



Eastern Oyster

Crassostrea virginica



Size: Adults oysters range from 6–10 inches long.

Description: The oyster is a bivalve mollusk with a calcium carbonate shell. The shell provides shelter from dehydration when exposed at low tide and protection from predators. The upper valve is smaller and flatter than the lower valve. The muscle scar in the shell is purple with the rest of the shell being white inside and dirty-gray outside.

Range and Habitat: Western Atlantic from the St. Lawrence to the Gulf of Mexico in moderately shallow water. Southern climates are more likely to have intertidal oyster reefs.

Diet: The oyster is a filter feeder of phytoplankton from the water column.

Breeding: Large numbers of eggs (50 million) are produced and fertilized in the open water. Larvae have metamorphosed into adults and attach to hard bottom as “spat” in about three weeks.

Predators: Chief predators are sea stars and snails. Sea stars wrap around them and apply pressure with its tube feet until the shell is forced to gape at which point the sea star inserts its stomach and digests the oyster meat. The oyster drill, a particularly successful predator drills a round hole through the shell with its radula and feeds on the animal.

Threats to species: The obvious threat is direct loss of the habitat due to dredging to deepen nearshore areas. Less obvious but more harmful are the affects of pollutants and dangerously low or high salinities.

Status: Did you know?

- This is our most important bivalve
- Since the inside of a shell indicates what the pearl will look like, any pearl formed will be smooth but dull if formed from this species.
- Dead oysters are called “clutch” and are spread out on mud bottoms to prevent spat, the free-swimming larval stage, from landing on mud and perishing.

REFERENCES

Abbott, R.T., (1954) *American Seashells*, D. Van Nostrand Co., Inc.: New Jersey 541 pp.

Morris, P.A., ((1973) *A Field Guide to Shells of the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts and the West Indies*, Houghton_Mifflin Co.: Boston. 330 pp.

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