

# Shelling the Pearl Islands of Panama

Vicky Wall

Since 1988 I have been fortunate to go on several shelling trips, but only during the summer due to my job as a high school biology teacher. After retiring last year I could finally go on a minus-tide shelling trip during the winter, specifically to the Pearl Islands of Panama. From 18-24 January 2015, 8 North Carolina Shell Club members headed to Pacific Panama: NC residents Everett Long, Ed Shuller, Jeannette Tysor, Susan O'Connor, Bill Bennight, and myself, and our two club members from Florida, Charlotte Thorpe and Alan Gettleman. Everett, Charlotte, and Alan started working on this trip back in September, checking out maps and arrangements for boat trips to various islands in the area. Everyone but myself had been to Panama before so the hunt was on for new places to explore. Everett arranged for the use of a boat for the week, the *Relampago*, maintained by a very friendly Captain and his first mate.

Our flight to Panama was uneventful, however, not so for our arrival at the hotel on Isla Contadora. First we took a harrowing van-taxi ride through Panama City traffic to get to the marina. There didn't appear to be any designated traffic lanes. It was a massive game of chicken or as my son would say, "mom, you have to own the intersection." The problem is that everyone in Panama City tries to own the intersection! At the marina, we met our boat for our 2.5 hour trip to Isla Contadora. The owner of the boat was from Panama, but had attended Lenoir Rhyne University in Hickory, NC...what a small world! Our boat was good sized but it sure didn't look like it could hold 8 people plus 16 pieces of luggage and 8 backpacks. Our captain and mate made it all fit and it was a comfortable ride. Upon arrival at our island, the first thing we noticed was the absence of a dock. To get to the beach, we were transferred, along with our luggage, to smaller water taxis that got as close to shore as possible, but we still had to wade in the water to get to shore. Depending on one's height, this could be knee-deep or waist-deep. Susan is the shortest one in our group and she was a good sport about it all. I wish I had gotten a picture of our departure from the small boats but the cameras were inside my backpack and I was trying hard to keep that over my head and out of the water, along with my shoes. Once on the beach, we had a steep walk up concrete and wooden



*Macrocypraea cervinetta* and *Conus purpurascens* were just two of many species I hoped to find on my first Panama trip. Photo by the author.

stairs to get to our rooms. Our porters were amazing, carrying our heavy bags from the water up those stairs for us. Once we got situated in our rooms, it was close to dinner time. We had a few minutes so Charlotte and I went down to the beach to see what we might find. In just minutes exploring the rocks we found *Littorina modesta*, *Nerita funiculata*, and *Siphonaria gigas*. As this was my first trip to Panama, every shell was new for me so finding several species right away was exciting.

The next day we headed out early for Isla Mogo Mogo (of TV's Survivor Fame). This was an amazing place, with sand flats, tons of rocks to turn, and good snorkeling. I didn't know where to start! Aside from Guaymas, Mexico, my other shelling trips didn't include very much rock turning, but here in Panama, literally every single rock had something hiding underneath. Some of the many species found included *Conus gladiator*, *Conus princeps*, *Conus purpurascens*, *Bursa corrugata*, *Cerithium adustum*, *Chiton stokesii*, *Macrocypraea cervinetta*, *Tegula picta*, *Turbo saxosus*, and *Opeatostoma pseudodon* (with unusually long aperture spines). One of my favorite finds was on a second take. I had put a rock back but then thought I'd take another look at what appeared to be just a scaly part of the rock. It turned out to be *Crucibulum umbrella* with a beautiful lavender interior. The cowries were the toughest for me to see. Everett asked me if I had found any yet and when I said no, he said he'd help me out. Everett is the "Rock Whisperer".

He surveyed a couple of rocks and then told me to turn “that one”. Well, “that one” had a cowrie underneath. The other one didn’t. As the tide came in we started to find murex coming out of the sand in between the rocks. Finding my first *Hexaplex radix* was a thrill as that was one of the shells on my “Panama Wish List”. Charlotte had told me that I would find lots of them. I believed her but was still amazed at the number. All of us were able to find enough to choose the best specimens to keep and then return the rest. The children and adults we met along the way use the various murex species as a food source, so they were very adept at finding them quickly. Other species we found were *Hexaplex princeps* and *Hexaplex regius*. While snorkeling, Ed and Jeanette found three amazing *Homalocantha oxyacantha* and two *Neorapana muricata* with beautiful deep orange apertures. Ed and Bill found several *Jenneria pustulata* living at the base of corals. Charlotte was the first to find large *Vasum caestus* in about 5 feet of water. They blended in well with the sand but after seeing hers, it became easier to spot them on the bottom.

