

Shell of the Month

by Dr. Rick Batt

Lobatus (Eustrombus) gigas (Linnaeus, 1758) (Queen Conch or Pink Conch)

The Queen Conch belongs to the family Strombidae. It is one of the most well-known seashells, and it is found adorning mantel pieces, shelves, and even gardens the world over. The large size, often strong, pointed knobs, and flaring outer lip, usually tinged with pink and occasionally yellow (though this color fades quickly), make this shell highly sought after by both shell collectors and those who desire some nice décor to accent their dwellings. Typical adult specimens range in size from about nine inches (228 mm) to more than eleven inches (279 mm), but smaller adults, about six inches (152 mm), have been found: some people refer to these “dwarfs” as “bonsai conchs”. Occasionally a specimen is found that exceeds 12 inches (305 mm), but these are rare. Juvenile specimens lack the flaring outer lip and are often called “rollers” because the shells easily roll around in the surf.

Lobatus gigas is native to the Florida Keys and southeastern Florida, where it is protected due to “over-fishing” (as a food source, for decoration, and once even to be ground up to make ceramics); and it is also found throughout the Bahamas and south through the Caribbean, including the West Indies islands, northern South America, Panama, and even the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico. It is also found further north around Bermuda, where it originally arrived as its larvae were carried there by the warm waters of the Gulf Stream.

The picture on the left below shows three typical adult specimens of *Lobatus gigas* from various localities (US quarter for scale): Bermuda (left, 291.8 mm); the Bahamas (middle, 300.4 mm); and Cuba (right, 241.0 mm). The picture to the right shows three juveniles, or “rollers”: 182 mm from St. Lucia; 211.4 mm from the Florida Keys (this albinistic, or nearly white specimen, was collected in the 1950’s); and 106.4 mm from Grand Cayman.



Queen Conchs typically live at water depths between 2 and 30 feet (0.6 to 9.2 meters) in areas with a sand bottom and eel grass. They use their horny, sickle-shaped operculum to “pole vault” across the bottom, where they feed on algae and detritus. In turn, meat from Queen Conchs is a sought-after delicacy, especially among islanders in the Bahamas and West Indies (where it is often called “Lambi”). Piles of empty conch shells can be found, each shell bearing a hole knocked into its spire to facilitate cutting of the muscle for easy removal of the meat. Queen Conch meat is used in a variety of dishes, from raw ceviche (though that dish traditionally uses gastropods from the western coasts of the Americas) to conch fritters, conch steaks, and conch chowder. Even though the Queen Conch is protected in US waters, you can still buy its meat at local Florida farmers markets (imported from the Bahamas or Honduras) so you can prepare the delicacy of your choice.

Finally, the pictures below show two of my more unusual specimens of *Lobatus gigas*. The one on the left, from Puerto Rico, measures 326.9 mm (12.87 inches) across its largest dimension: they don’t get much bigger than this. The specimen on the right, collected in the Florida Keys back in 1962, measures 285.0 mm and is unusual in that it has black color integrated into the inner and outer lips. Occasionally old individuals of Queen Conch as well as Milk Conch (*Lobatus (Macrostrombus) costatus*), when they reach a certain point, develop this black coloration. Speaking of Milk Conchs, because the ranges of these two species overlap, rare specimens (a total of two so far: one in my collection) have been documented that are hybrids between a Queen Conch and a Milk Conch.

