

## North Carolina Collecting

by Marc Nathanson

**North Carolina, September 1996, thirty miles due east from Beaufort Inlet:** stepped off the boat, swam to the anchor line, and looked down. Clearly visible one hundred and twenty feet below was the upturned wreck. Dropped down the anchor line, landed on the keel, and there by my feet were two *Macrocypraea cervus* (Linnaeus, 1771), the



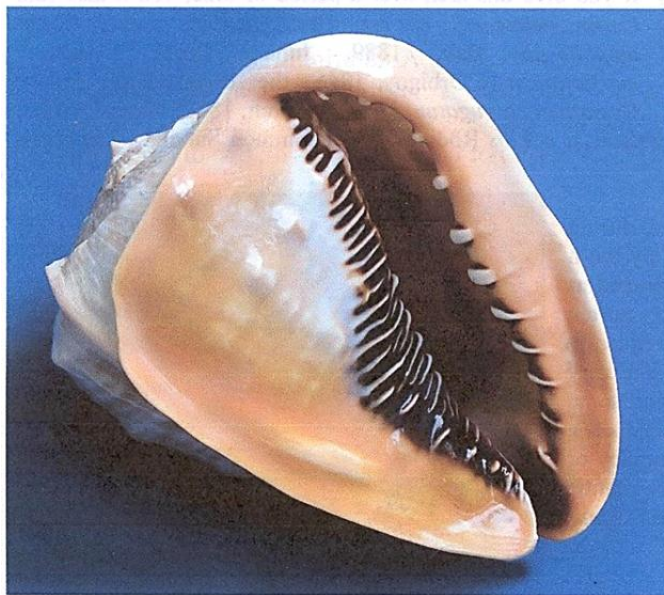
Atlantic Deer Cowrie and four *Conus ermineus* Born, 1778. Within sight from this same point were a Lace Murex, *Chicoreus florifer dilectus* (A. Adams, 1855) and a *Babelomurex mansfieldi* (McGinty, 1940), the Staircase Coralsnail. This was ten years ago, and, while I've never again experienced such extraordinary visibility or found another *Conus ermineus*, each year has yielded something new and many times a totally unexpected species.

*Conus ermineus* pictured at left.

My collecting in North Carolina has been on the wrecks, ledges, and hard-bottom ranging from Diamond Shoals, north of Hatteras, south to the Wilmington area. The diving has been from ten to forty miles offshore in a swath of water strongly

affected by the Gulf Stream. Even though the warm Gulf Stream and the cold Labrador Current are in a constant battle for dominance, most of the offshore sites are tropical in character (some even have coral growth). The prime sites, frequented by the commercial charters, generally require a two to three hour trip from the dock and range in depth from 60 feet (inshore) down to 140 feet. Most of the large boat clientele wants to dive wrecks, so the larger boats invariably go to wreck sites. These sites can be little more than rubble fields or a totally intact ship. The ledges and rocks are the province of spear fishermen and lobster hunters and require special charters, usually six divers per boat. You must be prepared dive to 120 feet deep plus, as the most popular sites fall into this range. Although there are flat calm days, three to four foot seas are the norm, and don't be surprised if the boat leaves the dock and heads into five foot swells. Take your Dramamine or whatever other seasick preventive works for you. For those willing to brave these deterrents, great shelling awaits.

Now what's down there? Very common on the reef structures are *Cymatium parthenopeum* (von Salis, 1793), the

