

This Month

Purple Sea Urchin

Colloquial Nickname: Sea urchin
 Scientific name: *Arbacia punctulata*



Field Markings: Dark purple to reddish brown
Size: Up to 2 inches in diameter. The spines can be up to 1 inch long
Habitat: Attached to rocks and shells in tide pools, on seaweeds, along rocky bottoms
Seasonal Appearance: Year-round

Urchins have an organ in their mouths called “Aristotle’s Lantern,” which they use for feeding. This structure resembles a bird beak, with five plates rather than two, and is used to scrape algae from rocks. Purple sea urchins are omnivorous and feed on sponges, algae, small invertebrates and detritus.

Distinguishing Features and Behaviors

Sea urchins are squat, round creatures with a hard exoskeleton usually covered in spines. They belong to the group of echinoderms that also includes sea stars and sand dollars. The hard exoskeleton, known as a test, is composed of calcium carbonate plates called ossicles. The exoskeleton can often be found among other shells on the shore, distinguishable by the sutures of the plates along with rows of bumps and pin-sized holes.



While alive, the exoskeleton resembles a pin cushion, covered in spines. Spines are absent in a small area near the top where pores lead to reproductive organs and on the bottom where the mouth is located.

In tiday areas, urchins use their spines to dig small depressions among the rocks and sand. These holes hold water even after the tide has gone out; the holes also protect the urchin from waves at high tide.

Relationship To People

Urchins are sensitive to light and hide in rock crevices during daylight; however, this has not prevented divers from finding and harvesting them. Sea urchins are harvested along both the Pacific and Atlantic coasts, but many areas have been closed in California and the Gulf of Maine as a result of overfishing. They are primarily exported to Japan for food.

Purple sea urchins - and the occasional green sea urchin - are common along the rocky shores of Narragansett Bay. Stepping on or touching the spines of an urchin can cause a small cut.

HOW TO GET YOUR OWN COPY

RISAA members can purchase their own copy of *The Uncommon Guide To Common Life on Narragansett Bay* for \$15 from the RISAA Merchandise Committee. Stop by the committee table at any monthly RISAA meeting.



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