

The Atlantic Tun

Steve Hathcock



“Mr. Hathcock, I found a shell while vacationing last September on South Padre Island. It appears quite fragile and I was very surprised to find it in an unbroken condition. My husband says it was probably bought at a shell shop because of its condition. Is this shell normally found on Padre Island?”

Thank you,

Marifel Lovell

Hi Marifel,

Congratulations on your find! The shell you found, the Atlantic Tun, belongs to the group of *Prosobranchiata* and the family of *Tonnidae*.

Yes, the shell is thin-walled which makes it buoyant. As a result, the tun oftentimes floats ashore intact and can be found near the trash or wrack line left by the high tides. The top, or apex, is generally darker and has seven spirals while the body of the shell ranges from pale yellow to brown and can grow as long as 7 inches.

The snail itself is usually lightly colored with dark toned spots and is larger than the shell it lives in. During the day, the tun buries itself beneath the silt, venturing out only after dark. It moves about with the help of a large, flat foot, usually in shallow water. A predator, it feeds on shellfish, crabs, sea urchins, sea cucumbers and other smaller animals. It dissolves the shells of other animals by means of an acid

secretion from its salivary glands and then pulls its prey from the shell and eats it.

Around 20 species exist worldwide. In North America, the tun can be found from North Carolina to the southern tip of Texas. I'm not sure if



they are edible but would imagine there are those chefs who will attest to its flavor.

The name, tun shell, means “cask shell” or “wine jar.” In Merry old England, a tun was the volume of wine held in a wooden cask (eight barrels or four hogsheads) whose combined weight equaled our modern ton.

If purchased in a shell or souvenir shop the shell in your photo would cost around \$13.00.