Seashell ID Guide

Use this handy guide to Scottish seashells to identify the species you find while exploring rockpools and the strandline of your local beach.

Common periwinkle (*Littorina littorea*)
**Description:** Shell with pointed whorls at side. Dark grey coloured with fine lines visible. About 2.5 cm high
**Where found:** On rocks, stones and seaweed. Feeds on algae and seaweed.
**Similar species:** The Small periwinkle (*Littorina neritoides*) is smaller (about 0.5 cm high), smooth, blue-black and found further away from water. It feeds on lichens.

Flat periwinkles (*Littorina obtusata*)
**Description:** Flattened whorled shell, various bright colour variations. Thickened opening of shell. About 1 cm high
**Where found:** Anywhere with brown seaweeds. Feeds on brown seaweed.
**Similar species:** The Open-mouthed flat periwinkle (*L. fabalis*) looks very similar, but generally the opening/aperture of the shell is wider than the diameter of the shell whorl.

Common mussel (*Mytilus edulis*)
**Description:** Dark blue/purple bivalve shell (occasionally dark brown). Length and shape can vary, but generally grow up to 10 cm (although 20 cm possible!).
**Where found:** Common around all British coasts, in large groups on rocky shores, attached to rocks, piers and in crevices. Filter feeder.
**Similar species:** The Mediterranean mussel (*M. galloprovicialis*) is similar, but only in south of England and Wales.

Common whelk (*Buccinum undatum*)
**Description:** A large yellow-brown whelk (up to 11 cm) with a spire of eight whorls with a distinctive ribbed surface. It’s spongy egg mass can often be found washed-up on the shore.
**Where found:** Common around all British coasts. Carnivorous, but mostly scavenges on carrion.
**Similar species:** The Netted dog whelk (*Hinia reticulata*), Thick-lipped dog whelk (*Hinia incrassata*) and Small dog whelk (*Hinia pygmaea*) have ribbed shells, but are all smaller (up to 3 cm) with thickened conical shells.

Red whelk (*Neptunea antiqua*)
**Description:** A large white/pale coloured whelk (up to 20 cm in length) with red-brown colour around opening. Shell smooth with, rounded, finely-grooved whorls coming to a point.
**Where found:** Common around the coasts of Scotland. Carnivorous, feeding on worms and bivalves, but will also eat carrion.
**Similar species:** Other smooth whelks tend to have more flattened or less rounded whorls.

Dog whelk (*Nucella lapillus*)
**Description:** Small whelk (up to 4 cm) with smooth rounded whorls. Colours vary from white to dark brown with or without stripes.
**Where found:** On rocky shores. Feeds barnacles and mussels.
**Similar species:** None
**Painted topshell (Calliostoma zizyphinum)**
*Description*: Perfectly conical-shaped shell. Colour varies but usually pink-orange. Up to 3 cm high.
*Where found*: On rocky shores. Feeds on algae growing on rocks.
*Similar species*: None

**Grey topshell (Gibbula cineraria)**
*Description*: Shell with blunt conical whorls. Grey or yellowish with thin greyish-brown bands. About 1.3 cm high
*Where found*: On rocky shores, stones and seaweed. Feeds on algae.
*Similar species*: None

**Flat or Purple topshell (Gibbula umbilicalis)**
*Description*: Rounded shell with blunt conical whorls, more flattened than Grey topshell. Yellow-greenish colour with thick purple-red bands. About 1.3 cm high
*Where found*: On sheltered rocky shores, stones and seaweed. Feeds on algae.
*Similar species*: None

**Common limpet (Patella vulgata)**
*Description*: Steeply conical shell with rough ridges. Green-brown colour with rough ridges. Inside of empty shell greenish-grey. Up to 6 cm across and 3 cm high.
*Where found*: On rocks and stones. Feeds on algae on rocks.
*Similar species*: The China limpet (Patella ulyssiponensis) is less steeply conical with a glossy white inside the empty shell. The Black-footed limpet (Patella depressa) is flattened and grows up to 3 cm across. The living creature has a dark greenish sole to the foot with pale tentacles.

