

This Month

Sea Squirt

Colloquial Nickname: *Sea Grape*
 Scientific name: *Molgula manhattensis*



Field Markings: Golden yellow to purplish-brown, with white or purple specks

Size: Up to 1.375 inches high

Habitat: Attached to the base of pilings, on rocks and buoys in intertidal zone

Seasonal Appearance: Year-round

Distinguishing Features and Behaviors

Sea squirts - so called because they squirt water out of the siphons when touched or squeezed - are irregularly shaped creatures belonging to a group of animals called **truncates**.

Truncates are classified as higher invertebrates because they are chordates - animals that have a spinal cord and a backbone during development. Other chordates include fish, birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians.

Sea squirts can be found in three forms: as solitary animals, as a loose colony resembling a bunch of grapes and in a compound, gelatinous mass.



The leathery tunic or body covering is composed of cellulose, a compound commonly found in plants.

Truncates are filter feeders, constantly drawing water into their siphons, where planktonic particles are trapped in mucus-covered cilia that line the mouth and intestine.

Water and waste products are excreted through an outgoing siphon. The round, grapelike tunicate has two openings at the top used to siphon water in and out of the body.

Tunicate larvae resemble tadpoles and live in the planktonic zone until settling. The free-swimming larvae eventually attach themselves to an object or other organism and will remain in the same place throughout their lives.

Sea squirts will not settle unless the substrate is free of other organisms. They are usually found separate from other sessile animals.

Relationship To People

Sea squirts are tolerant of pollution and can survive in very dirty harbors.

Although some species of tunicates are native to Narragansett Bay, several of the more common species found here are actually invasive, often arriving in ship ballast water.

Invasive truncates can reproduce quickly, accumulate on boats and pilings, and smother organisms on the sea floor.



HOW TO GET YOUR OWN COPY

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