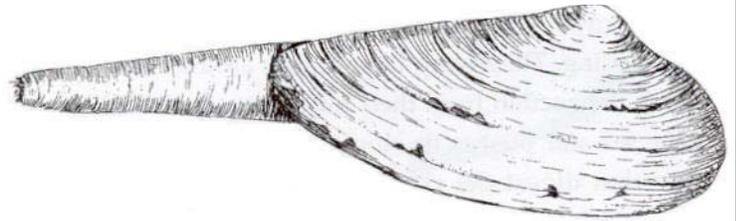


This Month

Soft-shelled Clam

Colloquial Nickname: Steamer, longneck

Scientific name: *Mya arenaria*



Field Markings: Shell is chalky white to dark gray.

Size: Up to 4 inches long. Siphons can extend several inches out of the shell

Habitat: Burrowed in sandy or muddy bottoms of bays and estuaries

Seasonal Appearance: Year-round

DISTINGUISHING FEATURES AND BEHAVIORS

Soft-shelled clams are thin, oval-shaped bivalves that can grow up to three inches long. They have two long siphons covered in a thick, black skin. Within the shell is a soft body composed of two gills, a heart, a stomach, a kidney, and a large muscular foot. The gills are used for respiration and for feeding.

The soft-shelled clam is a filter feeder. Water is brought into the clam through an intake siphon, which extends from its shell to the surface of the mud. As the water passes over the gills, oxygen is removed for respiration and small hairlike structures known as cilia trap plankton for food. The particles of food are transported to the mouth, and the water is expelled through the exit syphon. When the tide is high, the siphons are extended out of the burrow; they are retracted during low tide. The siphons are encased in a fleshy tube and cannot be fully retracted into the shell. Because soft-shelled clams burrow, the siphons may be the only part of the clam a beachcomber will see.

Soft-shelled clams spawn in early summer. The eggs develop into free-swimming larvae, or plankton, and eventually settle onto a hard substrate, attaching themselves with a sticky thread secreted from a large, mobile foot. This "byssal" thread keeps them from being swept away by waves. Once mature, the foot



reduces in size, and the clams release from the substrate to burrow into the sediment where they will remain for life.

The primary predator of the clam is the moon snail. Moon snails secrete an acidic material that softens the shell, allowing them to easily drill through and eat the clam. Large groups of moon snails can destroy soft-shell clam beds. Soft-shelled clams are also preyed upon by digging fish, such as sea robins, which disrupt the burrows. Once dislodged, a soft-shelled clam cannot burrow quickly and is easy prey.

Soft-shelled clams can tolerate low salinities and rapid salinity changes. This allows them to thrive in upper, as well as lower estuaries.

RELATIONSHIP TO PEOPLE

Soft-shelled clams are commercially fished for use in clam chowder, are widely enjoyed steamed in water, and are known regionally as "steamers." Unfortunately, bacterial pollution has caused the permanent or conditional closure of many Narragansett Bay shellfish beds.

HOW TO GET YOUR OWN COPY

RISAA members can purchase their own copy of *The Uncommon Guide To Common Life on Narragansett Bay* for \$15 from the RISAA Merchandise Committee. Stop by the committee table at any monthly RISAA meeting.



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