

Florida Sand and Grass Flat Molluscs

by Peggy Williams

The Shell Club's field trips aboard the Care-free Learner usually go to a sand bar which is especially prolific with sea life, including molluscs. Besides sand, there is turtle grass at the edges of the bar and other patches of grass here and there on the sand.



Sand is the preferred habitat for clams, and here we find the Quohog Clam, *Mercenaria mercenaria* (Linne, 1758), the Sunray Venus Clam, *Macrocallista nimbosa* (Lightfoot, 1786), and the Cross-Barred Venus, *Chione elevata* (Say, 1822). They happily burrow in the sand and extend their siphons to its surface to partake of passing plankton.

Since several gastropods eat mainly clams, here is where you will find them, especially the "whelks", the Left-Handed Whelk, *Busycon sinistrum* (Hollister, 1958) and smaller Pear Whelk, *Busycon spiratum pyruloides* (Say, 1822). These animals burrow in the sand during the low tide and emerge just before the tide turns to hunt their prey. The Tulips, *Fasciolaria tulipa* (Linne, 1758) and *Fasciolaria lilium hunteria* (G

Perry, 1811), and the Florida Horse Conch, *Pleuroploca gigantea* (Kiener, 1840) also live on the sand bar, eating not only clams but also small gastropods.

If you find a fresh-dead clam, fish, or other animal with some of the flesh still there, there are likely to be scavengers nearby, especially Basket Shells, *Nassarius vibex* (Say 1822) and Marginellas, *Prunum apicinum* (Menke, 1828).

Even dead clams attract molluscs. A clam that has been in the water for awhile will be a veritable reef of attaching shells, such as oysters and Jingle Shells (*Anomia simplex* Orbigny, 1842, various Ark Shells and mussels, plus crabs and even sea stars and brittle stars. Lift the dead clam gently out of the water and look it over, top and bottom, to examine and see all the marvelous life it harbors. Eating the oysters, etc, may be Drill Shells, *Urosalpinx cinerea* (Say, 1822) and *Eupleura sulcidentata* Dall, 1890, also *Muricantharus multangulus* (Philippi, 1848).

Tiny shells also hide and find food inside clams: the Wood Screw Shell *Seila adamsi* (H C Lea, 1845), and Dove shells *Costoanachis semiplicata* (Stearns, 1873) and *Columbella rusticoides* Heilprin, 1887.

Moving along just under the surface of the sand and making trails as they go are many other species of mollusc. On the west side of this sand bar



you can usually find Jasper Cones, *Conus jaspideus* Gmelin, 1791, which “pop” out of the sand when the tide turns. On the east side is where the Florida



Fighting Conchs *Strombus alatus* Gmelin, 1791 bury. Before they pop out of the sand you’d never know they were there. Sometimes on the top of



the bar you’ll find Lettered Olives, *Oliva sayana* Ravenel, 1834 and Baby’s Ears, *Sinum perspectivum* (Say, 1831), with the animal so big the shell is buried in its mass and it resembles a slimy slab of salt pork. Baby’s Ears make a wide trail like a bulldozer and sometimes are several inches below the surface when you did them up.

Several small species can be found, especially

in small pools of water, making pencil-thin trails in the sand. These include Naticas (we found *Tectonatica pusila* Say, 1822 on this last trip), which wander around as though they were lost; Olivellas such as *Olivella mutica* (Say, 1822), and others, *Pyramidella candida* Morch, 1875, various Turbonillas, the Fly-Specked Cerith *Cerithium muscarum* Say, 1832, and sometimes the Atlantic Gray Auger, *Terebra dislocata* (Say, 1822). To find the shell, follow the trail to an end that has a “bump” and dig it up with your fingers, rubbing the fingers together to feel the shell before you drop it.

Finally, look in the turtle grass for several small species that eat the epiphytes which grow on the grass. These include the Button Shell, *Modulus modulus* (Linne, 1758), Dove shells *Costoanachis semiplicata* (Stearns, 1873) and *Columbella rusticoides* Heilprin, 1887, Marginellas *Mitrella lunata* (Say, 1826) and *Prunum apicinum* (Menke, 1828), tiny *Bittium varium* (Pfeiffer, 1840) that will likely get in your shoes, and many shells with hermit crabs in them.

Besides all this, there are several bivalves that can be found dead on the sand, including cockles *Trachycardium egmontianum* (Shuttleworth, 1856) and *Dinocardium robustum* (Lightfoot, 1786),



Tellins, and many others.

All-in-all, I think there were at least 50 species found on our March trip on the Carefree Learner. What a haul!