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WILD CAPE COD

Clamming on Cape Cod: How to Get a License, Find the Flats & Dig Your Own Dinner

A free field guide from the people who actually live here.



capecodcertified.com/guides/clamming-cape-cod-guide

There is no more local Cape Cod activity than clamming. On a minus tide in July, the Barnstable Harbor flats or the Wellfleet Harbor edges are dotted with locals in waders or shorts, armed with rakes, filling mesh bags with soft-shell clams for that evening's pot. The technique is simple, the license is usually available to non-residents, and eating a clam you dug yourself from Cape Cod mud is better than any restaurant experience.

Clamming on Cape Cod is accessible to anyone willing to wade onto a tidal flat at low tide, do a little homework on licenses, and verify that the flat is open before going. This guide covers everything: which town to get licensed in, what you are digging for, how to read the flat, what gear you need, and how to turn your haul into dinner.

Getting Your Shellfishing License

Each Cape Cod town issues its own shellfish licenses — there is no single “Cape Cod” or regional license. You must obtain a license from the specific town where you intend to clam. The good news is that most Cape towns allow non-residents to purchase a short-term license, typically valid for one week or the full season.

Non-resident weekly license fees generally run in the range of \$10–\$25 [VERIFY by town — fees change annually]. Some towns sell licenses online through their municipal websites; others require an in-person visit to the harbormaster's office or town hall. Verify before you go — a wasted trip to a town hall that is closed at 4pm on a Saturday is a real possibility.

Where to get your license by town:

- **Barnstable:** Barnstable Harbormaster's Office [VERIFY address, phone, and whether online purchase is available]
- **Wellfleet:** Wellfleet Shellfish Warden [VERIFY address, phone, hours, and online availability]
- **Orleans:** Orleans Natural Resources Department [VERIFY address, phone, and hours]
- **Chatham:** Chatham Shellfish Constable [VERIFY address, phone, and hours]
- **Eastham:** Eastham Natural Resources Office [VERIFY address, phone, and hours]
- **Yarmouth:** Yarmouth Natural Resources Department [VERIFY address, phone, and hours]

Each town's Natural Resources or Shellfish department is also the authoritative source for which specific flats are currently open for recreational harvest — they can tell you on any given day whether the area you plan to dig is safe and legal. It is worth calling the morning before you go.

What You're Digging: The Three Main Cape Cod Clams

Soft-shell clams (*Mya arenaria* — steamers): This is the quintessential Cape Cod clam. Soft-shells live buried 4–8 inches down in mud or sandy mud in the middle and lower intertidal zone. The giveaway at the surface is a small, oval or keyhole-shaped siphon hole — the breathing and feeding tube the clam extends upward. Once you train your eye to see them, you will find them everywhere on a good flat. Rake down 6–8 inches and pull the tines back toward you through the loosened sediment. The clam tumbles out of the disturbed mud. Soft-shells have thin, fragile shells — handle carefully and do not pile them deep in a bucket.

Quahogs (*Venus mercenaria* — hard-shell clams): Quahogs go by size: littlenecks are the smallest and best eaten raw on the half shell; cherrystones are medium and good raw or cooked; chowder clams are the largest and are best chopped into chowder. Quahogs live in sandier bottoms in shallow bay areas, typically in the top 2–4 inches of substrate. Raking quahogs feels different from digging steamers — you are working shallower and in firmer sand,

and the shells are solid and substantial when the tines hit them. Bay-side town flats throughout the Mid-Cape — Barnstable, Yarmouth, Dennis — are productive quahog territory.

Razor clams (*Ensis directus*): Long, narrow, and fast. Razor clams are found in sandy intertidal flats, and the traditional technique for catching them is one of the more satisfying small dramas in recreational shellfishing. Find the keyhole or figure-8 hole at the surface, pour a small quantity of coarse salt into it, and wait: the salt creates an osmotic signal that encourages the clam to extend its muscular foot toward the surface, at which point you grab it — and hold on, because they can pull themselves back down faster than most people expect [VERIFY whether the salt-pour technique is reliably effective]. Razor clams are not as commonly targeted as steamers or quahogs, but they are worth the attempt.

Where the Flats Are Open — and How to Check Before You Go

Water quality monitoring can close shellfish flats without warning. Heavy rainfall causes bacterial runoff from roads, lawns, and septic systems that temporarily makes shellfish unsafe to harvest. Paralytic shellfish poisoning from harmful algal blooms is a separate, less frequent concern. Either way, the closure system exists to protect you.

Flat closures and openings are managed cooperatively between the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries (DMF) and each town's shellfish department. Current closure status can be checked through the DMF's shellfish sanitation page [VERIFY current URL — likely at mass.gov under Division of Marine Fisheries] and through each town's shellfish page. Many regular clambers simply call the town shellfish warden the morning they plan to go. That call takes two minutes and removes all ambiguity.

This step is not optional. Harvesting from a closed flat is illegal and a genuine health risk.

