

Sea-shelling by the shore

The Brunswick County coast is a treasure trove for shell collectors. Our estuaries and ocean waters hold over 1,000 species of mollusks, the shell-bearing animals.

Miles of sand beaches provide collecting grounds for many species; however, beaches aren't the only places for good shell collecting. Sounds, inlets, lagoons and intertidal flats are also home to many mollusks. These areas are rich in food and less subject to the rigors of wave action and, therefore, yield a wide variety of mollusks ranging from the tiny periwinkles that cling to marsh grasses to the spiral-shaped whelks that surface on sand flats at low tide.

While the tides bring shells to our beaches year-round, spring-time, particularly after a storm, and early fall, during the height of hurricane season, are prime times for shelling. Winter storms and hurricanes churn the coastal waters, pulling shells from the ocean floor and washing them to shore. When canvassing the shore after a storm, don't forget to examine the masses of seaweed on the beach for shells that might be lodged within.

Tides and timing are also important factors to consider when searching for shells. An hour before and after low tide, especially during spring tides that occur on new and

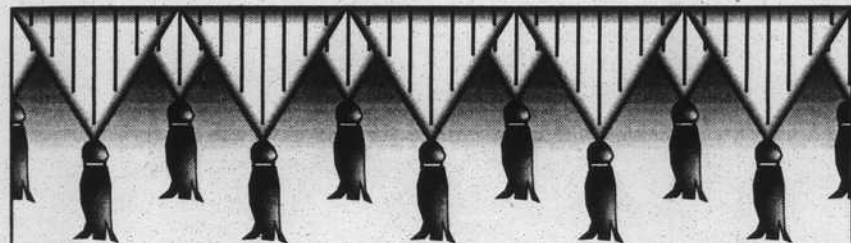
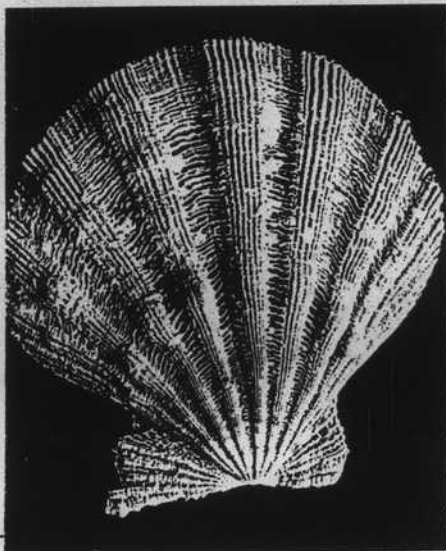
full moons, are favorable times for collecting.

Although most of the shells found on the shore are empty, each one was once an outer covering for a living mollusk. Mollusks make up one of the largest groups in the animal kingdom, second only to insects. Most shells belong to two mollusk classes: Gastropods (the largest group) and bivalves. Gastropods have a single shell and are usually spiral- or cone-shaped. Snails, whelks and scotch bonnets, the state's official shell, are members of this class. Bivalves have two hinged shells which are connected by muscle and teeth. Clams, oysters and scallops belong to this class.

The shell of a mollusk is formed by secretions from the mantle, a fleshy sac that lines their soft bodies. These secretions mix

with calcium they derive from their environment, either the food they eat or the water in which they live, to form a shell. Food, climate, environment and the mollusk's particular heredity all play a part in making each shell unique.

Most mollusks found in or near North Carolina's coastal waters are plentiful, but destruction of natural habitats and overfishing have seriously reduced some populations. If a living creature inhabits a shell, enjoy observing it, but leave it in its natural habitat undisturbed.



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