

SCALLOPING: *The thing to do on a hot August day*



We drop anchor in 4-5 feet of clear water where the bottom is thickly covered with sea grasses, the only boat visible on the wide span of the Gulf. Horseshoe Beach is to the south. To the north, Pepperfish Keys lies against the near horizon, two narrow strips of land capped with green vegetation and a few clumps of trees. It is 10 am on a Tuesday morning, and about three quarters of an hour since we left Suwannee Marina under cloudy, threatening skies.

“There were so many boats here last Saturday you could practically walk from boat to boat all the way back to Horseshoe,” someone quips as we don masks, snorkels and fins.

Within a few minutes three of the five aboard—Ben West, Shane Murray and I (Jane Connors)—are in the water floating above a world of gently waving sea grasses of muted green and gold. Aboard the *Lady Lynne*, captains Wayne

Donn and Ron Hall of Suwannee, our guides for the day, keep a close eye on our progress and the weather. Although we are flying the required diver down flag and there are no other boats nearby, this is a wise precaution with divers in the water.

My attention is underwater. Here and there little fish flick by, unafraid of the intruders in their silent seascape. But where are the scallops?

Ben has already started picking them up, but with my efforts focused on getting used to the snorkel

(it is literally 20 years since I’ve used one) and my new surroundings, I see nothing resembling a scallop shell. Ben patiently shows me how to spot them, even pointing one out, but I still can’t seem to find any on my own. Then Shane shows me a lone scallop lying on an open sandy patch. I dive down to get it (without

swallowing water!) and suddenly I am seeing them everywhere.

After about half an hour our captains signal us in, we pick up anchor, and move further north. A few other boats have appeared, mostly closer to Pepperfish Keys. We are still a fair distance south of these low islands. Now the sun comes out, turning our grey world into one where the



Scallops are harvested in and around sea grass beds in clear, shallow water from Horseshoe Beach to Keaton Beach. Snorkel, mask, fins, a mesh bag and a sense of fun are required equipment as shown above by Suwannee resident Shane Murray.

softest, clearest blue paints all from the sweep of the now placid ocean, to the bright sky where only a few clouds linger. Around the boat the sea floor is dotted with bare sandy patches, bright in the sunlight. The water is so clear we are able to snap photographs of the bottom from the boat.

In the water again, we begin to pick up many more scallops around the edges of these little reverse oasis. Mostly I am seeing the bivalve shells resting lightly on the finer sea grasses about a foot or so above the sea floor, or right on the sandy bottom. With sun lighting the water I can see the beautiful blue eyes set around the edge of their shells, glittering like tiny sapphires. Little fish flash like silvery coins in the light. It is so serene and calming, just floating, gazing down into the water. Diving

down to retrieve scallops is part of the fun, but by no means the entire experience.

We move one last time, once again closer to the keys where several boats are now anchored. By this time the area is dotted with shallow draft vessels—I count eighteen in sight resting on the placid Gulf with red and white diver flags visible.

This last stop is the sweet spot. Captain Wayne, owner of the *Lady Lynne*, gets in the water and starts filling his mesh bag in earnest. It isn’t long until we have our limit of 10 gallons. (There is a limit of two gallons per person and 10 gallons per boat.)

“On a hot August day this is the thing to do,” says a satisfied Captain Wayne as we finally pull up anchor and head back to Suwannee.

I have to agree. I feel relaxed and pleasantly tired. I have managed not to get sunburned or breathe any water and have now experienced the fun of scalloping first hand.

“A lot of people plan their vacation around this,” Ben says as we sit around chatting about the day. It is easy to see why families love to do this together. Even children can manage the shallow, placid water and once they master a snorkel can easily dive the few feet to retrieve scallops. Cleaning them is also a family affair where everyone sits around a table opening shells, removing innards (the newest way to do this is by using a shop vac—yuk!) and cutting the meat from the shell.

Along the Hidden Coast, the shallow, clear waters where scallops gather are located from just north of Horseshoe Beach all the way to Keaton Beach and beyond. Captains for scalloping trips can be hired in Cedar Key, Suwannee, Horseshoe Beach, Steinhattee and Keaton

Beach. Check our tide chart page for local captains, or ask at a local marina for a recommendation. Bay scallops may only be harvested recreationally. A salt water fishing license is required.

Editor’s Note: Captain Wayne Donn (352-542-0743) and Captain Ron Hall (352-542-0358) both offer guided trips out of Suwannee for all kinds of fishing adventures.





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