

Shellfishing in Rhode Island

Recreational Harvester's Guide

A resident and visitor guide to safe and lawful harvest of shellfish in Rhode Island



Shellfish as More Than a Meal

"To most people they're clams, but to us they're quahogs. We take great pride in our seafood and summers, and quahogs are a big part of that. Clam cakes, chowder, stuffies, and raw. Rhode Island wouldn't be Rhode Island without them." — **U.S. Senator (Rhode Island) Jack Reed**

Shellfish are, and have always been, part and parcel of the Rhode Island way of life. Residents and visitors alike honor the roles that shellfish play in their lives through memories, culinary traditions and summer activities. From the iconic quahog, to mussels, oysters and bay scallops, shellfish are a Rhode Island treasure and are widely accessible to all.

Recreational harvest of shellfish is a traditional pastime. Residents and tourists of all ages, cultures, and backgrounds flock to the shores of Narragansett Bay and Rhode Island's coastal salt ponds to harvest shellfish during the summer season. For many, gathering shellfish embraces both fun and food, creating a satisfaction that comes from eating the fruits of one's labor at the end of the day.

Shellfishing in Rhode Island began 10,000 to 12,000 years ago, with Native Americans harvesting shellfish for food in spring and summer. In the 16th and 17th centuries, Europeans arrived and engaged in shellfish trade with Native peoples. According to Sarah Schumann, author of Rhode Island's Shellfish Heritage: An Ecological History, "The Narragansett and Wampanoag Indians were the first humans to relish the shellfish of Narragansett Bay....To the [tribes] who lived in what is now Rhode Island, shellfish was both sustenance and symbol."

Since then, shellfish have served both commercial and recreational purposes. Commercial harvest and aquaculture industries inject \$12 million annually to the state's economy, creating livelihoods for hundreds of Rhode Islanders and food for local, regional and national consumers.

Harvesting Your Own Shellfish

Species	Harvest season	Minimum size	Management area: resident limit	Management area: non-resident limit	Non-management area: resident limit	Non-management area: non-resident limit
Channeled and Knobbed Whelk (Conch), <i>Busycon</i> species	Year round	2¼-inch shell height	½ bushel (maximum 1 bushel/vessel) and 5 pots	Residents only	½ bushel and 5 pots	Residents only
Bay Quahog, <i>Mercenaria mercenaria</i>	*Year round	1-inch hinge width	1 peck	½ peck	½ bushel	1 peck
Soft-shelled clam, <i>Mya arenaria</i>	Year round	2-inch longest axis	1 peck	½ peck	½ bushel	1 peck
Oyster, <i>Crassostrea virginica</i>	September 15–May 15	3-inch longest axis	1 peck	½ peck	½ bushel	1 peck
Bay Scallop, <i>Argopecten irradians</i>	*November–December	1 annual growth ring; no seed possession	1 bushel	Residents only	1 bushel	Residents only
Surf Clam, <i>Spisula solidissima</i>	Year round	5-inch longest axis	1 peck	½ peck	½ bushel	1 peck

**Harvest season and possession limits may vary by management area and season (refer to the Marine Fisheries Regulations Part 4, Shellfish § Shellfish Management Areas).*

NOTE: 1 bushel is 9.3 gallons (¾-full orange fish basket); 1 peck is 2.3 gallons (almost half of a 5-gallon bucket). All shellfishing is prohibited statewide between sunset and sunrise.

Ready for the Clam Flats

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

There are many different tools for harvesting shellfish recreationally, hands, feet, and simple gardening tools like rakes, pitch forks and hand trowels. Local bait shops also sell clamming rakes and measuring tools. All are permitted and depend only on personal preferences and the tides. In addition, bring a clamming license or driver's license, a measuring device (clam gauge), a cooler and ice packs, sunscreen/hat, sturdy shoes, a towel, gloves, and comfortable clothes.

KEEP IT COLD

Bring ice/ice packs and a cooler; shellfish that are not kept cold can become dangerous due to bacterial growth. Do not leave shellfish in the sun or melted ice water. Once home, refrigerate at 41°F or below in a dry container and cook within a few days for maximum freshness. Shellfish can be steamed or grilled. Discard clams that don't open after cooking.

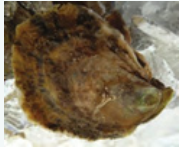
ITCHY BITES AFTER CLAMMING

Small parasites that live in the mud can be to blame; their bites can result in a poison ivy-type rash. To avoid these pests, rub arms and legs vigorously with a towel when you finish clamming. If a rash results, treat as poison ivy and symptoms should subside after a week or two.

