

Welcome to another edition of our on-line newsletter!

Those of you who visit Ocracoke in the off-season may have noticed broken shells on Highway 12, especially on the north end of the island where the road is close to the sound, or near the bridges that cross over our island creeks.

Contrary to what evolutionary biologists tell us, *Homo sapiens* is not the only animal that imitates or learns from other members of its species. Not only do seagulls learn and imitate, they use their little bird brains to annoy and frustrate those of us who think we are so smart.

For untold eons, seagulls have been plucking scallops from the shallow waters of Pamlico Sound, carrying them high into the sky, and dropping them deliberately onto the hard-packed ocean beach between high and low water marks. They do this in the winter because, well, that is when the scallops are plentiful in the sound.



Sometimes a bird must drop a scallop two or more times onto the hard beach before it breaks open. In the evolutionary “arms race” the scallop genes are racing along, trying to figure out how to make their camouflage more protective, their muscles stronger, and their shells harder. Seagull genes, on the other hand, are frantically trying to make their hosts able to spot scallops more easily, fly higher, and, since 1957, retrieve their delicacies and get out of the way fast, before their host is creamed by a passing motorist. For, you see, seagulls have learned (by accident, by trial and error, or by imitating a cleverer gull) to drop their scallops onto Highway 12. Black top is consistently harder than the beach and, I would imagine, a scallop is tastier not seasoned with sand.

Other coastal communities have tried painting seagull images on their highways to discourage birds from dropping their tasty morsels onto the pavement. The rationale behind this logic is that if a gull thinks another of his kin is already on the ground, he will not knowingly drop a shell there and risk losing his prize. It doesn't work. Maybe the painted gulls are not realistic enough. Maybe there aren't enough of them. Or maybe gulls are smarter than we want to acknowledge.

Some municipalities have actually paved areas near the water, and away from the highway for the exclusive use of seagulls. This doesn't work either. Gulls are opportunists. If the

highway is closer, they choose to do their dropping there. At least they do so until they misjudge a native islander racing to catch the next ferry.

So Highway 12 is often littered with broken scallop shells (and dead seagulls) this time of year. The dropped shells are broken and ragged, with edges sharp enough to cut through a radial tire. The wise driver avoids the broken shells whenever possible.

The good news, of course, is that scallops are plentiful this time of year. So it was with much anticipation that I was planning to “go scalloping” one day in late February. I enjoy clamming a lot, but had never been scalloping. Clamming is a summer activity. Somehow the thought of wading around in Pamlico Sound in winter was much less appealing. But it just didn’t seem right to live here for so many years and miss this experience. Dave Frum goes often, so I mentioned that I’d like to join him sometime.

On a recent Tuesday afternoon we set out for the north end of the island. Dave had just returned from his job as Park Ranger on Portsmouth Island. It was perfect timing. Even though it was February, the day was warm and sunny.

Dave pulled into my driveway about 4:30 pm, his rusting 4-wheel drive vehicle loaded with plastic buckets, waist boots, a large plastic barrel surrounded by an inflated truck inner tube, plenty of rope, and a red sea kayak. I brought canned drinks and crackers. After some sputtering and stalled starts, we eventually backed out of my driveway. The old truck bucked and jerked until we finally picked up enough speed so it ran smooth.

“It always runs great on the highway,” Dave assured me. “I must have water in the gas tank. Hey look here,” and he pointed to a yellow, five gallon plastic container behind my seat. “It was going to cost me three-hundred bucks to replace the gas tank. Heck that’s more that this thing is worth! So I just put this plastic container in here for a gas tank.”

I looked behind me, at the container, then at the dashboard. The fuel gauge, of course, read empty. The speedometer read zero. Big rusting patches adorned the hood. There was no rear window. The air was rushing in over my shoulder as we hurtled down the highway at about 50 mph. “Don’t know why,” offered Dave, “but she won’t go over 50. I’ve got the pedal down to the floorboard.”

“Don’t worry,” Dave added, apparently noticing my concerned look. “I’ve got my cell phone. We can always call somebody to come get us if we have any trouble with the truck.” I was going through my inventory of folks to call. Dave’s wife, Karen, was off the island. My dad no longer drives at 90 years old. I didn’t know where my daughter was. But, of course,

I knew we could always call someone! On the other hand, I thought, I can walk seven miles if I have to, either back to the village, or to the Hatteras Inlet ferry office. At least I have warm clothes.

