



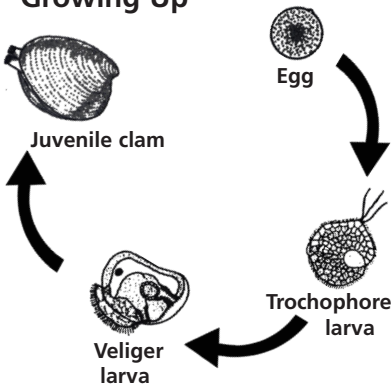
## Clams and Mussels at Assateague - Maryland



### Living Filters

Though they may not look like much more than a hard shell, clams and mussels are among the most important animals found in the coastal bays. These animals feed by filtering plankton (free-drifting plants and animals) living in the water as well as sediment and detritus (decomposing organic matter). By simply eating, they improve water quality and clarity for other organisms who share their home. In fact, large clams can filter up to a gallon of water each hour.

### Growing Up



Northern quahog clams and Atlantic ribbed mussels begin their lives similarly, as eggs floating and drifting in the bay. Both of these creatures belong to the bivalve class of animals, meaning that they have two shells covering their soft bodies.

Within the first six to twelve days after hatching, these planktonic larva begin to develop their shell and settle into the mud or marsh edge.

As their organs continue to grow, clams use their muscular foot to bury themselves deeper into mud while mussels use their anchor-like byssal threads to attach to the marsh edge.

Clams and mussels continue to grow their shell larger and thicker as they age. They use their mantle, a thin tissue on the edge of their shell, to deposit calcium carbonate from the water in layers on their shell.

Clam life cycle drawings curtesy of Barnegat Bay Shellfish ([barnegatbayshellfish.org](http://barnegatbayshellfish.org))

### Mussels

Atlantic ribbed mussels are found in the grassy banks along the creeks of the salt marsh. Their shells are only partially buried in the mud, making them easier to find than quahog clams. Mussels attach themselves onto the marsh using their anchor-like byssal threads, making them important builders to the marsh structure.

*When is the best time to collect mussels?*  
Mussels should be collected at high tide when mussels are submerged underwater. Mussels exposed at low tide are not actively filtering and build up waste products, which can cause illness in people.

*What equipment will I need?*  
- a floating basket  
- a dry container

*How do I collect mussels?*  
Mussels are best removed one at a time by hand. Pull and twist the mussel where it is attached to the marsh bank until the mussel is detached.

### Regulations in Maryland

Collecting mussels on Assateague in Maryland does not require a license. Collecting mussels can be done all year long.

**Minimum size limit:** none

**Limit:** none

There is no minimum size or take limit for ribbed mussels but we recommend following the “rule of thumb,” specifying that mussels be the length of your thumb. Only take what you will eat.



Mussels should be at least as long as a thumb

Clams

Northern quahog clams have played an important role at Assateague for centuries. Native Americans once used the purple portion of the clam shell to make wampum (jewelry) for ornamental and ceremonial use. After European settlement of America, wampum was used as a trade currency; hence their scientific name *Mercenaria mercenaria*. You may know these clams as littlenecks, cherrystones, and chowder clams. From smallest to largest, these names are given to quahog clams depending on their size.

*When is the best time to collect clams?*  
Clams can be found at any tide but are easier to find at low tide.

- What will I need?*
- a clam rake
  - a floating basket
  - a ruler to measure clams
  - a dry container

*How do I collect clams?*  
Quahog clams live a few inches under the bottom of the bay. To collect clams, drag a clam rake through the mud and listen for the sound of the rake scrapping over a clam shell. Make sure to stay out of submerged grass beds while raking. You may also collect clams by feeling for their shells under your feet, but it is recommended to wear wading shoes to avoid stepping on any sharp shell pieces or glass.

Regulations in Maryland

Regulations change frequently. Please check the Assateague Island Visitor Center or with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (887-620-8DNR, <http://dnr.maryland.gov/fisheries/>) for the latest regulations.

Recreational clamming on Assateague in Maryland does not require a license. Clamming can be done all year long. Rakes are permitted but mechanical harvesting is not allowed.

