



# SEA ISLAND LIFE

SPRING/SUMMER 2022

## BUCKETS OF **BLUE** CRABS

EXPLORE THE  
COLORFUL WORLD  
OF CRABBING

### **SOUTHERN HOSPITALITY**

A Way of Life

### **PERFECTING THE PICNIC**

Enjoy an Alfresco Outing



# Features

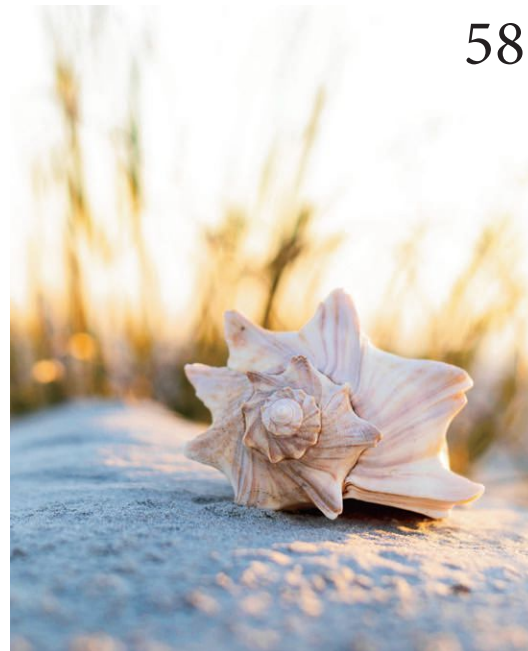
SPRING/SUMMER 2022



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BY DALE LEATHERMAN







# Coastal Treasures

DISCOVER KNOBBED WHELK SHELLS,  
A GEORGIA SHORELINE GEM.

| BY JOE RADA |



Knobbed whelk on the shores of Sea Island.

Beachcombers love finding treasures in the sand and often those treasures are seashells. For those searching for shells on Georgia's coast, the most sought after are unbroken knobbed whelk shells known for graceful curves, lustrous hues, glossy openings and spiraling rows of signature knobs forming dramatic, crown-like tops.

"Knobbed whelk shells are so beautiful," says Haley Watkins, lead naturalist at Sea Island, who coordinates a variety of family-friendly outings focused on coastal ecology. "They come in a range of colors — in shades of amber, orange and red — but around here the most common whelks have lovely ochre-colored stripes when they're younger that fade to a sort of ivory white as they age."

Designated as the state's official seashell since 1987, "knobbed whelks can grow to be eight inches long, making them among the biggest shells found on Georgia beaches," Watkins says. "Finding them is something families love doing together."

Before pocketing one as a keepsake, keep in mind that inside every whelk shell, at least at first, dwells a soft, squishy sea slug that might not be finished with it. Whelks are a species of marine gastropod that look like a dark blob with a tentacled head at one end, a grippy foot at the other and a lifelong habit of secreting a substance that slowly forms its hard-shelled and oh-so-attractive home.

#### WHERE TO LOOK

"Knobbed whelks can be found just about anywhere along the five miles of beach on Sea Island, either on top of the sand or partially buried," Watkins says. "One of the best places to look is near the south end of the island. More shells of all kinds wash onto that stretch."

Whelks can also be found in shallow tidal creeks, salt marshes and estuaries on the sheltered side of coastal islands, easily spotted while wading or when floating by in a kayak or canoe. Good locations to search include the Black Banks River between Sea Island and St. Simons Island and Rainbow Island.

Seasons make a difference. More knobbed whelks wash ashore or stroll shallow waters during spring and fall. In summer and winter, they migrate to deeper offshore waters, crawling slowly there and back along the ocean floor.

With tides rising and falling as much as nine feet in Georgia, low tide reveals very gradually sloped beaches and vast room to roam. Successful shellers know that low tide is their sweet spot, simply because more exposed beach means more tidepools to search for the various marine plants and animals thriving there.





### NATURE'S MARVELS

For guides like Watkins, “Our main goal is to continually be educating. We talk about how knobbed whelk sea snails, who live inside the beautiful shells they carry around, build them very slowly over a lifetime. We discuss what knobbed whelks eat, what eats them and how interconnected everything is. We try to provide an outstanding outdoor experience and have fun, but we also want to instill a deeper appreciation for life in this amazing coastal region.”

