

This Month

# Common Periwinkle

Nicknames: Winkle

Scientific Name: *Littorina littorea*



**Field Markings:** Shell is dark in color, usually brown, black or gray.

**Size:** One inch long and three-quarters of an inch wide.

**Habitat:** Intertidal zones, rocky shores, tide pools, pilings, rock jetties.

**Seasonal Appearance:** Year-round

## DISTINGUISHING FEATURES AND BEHAVIORS

The periwinkle, which is related to limpets, whelks and other marine snails, is the most common snail in the Bay. Periwinkles are protected by a single spiral shell that grows with their bodies. Without the shell, they resemble land slugs. Their body includes a fleshy foot, a short tail and two antennae on the head. The cream-colored foot on the periwinkle is divided into a right and left half, which the snail moves alternately as they muscle ripples forward. Periwinkles use their foot to hold securely onto rocks or sea grasses when waves pass over them. Their stalked tentacles are sensory organs that are used to see and taste. Common periwinkles are closely related to the marsh periwinkle (*Littorina irrorata*), more common in salt marshes.

These creatures are herbivores, using their file-like tongue to feed on diatoms and algae attached to intertidal rocks. The periwinkle breaks down its food by mixing it with mucus on the radula before bringing the food into its mouth, and it can live for many days without food or water by retaining moisture in their



gills. Periwinkles are eaten by sea stars, whelks and some fish. The shells of dead periwinkles are often inhabited by hermit crabs.

During spawning, females release fertilized eggs at night and only during high tide to ensure the egg capsules are dispersed and not exposed to air. After about six days, the eggs hatch into a larval stage that floats in the water column for several weeks before transforming into tiny periwinkles that settle in the subtidal zone.

Periwinkles close themselves into their shells and excrete a sticky mucus that hardens, firmly attaching the animal to a rock or blade of seagrass. Periwinkles adapt to a variety of environmental conditions, including extreme heat and wind when the tide is low and severe wave action and submergence when the tide is high.

## RELATIONSHIP TO PEOPLE

Although easy to spot along the coast, periwinkles are not native to North America or Narragansett Bay. Periwinkles were introduced to Nova Scotia from western Europe in the 1800s. Before their introduction, it is believed that the Bay's rocky shores were covered with lush green algae, unlike the gray bare rocks we see today. Although periwinkles are small in size, the constant scraping action of the radula of so many individuals can eventually lead to rock erosion.

Considered a delicacy in Europe, periwinkles are edible after a light boiling in seawater. Regularly harvested in the Bay, their local popularity as a food source has grown in recent years.

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