

# News-Press.

## ENVIRONMENT

# Sanibel's Bailey-Matthews shell museum acquires world record-sized shell



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After what Hurricane Ian did to Sanibel Island and surrounding areas last September, places like the island's Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum deserve all of the good news it can get.

José H. Leal, the Science Director & Curator for the museum, has something to not only be happy about, but also something to brag about. That would be the newest addition to the museum's already impressive collection – a world record-sized West Indian Chank.

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Leal was kind enough to take a few minutes and answer the following questions about the shell:

## Is this the biggest shell in the museum's collection?

No it's not. We have a Giant Clam (*Tridacna gigas*) that is about 972 mm / 38.25 inches / 3.2 feet!

## What is the next biggest shell in the museum's collection?

The World Record Size Horse Conch, *Triplofusus giganteus*, is 606 mm in size (23.86 inches)

## **Is there a world's record biggest shell on the books and how does this one compare?**

Yes, the largest living shelled mollusk is the Giant Clam, *Tridacna gigas*. The world record size for that species is 120 cm / 47 inches / almost four feet long.

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## **What is the back story on the donor, Donald Dan? How did you acquire the shell?**

Donald Dan is a retired shell dealer. He's very active in the American shelling community. He's a past board member of the Sanibel-Captiva Shell Club, the Conchologists of America, and other shell-related organizations. Donald has been a supporter of the National Shell Museum since its inception. He learned about the shell at the recent Broward Shell Show in Pompano Beach, making a financial donation specifically for the purchase of the specimen. The shell belonged to Mr. Pete Stimpson of Loudon, Tennessee, and was being sold in consignment by *Femorale*, a Brazilian-Italian-American shell dealership enterprise. The shell was originally sold to Mr. Stimpson by *Showcase Seashells*, formerly of Sanibel Island, so things came around full circle with the return of the shell to Sanibel thanks to Mr. Donalds' generosity.

## **How was the shell delivered to the museum?**

I was a judge for the Scientific Division of the Broward Shell Show early in January at Pompano Beach. Donald forwarded the shell to me and I brought it to the museum.

## **What is the biggest shell you have personally seen or held in your career?**

Any of the Giant Clams, *Tridacna gigas*, in assorted world museums I visited or worked on.

## **Is it unusual to find a shell in this family of shells that is this large?**

Yes, they are usually in the 10-12 inches size range.

## What body or agency declares it as a 'world record' shell?

A private group effort called the Registry of World Record Size Shells.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Registry\\_of\\_World\\_Record\\_Size\\_Shells](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Registry_of_World_Record_Size_Shells). It was started in 1964 by Rolbert L. Wagner and Robert Tucker Abbott, who later became the Founding Director of the Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum. The Registry is now managed and published by Philippe Quiquandon and Jean-Pieer Barbier in France.

## Can you provide the key numbers for this shell?

**HEIGHT:** 499 mm (19.65 inches)

**CIRCUMFERENCE:** Roughly 635 mm, or 25 inches

**OFFICIAL COLOR:** Tan-brown

**NOTE:** We asked how much it weighed but unfortunately the museum's scale was destroyed by Hurricane Ian.

## What else would people want to know?

West Indian Chanks feed on gastropods, bivalves, and tube worms, and lay eggs in round, flat egg capsules that are connected by a string.

## Is the shell on display at the museum?

Not currently, It'll be incorporated into a new version (post-Hurricane Ian) of our exhibit "World Record Size Shells".

## What has to happen for a shell to get to this size?

Live a healthy life and avoid predators at younger life stages, when the mollusk is small.

## Was something living in this shell at some point in time?

Shells are made by animals called mollusks. All shells are or were an integral part of the animal, serving to protect and lend physical structure to the animals. The mollusk grows the shell as its body grows, so that the shell size is always proportional to the size of the animal that makes it, affording the protection they need against predators and their environment.

## **Can you explain: How does a shell grow? Why does one shell like this one get this big where others are more 'normal' size?**

The mollusk animal lays more shell material at the shell edge, to make it grow. Some get bigger than others probably as the result of a combination of genetics and feeding. And also avoiding an early death.

## **Is it possible for someone shelling on Sanibel to come across a shell this big?**

Very unlikely. However, one of the local species, the Horse Conch, is the largest shell-making mollusk in the Atlantic Ocean (and Gulf of Mexico), so finding a very large Horse Conch can happen once in a blue moon. Read my comment above about this latter species. The museum owns the world record size Horse Conch shell, which measures 604 mm (23.86 inches). That shell was collected by a scuba diver off Sanibel Island.

## **Any final thoughts?**

That the shell is one among a number of world record size shells in our collection and on display in the World Record Size Shells exhibit at the museum. Those include the largest Horse Conch, *Triplofusus giganteus*, at 604 mm (23.78 inches); the largest Lighting Whelk, *Sinistrofulgur sinistrum*, at 402 mm (about 15.83 inches), the largest Goliath Conch, *Lobatus goliath*, at 380 mm (15.96 inches), the largest Banded Tulip, *Cinctura hunteria*, at 129 mm (5.08 inches), and the largest Atlantic Trumpet Triton, *Charonia variegata*, at 387.5 mm (15.3 inches). With the reconstruction of our gallery, *The Great Hall of Shells*, following the damage inflicted by Hurricane Ian, that exhibit will be expanded to include the new shell.

## **More info**

The Bailey-Matthews Shell Museum on Sanibel Island is open for limited hours while it recovers from Hurricane Ian. Go to the museum website for more information:

**[shellmuseum.org](http://shellmuseum.org)**