### FASCINATING CREATURES

Watkins can spout facts about knobbed whelks for quite a while. As mollusks, they are related to octopi, which have no shells, and squids, which have internal shells. Whelks have existed for 30 million years. Larger whelks are females. People mistake knobbed whelks for conchs, which look similar but grow significantly larger.

“Knobbed whelks start out super tiny, just two millimeters across when they hatch,” she says enthusiastically, “yet they already have the same delicate, spiraling shape as when they mature, only much smaller and without as many knobs formed yet.”

### BEYOND JUST PRETTY

Besides being sought after on beaches, knobbed whelks are also commercially harvested in shallow waters offshore, although not in great quantities. Last year, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources issued only three permits for a brief winter harvest. Harvest data is kept confidential, so details about how many whelks are caught and how they are used isn't released.

It's possible such whelks land on faraway dinner plates. Like

other briny sea snails, whelks are low in fat, rich in healthy Omega-3 oil and considered a culinary delicacy in parts of Asia and Europe. Cooks there often prepare whelk similarly to jellyfish or tofu, since like those, whelk takes on the flavor of any sauce it is cooked in.

Georgia beach walkers may have seen commercial whelk trawlers offshore without realizing. The gear involved looks a lot like gear commonly used to trawl for shrimp or blue crab. Same V-shaped arms extended, same mesh nets dragged, same devices required that allow sea turtles and flounders to escape the nets.

“Years ago, whelks were harvested more than they are now,” says Eddie Leonard, a marine biologist with GDNr's Coastal Resources Division, who spends many of his workdays aboard trawlers and research vessels, monitoring harvests and studying marine species. “One main reason for the decline of the local whelk fishery was the disappearance of ‘picking houses,’ labor-intensive operations that extracted whelk and crab meat to supply seafood markets.”

Among knobbed whelk characteristics, Leonard has a few favorites. “The geometry of the shell construction is so fascinating,” he says. “Cut a cross-section to expose the inner chambers, and the elegance of the spiraling design is amazing.” Since growing whelks always spiral in the same clockwise direction, “they're all basically right-handed,” he jokes, although technically they have no hands.

Leonard says you can identify a living whelk by peering into the shell opening. “If a whelk is there, you'll see part of it clinging to the shell, but if a hermit crab has moved in, it can crawl deep inside and out of sight, so you might not realize anything is in there,” he says.



## A FEW MORE INTERESTING FACTS

Tybee Island Marine Science Center, a home to marine life education and conservation efforts located at the northern tip of Georgia's coast, shares a few more details about these interesting creatures.

According to the Center, whelks are "protandric hermaphrodites" that all begin life as males and then become females as they age. Whelks mate in the fall, and then the females lay long yellow strings of parchment-like egg cases, anchoring one end in deep-water sand, with each string consisting of up to 40 disc-shaped pouches and each pouch holding up to 100 fertilized eggs. The hatchlings crawl out of the pouches the following year in late spring.

## GUIDED TOURS

Take a tour with the Sea Island Nature Center and explore outdoors on foot, bicycle, golf cart or boat.

### COASTAL WILDLIFE BIKE TOUR

Naturalist-led 6-mile ride with informative stops at salt marshes, maritime forests and beaches to learn about native animals and plants.

### BIRDING TOUR ON GOLF CART

Birds are the main focus, yet details arise about what birds eat, including shell-dwellers. For example, red knot sandpipers visit Georgia's coast during spring and fall migrations.

### MARSH HABITAT AND WILDLIFE WALK

Stroll a boardwalk, fishing dock and sandy paths to observe wildlife including oysters, fish, turtles, raptors and knobbed whelks in their natural habitats. Ecotours can also be customized to explore nature from kayaks, catamarans, fishing boats and other vessels. The Sea Island Nature Center allows hands-on contact with live turtles, horseshoe crabs, alligators and other coastal denizens. Contact the Nature Center by calling (855) 209-5648.

