



Oregon Sea Grant Extension
Sustainable Tourism &
Outdoor Recreation Program

Interpretative Fact Sheet Gaper Clam (*Tresus nuttallii*)



The following short article is from the [Oregon Coast 101 Species](#) collection used by the Guide and Outfitter Recognized Professional (GORP) training program. These articles are intended to provide interesting facts you can share with your clientele and add value to your services.

An Interpretive Fact Sheet has been written about each species. We are currently uploading these blogs and creating the links.

Come visit us!

Tourism and Business Development College of Business,
Oregon State University Extension - Oregon Sea Grant at

<http://tourism.oregonstate.edu/>

Guide and Outfitter Recognized Professional Program

<https://www.GORPguide.org>

For more information about the GORP training program see:

<https://www.gorpguide.org/become-a-gorp-certified-guide>

Gaper Clam (aka Horseneck Clam)

 tourism.oregonstate.edu/gaper-clam-aka-horseneck-clam/

By colliiek2

September 8, 2020

“There were times over the years when life was not easy, but if you’re working a few hours a day and you’ve got a good book to read, and you can go outside to the beach and dig for clams, you’re okay.”

~ Mary Oliver

Oregon estuaries have a rich assortment of clams. Some in great abundance, some with great taste, and some are just watching for your shovel.

Why go out and harvest? Think clam chowder, fried clams, clam burgers, and more. Clam chowder is an American favorite and was first serve up in the New England area in the 1700s.

Two species of *Tresus* gaper clams are found in Oregon: Pacific gaper clam – *T. nuttallii* and the Fat gaper clam – *T. capax*.



Gaps in clams.
The Gaper clam is on the bottom. (Image courtesy of ODFW)

Range

Pacific gaper clams range from Baja California north to Kodiak Island. They are the largest common bay clam in Oregon and California.

In Oregon, the shells may measure up to eight inches long, and weigh up to four pounds. In California they can grow up to 10 inches and weigh up to five pounds each.

Mind the Gap

The clams have evolved in such a way that the shell is just a wee bit small. There is just not enough room to totally retract the large siphon, or neck, in. This creates a gap that cannot completely close.

Both species of Gaper clams and geoduck clams have this problem. The geoducks have larger siphons compared to the *Tresus* species.

The siphon is one of the reasons this clam thrives. The siphon filters the water for plankton and bits of food during high tide.

It also helps the Gapers avoid many predators as the clam is able to live deep in the substrate (like potentially four feet). In Oregon, the typical depth for finding Gapers is 12 to 16-inches. Trophy-sized catches are found a bit deeper nearer to 30 inches.

These clams are often incidentally taken during harvest along with butter and littleneck clams that live at the same substrate level.

Shells

Shells are oval and typically are chalky-white or light yellow. The shell may also be darkly stained in a muddy areas. There are patches of brown, leather-like skin on the shell.

The upper shell is whitish with a thin brown membrane coating. It is relatively thin and can be broken during the digging process. Broken clams count towards daily limit. (See Regulations)

The thickest part of the shell is a cavity called a ‘chondrophore.’ In gaper clams, it is very pronounced. As the shell deteriorates, the chondrophore is the last piece to go. It is often polished by sand and surf and found by beach combers.

Annual lines on the chondrophore’s surface are used to age the clam. Gapers grow about one inch per year for the first four years. Growth rate begins to slow after that. They have a life span up to 17 years.

Reproduction

These animals are quite prolific and, depending on the conditions, may reproduce year-around. Young are carried by the water and swim freely until they settle onto the sea floor. They move downward into the sediments.

Where Found and Harvest Tools

Large bay clams are found on firm, sandy or muddy areas. In muddy areas, clammers often use a shovel or shrimp gun. They look for an oblong “show” hole about the size of a quarter. Some use a three-foot PVC pipe about 12-15 inches in diameter to prevent holes from caving in.

They Got Crabs

You may notice a pair of small crabs (Gaper pea crabs, *Pinnixa faba*) hanging out with the Gaper. They are 'room mates' and the female may live within the mantle cavity. They do not affect the clam as food.

Lucky Us

Gaper clams are great eating and are fun to harvest. Before you go check the Oregon biotoxin hotline at 1-800-448-2474 and read more at <https://myodfw.com/articles/shellfish-and-biotoxins> and <https://www.oregon.gov/ODA/programs/FoodSafety/Shellfish/Pages/ShellfishClosures.aspx>. Always check harvest regulations and requirements.

NOTE: In certain conditions, you can rebury a Gaper. Leaving it on the surface is a sure death. The Gaper needs the pressure of the surrounding sand to remain intact and maneuver.

Go forth, dig and be Okay!

REFERENCES:

- Oregon Dept. of Fish & Wildlife, Crabbing and Clamming (<https://myodfw.com/crabbing-clamming/species/clams> and .../species/gapers.html)
- Washington Dept. of Fish & Wildlife, Gapers (https://www.dfw.state.or.us/MRP/shellfish/bayclams/about_gapers.asp and [bayclams/cleaning_gapers.asp](https://www.dfw.state.or.us/MRP/shellfish/bayclams/cleaning_gapers.asp))
- California Dept. of Fish & Wildlife (<https://cdfwmarine.wordpress.com/2015/06/05/creature-feature-gaper-clams/>)
- Sole soups, History of Clam Chowder (<https://solesoups.com/2018/02/12/history-clam-chowder>)
- Wikipedia, *Tresus* (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tresus>)
- Mary Oliver quote (www.azquotes.com/quotes)