We cruised on by Molasses Creek, Old Quork's Creek, Parker's Creek, and Try Yard Creek. The roadway was strewn with broken scallop shells. Seagulls were standing in the middle of the pavement snacking, until the last moment when they made a hasty retreat into the air. We only saw one dead gull. I guessed that natural selection was eliminating the slower, dumber birds regularly and that in a few more years the birds that were left would be smart enough to forsake the highway altogether and would be sautéing their scallops in garlic butter and white wine on my stove.

At the north end we pulled off the blacktop and onto a sand road that led directly to the sound. We untied the kayak and lifted it down from the roof. Off came the inner tube, the ropes, our one clam rake, and the waders.

I knew it would get colder as the sun sank lower in the sky so I pulled on my wool sweater and windbreaker. I slipped off my shoes and put on wool socks. Dave had a pair of waist boots for himself, and hip boots for me. I was a bit dismayed when I turned one of my hip boots upside down and a trickle of water ran out. "Oh well," I thought, "my socks will soak up a little moisture."

I slipped my right foot into the boot. Something was funny. Not "ha, ha" funny, but peculiar. My foot wouldn't go all the way in. I reached down, grabbed hold of something and extracted a wet and soggy sneaker. I held it up for Dave to see. "Oh that's Emma's shoe. I guess she forgot to take her sneakers out the last time she used the boots." Emma is Dave's eleven year old daughter. I smiled a wan smile and pulled the other shoe from the left boot, then turned both boots upside down and let the rest of the water drain out.

I was right. My socks really did wick up most of the moisture and my feet felt fairly dry.

We dragged the kayak, with the inner tube and tub tied to the stern, through the marsh and out into the water. The bottom was black and squishy, and it felt like we were walking through congealed pork fat. Every step went "slurrrrrp" and my boots seemed to be sucked into a murky netherworld from which I could just barely escape. It was a struggle just to stay upright.

Once we reached water deep enough to float the kayak, the bottom was hard and sandy. We got in, and pushed ourselves into a small channel that separated the shoreline from the

shoal. Since Dave had brought only one paddle, I sat in the bow, sans paddle, and felt like an Egyptian pharaoh being ferried across the Nile by royal slaves. When I voiced this fantasy Dave reminded me that I wouldn't feel so regal if we tipped over. I was beginning to imagine the river Styx.

The wind was stronger than usual, and the tide nearly high, so when we reached the shoal it became apparent that seeing scallops lying on the bottom would be more difficult than normal. We disembarked and pulled the boat to a lone, dead bush that had gotten trapped on the shoal. Dave tied the kayak and proceeded to instruct me about scalloping. Rakes are OK, he reminded me, but not really necessary. Mostly the scallops just lie on the bottom, waiting to be scooped up by beak or hand. Sometimes, Dave told me, there are so many you can just feel them under your feet and then reach down and grab them. With that, he stopped, and reached under water to pull up a medium sized, muddy scallop.

Dave's right arm and sweat shirt were now thoroughly soaked. He didn't seem to mind. We trudged along, stopping periodically to extract a scallop from the bottom and throw it into the tub, which was now tied securely to Dave's waist. I preferred the rake. Not only was it easier on my lower back, but I didn't have to get wet bending over to reach under water.

Eventually Dave and I wandered away from each other, and I stuffed scallops (and an occasional clam or oyster) into my pockets. I noticed that Dave was much busier than I, for he was mostly bent over, his arm down into the water up to his shoulder. Clearly he had found a rich bed of scallops. I ventured toward him for a while, but the water kept getting deeper and I feared the waves would start lapping over the top of my hip boots. So I contented myself with walking slowly from one underwater grass bed to another, poking the bottom with my feet and the rake.

It didn't really matter that I was only finding a tenth of the scallops that had caught Dave's attention. I was in heaven. The sun was slowly sinking in the West, and the nearly full moon was rising above the shoreline like a magical luminescent balloon, the rabbit on its surface cavorting merrily as if to celebrate my good fortune.

Before long the last small arc of red sun dipped below the horizon and bathed the western sky in shades of pink. As the moon rose steadily in the East, it appeared smaller and whiter. Meanwhile the sandy bottom was getting increasingly more difficult to see. I had to rely on my feet or the telltale scrape of metal tongs on rough shell to locate more scallops.

All the while Dave seemed oblivious to the waning daylight. Every time I glanced in his direction he was stooped over, feeling the bottom for more dinner fare. Eventually, as the

sky darkened, he headed in my direction, but he stopped every few steps to pull up another scallop and toss it into the tub. "Damn," he would repeat, "another one. Why can't I just walk over them and leave them be?"