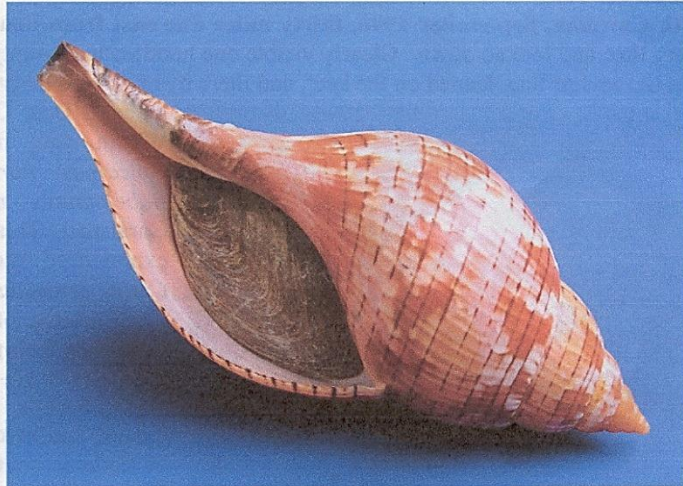


Neapolitan Triton; *Babelomurex mansfieldi* (McGinty, 1940); *Spondylus americanus* Hermann, 1781, the Atlantic Thorny Oyster; *Stramonita haemastoma floridana* (Conrad, 1837); the Florida Rocksnail; *Chicoreus florifer dilectus* (A. Adams, 1855), Lace Murex; *Chicoreus pomum* (Gmelin, 1791), Apple Murex; *Hexaplex fulvescens* (G. B. Sowerby II, 1834), the Giant Atlantic Murex; *Turbo castanea* (Gmelin, 1791), Chestnut Turban; *Cerithium* species and the Eastern Auger *Terebra dislocata* (Say, 1822). In the sand you'll find *Cassiss madagascariensis spinella* Clench, 1844 Cameo Helmet (pictured on left); *Semicassis granulata granulata* (Born, 1778), Scotch Bonnet, and *Oliva sayana* Ravenel, 1834, the Lettered Olive. The sand dwellers are very common as fresh dead shells but it's rare to find a living specimen. The Thorny Oysters are abundant on several wrecks,

almost always have a heavy sponge cover. I dove one site for years and never saw one. Then one day I put my hand down on a sponge and was spiked. That wreck was virtually paved with *Spondylus*!

Good finds, but not uncommon (also on the wreck structures), are *Nodipecten nodosus fragosus* (Conrad, 1849), the Northern Lionspaw; Chestnut Latirus, *Leucozonia nassa* (Gmelin, 1791); *Astralium phoebium* (Röding, 1798); *Macrocypraea cervus* (Linnaeus, 1771); *Cyphoma mcgintyi* Pilsbry, 1939; and *Triplofusus giganteus* (Kiener, 1840), Horse Conch. Live on the sand expect to find *Fasciolaria tulipa* (Linnaeus, 1758) the True Tulip and fresh dead *Cancellaria reticulata* (Linnaeus, 1767), Common Nutmeg; *Erosaria acicularis* (Gmelin, 1791), Atlantic Yellow Cowrie; *Natica canrena* (Linnaeus, 1758), Colorful Moonshell; *Neverita duplicata* (Say, 1822), Shark Eye; *Pollia tinctoria* Conrad, 1846, the Tinted Cantharus; and the Florida Fighting Conch, *Strombus alatus* Gmelin, 1791.

The tulips are especially beautiful, always red or red over a strawberry background. All my tulips have been taken from the inshore wrecks (ten miles or less from shore) so there is no need to be disappointed when the seas are up, and the choice is inshore or back to bed.



*Fasciolaria tulipa* (Linnaeus, 1758) the True Tulip



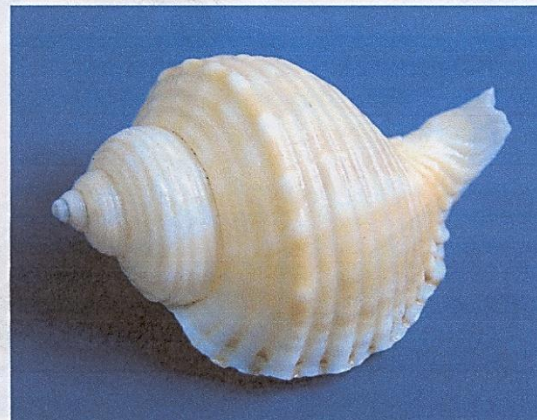
At left *Cymatium nicobaricum*.

Some of the less common but often-found shells are *Cantharus multangulus* (Philippi, 1848), Ribbed Cantharus; *Calliostoma euglyptum* (A. Adams, 1855), Sculptured Top; *Distorsio clathrata* (Lamarck, 1816), Atlantic Distorsio; and *D. mcgintyi* Emerson & Puffer, 1953, McGinty's Distorsio.