The Pearl Islands received their name from the pearl industry dating back to the 1400s. One of the most famous pearls in the world was found by a slave in 1513, the 55 carat, tear-drop shaped La Peregrina (Spanish for pilgrim). Owned by several royal families over the centuries, this pearl was purchased by Richard Burton for Elizabeth Taylor in 1969 for \$37,000. In 2011 it sold for 10.5 million dollars! I was fortunate to be able to see this pearl at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. when Ms. Taylor offered it on loan for their Pearl Exhibit. It was absolutely breathtaking. Needless to say, after finding several pearl oysters, *Pinctada mazatlanica*, I checked each one carefully for a pearl. I really wanted to be able to tell my husband that I was able to pay for my trip plus some with my pearl! None of us had such luck, but we did have those beautiful shells to take home.

On Wednesday, we headed to another island, Isla Casayeta. Here is where we experienced what a true minus tide is and how fast the water can recede! Our captain and his mate anchored our trusty *Relampago*, and I’m not positive, but I think the water depth was 4 or 5 feet. We were ferried to shore in small boats that met us at our boat. Alan and Charlotte headed into the village to see if there were any fishermen who had shells they would want to sell. The plan was to stay just a little while and then head to another island to catch low tide. While we waited for Alan and Charlotte to return, we checked out the rocks and shoreline for shells. It couldn’t have been more than 20 or 30 minutes when I turned around to look at our boat. At that moment, it leaned over and I saw Everett slide off the back of the boat into the water, landing on his feet. Right behind Everett our poor captain and his mate jumped into the water. Our 5 foot anchoring depth was now less than a foot and the *Relampago* was stuck in the mud (relampago is Spanish for lightning,



Exposed rocks at low tide in Panama, a shellers dream. L-R: the author, Jeanette, Charlotte, and Ed. Photo by Alan Gettleman.



*Opeatostoma pseudodon* is by no means rare, but I was still thrilled to collect this beautiful shell. With the periostracum intact it is brown with black spiral lines. Photo by author.



Our shell cleaning station with electricity, sink, running water, and loads of counter space. L-R: Everett, Bill, Charlotte, Jeannette & Ed. Photo by author.



An ignoble afternoon for our boat, the *Relampago*. No harm was done (except maybe the captain's pride) and the collecting was great. Photo by author.



*Lobatus peruvianus* with the vivid coloring only found in freshly caught individuals. Photo by author.



Although it might look like a miracle, that is actually Susan collecting during an extremely low tide. Photo by Alan Gettleman.



The beach at our hotel on Isla Contadora. Photo by Jeannette Tysor.



*Lobatus galeatus* collected by Ed and Jeanette. Photo by Jeanette Tysor.



Ed and Jeanette found these *Hexaplex radix*, *Vasum caestus*, *Neorapana muricata*, and *Homalocantha oxycantha*. Photo by Jeanette Tysor.

which at this point was very sad!). If I had known this was going to happen and had shot a video, I know it would have been a hit on YouTube. I felt badly for our captain and mate, as they were really embarrassed that they hadn't kept an eye on the tide. Alan was able to speak with them in Spanish, reassuring them that everything was fine and that we were not angry with them. Thank goodness there was no damage to the boat. Everett, with his agile slide off the boat, was the subject of some good ribbing the rest of the week. Our poor *Relampago* looked like the SS *Minnow*, but not a problem. We just continued to shell as we waited for the tide to come back in and right our boat. Everett and Susan had a good time checking out the shell piles and bartering for shells with a very enterprising 10 year old. It was fun to watch as he and Everett sparred back and forth over the price of some spiny oysters. We enjoyed sitting with the local folks, even if communicating was a challenge. One older man was disappointed that we didn't have any cigarettes. Everett had some candy that he brought for the children so he shared some with that man, which he enjoyed very much.

Back at our hotel our daily routine consisted of shelling until the late afternoon, then time to clean shells, eat dinner (the local restaurants were great and within walking distance), and get some rest for the next day. Leave it to Everett to find a primo place for cleaning shells...an unused outdoor bar area with electricity, sink, running water, and loads of counter space on which to work. He checked with the hotel desk and the young American tour director there said it would be fine for us to use that space. In fact, she was very interested in what we were doing and what shells we were finding. This particular hotel was getting back on its feet after being vacant for several years. I imagine our cleaning station will once again be used as an outdoor bar and seating area someday, but for our week, what a find!

