

## CHITONING THE SALISH SEA

By Roger Clark

Growing up in the Pacific Northwest and collecting chitons, I explored many low tides in the region then known as Puget Sound, now appropriately and romantically re-named the Salish Sea. Most of my explorations in recent years have been in Alaska. Indeed I have not explored a low tide in the Salish Sea since 2001. From 1978 to about 1989, I collected many fine chitons with my friends and fellow chiton collectors Tom Rice (who actually got me started in chitons), my mentor Col. George A. Hanselman (just once, in 1981), and my old collecting buddy William E. "Bill" Rice and many others. It was Bill Rice who showed me the wonders of the Tacoma Narrows.

So lately I decided to make a couple of trips up to the Salish Sea to once again hunt for chitons. In June, armed with my trusty camera (Canon Powershot G 9) I headed out to some of my favorite old "stomps" to see how the chiton fauna was doing, and if it had changed since "the old days".

### JUNE

My first stop was Indian Island, near Hadlock. In the past this site, just east side of the channel, just north of the bridge had large wooden "cribs", filled with boulders. These boulders were wonderful and I found such treasures as Giant *Mopalia hindsii* up to 116 mm and even a giant six plated *M. hindsii*, as well as many other *Mopalias*. On my trip this time I found that the outer crib reachable only at the lowest tides had collapsed into a pile, and that collecting the giant *M. hindsii* was now nearly impossible, indeed I found only a single one (that I could reach), and little else.

Next I headed across the bridge to Oak Bay County Park, where I met up with my old chiton buddy George Holm, and a person with whom I had corresponded with for over two decades, but never actually met, Rick Harbo. We met up several other people I met for the first time. It was great fun. My wife Kayla was with me on her first chiton trip.

Oak Bay Jetty had always been great for the small *Mopalias*, and color

variations of *Lepidozonia mertensii*, as well as the occasional *Lepidozonia retiporosa* [1]. The tide had already turned and was headed in when I got there, but it was still great, and I was not disappointed! One of the first things found was a beautiful purple phase of *L. mertensii*, and later a magnificent *Mopalia swanii*. Also found were three small *Mopalias*, *Mopalia imporcata* [2], *M. cirrata*, and *M. sinuata* [3]. Another nice find was

an albanistic *Tonicella lineata* [4] small *Cryptochiton stelleri* 30-40 mm were also found. Curiously, one thing missing at this site was *Mopalia spectabilis*.

Next I was off to the former mecca of Puget Sound chitoning, the Famous Tacoma Narrows. In this I was disappointed, as I found that the former access to this great site had been cut off at the building of the new Narrows

Bridge. An attempt to reach the site by another route was frustrated by a run in downtown Tacoma that closed off many streets. Eventually I found a way down to Salmon Beach a couple of miles north of the old grounds

(And that turned into quite a wonderful adventure in and of itself and the making of a new conchologist friend, one Joan Rutherford). But finally (after miles of walking) I found myself at a boulder slope south of the fascinating community of Salmon Beach. I had never been there before, but it turned out great and some wonderful species were found, including *Tonicella insignis* [5], *Mopalia spectabilis* [6], *M. imporcata*, and *Dendrochiton flectens*. Upon returning I went to the north end of the salmon beach community where I met







up with my wife and local Mrs. Joan Rutherford. Joan is a wonderful lady, and helped me find a “new” way to the traditional chiton spot at the Narrows.

So, the next day, following the instructions Joan had gotten from a friend, and after a long maybe 2-3 mile walk. I reached “the place”. I was happily surprised to find that not much had changed here, and I found some wonderful chitons, including *Cyanoplax fernaldi* [7] the rare turquoise phase, many amazing *Mopalia spectabilis*, some nice *Mopalia lignosa* (probably my favorite *Mopalia* sp.), many beautiful *Tonicella lineata* and *Mopalia vespertina*, and a couple of specimens of the famous “Tacoma Giants” *Tonicella insignis*, (these monsters can reach more than 60 mm!) biggest that day was about



54 mm. I also found a few *Mopalia imporcata*, and some *Lepidozona retiporosa*. It was a great day, interestingly however no *Mopalia muscosa*, was found which used to be fairly common there, and only a few *Mopalia hindsii*. This turned out to be a great trip and re-introduction to my favorite old collecting sites. I became reacquainted with old friends, and made several new ones. I decided to make a return trip in July and hit some other beloved sites.

### July

I decided in July to start out with a visit to a site in which I had never been before, Slip Point. This turned out to be an awesome place for chitons, kind of transitional between the coast and the “Sound”. Some really neat species were found, including the predatory chiton *Placiphorella velata* [8], the tiny *Leptochiton* sp. (often identified as *L. rugatus*, but apparently distinct, D. Eernisse, pers. Comm.), large *Cyanoplax dentiens*, it’s congener *C. fernaldi* and large numbers of two of my favorites *Katharina tunicata* and *Mopalia muscosa*.

My next stop was an old favorite, out near the edge of the Salish Sea, the breakwater at Neah Bay. Apparently there was some damage to the breakwater at some point in the past 20 years or so,



as there was a lot of new rock in various places. The tide was not great for this site, but I found some nice stuff, including *Tonicella venusta* [9], *T. “undocaerulea”*, *P. velata*. I also saw some wonderful young *Crassadoma gigantea*, and the dwarf triton *Ocinebrina sclera*.



In an effort to spend the two best tides of the series at Neah Bay, and my old favorite, the Tacoma Narrows, we headed back to Tacoma. At Tacoma we met up with PNW shell club member Linda

Schroeder and had the pleasure of introducing Linda to the Narrows. The Narrows were great again, as they were in June, and we got some great pictures. Two chitons of note that we collected this time around that we missed in June were *Mopalia muscosa* and *Dendrochiton flectens*.



After Tacoma we decided to head just outside of the Salish Sea to a site that Bill Rice had told me of many years ago, and I had always wanted to visit, Cape Alava on the outer coast of Washington, south of Mukkaw Bay. So back out to the west we went. Cape Alava can be reached by traveling about 23 miles inland from the straits, just past Clallum Bay, to the camp ground at Ozette Lake. From here it is a 3.5 mile hike through the gorgeous Olympic rain forest, out to the coast (plus a ½ mile more across the cobble beach to reach the water’s edge). Why go to the trouble? Because this was the first place that the wonderful and very rare orange phase of *Mopalia spectabilis* [10] was found by Bill, back in the late ‘70’s and early ‘80’s. The drive was about 45 min. from where we were staying, at Clallum Bay, the hike about

one and an half hours. Since the tide was at around 7:30 AM and we did not have camping gear, that meant we had to leave at about 4:00 AM (I am not a morning person, except when tide pooling).

Upon reaching Cape Alava, I was awed by extensive tidal area, and was excited by what I expected to be a chiton mecca! Unfortunately, for some unknown reason, other than a few *Mopalia muscosa* and *M. hindsii* on the walk out to the water, chitons were very scarce! In fact I found only a dozen or so *Mopalias*, and of those only three *M. spectabilis*! But one was the beautiful orange phase! We also found two giant *Placiphorella velata* [11], there were about 7.5 cm! So although only a very few chitons were found, it was well worth the 7 mi round trip hike out to this interesting area.

This summer's trips to Washington were wonderful, and I can't wait until next year!

all photos by the author