**Minimum size limit:** at least 1” wide at the hinge.

**Limit:** 250 per person per day.



Clam rake and floating basket



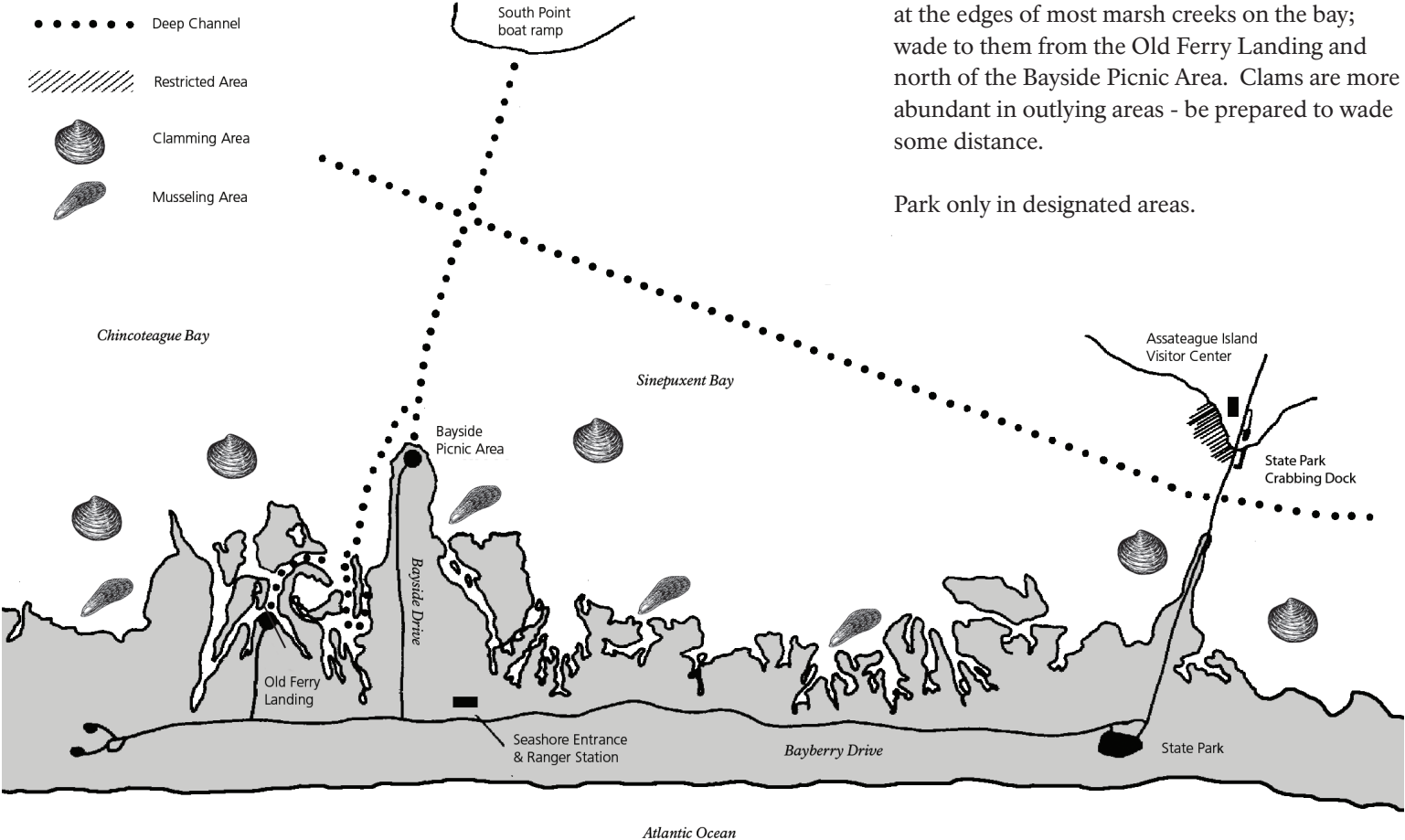
Food Safety

While collecting, keep clams and mussels in a floating basket so that they can continue to filter wastes. Never attach a bag of shellfish to your body while collecting.

During transport, store clams and mussels in a cool and dry container. Shellfish will not survive in a bucket of water.

In addition to eating plankton, clams and mussels also filter toxins, bacteria, and other pollutants from the water. Never cook dead clams or mussels. Bacteria accumulate quickly in dead shellfish. After cooking, do not eat shellfish whose shells have not opened.

Where to Collect Shellfish



Shellfishing Areas: Note deep channels and small restricted area by the bridge. Mussels are located at the edges of most marsh creeks on the bay; wade to them from the Old Ferry Landing and north of the Bayside Picnic Area. Clams are more abundant in outlying areas - be prepared to wade some distance.

Park only in designated areas.