

SAVE THE BAY.

NARRAGANSETT BAY

This month....

Uncommon Guide to Common Life on Narragansett Bay

A continuing series that describes the common fish, invertebrates, plants, water birds and marine mammals that share our Bay.



BLUE MUSSEL

Colloquial Nickname:

Edible mussel

Scientific Name:

Mytilus edulis



Habitat: Intertidal shallow water along the shoreline and throughout the Bay; attached to rocks, pilings and shells

Field Markings: Blue-black to brown outside with shiny violet interior.

Size: up to 4 inches long, 2 inches wide

Seasonal appearance: Year-round

DISTINGUISHING FEATURES AND BEHAVIORS

Shaped like a rounded triangle, the blue mussel is a hinged, filter-feeding bivalve. The blue mussel has a slender, brownish foot that allows it to be temporarily hold onto a substrate, plus a strong, threadlike anchor, called a byssal thread, attaching it more securely to almost any substrate. The byssal threads are secreted as a liquid upon contact with water. Byssal threads are tough but not necessarily permanent structures. To find protection or food, the blue mussel moves by releasing the byssal threads and using its foot.

Instead of the large protruding siphon common to hard-shelled clams, the mussel has two short siphons, on the inside of the shell, which direct the flow of water in and out. Mussels feed by filtering out detritus and plankton in the water. Cilia inside the mussel create a current that pulls in water and plankton.

Blue mussels live in dense colonies called mussel clumps. When the tide comes in, the mussel partially opens its shell and takes in water. Mussels resist dehydration during low tide by keeping their shells tightly closed. Their major predators are sea stars, whelks, fish, birds and humans.

The blue mussel - similar to another species, the ribbed mussel - is tough and withstands great temperature extremes, including freezing, excessive heat and drought. If a mussel is

left exposed to air when the tide goes out, it survives by passing air over its moist gills to breathe. Blue mussels prefer areas of high salinity, while ribbed mussels are more prevalent in marshes where the salinity has been diluted by fresh water. Like clams, mussels have growth rings, which show their age. Full maturation takes from one to five years.

RELATIONSHIP TO PEOPLE

Unlike the ribbed mussel, blue mussels are edible and are regularly harvested in Narragansett Bay. Many mussel beds are transitory in the upper Bay. The most permanent and most harvested mussel beds are in the East Passage and middle Bay. Deeper subtidal populations are of special interest both for commercial harvest and for their interference with quahog growth and harvest. Overfishing and siltation caused by shoreline development have reduced the number of healthy mussel beds in the Bay.

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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