

## Dentalium Encounters by Bill Merilees



Live *Antalis pretiosa*, Gordon Islands, Haida Gwaii, B.C.

Perhaps the most intriguing of the mollusc groups on our West Coast is the scaphopods, with the most notable species being *Antalis* (formerly *Dentalium*) *pretiosa* (Sowerby, 1860) [1]. There are many common names for this species including, tusk shell, Indian tooth shell, money shell and haiqua, (Lamb and Hanby, 2005; Galois and Mackie, 1990). Shimek (2008) lists five additional species of inshore scaphopods for our area, 2 *Cadulus*, 1 *Gadila*, 1 *Pulsellum* and 1 *Rhabdus*. All six are sub-tidal and, being buried in bottom substrates, are seldom seen. On rare occasions, a sharp-eyed beach collector might encounter one or two washed ashore on west coast beaches.

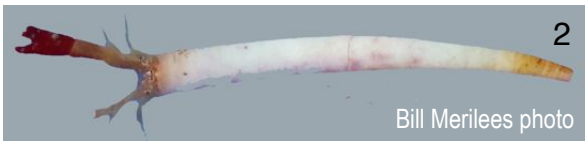
*A. pretiosa* is a sturdy attractive shell, an almost exact miniature of an elephant's tusk. During the period between 1750 and 1850 it was known as Haiqua and became the unit currency during the fur trade era. As such it was much sought after by First Nations people and fur traders alike. The Hudson Bay Company quickly caught on to their trade value. The shells were strung and

measured by the fathom (six feet), 40 shells making up a fathom. This would make the average length of each shell to be about 7 cm (1.8 inches) (Galois and Mackie, 1990, Mackie and Galois, 1990).

First Nations had specific locations and specialized methods for collecting Haiqua. Along the west coast of Vancouver Island the prime collecting areas were in the vicinity of Barkley Sound, Kyuquot and Forward Inlet. By First Nation people these shells were used for prestigious ornaments and were widely traded north and south along the coast and inland for considerable distances.

During a visit to Kyuquot this past summer, commercial geoduck harvesters all had specimens, garnered as by-catch, from their activities. Recreation divers also picked up specimens, most of which were being dragged across the bottom by hermit crabs [2]. This crab is specifically adapted to utilize tusk shells, its body being straight rather than coiled. Hence its generic name, *Orthopagurus*.

Many of the crab occupied tusk shells were encrusted by bryozoans. When removed, these 'moss animals' had imparted a distinctive pattern to the shell [3]. The specimen photographed also appeared to have been drilled by one of our moonshell species.



Bill Merilees photo



Rick Harbo photo



Bill Merilees photo

*Rhabdus rectius*, off Thetis Island, B.C.

From the author's experience the 'best' live *Antalis pretiosa* specimens, are found along our outer west coast, in clean, slightly coarse sand. Within the Salish Sea, *Rhabdus rectius* (Carpenter, 1865) [4], a longer (to 10 cm or 4 inches), more slender and brittle species, is sometimes encountered in soft mud.

Finding scaphopods is never easy. If you do not utilize SCUBA, a small dredge with a long rope or cable, and a strong body, is required to reach these habitats.

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### References:

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