

## **Chestnut Cowries (*Cypraea spadicea*)** **Ranger Jim Serpa**

"Watch out", I yelled just as the first powerful wave hit my cousin Shannon. Neither one of us had been paying much attention to the large waves that had started to roll toward us that spring day so long ago. What we were paying attention to was the tremendous amount of shells littering the beach and the shallows. The shells were brought up by a ferocious storm that had just moved through San Diego the



day before. In particular, the shell we were searching for, and on this day finding in large numbers, was the strikingly beautiful Chestnut Cowrie.



Normally the only way to find this shell, the only true member of a group of mostly tropical shells known as cowries, was to dive in the shallow bays and lagoons along the rocky coast of San Diego. If you were lucky enough to find one washed ashore it was usually scratched or pitted from the constant abrasion of the beach. But not today!

Cowries are known and eagerly sought after by collectors because of their glossy, sometimes extravagantly colored shells. These shells are naturally polished by the animals mantle (skin), which covers the shell when the animal is not stressed or sleeping. The animal accomplishes this by pulling itself through the ventral slit (aperture) of the shell. This slit normally runs the length of the shell and is lined with denticles or "teeth". The cowrie is a member of the mollusk

phylum and is related to those pesky garden snails you find munching on your prized petunias from time to time.

Through the ages cowries have been used by man in three basic ways: as charms, amulets or talismans, as ornamental objects and as money. It is easy to see why people would use the shells as ornaments and we find them being used as brooches and necklaces in almost all cultures that have access to them. The North American Plains Indians were known to have traded with other tribes to obtain them. Cowries were believed by many cultures to possess special magical properties. In many areas of the South Pacific they were worn on the skirts of young women in the belief that they helped ensure fertility. In Japan, cowries were often held during childbirth to help ease delivery, "Forget the epidural Doc, but could you hand me that Tiger Cowrie." Cowries have also been used to ward off the evil eye and placed on graves to ensure the afterlife of the deceased. In Egypt cowries were placed on eye sockets of some mummies. Finally, cowries have been used as money in many civilizations. In China, these shells were used as currency as early as 1000 BC, as well as in India, Africa, and the South Pacific. The Chinese replaced the cowrie with coins as legal tender fairly early on only to bring back the use of cowries because of the skill with which counterfeiters could duplicate the coins. There are two species of cowries known collectively as money cowrie that live in the tropical Pacific.

Getting back to our local species, the Chestnut Cowrie, we find them from the intertidal zone to 100 feet in depth and rarely much farther north than Santa Barbara. It can grow up to three inches, which is rare, usually topping out at 2-1/2 inches.

Like most cowries it is nocturnal and omnivorous, preferring to dine on sponges, anemones and similarly small, sessile (non-moving) animals. The mantle, when exposed, is orange with black dots and the shell is a beautiful chestnut brown on top with bluish-gray to tan on its sides. The bottom and the "teeth" of the shell are colored cream to white. Believe me, you won't mistake it for any other shell in this area.

The specimens we have on display at Doheny can be found in our Kelp Bed tank and Tide Pool exhibit. Being nocturnal, they prefer to

come out under the cover of darkness. This has held true for the specimens in the Kelp tank, but our Tide Pool inhabitants have become accustomed to the light and can be seen cruising around in the middle of the day searching for an easy meal. Come by and see if you can spot one.

Just as I yelled, the wave crashed into my cousin with a resounding whomp! Shannon was now face-first in the sand completely wet with another wave taking deadly aim at her prone body. Just then an arm raised and a shriek of delight rang out. "I got it, and it's a perfect cowrie!"