

Shelling at Sanibel Island by Linda Schroeder

All photos are by Linda Schroeder unless otherwise stated.

In December Teresa Anderson and I took our first trip to Sanibel Island. We met up with Janet Armbrust Gurr and her husband Philip. We were all staying at the Blue Dolphin Cottages. Teresa and I arrived at the cottages at 1AM on a Tuesday and I made it out to the beach by around 7AM. Within an hour I encountered Janet, who had already been on the beach for a couple of hours. It soon became routine for the two of us to be out there with flashlights by 5:30-6AM. Teresa, not being an early morning person, usually followed a few hours later. Generally we saw some other flashlights down the beach and no matter how early we made it out, someone else's footprints already marked the wet sand, even when we were out there just minutes after high tide peaked.

The week started off unseasonably warm for even Florida with temperatures well into the mid - 80's. Even the locals were complaining. And this was quite a change from the early season



A golden sunrise illuminates the beach.

the first half of our stay and we spent many hours on the beach. The birds were numerous and it was fun watching the pelicans and others dive for fish. Philip is an avid bird photographer and he got some fantastic photos.



Interior entrance to Bailey Matthews Museum.

One exhibit is the State Fair which is made of shells.



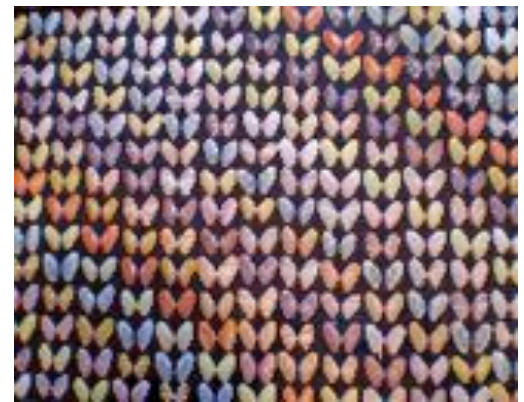
American White Ibis (*Eudocinus albus*)

snowfall and cold weather that

Teresa and I had left back home. Fortunately there was little humidity to accompany the high temperatures at first. But this was the week of the giant ice/snow storms that swept across the Midwest and eventually the edge of that cold front pushed some weather our way. In a couple of days the humidity rose and that caused the bugs to come out in force. We went from having just the occasional mosquito bite to a barrage of no-see-ums attacking us. And of course bug repellent only works if you're not constantly walking in the surf and washing it all off!

Despite the bugs we had a great time. The waters were pretty calm

the first half of our stay and we spent many hours on the beach. The birds were numerous and it was fun watching the pelicans and others dive for fish. Philip is an avid bird photographer and he got some fantastic photos. Dolphins routinely cruised up and down the coastline feeding and we occasionally saw one leap clear of the water. Janet spotted a shark one day but Teresa and I missed seeing one. During this time the beach was exactly what I expected of Sanibel – broad swathes of shell berms piled along the sand. Sometimes we simply walked along to see what was on the surface. Other times it was most beneficial to just stay in one spot,



Colorful Donax shells created this rainbow .



sifting through the freshest layers. My other favorite technique was to walk in the surf and watch for new shells to roll in. I acquired a this way. We heard many comments from regulars that the *Donax variabilis* Say, 1822 were more brightly colored than they had been in awhile so we made a point of collecting a great many of them. We all ended up with many hundreds.

At some point you do

have to take a break from shelling. Teresa and I visited the Bailey-Matthews museum and many of the numerous shell shops on the island. We each purchased a few treasures. Teresa found a number of pretty Harp shells to add to her collection and I found some books, including one to add to our club library. Teresa also explored some of the art galleries she found.

By Friday the winds were picking up and the waves were starting to really crash on the beach. We had been hoping for a storm to come along and toss up some good specimens. Because the weather had been calm, there were few whole bivalve shells on shore and only small gastropods. This didn't bother Teresa and I. Since it was our first trip, it all seemed good to us. On Saturday the waves had pretty much



Wind and waves herald an approaching storm.

swept the beach clean of the shell berms and the weather turned much windier so it wasn't a very good day for shelling. Janet got some incredulous looks from some non-shelling people when she commented there were no shells on the beach that day. Of course they didn't understand Janet meant "good" shells. We took this opportunity to all go to lunch up on Captiva Island. Teresa and I then drove through the J.N. "Ding" Darling Wildlife Refuge, which was nearby. I also used this day to go fossil hunting.