Generally reliable open areas when water quality permits:

- **Barnstable Harbor inner flats:** one of the most accessible and productive steamer flats on the Cape; broad mud flat with good soft-shell populations; accessible from multiple points around the harbor
- **Wellfleet Harbor margins:** productive for both steamers and quahogs; note that Wellfleet Harbor also has extensive commercial aquaculture lease areas, and harvesting oysters from those leased beds is prohibited — verify which areas are open for recreational harvest with the Wellfleet Shellfish Warden before going [VERIFY which specific areas are open for recreational harvest]
- **Orleans tidal flats:** Town Cove and the flats accessible from town landings offer good access to both hard- and soft-shell clams; contact Orleans Natural Resources for current open areas
- **Eastham:** the Bay-side flats accessible from town ramps have been historically productive; check with Eastham Natural Resources for current access points
- **Chatham:** Stage Harbor and surrounding flats have both soft-shell and quahog populations; access points vary by season; verify with the Chatham Shellfish Constable

Equipment, Timing, and the Low-Tide Window

The essential kit for clamming on Cape Cod is minimal: a shellfish rake with a long handle and tined head (available at Cape Cod hardware stores and marine supply shops for approximately \$20–\$40 [VERIFY current retail range]); a wire-mesh bag or bushel basket for your haul; and footwear you do not mind getting thoroughly muddy. In July and August, old sneakers or rubber-soled water shoes work fine. In shoulder season, waders or neoprene boots make the experience significantly more comfortable.

Timing matters more than almost any other variable. Plan to arrive at the flat one hour before the predicted low tide and stay until one hour after — this two-hour window gives you maximum flat exposure and the shallowest water for

wading. Minus tides (below 0.0 feet on the tide table) expose the most territory and reveal the best steamer ground, which sits in the lower intertidal zone. Check tide tables for the specific town you are visiting, not a generic “Cape Cod” tide — there can be 30–45 minutes of variation between Upper Cape and Outer Cape tide times.

Bag limits vary by town and species. The shellfish department will tell you the current limit when you purchase your license. Do not exceed your limit and do not take undersized clams: soft-shells must meet a minimum shell length [VERIFY minimum size by species and by town — commonly 2 inches for soft-shells but confirm], and quahog minimums vary similarly.

Cooking What You Catch: The Classic Steamer Method

The reward for a productive morning on the flat is one of the simplest, best meals Cape Cod offers.

Rinse your clams thoroughly in cold water and scrub off any mud. Traditional prep calls for soaking steamers in fresh water — some cooks add cornmeal to help the clams purge sand over 20–30 minutes [VERIFY whether cornmeal purging is reliably effective for soft-shell clams, or whether a clean saltwater soak is preferred by most cooks]. After soaking, rinse again.

To cook: put 1–2 inches of water, or a mix of water and dry white wine, into a heavy pot with a tight-fitting lid. Bring to a boil, add the clams, cover, and steam until the shells open — approximately 5–8 minutes [VERIFY]. Discard any clams that do not open. Serve immediately with the cooking broth in a small bowl on the side and drawn butter for dipping. The technique: pull the clam from the shell by the dark outer siphon skin, dip it briefly in the broth to rinse off any remaining grit, then dip in butter. The siphon skin peels away; the tender meat inside is the sweet, unmistakably Cape Cod bite that no restaurant preparation quite replicates.

Quick Facts

License required	Yes — from the specific town where you dig
Non-resident license	Available in most towns; weekly or seasonal [VERIFY]
Approximate cost	\$10–\$25 for non-resident weekly license [VERIFY]
Best tide	Low tide; arrive 1 hour before; minus tides are ideal
Best season	May through October; summer is peak
Main species	Steamers (soft-shell), quahogs (hard-shell), razor clams
Before you go	Verify flat is open with town shellfish department
Essential gear	Shellfish rake, mesh bag, water shoes or waders

Frequently Asked Questions

Can tourists go clamming on Cape Cod? Yes. Most Cape Cod towns sell non-resident shellfish licenses to visitors, typically for a weekly or seasonal fee. You must purchase the license from the specific town where you plan to clam — there is no single regional license. Some towns now offer online purchase; others require an in-person visit. Verify the process for your town before heading out so you are not turned away at the flat.

Do I need a license to clam on Cape Cod? Yes, always. Clamming without a valid shellfish license from the town in question is illegal and subject to fines. The license also comes with current information about which flats are open for harvest — the town shellfish warden is your best single source of up-to-date information about where to go and whether it is safe to harvest that day.

What is the best time of day to go clamming on Cape Cod? Plan around the tide, not a specific hour. Check the tide table for your specific town — times vary meaningfully across the Cape — and arrive about one hour before the predicted low. The most productive window is the two hours centered on low water. Before that, too much of the productive flat is still underwater; after, the tide returns quickly. Minus tides, which expose the greatest area of intertidal flat, are the gold standard for a productive outing.

How do I know if a clamming area is safe to harvest? Call the town shellfish department or warden on the morning you plan to go — they track real-time water quality closures caused by rainfall runoff and bacterial contamination. The Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries also maintains shellfish sanitation data online [VERIFY current URL]. Do not harvest from a closed flat: the health risk from contaminated shellfish is real, closures happen quickly after heavy rain, and the fine for illegal harvest is not trivial.

Clamming connects you to a Cape Cod that existed long before the motels on Route 28 or the traffic backup at the Sagamore Bridge — a place where the best meal you can eat costs almost nothing and tastes exactly like the place it came from.

Find shellfish-friendly restaurants, local gear shops, and Cape Cod town resource contacts at capecodcertified.com/directory.

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