OUTDOORS

In a boom year for razor clams, here's a guide for new diggers

By JEFF LAYTON Special to The Seattle Times

It might be the worst-kept secret in the Northwest this spring: Razor clamming is going to be epic in 2014.

"We've seen three good waves of successful spawning events this winter," says state Coastal Shellfish manager Dan Ayres. "Clamming is strong now and should remain strong over the next couple of years. The ocean is very healthy and there is a lot of food for razor clams."

Don't be surprised if you find yourself swept up in the fervor to unearth a bucket full of meaty bivalves. It's one of those classic Northwest experiences that everyone should try at least once.

To see how things were shaping up, I dropped by the small coastal community of Grayland in Grays Harbor County, for a late-winter dig.

While I expected to encounter a few families digging, I found a beach crowded with thousands of diggers - all of them hunched over, walking in slow circles, like zombies.

The experience that followed felt novel, quintessential, challenging, charming and fun, all at the same time.

Here's what you need to know to get into the action.

Step 1: Decide where to go

The razor-clamming season runs through the end of May on select days. This time of year, you dig on the morning low tide, so you're not in the dark as you often are during winter digs.

Frequently opened locations on the coast are Long Beach, in Pacific County, and Twin Harbors and Mocrocks beaches (with the likely addition later this month of Copalis Beach), in Grays Harbor County (see map).

Step 2: **Get a license**

A quick search online identified three stores within a mile of my house where I could buy a license, or you can buy online.

An annual razor license is only \$13 but if you're planning to fish or crab this year, you can com-



JEFF LAYTON / SPECIAL TO THE SEATTLE TIMES

Clam diggers harvest the razor-clam bounty recently on Twin Harbors Beach near Grayland, Grays Harbor County.

IF YOU GO

Clamming on the coast

The next expected open days for razor-clam digging on the Washington coast are April 14-20. Check the state Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) website for exact locations, dates and times: wdfw.wa.gov/fishing/shellfish/razorclams.

The website includes useful information on how to obtain a license, where to stay, tips on cleaning and digging, and more.

Under state law, diggers may take 15 razor clams per day and must keep the first 15 they dig. All diggers age 15 or older must have an applicable 2014-15 fishing license to harvest razor clams. Licenses range from a 3-day razor-clam license (\$8.60) to an annual combination fishing license, and are available on WDFW's website and from license vendors around the state.

Festival coming soon

The Long Beach Razor Clam Festival, April 19-20, includes free clam-digging lessons and the World's Largest Fry Pan Clam Fritter Cookout; www.razorclamfest.com.

bine a clam license with other types of fishing licenses.

Step 3: Plan your trip

You're going to get wet and sandy, so pack your rubber boots and foul-weather gear. I didn't have rubber boots, so I wore my hiking boots, but I had to abandon a few good holes when the waves came surging in.

Every digger is required to have a license and bucket, but you can share a shovel or a clam gun. (Which to choose? More on that in a moment.)

Digging begins about two hours before low tide, which gives you four solid hours to reach your 15-clam limit. This is more than enough. As a total novice, it took me about 90 minutes to hit my limit, and most of that time was spent chatting with the locals and shooting photos.

Step 4: Find the dimple

I didn't know the first thing about digging up a clam, and during the first 30 minutes I wandered among my fellow zombie diggers, trying to locate a dime-sized divot or doughnut shape that gun, which uses suction to indicated a clam. I stared blankly at the sand while everyone else seemed to find a hole every 30 seconds.

For help, I turned to two Grayland residents, brothers Steve and Don Beatty. As waves swirled around our feet, they rattled off a comprehensive litany of clamming knowledge passed down to them by their father and honed with 80 years of combined experience.

Look toward the sun so the light reflects off the sand and look for tiny imprints. Stomp on the wet sand and look for mounds to appear. A razor clam will dig a foot deeper before you reach it, but they always move down and toward the ocean. Razor clams live in groups. As you're digging, look for other holes to appear nearby.

Step 5: Shovel or gun?

The Beatty brothers demonstrated the two popular digging tools — the shovel and the gun.

To use a shovel, dig adjacent to the dimple, and feel around with your hands until you find a clam. It's fast but dirty, and those who've mastered the technique swear by it, says Steve Beatty.

For 90 percent of diggers, however, it's the long tube barrel of the so-called clam

remove a wad of sand hopefully with a clam inside. Tip the barrel handle a few degrees toward the dunes and wiggle it as you push. Plug the air hole with your thumb and pull out a slurping wet sand noodle.

If you strike a shell, you'll feel a crunch, so back out and try again at a steeper angle. "It happens," said Westport resident Scott Holley. "But they all taste the same when they're in the pot!"

Step 6: **Clean your clams**

Like any seafood, it's best to cook razor clams right away, but they'll live until you get home if you fill your bucket with seawater. If needed, they'll survive in the fridge for a few days, or you can freeze them in saltwater.

To remove the clams from the shells, drop them in boiling water for about 15 seconds. You don't want the clams to cook yet, so rinse the clams in cold water as soon as the shells pop open and the meat will slip out of

For cleaning technique, I watched a YouTube video (go to YouTube.com and search for "How to clean razor clams"). It took some practice, but by the time I cleaned my last clam, I had



the process down to about two minutes.

Step 7: Feel the pride (and eat well)

It's a lot of effort to dig up clam. But I felt a notable sense of satisfaction when I walked through my front door with a bucket full of food that I'd caught with my bare hands.

The effort was worth it just for that feeling alone. But I'm not going to lie, I couldn't wait to find out how the clams tasted.

I "hunter-gathered" for m family, and they rewarded me with clam deliciousness in the week that followed. First it was clam fritters, followed by a clam dip featuring ridiculously large pieces of clams - and, final ly, a New England bacon clam chowder that melted i my mouth.

Seattle-based writer Jeff Layton on a quest to see 100 countries, visiting No. 77 this month. Read about his adventures in Grenada and download clam recipes on his blog, www.MarriedToAdventure.com

COMING UP

Planning ahead for events beyond Seattle

Washington

BirdFest, April 10-12, Orcas Island. visitsanjuans.com

Feast Walla Walla, April 12, Walla Walla. feastwallawalla.com. Leavenworth Ale-Fest, April 12, Leavenworth. leavenworthalef-

Razor Clam Festival, April 19-20, Long Beach. razorclamfest.com. Black Lake Fishing Derby, April 26, Ilwaco. ilwaco-wa.gov.

Tour De Lopez, April 26, Lopez

Island. lopezisland.com. Washington Comedy Festival, April 26, Wenatchee. laphpro.com. Bloomsday, May 4, Spokane.

bloomsday.org Maifest, May 10, Leavenworth. leavenworth.org

Oregon

READER'S LENS

Photographer: Jim Zaikoski, Redmond

Photo taken: Feb. 6, Rattlesnake Lake

Photographer's description: "I took this during the early February cold snap. I liked the way the hoar frost elevated some of the beach gravel to make it look like it was exploding."

Expert says: "I've never seen anything like this and that's what I love about photography - someone can capture something they experience and share it with the world. It really does look like it's exploding. I like the tight frame the photographer made to focus in on what's important and I believe this is what emphasizes the look of an explosion since we don't see the surrounding beach."

- Katie G. Cotterill, Seattle Times photo staff

Share your recent photo from around the Northwest. Submit online at seattletimes.com/northwestphotos (and see an online gallery of other Reader's Lens photos). We judge the best and award a prize every December.