Our last day of shelling was the most exciting. And as "Murphy's Law of Shelling" would have it, one of the most productive. It was a long afternoon and night cleaning and packing shells for the trip home the next day. We arrived at Isle Bayoneta for another great low tide. Two species on my wish list were still elusive, the beautiful tented olive *Oliva porphyria* and the large conch *Lobatus galeatus*. Earlier in the week I found a fresh dead juvenile *Lobatus galeatus* but none of us found any of the olives or mature conchs. Time was running short so we fanned out among the rocks and got to work. Here is where I finally found one of my favorites, the thorn latus, *Opeatostoma pseudodon*. They were grouped underneath rock ledges and in crevices. If we had to leave at that moment, I would have left with a smile, as it had been such a wonderful week, but we weren't finished yet. As the tide was slowly coming back in, things really got hopping. As I was picking my way among the rocks I found a mature *Lobatus galeatus* and then in two more steps, I found another. I couldn't believe it! As my students would say, OMG! I never would have thought such a large shell could fit and maneuver among the rocks. Then Jeannette said she found one and then a second one a few



**Our group getting ready to board the *Relampago*: (back) Vicky Wall, Bill Bennight, Alan Gettleman, Ed Shuller, (front) Charlotte Thorpe, Susan O'Connor, (boat owner), Jeannette Tysor, Everett Long. Photo by boat captain.**

minutes later. The best moment was with Alan. He was wading in knee-deep water several yards ahead of us when he waved his hand above his head holding a *Lobatus galeatus*, the prettiest one of all. Not to be outdone, as Everett was walking along the water's edge, probably thinking we had lost our minds, he casually reached down and then asked, "what do you think about this?" He had found a beautiful *Lobatus peruvianus*! They were popping out of the sand too. I found two juveniles, that I left, and then two mature specimens. I believe Ed and Jeannette found several, as did Everett and Charlotte. What a great way to end the trip. For the week, we found 110 different species of mollusks.

Saturday was "going home" day. Once again our porters were amazing, carrying 50 pound bags on their shoulders for the trip down the steps to the beach, and out to the waiting water taxis. This time we were old pros and were ready for the short wade out to the boats - shoes off, pant legs rolled up! What we weren't ready for was moving from the water taxis to the *Relampago* in pretty rough water. Thank goodness the water was much calmer in the next cove for the transfer. The 2.5 hour trip back to the mainland had calmer seas than the previous week. I struggle with motion sickness, but not this time. It was such a relief to be able to talk with everyone and take photographs and not feel sick. As we neared Panama City, we saw lines of huge transport ships waiting their turn for passage into the Panama Canal. Also waiting was a military frigate. The soldiers waved to us as our captain drove our boat around theirs. I hated to see our time in Panama end. It was great to spend time with old friends and make new ones. I hope there will be many more opportunities in the future to go shelling with such great people.

