

Want To Start A Shell Collection Of Your Own?

Betty Muirhead and Carol Jones, like other shell collectors, are glad to offer tips on starting your own collection.

Shelling is generally better in winter and early spring, especially after a tropical storm or a northeaster.

"There are too many people in summer," Muirhead declares matter of factly. "Everybody's picking up everything."

Their recommendations:

- collect on the second low tide after a storm.
- collect on an astronomical low tide, when more beach is available. Muirhead also advocates shelling on the new moon, while others swear by a full moon.

- walk the tide line. It can be profitable for rookie collectors, especially "if you can be the first one there."

- learn about the mollusks you seek. Where do they live? What do they feed on? Example: Moon snails and olives bury in the mud and leave tiny tunnels as a trail. Two holes in the mud signal a bivalve buried beneath the surface, like a clam or a scallop.

- check rocks, pilings, jetties and marsh grasses for clinging mollusks. A putty knife is useful for scraping a shell from its perch.

- examine sea whips (soft coral) tossed onto the beach for Single-toothed Simnia or for a rarer McGinty's Cyphoma, a cream-colored shell with a humped back that in Florida is nicknamed "flamingo's tongue," says Jones.

- venture into mud flats and shallows. Try snorkeling or diving.

- ask fishermen to search their nets for shells collected offshore, or to let you do it.

- keep a record of when, where and how you obtain each shell you consider a "find".

- use a soapy water scrub or a chlorine bleach soak to clean most shells; it helps remove algae, barnacles and corals. A dentist's pick will remove most remaining particles. Jones occasionally places a heavily-encrusted shell in an onion bag and dips it quickly in muriatic acid and then rinses, but cautions the acid can eat holes in the shell.

- soaking a shell in drugstore alcohol (time varies) helps remove live mollusks from their shell. If it's a gastropod, save the thin "trapdoor" or operculum at the shell's opening and replace it after cleaning.

- dry on a paper towel. Rubbing a dab of mineral or baby oil on the shell after it dries helps protect it from dust and dirt and brings out the color.



CAROL JONES "stumbled" into the joy of shelling 15 years ago on vacation in Florida, but says she still has lots more to learn. She shares her love and knowledge of the beach and its treasures as a volunteer with the Museum of Coastal Carolina at Ocean Isle Beach.

Watch Out! Shell Collecting Can Be Habit-Forming

BY SUSAN USHER

They lie scattered on the beach like candy on the street after a parade, colorful, inviting and free for the taking.

Seashells—in bits and pieces and whole, large and small, rare and common, smooth and rough—are home to the soft-bodied animals called mollusks. There are bivalves like the tellins, cockles and oysters, with their two shells hinged tightly together with muscles, and single-shelled gastropods like the whelk and moon snail.

Their seemingly endless variety and beauty snare collectors young and old. Toddlers, and sometimes adults, indiscriminately fill their sand buckets with the commonest of cockle shells, certain they've found treasure.

Watch out, that budding collector's horde could mark the start of a serious addiction to beachcombing.

Stroll along any Carolina beach inlet on low tide and you'll spot the addicts. You may be able to identify them by their buckets and jars or even the collection bags tied around their waists. They may carry a field guide and notebook in their shirt pocket, and a rake or putty knife in their hands as they meander along the tide line, wade across mud flats or patiently examine the tiny under-sea world surrounding a piling.

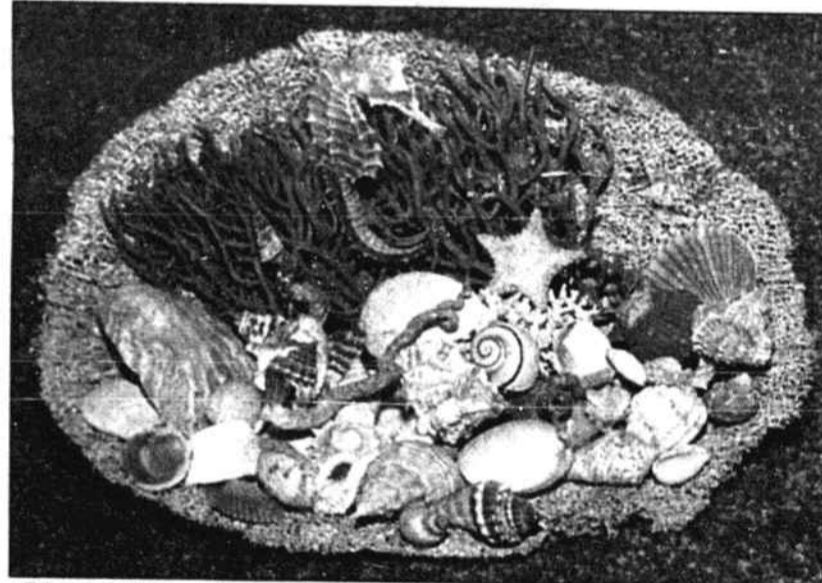
After "stumbling" into shelling 15 years ago when she and a friend vacationed in Florida, Carol Jones of Calabash is "still doing it for fun" though it's a rare day now when she encounters a shell she hasn't found before. She makes regular treks to Florida and its keys, and has baskets of shells gathered on a trip to Bermuda.

