

Littlenecks For Food, Thought And Enjoyment by William Merilees*

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Professional clam diggers along our British Columbia coast concentrate their efforts on two species of clam; the Native Littleneck and the Japanese Littleneck or Manila Clam. These two species are found shallowly buried in sand gravel beaches about the mid-tide line. Here they can be dug by the bucketful, when conditions are ideal.

What few people realize, and this includes the professional clam digger as well, is that there is a second native species, the Thin-shelled Littleneck. This second species is much larger, is thinner shelled and is much less common. It also has a very patchy distribution.

On very rare occasions, the two native species appear to hybridize, producing a form that is intermediate with respect to size, shape, shell thickness and sculpture. This form has been described as a separate species (*Protothaca restorationensis*) but it has no common name.

To illustrate this comparison, the two native species along with their hybrid are shown in the accompanying photograph. To make the record complete, the Japanese Littleneck and a form of the Native Littleneck which develops heavy concentric ridges when it burrows into heavy clay, are also included.

The Thin-shelled Littleneck and the hybrid were found at Louie Lagoon, just south of Louie Bay near the north end of Nootka Island. The ridged form of the Native Littleneck was located in the narrow passage between North and South Pender Islands.

In the past, the hybrid Littleneck may have been more common, as it is frequently found as a Pleistocene fossil at Restoration Point, near Port Blakely, Washington.

The Manila Clam has an interesting history in British Columbia. It was first found in Ladysmith Harbour where the

Provincial Shellfish Biologist, not suspecting it had been introduced with the Pacific Oyster, described it as a new species! This clam, smaller than its native counterpart, is often strikingly marked with black, brown and yellow or deep purple, a sharp distinction from the other species and forms.

As one of the joys of beach walking is looking for shells, perhaps this short note and photo might stir a latent interest in clams. While it may take a trained eye to pick out small differences that serve to separate some species, the challenge can be a lot of fun.

The Gulf of Georgia has more than forty species of clams buried on its beaches! We also have a good Provincial Museum Booklet to help you identify the ones you find.

Reference

Quayle, D. B. 1960: *The Intertidal Bivalves of British Columbia*. B.C. Provincial Museum Handbook, No. 17. Victoria, B.C.



1) Native Littleneck, *Protothaca staminea*; 2) Thin-shelled Littleneck, *P. tenerrima*; 3) Hybrid, *P. staminea* X *P. tenerrima* known as *P. restorationensis*; 4) "Ridged" form of the Native Littleneck known as *P. staminea orbella* and 5) Japanese Littleneck *Tapes philippinarum*.

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