Shelling in Petersburg, Alaska by Linda Schroeder

Petersburg from the air. The Cannery Dock is in the center of the picture, Hungry Point is at the bottom, and Sandy Beach is at the bottom left and out of the photo.

We arrived midday on a Sunday and once we'd checked into our accommodations, we headed right down to the beach to check on the tide. We were staying only a block from the waterfront directly across from one of the best shelling spots. It was still too early for even the secondary afternoon low tide so we wandered about town and got the lay of the land.

As soon as we arrived we encountered another companion we were to have all week – the rain. The forecast was for temperatures in the 50's and 60's with more or less continuous rain showers of the light drizzly kind we are so accustomed to in the Northwest. As it turned out, this was not a bad thing. We quickly learned that when we were on the beaches, if the rain wasn't falling, we were going to be hounded by gnats and flies. We soon welcomed the rain and the cooler temperatures made wearing the rain gear comfortable. My new camera cover definitely experienced trial by fire.

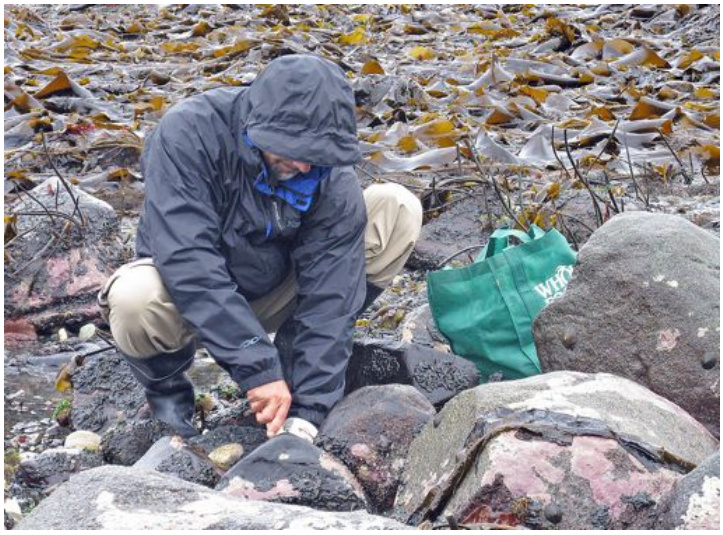
There were three main sites, which provided the best shelling, and we visited each of them repeatedly. Each morning was spent at one of them until the tide chased us in. We also went out for a couple of hours each afternoon for the secondary low tide, at least until that started occurring after dark. This way we could test out some other locations to see if they were worth more time. None of them approached the diversity of the top three choices.

Each of the primary sites had a slightly different habitat. The first one was the closest – under the pier occupied by one of the largest canneries in town. There were rocks, log debris, heavily encrusted pier pilings, mud and large swaths of seaweed. The ground directly under the pier was completely carpeted with tubeworms. It was like walking on dense foam. This site was fairly grungy-looking but if you looked closely there was an amazing array of molluscan life. We always attracted the attention of workers on the pier above us. I'm

In July a group of us headed off to Alaska to try the shelling during one of the record low tides we had this year. Myself, David Allison and Drew Skinner flew to Petersburg on Mitkoff Island. Alex Sassi joined us a little later in the week. David and Drew had been to Petersburg before and knew where the best shelling could be found. I was eager to try out the waterproof case I'd just purchased for my camera.

Petersburg is a small, but busy, commercial fishing town adjacent to the Wrangell Narrows. A common misconception is that it is named for St. Petersburg in Russia, but in actuality was founded by a Norwegian named Peter Buschman. He and some fellow countrymen settled and built the town, resulting in its nickname of "Little Norway".

David (top) and Alex (bottom) collecting at Hungry Point



sure they were wondering what the fools in the raingear were doing picking through the grunge under the pier in the rain.

The second site was down the beach from the cannery towards Hungry Point, but still along the Wrangell Narrows. This was a typical gravel beach with many larger rocks as well. Bull kelp and other seaweeds were heavily strewn about. In general we found the same mix of species here as we did under the pier although some required more searching. What was common at one site might be hard to find at the other and vice versa. This site contained an enormous population of sea urchins, specifically *Strongylocentrotus droebachiensis* (O.F. Müller, 1776). You couldn't walk without stepping on them. Several species of anenomes were also very abundant here. I gave my camera case a new workout by submerging the camera and was able to shoot some species in their full underwater glory.

Sea anemones at Hungry Point

David and Drew at Sandy Beach

The third site, Sandy Beach, was a little ways from town and faced Frederick Sound. As the name suggests it is primarily a sand habitat with small gravel. This beach is also bordered by larger rocks and boulders. We found a slightly different mix of bivalves here and naturally there were fewer species of gastropods. Another notable feature of this beach was a large boulder with 2000 year-old petroglyphs on them. The Tlingit natives carved them. The remains of native fish traps can also be found here. All of these features are only visible at low tide.