To keep the numbers manageable, she's found creative gifts to make with shells, crafting decorative lamps, mirrors, nightlight covers and whimsical animals. Special groupings in shadow boxes along the walls of her roomy modular home, and in a display case on her front porch. When she finds sand dollars, she cuts them and displays the shells attractively with the "doves" flying.

Interesting duplicates often wind up filling gaps in the collection of the Museum of Coastal Carolina at Ocean Isle Beach, where she conducts Thursday story hours and volunteers two other days a week conducting tours and giving talks. Her penchant for calling shells by their common rather than their Latin names comes in handy when working with her young charges at the museum.

Jones retired last year from a career teaching health and physical education in a school system near Philadelphia. She and her dad moved to Calabash to be near family, and the beach.

As she combs the shore, she delights in the changes in the beach as



COLORFUL shells and sea whips, or soft coral, fill a conical "sea basket" found floating in waters off the Florida Keys.

it responds to nature and to man's intervention. Sand cliffs and pools shift or disappear after storms, while dredging of an inlet tosses up new treasures for the finding.

Unlike some shell collectors, from the start Jones' interest has taken her beyond the shoreline. She's boated in the Florida keys, snorkeled in the bays of Bermuda and waded across her share of tidal zone mud flats and marshes.

Strolls along the inlet shallows and tidal pools of the beach remain a favorite ritual.

"I like going out early in the morning," she says. "It's so peaceful and beautiful. Even if I don't find anything it's still enjoyable."

Shell collector Betty Muirhead of Shallotte, who works for an Ocean Isle Beach real estate firm, echoes that sentiment.

"There's nothing more peaceful than walking along with my head toward the ground and a clam rake in my hand," she said. "I just like going anytime."

Both women find shelling a hobby that can be pursued privately or in the congenial companionship of other beachcombers. As Muirhead explains it, "I shell with people but not beside them."

Both are members of the local Beachcombers Shell Study Group and the N.C. Shell Club, which Muirhead serves as vice president. She also belongs to Palmetto Shell Club out of Columbia, S.C., and participates in that club's annual trip to one of her favorite shelling spots, Cedar Key, Fla. Another favorite spot is Cape Lookout, which she describes as "a neat place, especially in the fall."

"I like the trips. A trip often involves three or four days of collecting, meeting new people, finding new specimens, learning something new," says Muirhead, who travels extensively in her search for shells. She recently returned from a national conference in Corpus Christi,

you learn that more than 1,000 different kinds of mollusks are known to exist on the beaches and in the offshore waters of North Carolina, with hundreds of them moderately easy to find. With the Labrador current curving from the north and the Gulf Stream from the south, North Carolina, at the mid-point of the East Coast, offers warm- and cold-water species.

Membership in groups like the N.C. Shell Club, a statewide organization open to both novice and serious collectors, is a good way to connect with fellow shellers and to find out about outings, shows and other opportunities. Membership is \$10 a year, with quarterly meetings and several outings a year.

The club's annual show is set Nov. 18-19 at Cape Fear Museum on Market Street in Wilmington. This will be Jones' first shell show. She expects to "see what other people do," then decide what she might enter in next year's show.

Muirhead also recommends another good starter's book: *A Nature Guide to the Carolina Coast*, by Dr. Peter Meyer of Wilmington. Both are available at local bookstores and the Museum of Coastal Carolina gift shop at Ocean Isle Beach.

Muirhead and Jones are reluctant to collect live shells. It's part of the code of ethics most shell collectors share—to help preserve species and avoid waste by taking as few live shells as necessary. They may take one to have as a good example for a display collection.

"I'm at the point now," said Jones, "where I really don't want to pick up a live shell. The only advantage might be more color."



A CAREFUL SEARCH of intertidal pools at the right time of year sometimes yields good finds of Carol Jones' favorite shell, the beautiful small and glossy white Angulate Wentletrap.



Female cardinals are beautiful birds easily attracted to a bird feeder with sunflower seeds.

The Female Cardinal

BY BILL FAVER

In many bird species the male is the bird most often noticed because of his colorful plumage. Usually the female is of a duller color and sometimes can appear almost as another species. This is certainly true for the Northern Cardinal. And though in some ways the female is overshadowed by the brilliant crimson of the male, she is a striking bird in her own right.

The female is about the same size as the male, around 7 1/2 to 8 1/2 inches long. She is grayish-buff or grayish olive on the back and buff to greenish-gray on her underparts. Females have a reddish crest and red on the wings and tail. Like the male, she will hold her crest and tail erect when surprised or when she becomes excited. Her face is blackish and she has a stout, conical, pink bill.

Cardinals are usually seen in pairs and remain together for most of the year. Many mate for life and appear to have evolved a good relationship where the female builds the nest while the male sings to her and where he feeds her while she alone incubates the eggs. They both feed the young birds after they hatch, but as soon as they fly from the nest, the male takes over and the female begins to prepare for another brood.

With all this work and the sharing of duties, they seem to enjoy singing together. Sometimes he will sing and she will answer so that their songs echo across our yards and gardens. It is easy to attract these special birds to our feeders with sunflower seeds, bread crumbs, baby chick scratch feed, or almost anything else.

Feeding the two cardinals will give you a good opportunity to take a good look at this beautiful female and appreciate her, too!