Meet Your Shellfish

“The Ocean State’s most celebrated shellfish is the quahog – officially named the ‘state shellfish’ in 1987 – but at least eight other species are harvested commercially or recreationally from the state’s salt waters.” — Sarah Schumann, from Rhode Island’s Shellfish Heritage: An Ecological History

EASTERN OYSTER



Most at home on hard, rocky bottom and shorelines, the oyster was once the preeminent shellfish of Rhode Island. Oysters are considered foundation species, creating reefs and habitat for other animals and are coveted by growers and harvesters alike. The oyster is, by far, the most cultivated species by the state’s aquaculture industry, and generates millions of dollars annually. There is comparatively little effort to harvest wild oysters recreationally or commercially, due to low natural abundance and to wild harvest only being permitted in the colder months. The shell is often white in color, has ridges, and is strong and difficult to open without proper tools.

NORTHERN QUAHOG — HARD-SHELL CLAM



Rhode Island’s most well-known shellfish is the quahog, which is also the state shell. Quahogs are a popular species harvested by commercial and recreational diggers alike, and are also cultivated by shellfish farmers. Commercial fishery landings total millions of dollars annually and support hundreds of fishermen throughout the state. There are four market categories for quahogs, all the same species claiming different prices retail. In addition, there are two varieties of quahog which differ only in color. The “Alba” variety is the most common, having a more uniform white shell, while the “Notata” variety has a reddish-brown pattern on the shell (“Charlie Brown” clams) and is found in only 1–2% of the wild population. Quahogs are harvested recreationally by rake, foot or common garden tools. Legal harvest size is one-inch (hinge width); if the clam slips through a clam gauge (available at local bait stores), it’s too small to harvest. Quahogs prefer muddy bottom areas in the subtidal and intertidal areas of Rhode Island and can be found anywhere from the near surface to several inches deep.

SOFT-SHELL CLAM — STEAMER



Commonly referred to as “steamers,” these white clams have a thinner, softer shell than quahogs. Like bay scallops, they inhabit tidal flats. Harvested both commercially and recreationally along the shore, soft-shell clams can often be spotted due to the holes left in the sand from their protruding siphons; they will often squirt water through their holes when the sand next to them is disturbed. They are common in clambakes, but must be harvested carefully due to their delicate shells. While quahog rakes and garden tools will do, some proficient steamer harvesters use specialized soft-shell clam rakes and tools that can be purchased from local bait supply stores.

AMERICAN RAZOR CLAM — ATLANTIC JACK KNIFE



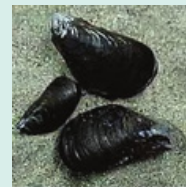
These two similar species of razor clams have streamlined shells with a strong, muscular “foot,” allowing them to burrow very quickly in shallow subtidal areas, and to swim. Recreational and commercial fishing for razor clams is limited, since Rhode Islanders generally don’t eat or harvest them, but they have a sweet flavor that rewards the effort to gather them.

PERIWINKLES



On some rocky shorelines, these small algae-grazing snails cover almost every square inch of rock. They are an invasive species that has been in Rhode Island waters so long (since the mid-1800s) that they now seem to be a natural part of the coastline. These slow-movers are left exposed at low tide and can easily be collected. There has been a small commercial fishery for periwinkles in the past. They can be recreationally harvested by picking them off the rocks and steaming, then removing the meat with a toothpick.

BLUE MUSSEL



This is an overlooked species in Narragansett Bay, from a commercial perspective. Blue mussels or “edible mussels” are, however, grown on several shellfish farms in the state. Shaped like a rounded triangle, they are black to brown in color on the outside with a shiny violet interior when opened. They grow most often in clumps and attach to rocks, pilings and other hard structures using their strong bisset threads, providing excellent habitat and feeding grounds for tautog and other finfish.

BAY SCALLOP



Found on sandy bottoms and eelgrass beds, the bay scallop is known as one of Rhode Island’s most decadent morsels. About three inches wide, with an exterior shell color that ranges widely from grey to yellow to red, bay scallops are able to swim, rapidly closing their valves to expel water and push them through the water. Equipped with 30–40 bright blue eyes along their shell margin, they are able to detect movement and shadows in the water. Bay scallops are a short-lived species (about two years) whose abundance is notoriously erratic from year to year, supporting short periods of intense harvesting in the past. While still popular today among commercial and recreational harvesters, the open season is short and many prefer other, more available species for recreational consumption.

CONCHS, SNAILS, CHanneled WHELK, KNOBBY WHELK



Conchs, which go by many other names, are the only snails commercially harvested from Rhode Island waters. The two species, channeled and knobby whelks, are carnivorous. They prey on sedentary shellfish like quahogs. With spiral shells, the knobbed whelk typically has strong, blunt knobs around the top whorls or spirals. The shell of the channeled whelk is generally smooth and more pear-shaped. A conch can tuck its muscular foot into its shell and close it to protect its soft flesh. Conchs offer a delicious meal if the flesh is tenderized, but are less targeted by recreational shellfish harvesters.

DECKERS, LAPAS, SLIPPER LIMPETS



These unusual snails, which spend their lives affixed to one another by the suction of their feet, can be found lying in great abundance in sandy areas, often over quahog beds. They are known by many names: “deckers” to commercial quahoggers; “lapas” to Portuguese Americans; and “slipper limpets” to the few people who have attempted to market them as a commercial product.