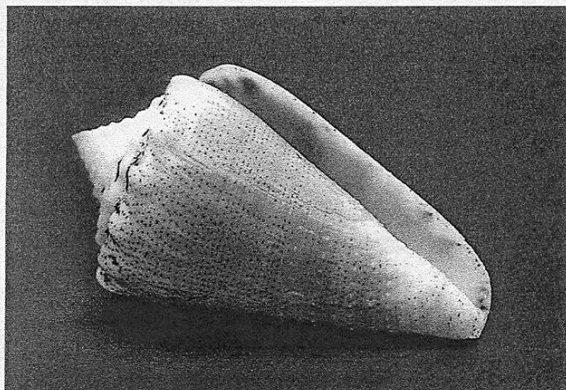
If you dive this area over a period of time, you'll also find *Conus delessertii* Récluz, 1843, Sozon's Cone; *Conus amphurgus* Dall, 1889, Julia's Cone; *Cymatium martinianum* (d'Orbigny, 1846), the Atlantic Hairy Triton; *Cymatium corrugatum krebisii* (Morch, 1877), Krebs' Triton;

*Tonna galea* (Linnaeus, 1758), Giant Tun; and *Architectonica nobilis* Röding, 1798, Common Sundial. The cones can be either in the sand or on the wreck structure.

**Surprises:** (I'm an amateur and may be easily surprised) during my first eight years of diving I came across one badly worn *Linatella caudata* (Gmelin, 1791), Ringed Triton (pictured at right). In year nine I found one large and perfect. In year ten I found six. These all came from sites that I had frequently dived. While you can count on consistency among the very common species, the surprises can occur anywhere and some of my most unique finds have come from heavily visited sites. Other surprises (for North Carolina) have been examples of *Conus granulatus* Linnaeus, 1758), Glory-of-the-Atlantic Cone; *Conus mus* Hwass, 1792, the Mouse Cone; *Conus*



*anabathrum* Crosse, 1865, the Florida Cone; *Conus regius* (form *citrina*) Gmelin, 1791, Yellow Crown Cone; *Cymatium nicobaricum* (Röding, 1798), Goldmouth Triton; *Latirus infundibulum* (Gmelin, 1791), Brown-line Latirus; *Bursa granularis* Röding, 1798), Granular Frogsnail; *Strombus costatus* Gmelin, 1791, the Milk Conch; *Cypraeassis testiculus* (Linnaeus, 1758), Reticulated Cowrie Helmet; and *Fasciolaria hunteria* (G. Perry, 1811), Eastern Banded Tulip. The *Fasciolaria hunteria* was unusual in that rather than having the blue and gray color common in Florida, this one was shades of brown over cream.

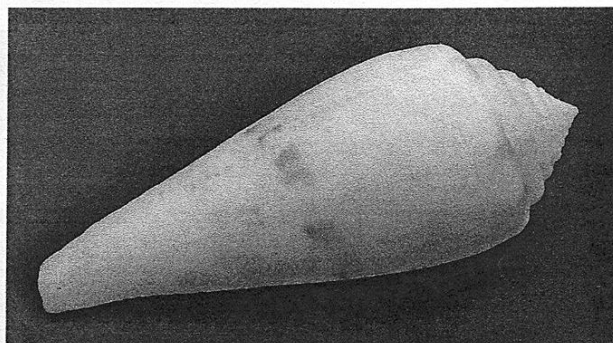


I haven't listed many bivalves, I'm not a big bivalve person, but I have found *Lirophora latilirata* (Conrad, 1841), the Imperial Venus; *Argopecten gibbus* (Linnaeus, 1758), Atlantic Calico Scallop; *Lindapecten mucosus* (Wood, 1828), Rough Scallop; *Euvola raveneli* (Dall, 1898), Round-rib Scallop; *Arcinella cornuta* Conrad, 1866, Florida Spiny Jewel Box; and *Dendostrea frons* (Linnaeus, 1758), Frond Oyster. Oh yes, and as a diver touches down on any wreck, he can almost hear a collective gasp as thousands of *Arca* species reluctantly close up.

Pictured on left is *Conus regius* (form *citrina*) Gmelin, 1791, the Yellow Crown Cone.

The question of favorite sites invariability comes up, but I don't think I have a special one. None of the sites seems to be over-collected, and, while every dive is certainly not a success, very few sites have not yielded something good. Several artificial reefs have recently been established by sinking obsolete vessels. Nature seems to work fast in North Carolina, and these new sites are quickly colonized and can be very productive.

A word of caution: Many of the charters are tolerant of shell collectors, but some are not; always ask in advance of using any particular diving charter service.



Above *Conus granulatus* Glory-of-the-Atlantic Cone.

All photographs by Marc Nathanson

N. B. *Conus granulatus*, *C. regius*, and *Cymatium nicobaricum* have not (yet), been collected off northeast Florida. H. G. Lee