

# The Queen CONCH

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**I**f you ever come across a conch shell while wandering along a stretch of beach, you may feel that you've found the ideal type of seashell to place against your ear and hear the sound of the ocean. A common name applied to over 60 species of medium-to-large similarly shaped shells, the word 'conch' (pronounced "konk") refers to both the attractive shells and the mollusks that live within them. In general, these shells are noted for having a high spire, which is the inner or upper part consisting of all the spiral growths (whorls) except those in contact with the mollusk's body, and a distinctive siphonal canal, resulting in a shape that has clearly defined points on both ends.

Perhaps the most well-known species, the Queen Conch (*Strombas gigas*) is indigenous to the warm waters throughout the Caribbean Sea and Gulf of Mexico, ranging as far north as Bermuda and as far south as Brazil. Making its home in shallow water environments that are up to 70 feet deep such as seagrass beds and coral reef habitats, this aquatic creature has also been observed at depths of 500 feet, according to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. As herbivores, these mollusks use their operculum, which is a claw-like structure that covers the opening of the shell, to dig into the sand and push themselves along the bottom as they wander for miles, foraging on algae, dead material, seagrass and sand.

Noted for both their beauty and size, Queen Conchs are one of the largest mollusks found in their native waters, with shells that can be greater than 12 inches in length upon maturity. Glossy pink, orange or yellow on the interior, these heavy shells first form their spiral shape, then begin to develop a "lip" that flares away from the shell. Although this process only takes about three years to complete, the conch's shell continues to thicken throughout its lifespan, which can be as long as 40 years. Interestingly, juveniles look remarkably different than adults: they have a simple, sharp lip, giving their shells more of a conical or biconic (having two

cones) shape. Because of this trait, young conchs are known as "rollers" in some parts of Florida since their shells are easily moved by wave action, whereas the shape and weight of an adult's keeps it safely moored in place.

Given these qualities, this shell is a prized specimen; therefore, beachcombers lucky enough to find one of these beautiful treasures during their beach adventures may be tempted to bring it home as a souvenir. That being said, it's important to know that the Queen Conch is considered a threatened species and it has been listed in Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) since 1992. As such, it is highly protected in Florida, throughout the United States and in many areas abroad. According to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FFWC), it is illegal to harvest, possess, land, purchase, sell or exchange live Queen Conch at any time, so if you come across a shell that's still inhabited by a living creature, leave it be. If it's vacant when you find it, you may be able to add it to your collection, provided it meets one other criterion. The FFWC regulations also specify that only shells that lack an off-center hole larger than 1/16 of an inch in diameter through the spire may lawfully be gathered.

**W**hile many different types of mollusks may make pearls, the gems produced by the Queen Conch are exceptional treasures that have been valued for their rarity and beauty since the Victorian era. Although these beads may occur in various shades of brown, orange and white, as well as many intermediate blends in between these colors, Caribbean Pink Pearls are highly coveted for several reasons. Since the Queen Conch is a threatened species, only limited quantities of these non-nacreous orbs exist. Plus, only one marketable pearl is discovered among every hundred thousand shells, which adds to their tremendous cachet. Additionally, conch pearls are renowned for their uniquely attractive appearance

with surfaces that display a shimmering type of iridescence known as "flame structure." A form of chatoyancy, or cat's eye effect, this enchanting glimmer is caused by the movement of light rays as they interact with the microcrystals in the pearl's surface.

Inside and out, Queen Conchs are valuable resources since, in addition to these priceless gems, they are also highly sought out for a number of other purposes. Long before the time of explorers such as Christopher Columbus, groups of indigenous peoples of South America and the Caribbean such as the Arawaks utilized these shells by carving them into assorted tools, ceremonial objects and musical horns. Honoring these roots today, the tradition of holding conch-horn blowing contests continues throughout the Caribbean. Exported around the globe as a delicacy, conch meat has been a popular food source in this region for centuries and, even now, it endures as an important resource for natives of Haiti and the Bahamas, where it is an essential ingredient in fritters, salads, soups and stews. Since the Bahamian archipelago represents one of the few remaining areas where large populations of these living creatures still exist, environmental conservation organizations like the Bahamas National Trust's "Conchservation" Campaign are working hard to ensure that conchs remain a local food source and economic resource for generations to come.



Turn to page 48 for a delicious conch salad recipe

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