Where and How Can I Harvest Shellfish?

The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM) designates areas for harvest based on whether an area has good water quality AND if more restrictive possession or harvesting restrictions are necessary to protect the shellfish population. Areas with more restrictive possession or harvesting restrictions are called “Shellfish Management Areas” and those without are called “Non-Shellfish Management Areas.”

Water Quality

Water quality impacts to shellfishing areas are also evaluated by RI DEM. Based on water quality data and pollution sources, shellfish harvesting may be: 1) Allowed, 2) Prohibited after specific pollution events (anticipated or accidental) or 3) Prohibited at all times. An online, interactive map with water quality-related shellfish area closures is available at RI DEM’s Office of Water Resources website. In addition, call 401-222-2900 for RI DEM’s 24-hour announcement of closures related to specific pollution events.

Protection Needs

“Shellfish Management Areas” are designated by RIDEM for the purpose of managing, conserving or enhancing shellfish resources, and providing sustainable harvest opportunities. Rhode Island areas include: Greenwich Bay, Conanicut Point, Potowomut, High Banks, Bissell Cove/Fox Island, Mill Gut, Bristol Harbor, Kickemuit River, Jenny’s Creek, Sakonnet River, Pt. Judith Pond, Potter Pond, Ninigret (Charlestown) Pond, Quonochontaug Pond, and Winnapaug Pond. All other locations are considered “Non-Shellfish Management Areas.” For ALL areas, it is important to check with DEM before harvesting to ensure there are no water quality concerns. Some areas that were open at one point may be closed due to poor water quality or other restrictions. (See Learn More for info).

Popular locations for recreational clamming include: The Galilee Escape Road in Narragansett, Fogland Beach in Little Compton, and Potter’s Cove in Jamestown.

MAP

Snapshot of RIDEM’s interactive shellfish area closures. Online map: <http://arcg.is/1WQAJl2>



HARVESTING RULES

RHODE ISLAND RESIDENT

Nonlicense is required, except for Great Salt Pond on Block Island which requires a license from the Town of New Shoreham. Any resident may, without a license, harvest quahogs, soft-shelled clams, mussels, surf clams, oysters (in season), and bay scallops (in season). Harvested shellfish shall not be sold. See chart for possession limits in designated areas.

NON-RHODE ISLAND RESIDENT

A license is required. Visitors to Rhode Island (i.e. non-residents) must purchase a license to harvest shellfish (\$11 for 14-day or \$200 for full year). A license allows the harvest of quahogs, soft-shelled clams, mussels, surf clams and oysters (in season). Shellfishing in Great Salt Pond on Block Island requires a license from the Town of New Shoreham. Non-residents cannot harvest lobsters, blue crabs or bay scallops. See chart for possession limits in designated areas.

NON-RESIDENT LAND OWNER

Non-resident landowner (i.e. someone who owns residential real estate in Rhode Island assessed at a value of not less than \$30,000) may, with proof of land ownership, obtain an annual, non-commercial, non-resident shellfish license for \$25. This license holds the same restrictions and allowable daily catch limits as a licensed non-resident.

FOR EVERYONE

Shellfishing is permitted in designated areas, according to the license requirements, between sunrise and sunset. Anyone harvesting after sunset and/or before sunrise is subject to a fine of up to \$1,000 or by imprisonment up to three years. Bay scallop season is open to in-state residents only from the first Saturday in November to December 31 if dip netting from a boat. Oyster season is open to all with appropriate license from September 15–May 15. Regulations may change annually (See Learn More for info).

Clams by Jody — Recipe



“This was my father’s clam recipe, It’s simple and delicious. Use a variety of market size clams (i.e. top necks, little necks, cherrystones) to make it visually appealing as well as scrumptious!” — Jody King, commercial quahogger

INGREDIENTS

2 dozen local quahogs; can be cherrystones, top necks, little necks and even chowders
¼ cup olive oil
2 tablespoons crushed red pepper flakes
2–3 tablespoons minced garlic
3–4 tablespoons of fresh basil, chopped

METHOD OF PREPARATION

Place clams in a large pan, rinsed but with no excess water on clams or in the pan. Add uncooked olive oil, crushed red pepper, garlic and basil. Cover the pan and bring to a boil. Once boiling, remove cover and check clams. When about half are opened, turn off burner, cover again and shake the pan. Keep covered for about 10 minutes. Serve clams and sauce over your choice of cooked pasta.

Learn More

- RIDEM Web and Phone Information: <http://www.dem.ri.gov/programs/water/shellfish>
- Marine Fisheries Regulations: <http://www.dem.ri.gov/pubs/regs/regs/fishwild/rimf4.pdf>
- Shellfish map: <http://www.dem.ri.gov/maps/mapfile/shellfish.pdf>
- Closures for specific pollution events: call 401-222-2900
- Recreational shellfishing licenses: call 401-222-6647
- Post-clamming Itch: <http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/swimmersitch/faqs.html>
- Rhode Island Shellfish Management Plan: www.shellfishri.com

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