

What is it that draws young and old, tourists and locals alike
to spend hours searching for the perfect seashell?
Is it the thrill of the hunt, the quest for unique treasure, or simply an excuse
to wander beaches aimlessly for hours?
No matter the reason, South Carolina provides numerous beaches
perfect for avid shell seekers.



Shell Seekers

By Julie Thompson Adolf



One of the most pleasurable pastimes when visiting South Carolina's coast is beachcombing. While it may seem a simple activity that is easily enjoyed by the entire family, there are a few hints that will make your shell seeking more pleasurable.

best beaches

Most importantly, however, when beginning your shell search is location and timing. While you're certain to find shells along all of the South Carolina beaches, the quality and quantity of shells vary from beach to beach.

Hunting Island State Park, located near historic Beaufort, provides an excellent opportunity for shelling. The park is one of the few South Carolina barrier islands that is still much the same as before the Europeans arrived in America. The island was used as a hunting reserve, and it was only accessible by boat until the 1940s. Today, you'll find 5,000 acres that include four miles of beaches where you can discover seashells, sand dollars and sea horses. The most common shells found at Hunting Island State Park include clam-shells, Atlantic cockles, and angelwings.

While not as rustic as Hunting Island, **Isle of Palms**, located approximately 11 miles from historic downtown Charleston, will delight beachcombers with the abundance of sea stars and sand dollars found on the shore. In 1898, visitors to Isle of Palms arrived by water or a single railroad bridge. Today, Isle of Palms includes the gated community of Wild Dunes Resort, a popular tourist area, as well as numerous residential and vacation homes. You may wish to search for shells away from the crowds, but remember to look up occasionally—you may see dolphins at play off the shore.

Only a few minutes from Isle of Palms is **Sullivans Island**. Charlestonians began building summer cottages on Sullivans Island in the early 19th century. One of its most famous residents was Edgar Allen Poe, who researched "The Gold Bug," a tale of buried pirate treasure, on the island. Visitors to Sullivans Island will find less crowds than on Isle of Palms and even more sand dollars and sea stars, as well as angel wings, whelks, scallop shells, and ark shells.

Located approximately one hour south of Charleston, **Edisto Island** provides a historical flavor for shell hunters. Believed to have been inhabited

4,000 years ago by Edistow Indians, Edisto Island is one of the oldest settlements in South Carolina. Visitors can find clues to the early inhabitants today, with a shell mound on the beach believed to have been used as a burial ground or ceremonial site. Edisto is considered to be one of the best shelling beaches in South Carolina, with beachcombers likely to find prehistoric fossils such as sharks' teeth. One of the best areas to locate fossils is at the north end of the beach in **Edisto Beach State Park**, a 1,255-acre park where camping is available.

For a more remote shell seeking experience, **Bulls Island** offers day-trips that allow visitors to collect shells on the deserted beach. Part of the 60,000-acre Cape Romain National Wildlife Refuge, a ferry takes visitors to the island in the morning,



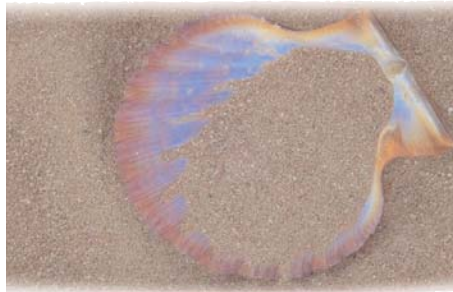


the tools

Before you head off on your expedition, arm yourself with a bucket or bag to collect your treasures. Too many shell hunters forget this necessary step, resulting in the need to juggle dozens of shells in one hand while trying to collect more shells with the other. A child's plastic sand bucket makes shell collecting much easier. Another useful tool that will keep the children entertained for hours is a plastic sand sieve. The kids can search for small shells and sharks' teeth by pouring sand in the sieve and rinsing with ocean water, keeping them entertained while Mom and Dad nap in the sun.

returning them to Moore's Landing in the afternoon. Here, beachcombers may find mermaid necklaces—long spirals made up of cases containing tiny, perfectly formed baby whelks. Additionally, periwinkle, scallop, conch, cockle and coquina shells abound, as do kitten's paws.

