

# The Baymen's Nightmare: All the Scallops Are Dead

There have been lean years in Peconic Bay, on Long Island. But fishermen have never seen a failed harvest like this one.

**By Charity Robey**

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You could tell it was going to be a bad scallop season just by looking in the parking lot of the Shelter Island Yacht Club.

When the scallops are abundant, gulls pluck them from shallows, drop them on the macadam from a height, and swoop down to eat the meat from the cracked shell. This October, for the first time in years, the yacht club parking lot was not carpet-bombed with scallop shells.

Sure enough, when bay scallop season opened on Monday, the baymen of Long Island brought news. Most of the adult scallops in Peconic Bay were dead.

Pete Wencel, a bayman who didn't go out on opening day, struggled with what the die-off will mean for him. "Honestly I don't know what the hell I'm going to do this winter," he said. "It's not good."

Bay scallops from the Peconic Estuary have been feeding the inhabitants of Long Island for centuries, but in fewer than 50 years, according to one expert on bay scallop biology, human activity driving climate change has threatened scallops with extinction.



A meager haul from a full day's run near Shelter Island. Johnny Milano for The New York Times

Sawyer Clark, a 22-year-old bayman accustomed to throwing the first dredge of the season every year at sunrise in Peconic Bay, often in the company of his father or grandfather, didn't even put dredges on his boat this year. He had heard that most of the scallops died over the summer. But even he was shocked at their sudden demise. "It's devastating," he said. "I only hope this is not a new normal."

The sweet and briny flavor of an adult Peconic Bay scallop is the result of 18 to 22 months of good living in bays of glacial till and silty mud. They must be eaten within hours of being caught, and some baymen eat them on the half-shell as they fish. An essential dish at East End holiday dinners, Peconic Bay scallops cost upward of \$30 a pound in a fish store, although in recent years strong supply has kept the price closer to \$25.

By the night before the season opened last year, Charlie Manwaring, owner of Southold Fish Market, had distributed about 300 bushel bags to his suppliers — scallopers going out for the harvest. This year it was fewer than 30 bags. Even that was hoping for too much. They returned with nothing.

“I can’t remember as bad as this,” Mr. Manwaring said. “And I’ve been doing this a long time. This year has got us all shocked.” With that, Mr. Manwaring left the store in charge of his sister and went hunting.



Wayne King and Donna King preparing their boat on opening day. Many baymen, aware of the situation, didn't even go out. Johnny Milano for The New York Times

The fact that anyone went scalloping on opening day in spite of the consensus that there weren't any scallops is testament to the fortitude, and perhaps stubbornness, of the few who did go.

Tim Sweat, a full-time commercial fisher, left Greenport before sunrise loaded with dredges to increase his chances of making the 10-bushel limit. He returned 10 hours later with about 150 scallops — too few to sell. “I’m scared,” he said on the dock where his boat, Next Step, was tied up. “I don’t know what I’m going to do at this point. This is what I was banking on.”

Ken Homan of Braun’s, a longtime distributor of bay scallops, has seen years that were down, but never a year when his best suppliers decided to skip opening day. By the end of the day Monday, Braun’s had sold 24 pounds of Peconic Bay scallops, down from 2,000 pounds on opening day last year.

The season in Massachusetts opened a few days before New York, and baymen there were finding a solid set of bay scallops this year, after a bad 2018.

But New York’s bay scallops are living close to the edge, unable to tolerate water hotter than the mid-80s. They are particularly stressed by temperature spikes that also stimulate them to spawn. Water temperatures reached the mid-80s several times this past summer, according to a U.S. Geological Survey station gathering data in Orient Harbor.

Baymen were the first to know that something disastrous had happened to this year’s adult Peconic Bay scallop population. On the Friday before opening day, the East End Maritime Museum was filled with an audience of concerned baymen, environmental officials, and local scallop-lovers who wanted to hear from Stephen Tettelbach, a shellfish ecologist with the Cornell Cooperative Extension, on what they already knew would be a terrible season.



Tim Sweat, early morning on Peconic Bay. Johnny Milano for The New York Times

Mr. Tettelbach is well known to baymen for his leadership of a long-term bay scallop restoration project funded by Suffolk County. The project so improved bay scallop numbers that during last year's season, which ended in March, the supply of scallops actually exceeded the demand, and distributors asked baymen to slow down the catch because of a lack of skilled shuckers to process the bounty.

The scallop restoration project involves raising and releasing scallops into Orient Harbor. In June and October, they assess the numbers, size, and health of the bay scallop population through a series of dives. The survey, completed in June of this year, showed a strong population. But by October, most of the adults were empty shells.

Mr. Tettelbach believes the cause of the collapse from Flanders Bay to Orient Harbor is high water temperatures and the accompanying low oxygen levels. In the late 1980s, the bay sustained three successive years of brown tide, a harmful algal bloom that had a devastating effect on the bay scallop population.

This catastrophe, however, he attributes primarily to human-induced climate change.

“We have seen population reductions in the past,” Mr. Tettlebach said. “This is worse than that. Given that there are juveniles there is hope,” he added. “Can the population sustain themselves on their own? Prior to this year, I would have said maybe. Not now.”



John Tehan, a Shelter Island bayman, heading out on opening day. Johnny Milano for The New York Times

The mood was funereal in the basement of Keith and Louise Clark’s 1928 bungalow, a licensed scallop-processing facility, on Monday afternoon as Ms. Clark opened the 30 or so scallops she and her husband caught. Richie Surozenski, a retired bayman from Shelter Island, came by to see if he could get a “mess” for dinner, and realized the futility of his mission when he saw a pile of scallops that would barely fill a soup bowl.

“In the old days, they used to push the bow of the boat up into the grass and just shuck them right on board and take the meat home,” said Mr. Clark. He showed the day’s meager catch to Mr. Surozenski. “That’s it for this year.”



Louise and Keith Clark shuck the day’s catch in their Shelter Island basement. Johnny Milano for The New York Times