Many of the species we found in Petersburg can also be found locally in Washington waters. It was interesting to see them in different population proportions. Where *Nucella lamellosa* (Gmelin, 1791) tends to be the dominant dogwinkle at home, *Nucella lima* (Gmelin, 1791) took that honor in Petersburg. *Macoma balthica* (Linnaeus, 1758) can be difficult to locate in Washington, but were abundant and easy to find in Alaska. *Hiatella arctica* (Linnaeus, 1767), *Modiolus modiolus* (Linnaeus, 1758) and *Mya truncata* Linnaeus, 1758 were a few other species that we rarely see at home but found to be common here. While the *H. arctica* are not as rare as the other two at home, they are dwarfed by the size of the specimens in Petersburg.

The average size of some species was a distinct difference from what we are used to seeing. The *Margarites pupillus* (Gould, 1849) were so large we first thought they were *Calliostoma ligatum* (Gould, 1849), which turned out to be a species we never did see there. The *Nucella lima* and *Macoma inquinata* (Deshayes, 1855) were decidedly larger than the ones in Washington also.

Sometimes we were surprised by what we didn't find. *Littorina sitkana* Philippi, 1846 was very abundant but we never located a single *Littorina scutulata* Gould, 1849. In several areas the habitat seemed to be ideal for *Pododesmus machrochisma* (Deshayes, 1839) but I found only a single dead specimen, in spite of a dedicated search for it. We only located two crabbed specimens of *Nucella ostrina* (Gould, 1852), another species we expected to find in number.

Naturally one of our primary goals was to find the species that we don't normally see at home. In this we were very successful. We saw many *Neptunea lyrata* (Gmelin, 1791) under the cannery and also the egg cases of another species of Neptunea. The *Volutharpa ampullacea* (Middendorff, 1848) were very interesting. They readily crawled around for me and made excellent photography subjects. (See photo on page 1.) I was also able to photograph live *Buccinum baeri* (Middendorff, 1848), *Cryptonatica aleutica* (Dall, 1919), *Margarites helicinus* Phipps, 1874, *Macoma golikovi*

Cryptonatica aleutica (left) and Neptunea egg case (right)

Scarlato and Kafanov, 1988 and *Balcis columbiana* (Bartsch, 1917). The latter we found directly on the Giant Black Cucumber, *Cucumaria frondosa* (Gunnerus, 1770). We also found one on a *Mopalia kennerleyi* Carpenter, 1864 and some in nearly anaerobic mud inside large dead Butter Clams. Other local species we found, although not live ones, include *Serripes groenlandicus* (Bruguiere, 1789), *Buccinum plectrum* Stimpson, 1865, and *Panomya ampla* Dall, 1898. We also found a few we have yet to identify including a species of *Astarte*, *Boreotrophon*, *Lacuna*, and *Margarites*.

Buccinum baeri

Balcis columbiana on Giant Black Cucumber

Molluscan species weren't the only creatures of interest on the beaches. We saw a number of different crab and sea star species. The Mottled Star, *Evasterias troschelii* (Stimpson, 1862), was a dominant species here. We do see them in Washington, but not in the vast array of bright colors, which we saw near Hungry Point. The Sunflower Star, *Pycnopodia helianthoides* (Brandt, 1835), also took us by surprise. This was one I photographed underwater and in doing so, discovered the bright blue and white pedicellariae on their arms, something none of us had witnessed before. I saw my first live Alaskan King Crab as well – a juvenile that would fit in the palm of your hand.

Underwater photo of arm of the Sunflower Star

Juvenile Alaskan King Crab

Some vertebrate wildlife also caught our attention on this trip. The rainy weather deterred many birds from hanging around but we did spot some Bald eagles. The large, local ravens didn't seem to mind the wet weather at all. One particular day gave us the most sightings of animals. We were at Hungry Point when a family of Sitka deer strolled down to the beach. At the same time, Steller's sea lions could be heard barking in the distance. They were lounging on the buoys out in the channel. During a lull in the rain we suddenly heard a spray of water and realized a whale must be nearby. Sure enough, a huge male Orca was swimming down the channel near us. Later that same day we spotted a Humpback whale out in Frederick Sound.

Orca swimming in Wrangell Narrows

On our very last day the sun finally made an appearance. At last we were able to see the beautiful surrounding hillsides and islands. It was a treat to be able to head to the beach just once without the raingear. We chose to go under the pier one more time and in the sunlight were able to spot some small species that were previously hidden in the shadows. It's dark under the pier anyway and the rain clouds just made it gloomier. Larger chiton species were visible before but in the sunlight we now spotted a *Leptochiton rugatus* (Carpenter, 1892) and *Cyanoplax dentiens* (Gould, 1846).

It was a nice trip in spite of the weather. We did a little local sightseeing during some short breaks in the weather, but most of our time was definitely spent shelling or cleaning our shells. The clear weather remained for our flight home and we were able to view the terrain the entire way. I spent the entire flight glued to the window with my camera. Once we exited the plane, we wanted to go right back. From the cool of the north, we had returned home to the beginning of the record-breaking heat wave that was to grip western Washington for the next week.

Linda Schroeder photos