"Arrogantly shabby" **Pawleys Island**, located just south of Myrtle Beach, offers shell seekers a laid back atmosphere. Famous for its hammocks, the four-mile-long island was once a refuge for families of Colonial rice planters who sought escape from malaria. Today, Pawleys Island provides a relaxed atmosphere for visitors to the



Myrtle Beach Area and The Grand Strand. Beachcombers often find collections of sharks' teeth along the south end of Pawleys Island, along with a variety of other shells.

timing

Regardless of the beach, there are particular times that are better than others for finding truly unique shells. After a storm, collectors may find spectacular shells, as the shells are pulled from their ocean floor fossil beds and washed ashore. Additionally, during a new moon or a full moon, the rise and fall of the tides increases, producing more shells on the beach. However, throughout the year, shells are found on all South Carolina beaches. Don't forget to search through seaweed found on the beach—often shells are entangled in the seaweed, and small but perfect shell specimens can be found within the leaves.



the collection

Most of the shells found on the beach are fairly young. Occasionally, though, an older ecto-skelton from the late Pleistocene era may be found on the shore—approximately 10,000 years old. How can you determine the age of your treasure? Color is a key factor—a dark gray shade may indicate a rare or old specimen.

A true treasure you may find during your shell searching is the lettered olive shell. This shiny little shell resembles an olive and was first documented by Edmund Ravenel, a 19th-century naturalist who donated a collection of shells to the Charleston Museum that is still on exhibit today. If you find this shell, you'll have a special memento from your visit to South Carolina—the lettered olive is also the state's official shell.



environmental responsibility

No matter what treasures you find, please remember the most important rule during your beachcombing—leave live creatures on the beach. Too often, in their quest for the perfect sand dollar or sea star, visitors collect living specimens. To ensure that your shell collection is environmentally friendly, please look carefully at the specimens. If it moves, place it back in the ocean. You can tell the difference between live and dead sand dollars by their appearance. Live sand dollars will be dull white or gray, with spiny hairs on the underside. Dead sand dollars are bright white and have little or no hair. These souvenirs are perfectly fine to collect. By carefully analyzing the potential additions to your shell collection, you can help conserve the beach and its inhabitants for future generations.

Wherever your travels lead you, you're certain to find the perfect souvenir on South Carolina beaches.

how to preserve sea shells

You've found the perfect specimens from your beach visit. Now, how do you ensure that your souvenirs survive the trip home, as well as avoid adding that "funky beach smell" to your collection?

Shells found on the beach need to be thoroughly examined to ensure there is no creature living within. If the shell is empty, soak the shell for several days in a solution of half water and half bleach. Rinse well with fresh water and dry the shell in the sun. If algae is present, it can be removed by gently rubbing the shell in fresh water after bleaching. To add more luster to your shell, polish the shell with mineral oil.

Sand dollars can be preserved by placing them in fresh water. The water may turn brownish in color—change the water until the water remains clear. Replace half the water with bleach and leave the sand dollar immersed for 15 minutes to bleach the sand dollar white. Do not use too much bleach or leave in the solution for too long, as the bleach will cause the sand dollar to crumble. Rinse the sand dollar well with fresh water to remove the bleach, and allow it to dry in the sun.



If your collection includes sea horses or sea stars, you'll need to carefully preserve them, as their odor can become quite foul. Soak the sea horse or sea star in 70-percent rubbing alcohol for one or two nights. Allow to dry on a paper towel in the sun. With sea stars, you'll need to flatten the arms with a small weight while drying or they may curl.

With a little effort, you'll have a beautiful, long lasting collection to remind you of your visit to South Carolina!