**Blue-rayed limpet (Patella pellucida)**
*Description*: Distinctive flattened limpet. Shell orange-brown with ‘rays’ of electric blue. Up to 2 cm length.
*Where found*: On large kelps, where it feeds.
*Similar species*: None

**Slipper limpet (Crepidula fornicata)**
*Description*: Invasive non-native from America. Low conical shell up to 5 cm in length and 2.5 cm high. Forms stacks of individuals, the largest at the bottom is female and the smallest at the top is male.
*Where found*: On hard rocky or muddy shores. Filter-feeder.
*Similar species*: None

**Common cockle (Cerastoderma edule)**
*Description*: Oval white bivalve shell with around 24 ridges. Each half of full shell (valves) equal in size. Up to 5 cm in length.
*Where found*: On sandy shores. Burrows into sand and siphon feeds on plankton.
*Similar species*: The Lagoon cockle (Cerastoderma glauccum) is similar, but mostly on the south coasts of Britain and saline lagoons in the Western Isles. One edge (posterior) is straightened rather than rounded, giving it an angular shape.

**Spotted cowrie (Trivia monacha)**
*Description*: Small egg-shaped shell flattened underneath. Shell with many ridges and three dark spots. Up to 1.2 cm in length.
*Where found*: On rocky shores. Predator of seasquirts.
*Similar species*: The Arctic cowrie (Trivia arctica) is slightly smaller (1cm) and lacks the dark spots.
Pelican's foot (*Aporrhais pespelecani*)

**Description:** Small pale, pointed shell with up to 10 whorls with thickened ridges. Distinctive flared-lip with up to 5 projecting blunt lobes (often worn) resembling a bird's-foot. Up to 4 cm.

**Where found:** Sandy shores. Feeds on algae and detritus.

**Similar species:** The De Serre's pelican's foot (*Aporrhais serresianus*) has fewer whorls in shell (up to 8) and flared-lip with narrow pointed lobes.

Curved or Common razor shell (*Ensis ensis*)

**Description:** Slender razor shell with both sides evenly curved. One end truncated and other rounded. Up to 13 cm long.

**Where found:** Lives in burrows in soft sands. Feeds on plankton and debris using a siphon.

**Similar species:** *E. arcuatus* grows to 15 cm with one long edge straight and the other curved. *E. directus* is an invasive alien, broader and evenly curved along both edges with truncated ends.

Straight or Pod razor shell (*Ensis siliqua*)

**Description:** Large razor shell with both sides straight. Up to 20 cm long.

**Where found:** Lives in burrows in soft sands. Feeds on plankton and debris using a siphon.

**Similar species:** The Grooved razor shell (*Solen marginatus*) grows to 12 cm with parallel straight edges and distinctive grooved-lip at the top of each half-shell (valve).

Tower or Auger shell (*Turritella communis*)

**Description:** Elongated, pointed shell with about 20 whorls sculptured with 3 to 6 bold growth lines. Colour varies from red-brown to yellow or white. Mouth opening relatively small and concave. Up to 5.5 cm in length.

**Where found:** On sandy shores. Filter-feeds on fine particles of debris and algae.

**Similar species:** None

Queen scallop (*Aequipecten opercularis*)

**Description:** Thick oval shell with around 20 bold ridges. Both half of the shell (valves) are concave. Generally pinky-red colour. Up to about 9 cm diameter. Can actively swim by 'shell-clapping' to avoid predators such as starfish.

**Where found:** Generally widespread around all coasts.

**Similar species:** The King or Great scallop (*Pecten maximus*) has 15-17 bold ridges with the right valve concave and the left valve is flat.

Cuttlefish bone (*Sepia officinalis*)

**Description:** The internal shell or cuttlebone of the Common cuttlefish (*Sepia officinalis*), is often washed ashore. Up to 30 cm in length.

**Where found:** Tends to be found on sandy shores. Cuttlefish mainly feed on crabs and other crustaceans

**Similar species:** The cuttlebone of the Elegant cuttlefish (*Sepia elegans*) is smaller and tapered, appearing almost arrowhead-shaped at the rear end. Up to about 6 cm in length.

Sea potato shell (*Echinocardium cordatum*)

**Description:** The internal shell of the Sea potato heart urchin is brittle and brown. The living creature is covered in a dense mat of yellow spines. Up to 9 cm in length.

**Where found:** Sheltered, sandy shores. The living Sea potato is a burrower and feeds on small particles of debris collected using its tube feet.

**Similar species:** None