

Shell of the Month

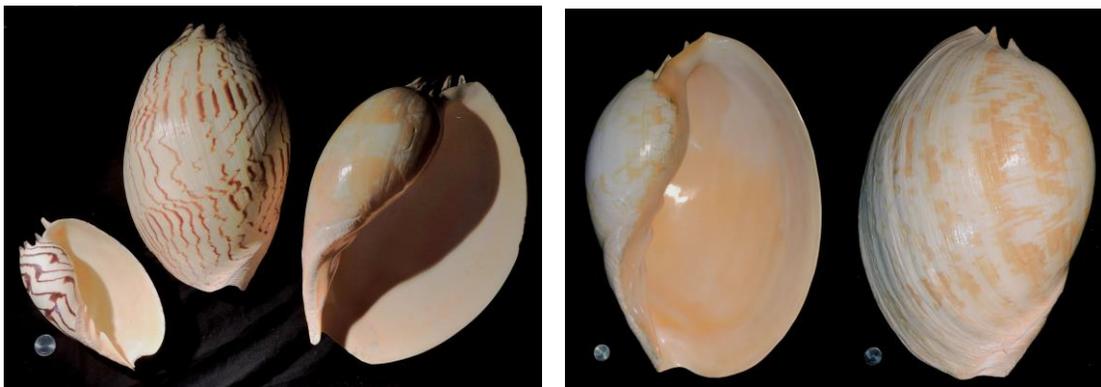
by Dr. Rick Batt

Melo umbilicatus (Broderip in Sowerby I, 1826) (Heavy Baler or Umbilicate Melon)

The genus *Melo*, which belongs to the Volute family (Volutidae), includes nine distinct tropical to subtropical species that inhabit the waters around Southeast Asia, the Philippines, portions of Indonesia, and much of Australia. They are often called “Melon Shells” because their large size and rounded shape with a large aperture remind people of melons. They’re also sometimes called “Baler Shells” because natives of some of the islands may have used these open shells to bail water out of their canoes. Even though there are few species, their size and shape, the variety of color patterns, and the great variety in form within several of the species (as well as freaks and documented hybridization between species) make this genus one of my favorite shell genera to collect.

Melo umbilicatus inhabits relatively shallow areas (shallower than about 20 meters or 67 feet) along the northeastern coast of Australia from southern Queensland north Thursday Island in the Torres Strait, and is also found in the Moluccas Islands area of southern Indonesia. It is one of the largest species of Melon Shell (second to *Melo amphora*), with adult specimens ranging from about ten inches (254 mm) to more than 17 inches (450 mm), and it’s been reported that in Australia certain collections include specimens greater than 500 mm (nearly 20 inches). The shell can be distinguished from *Melo amphora*, which overlaps this range then continues westward down along the northwestern coast of Australia, by its arched columella (along the inner lip), posterior-flaring outer lip, and sunken spire totally surrounded by the final whorl with its row of spines. The spines can be long and narrow or short and wide.

The pictures below show some of the variability in color and size of specimens of *Melo umbilicatus* (US quarter for scale). The left picture includes a specimen with a unique color pattern from the Timor Sea (194.6 mm, on the left); a 297.3 mm specimen from the Moluccas Islands; and (to the right) a more typical specimen from Queensland, Australia (310.0 mm). The picture on the right shows two views of my specimen from Queensland that was once the registered world size specimen for this species, at 450 mm.



Because its geographic range overlaps with a couple other *Melo* species (namely *Melo amphora* and *Melo georginae*, a species found only off southern Queensland), there is the possibility of hybridization between species. I have one large specimen that is a definite hybrid between *Melo umbilicatus* and *Melo amphora*, and several smaller specimens from southern Queensland that show such a wide range of variation that some may represent hybrids between *Melo umbilicatus* and *Melo georginae* as well. More work needs to be done on this genus.

Finally, the two pictures below show a couple of my favorite specimens of *Melo umbilicatus*. First are three views of a 327.6 mm specimen from Queensland, Australia with a severely “sunken” spire totally hidden by overlapping spines. I have seen very few specimens like this. Below that are two extremes in “freaks” of *Melo umbilicatus* from northern Queensland. The one on the left (248.6 mm) has two rows of spines; the one on the right (255.0 mm) not only has no spines but has a very unusual shape, a little reminiscent of the very rare (represented by only a few specimens) species from northwestern Australia recently named *Melo ashmorensis*.