Vicky Wall  
vwall3@embarqmail.com

## Panama species list

- Acanthais brevidentata* (Wood, 1828)  
*Anachis fluctuata* (G.B. Sowerby I, 1832)  
*Anachis pardalis* (Hinds, 1843)  
*Anachis rugosa* (G.B. Sowerby I, 1832)  
*Anadara tuberculosa* (G.B. Sowerby I, 1833)  
*Arca mutabilis* (G.B. Sowerby I, 1833)  
*Arene fricki* (Crosse, 1865)  
*Axinactis inaequalis* (G.B. Sowerby I, 1833)  
*Bailya anomala* (Hinds, 1844)  
*Barbatia illota* (G.B. Sowerby I, 1833)  
*Barbatia lurida* (G.B. Sowerby I, 1833)  
*Barbatia reeveana* (d'Orbigny, 1846)  
*Bursa corrugata* (Perry, 1811)  
*Cantharus sanguinolentus* (Duclos, 1833)  
*Carditamera affinis* (G.B. Sowerby I, 1833)  
*Cerithium adustum* Kiener, 1841  
*Cerithium gallapaginis* G.B. Sowerby II, 1855  
*Cerithium nicaraguense* Pilsbry & Lowe, 1932  
*Cerithium stercusmuscarum* Valenciennes, 1833  
*Chaetopleura lurida* (G.B. Sowerby I in Broderip & G.B. Sowerby I, 1832)  
*Chama buddiana* C. B. Adams, 1852  
*Chione subimbricata* (G.B. Sowerby I, 1835)  
*Chiton stokesii* Broderip, 1832  
*Columbella major* G.B. Sowerby I, 1832  
*Conus brunneus* Wood, 1828  
*Conus gladiator* Broderip, 1833  
*Conus nux* (Broderip, 1833)  
*Conus princeps* Linnaeus, 1758  
*Conus princeps* form *lineolatus* Valenciennes, 1832  
*Conus purpurascens* G.B. Sowerby II, 1833  
*Crassispira xanti* Hertlein & Strong, 1951  
*Crepidula aculeata* (Gmelin, 1791)  
*Crepidula lessonii* (Broderip, 1834)  
*Crepidula onyx* G.B. Sowerby II, 1824  
*Crepidula rostrata* C. B. Adams, 1852  
*Crepidula striolata* Menke, 1851  
*Crucibulum scutellatum* (Wood, 1828)  
*Crucibulum spinosum* (G.B. Sowerby II, 1824)  
*Crucibulum umbrella* (Deshayes, 1830)  
*Ctena mexicana* (Dall, 1901)  
*Cyclinella saccata* (Gould, 1851)  
*Diodora saturnalis* (Carpenter, 1864)  
*Echinolittorina modesta* Philippi, 1846  
*Engina pulchra* (Reeve, 1846)  
*Engina maura* (G.B. Sowerby I, 1832)  
*Eualetes tulipa* (Rousseau in Chenu, 1843)  
*Fissurella virescens* G.B. Sowerby I, 1835  
*Gari helenae* Olsson, 1961  
*Glyptanachis hilli* (Pilsbry & Lowe, 1932)  
*Granolaria salmo* (Wood, 1828)  
*Hespererato scabriuscula* (Gray in G.B. Sowerby I, 1832)  
*Hexaplex princeps* (Broderip, 1833)  
*Hexaplex radix* (Gmelin, 1791)  
*Hexaplex regius* (Swainson, 1821)  
*Homalocantha oxyacantha* (Broderip, 1833)  
*Jenneria pustulata* (Lightfoot, 1786)  
*Leucozonia cerata* (Wood, 1828)  
*Leucozonia rudis* (Reeve, 1847)  
*Lobatus galeatus* (Swainson, 1823)  
*Lobatus peruvianus* (Swainson, 1823)  
*Macrocypraea cervinetta* (Kiener, 1843)  
*Malea ringens* (Swainson, 1822)  
*Mangelia* species  
*Megapitaria aurantiaca* (G.B. Sowerby I, 1831)  
*Mitra tristis* Broderip, 1836  
*Mitrella delicata* (Reeve, 1859)  
*Modiolus capax* Conrad, 1837  
*Monoplex macrodon* (Valenciennes, 1832)  
*Murexsul zeteki* (Hertlein & Strong, 1951)  
*Nassarius collarius* (C. B. Adams, 1852)  
*Nassarius luteostoma* (Broderip & G.B. Sowerby I, 1829)  
*Nassarius versicolor* (C.B. Adams, 1852)  
*Natica chemnitzii* Pfeiffer, 1840  
*Neorapana muricata* (Broderip, 1832)  
*Nerita funiculata* Menke, 1851  
*Nerita scabricosta* Lamarck, 1822  
*Notoacmea subrotundata* (Carpenter, 1865)  
*Notocytharella striosa* (C.B. Adams, 1852)  
*Olivella volutella* (Lamarck, 1811)  
*Opeatostoma pseudodon* (Burrow, 1815)  
*Orthalicus princeps fischeri* Martens, 1893  
*Parvanachis nigricans* (G.B. Sowerby I, 1844)  
*Parvanachis pygmaea* (G.B. Sowerby I, 1832)  
*Periglypta multicostata* (G.B. Sowerby I, 1835)  
*Persististrombus granulatus* (Swainson, 1822)  
*Pilsbryspira aterrima* (G.B. Sowerby I, 1834)  
*Pinctada mazatlanica* (Hanley, 1856)  
*Planaxis planicostatus* G.B. Sowerby I, 1825  
*Polinices panamaensis* (Récluz, 1844)  
*Polinices uber* (Valenciennes, 1832)  
*Pseudozonaria arabicula* (Lamarck, 1811)  
*Pseudozonaria robertsi* (Hidalgo, 1906)  
*Pustulaturus mediamericus* (Hertlein & Strong, 1951)  
*Rissoina gisna* Bartsch, 1915  
*Rissoina stricta* (Menke, 1850)  
*Siphonaria gigas* G.B. Sowerby I, 1825  
*Siphonaria maura* G.B. Sowerby I, 1835  
*Stramonita biserialis* (Blainville, 1832)  
*Tagelus affinis* (C.B. Adams, 1852)  
*Tagelus politus* (Carpenter, 1857)  
*Tegula picta* McLean, 1970  
*Thaisella kiosquiformis* (Duclos, 1832)  
*Transennella puella* (Carpenter, 1864)  
*Turbo fluctuosus* Wood, 1828  
*Turbo saxosus* Wood, 1828  
*Vasula melones* (Duclos, 1832)  
*Vasula speciosa* (Valenciennes, 1832)  
*Vasum caestus* (Broderip, 1833)  
*Vermicularia pellucida eburnea* (Reeve, 1842)  
*Vitta luteofasciatus* Miller, 1879