *Peterson Field Guide to the Atlantic Seashore*.