By the time Dave reached me, he was cold, wet, and tired. The water had run down into his waist boots, and his sweatshirt was soaked through up to his neck. But the tub was overflowing.

We reached the kayak and untied it from the bush. We tied the inner tube and tub onto the stern. I crawled in but decided not to sit directly on the seat. It was wet, and I had managed to avoid getting soaked so far. There was no point in sitting in a cold puddle of water if I could help it. After all, it was dark now, and the air was considerably colder. It would be a while before I would be home in a nice hot shower. So I knelt, and held myself up by grasping the gunwales. I was determined to stay dry.

Dave held on to the sides and slipped a leg into the boat. When he swung his other leg across, the kayak tipped heavily to port, gracefully rolled over, and pitched us both into the cold water. So much for staying dry! My wool sweater was saturated, and my boots were nearly full.

"I guess I should have kept a lower center of gravity," I noted wryly. At this point, standing in thigh-deep water, and thoroughly soaked, I contemplated the slight discomfort of a wet butt (and dry torso) that might have been.

Now, of course, we were confronted with a boat full of water. It wasn't easy, but we lifted the kayak out of the water and turned it upside down. Water poured out and ran back into the sound. I noticed the paddle floating nearby and reminded myself not to let it slip away into the darkness slowly engulfing us.

This time I sat on the seat. No worry about getting wet now! Dave climbed in and we were off. Again, Dave paddled, but the wind also helped push us toward shore. We could see a small reflection of the moon off the top of our truck. It wasn't long before we were nosing into the marsh grass.

Out we stepped, but it was harder going than before. The bottom seemed gushier, our feet heavier. I took one step, lifted my other leg, but the gallon or so of water in the bottom of my boot kept it firmly anchored in the murky bottom. As my foot slipped out of the boot I lost my balance and fell face first into the shallow, muddy marsh. I was a mess.

As a pre-teen I had watched B-grade jungle movies where unwary explorers were routinely sinking into unexpected patches of quicksand. Their companions would offer an outstretched arm, all the while being careful not to venture too close to the gooey trap. Sometimes, if our hero was the unfortunate one to step into the quicksand, he would be pulled from danger just in the nick of time, as his chin was brushing the thick soupy sand. Occasionally, a minor character would slide under the surface after a desperate attempt to free himself. For a fleeting moment I wondered if I would sink out of sight, never to be seen again, but I pulled my hands out of the muck and eventually managed to stand upright.

It was easier after I emptied the seawater out of my boots. It took a while, but we transferred our scallops into two 5-gallon buckets.



Before long, we had the kayak on top of the truck, and all of our gear stowed away in the back. I was chilled by now and glad to pull off my boots, stow them with the rest of our belongings, and slide into the front seat of the truck. I remembered how difficult it was to get this truck started just a few hours before. And I wondered if Dave's cell phone had been in his pocket when we fell into the water. But my worries were misplaced. The truck started on the first try.

We drove up the sand road and turned onto Highway 12 heading back toward the village. When Dave shifted into second gear the truck lurched and several gallons of salt water poured out of the upturned kayak and ran down the windshield and across the hood. The windshield wipers would have helped Dave see if they had been touching the glass, but the torrent was soon over and we were glad to be on our way home.

Dave assured me the vehicle had a great heater...and he was right. It just didn't make a lot of difference because there was no rear window and the air rushed in like a howling north wind. By the time we pulled into my driveway I was chilled to the bone, but curious about how to open a scallop. Dave showed me in the light of his headlights. It wasn't much different from shucking a clam, just easier because scallops don't close as tightly.



The biggest difference is that most of the animal is discarded. All of the slimy, disgusting looking parts, including digestive tract and other “internal organs” are deftly peeled away “like pulling off a sock,” as Dave explained. That leaves just the white, appetizing “heart” or muscle to be cut away and tossed into a container, to be chopped up and fried in fritters, or sautéed in garlic butter. Now that’s what makes this whole adventure worth while!

Dave is talking about going back next week, but the weather is turning cold and the temperature is predicted to dip below freezing tonight. If we go again soon, and it’s much colder than last week, I might be secretly hoping that the seagulls have had a bonanza on the highway, and our tires will find their way to a jagged, broken scallop shell.

---

Be sure to visit our [What’s New](#) page regularly. We are adding new items every month, and adding new features periodically to make your on-line shopping experience at Village Craftsmen as efficient and enjoyable as possible.

Until next time, be well and happy!

Philip and the entire crew at Village Craftsmen