



# DIGGING FOR BURIED TREASURE— Clamming in New York's waters



**By Stephanie Rekemeyer**

Photos provided by author

Imagine a young girl playing in the sand at the water's edge: she's using her hands to dig into the wet sand, hoping to locate some clams. Farther out, her father is using a hand-rake to carefully search the bay bottom. Suddenly, her older brother comes rushing back from down the beach, a clam held in each hand. The two of them grab her bucket and quickly run back to the location of his buried treasure, hoping to add to his find.

On the other end of the beach you see another group of people who are waist deep in the water, using only their feet to explore the bay floor. Suddenly, squeals of excitement erupt from the group as one person happily displays a large clam he found buried in the sandy bottom.

With luck, after a full day of playing and searching in the water, both groups will have enough clams to bring home and host

their very own clambake, chowderfest, or any other shellfish-inspired feast.

Scenes like this are common on Long Island beaches, as people head to ocean bays on hot summer days to take a dip in the cooling waters. While there, a number of these folks try their luck at digging up a delicious clam dinner. In fact, during the summer, it's not unusual to find people gathered on the shore searching for these edible buried treasures.

Clamming is a fun activity that can be enjoyed by anyone. The most important tool you need is a container in which to keep your catch. This can be a cooler with ice, a mesh bag, or even an old kitchen colander. A small hand shovel or rake can aid in your pursuit of these tasty bivalves, but if you don't have either, your hands and feet will work just fine.

The best time of day to start your quest for clams is at low tide, when the water recedes from the shore. As the tide moves out, more of the sandy bottom is exposed and accessible to dig in, making it easier to notice signs of life below the surface. So be sure to check your local tide table before you venture out!

When selecting your digging site, look for small holes in the sand at the water's edge and farther out: tell-tale signs that there's life below. Depending on the size and species of the clam creating them, these holes can vary from as small as the tip of a pencil to about the size of a penny. You may also notice slight depressions in the sand that seem out of the ordinary—another good indicator that there may be a clam hiding below.

You can use whatever hand tools you have to dig into the exposed sand or

# Before You Go

Before heading to the beach to try clamming, be sure to familiarize yourself with state and local laws and regulations pertaining to the area. These regulations exist to protect human health, and to ensure that these animals are managed properly for the use and enjoyment of future generations.

When choosing a location for clamming, check to see which areas are certified or open for shellfish harvesting. For information on certified areas, check out DEC's website at [www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/103483.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/103483.html).

For more information on species of clams found in New York waters (including species identification), visit DEC's website at [www.dec.ny.gov/animals/69730.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/69730.html).

For a complete list of recreational shellfish possession and size limits, check [www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/29870.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/29870.html). DEC does not require a permit for recreational clam harvesting; however, some towns do, so be sure to check with the respective town in which you are harvesting. If you can't get a permit from a town where one is required, try clamming an area managed exclusively by New York State. Visit DEC's website at [www.dec.ny.gov/docs/fish\\_marine\\_pdf/underwaterlands.pdf](http://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/fish_marine_pdf/underwaterlands.pdf) to review the State's Underwater Lands.

For more information about clamming, please visit [www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/345.html](http://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/345.html) or call DEC's Shellfish Information Line at 631-444-0492.



Atlantic surfclams are an important commercial fishery. These clams are commonly used for preparing clam strips, baked clams, and clam chowder.

probe the bottom of the bay. Once you've located and collected a clam, you'll need to identify the species and measure it. The most commonly sought species is the hard clam, which must be greater than an inch in thickness (measured perpendicular to the hinge holding the two shells together) to be kept legally.

If the clam is large enough to keep, you can place it in a flow-through mesh bag or wire basket and keep it by your side. Some people add floats to the wire basket so they can drag it along with them while they're searching in deeper water.

If you don't have a container to keep your clams floating in the natural seawater, then use a cooler with ice. It's essential that clams are properly stored. If not, bacteria can grow and/or the clams can contract diseases that can make people sick. To protect your family and friends from illness, keep clams cool, out of the melted ice or standing water, and shaded from the summer sun.

Clams are just one type of bivalve mollusk. Other species include mussels, oysters and bay scallops (New York's official state shellfish). Delightful additions to a delicious dinner, these bivalves are called filter-feeders because they obtain food by constantly pulling water into their shells—via an organ called a siphon—and filtering out necessary nourishment. This process allows bivalves to readily obtain nutrients from algae and other microscopic plants and animals suspended in the seawater, and also to retrieve oxygen that is dissolved in the water. Waste and water are then exported out of their shells through their siphons.



Hard clam shell found on Short Beach, Nassau County.



DEC biologists conducting a surfclam survey in the Atlantic Ocean. Surfclams are collected, counted, and measured to determine population size. This information is essential for establishing sustainable harvest limits.

*(Note: in polluted waters, bivalve mollusks unfortunately take in pollutants at the same rate at which they take in nutrients. For this reason, DEC continuously tests water quality to ensure that shellfish in all marine waters of the state are safe for human consumption. For your health, and also to avoid a costly ticket and violation fee, it is important to know what areas are certified for harvesting—see “Before You Go.”)*

The presence of shellfish can dramatically affect the surrounding environment. As filter-feeders, bivalves remove microscopic particulates from the water column, greatly enhancing water clarity and quality. This allows more sunlight to reach the bottom, which in turn, affects surrounding organisms. For example, seagrass grows on the seafloor and requires a substantial amount of sunlight to survive. If bivalves are removed, the water clarity can decrease, making it difficult for seagrass to obtain light and grow. This change can have a domino effect on the rest of the ecosystem that relies on these aquatic plants for food and habitat. Keeping shellfish populations healthy is essential to maintaining biodiversity and a healthy coastal ecosystem.

Shellfish harvesting has been a longtime tradition on Long Island and in many other coastal communities. Historically, Long Island’s shellfish industry was one of the most prosperous in the nation. Years of overharvest and naturally occurring storms and disasters, however, have adversely affected present-day populations. To ensure that today’s population remains sustainable, DEC sets a daily limit on the number of shellfish you can keep. Different species of shellfish have varying daily possession limits. For the state’s most common species, hard clam, the daily limit is 100 clams a day, per person.

Spending a hot summer day digging for clams can be a fun and rewarding family activity. So if you find yourself on Long Island’s shores, try clamming. You’ll get to experience the excitement of searching for buried treasure, and enjoy the taste of these dynamic creatures for yourself.

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