Janet Armbrust Gurr photo.

Gravel path was full of fossils.

Juvenile land snail seen crawling in garden.



1. Horseshoe crab, *Limulus polyphemus* (Linnaeus, 1758)
2. Atlantic Pygmy Octopus, *Octopus joubini* Robson, 1929
3. Calico Scallop, *Argopecten gibbus*, (Linnaeus, 1758) and a small red sea urchin.

This was a laborious excursion requiring me to walk a full 10 feet from my front door! The pathway winding between the cottages consisted of gravel, which was riddled with fossil shells. Within an hour I had found 50 different species. We also watched a couple get married on the beach that afternoon.

Sunday morning was a different story as the wave direction had changed and some new stuff was thrown up onto the beach. Shelling brought a new adventure that day as the wind was very strong and whipped the sand



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at you like a sandblaster. Monday brought even better shelling as a lot of sea life was stranded on the beach that morning. It was also much colder by then and we had to resort to wearing long pants and coats in the morning. While there were many new shells and some of the shell berms were returning, of greater interest were all the other creatures stranded that day. We saw numerous red urchins, horseshoe crabs, large moon jellyfish, sea stars and pygmy octopuses. Many of the regular beachcombers spent as much time rescuing animals as collecting. I saved several octopuses myself. The technique was to scoop it up with one of the ubiquitous Pen shell halves and wait for a strong backwash wave to suck him back out to sea. Hundreds of *Argopecten gibbus* (Linnaeus, 1758) were stranded that day and many had perished in the cold and sun. As high tide returned and the first washes of water started reaching the remaining survivors it was fun to watch them start clapping their shells in anticipation of swimming back out into the water. It was as if a band of castanets were playing on the beach.

I found my nicest shell on Monday – a perfect 7-inch *Triplofusus giganteus* (Kiener, 1840). Unfortunately he was still alive, so after photographing the evidence, I returned him to the water.



Triplofusus giganteus (Kiener, 1840)

The taking of live shells is prohibited on the island. Many new items washed up that day and we finally saw some new complete bivalves and *Ficus communis* Röding, 1798 wash up. Several very large but well-worn Conchs and Whelks had washed in as well. While a couple would have been interesting to take home, the very real restraints of luggage space and weight made it unfeasible.

Monday afternoon found us packing to go home and trying to fit it all in. Teresa learned the very important lesson of culling your shells regularly as you pick up better ones and not waiting until the last day. We were up past midnight trying to get her collection whittled down to a size that she could pack home. I had been culling as I went, but still found it necessary to whittle it down more once I was trying to fit it all in my luggage.



Two of the shell displays at the library.

That day we also heard that the local library had a new display of local shells and that it was well worth going to see. Fortunately the library was nearby so we made a quick trip over to view it. It was a very thorough collection of local shells and included some Caribbean specimens as well. There was also a nice display of fossil shells that had been found at the site during the library's construction. Interestingly, although the museum has a lot of local specimens in their displays, it's far from a complete collection.

The next morning we were very sorry to have to leave, especially since that turned out to be the best shelling day yet. Suddenly the waters had calmed but overnight had thrown numerous prime specimens ashore. It was heartbreaking not to have the chance to walk the beach that morning. But alas, our luggage was jammed and we had to leave for the airport. I spoke to Janet the next day and it turned out the first *Scaphella junonia* (Lamarck, 1804) shell of the season had been found on Monday – a faded and worn but very large specimen. The person was encouraged to take it over to the museum, as it might have even been a record breaker! So few specimens come ashore that people have even had their pictures in the local paper for finding one.



Overall, it was a fun and successful shelling trip. Teresa collects shells for color and texture and found a large assortment of beach prizes to take home. I collect for species and wound up with just over 100 [left]. So we were both very happy with our haul. We were also treated to gorgeous sunrises and sunsets nearly every day. Now if only we'd had just one more day to shell!