

Harvesting Bay Clams

by Kenn Oberrecht



Bay clamming in Oregon requires no licenses, little equipment, and nothing in the way of trendy attire. It's family fun, good exercise, cheap recreation, and a wonderful way to enjoy Oregon's estuaries. The only equipment required is a shovel or rake and a container for carrying the catch.

In eel grass, walk slowly, feeling for cockles with your feet. Don't rake in the eel grass, which uproots and destroys this valuable plant.

Although any low tide exposes some clam beds, the best are morning minus tides occurring from March through September. May, June, and July offer the lowest and the year's longest series of minus tides.

Cockles are easy to gather. They're found in sandy mud, just beneath the surface or even on the surface, especially in eel-grass beds. You can harvest them with a shovel, rake, or even with your fingers in soft sand.

On bare flats, look for two tiny holes about a half-inch apart. In eel grass, walk slowly, feeling for cockles with your feet. Don't rake in the eel grass, which uproots and destroys this valuable plant.

The attractive cockle shells have prominent ridges emanating from the hinges. They range in color from beige to orange and are often darkly mottled.

Littleneck clams are other easily gathered shallow dwellers, often found with or near cockles. They're smaller than cockles, which they resemble, and their color ranges from ivory to charcoal gray. Ridges in the littleneck's shell are narrow and crosshatched by concentric ridges absent in the cockle's.

Butter clams reside in sandy mud and gravel, from six to 12 inches below the surface. They grow to four inches and have thick, chalky shells and short necks. Diggers look for half-inch or larger keyhole-shaped holes and harvest the clams with shovels or rakes. Where they've colonized, watch for spouts: streams of water expelled into the air as the clams retract their siphons.

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The most popular bay clam is the gaper, locally known as the empire clam, presumably after the Empire district of Coos Bay, where the clam flourishes in nearby mudflats. Diggers look for round or slightly oval holes in the mud, about an inch or so across. There's no mistaking the gaper's presence when you poke a finger in the hole and feel its rubbery neck retreat. Average gapers will be four to five inches long, with the largest exceeding seven inches and residing two feet deep or more. It takes effort to dig big ones out, but it's work well rewarded.

Oregon's abundant and widely distributed soft-shell clams thrive in virtually every estuary. Although large specimens resemble and are sometimes confused with gaper clams, they have thinner and more brittle elongate shells and shorter necks. They don't grow as large as gapers and seldom inhabit the same flats. These upbay clams often live in gravelly mud. They reside a few inches beneath the surface, nearer the high-tide line than any other clams, and are accessible on any low tide. A good way to find them is by stomping on the gravel as you walk and watching for spouts.

There's no better bargain on the Oregon coast. Clammers can take 20 bay clams a day, of which 12 may be gapers, then dig 36 soft-shells all free for the taking. Perhaps the old expression should be "happy as a clammer."

