

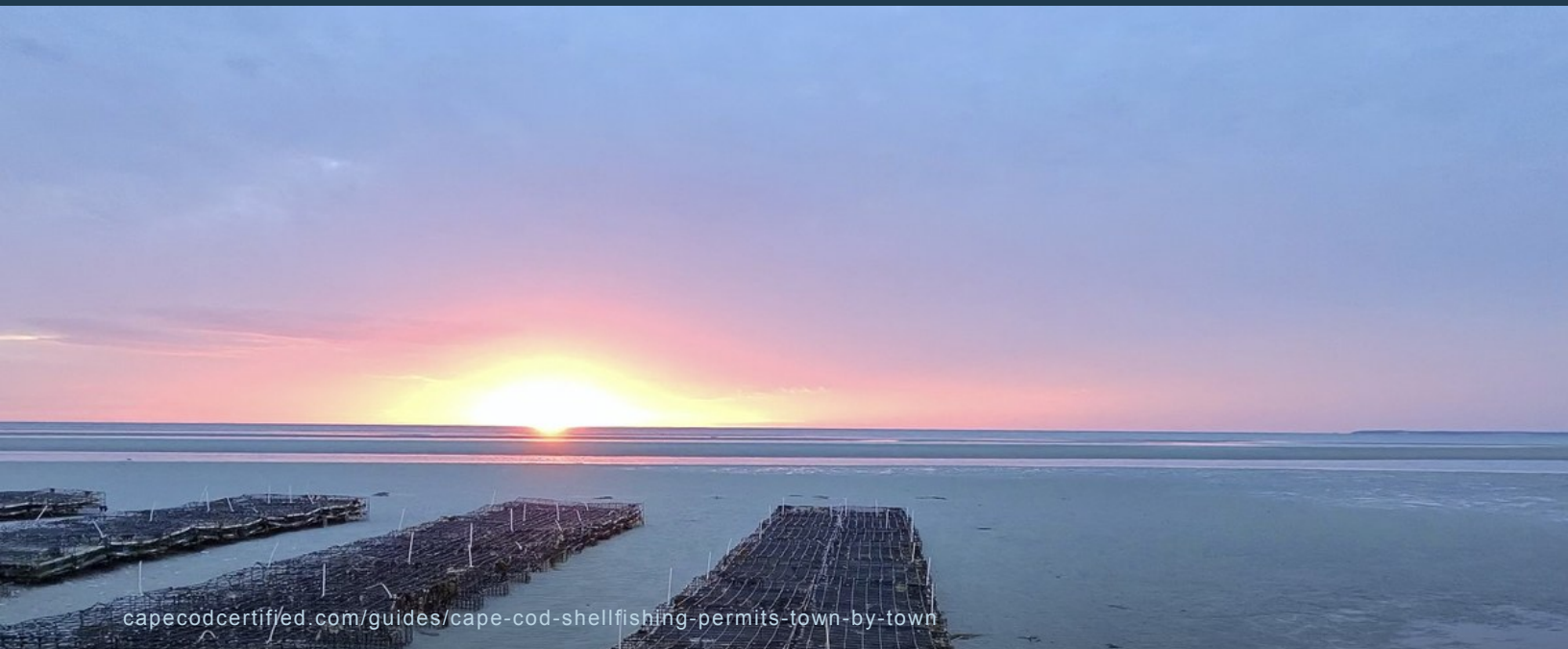


CAPE COD CERTIFIED

CAPE COD PURSUITS

Cape Cod Shellfishing Permits, Town by Town: Fees, Seasons & Where to Dig

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



capecodcertified.com/guides/cape-cod-shellfishing-permits-town-by-town

Most newcomers assume a single “Cape Cod shellfish license” exists. It doesn’t. Every one of the Cape’s 15 towns runs its own program, sets its own fee, picks its own season dates, and bans non-residents on certain flats entirely. The state license is for commercial fishermen — recreational diggers need a town permit from whichever town’s waters they want to work. Get the wrong one and you’ll get warned off (or fined) by a shellfish constable who has heard every excuse.

This is the guide I wish someone had handed me when I first started chasing steamers off the Wellfleet flats. Below: what each town charges in 2026, when seasons actually open, which permits non-residents can even buy, and the specific spots that produce the kind of haul that makes the early alarm worth it.

The one rule every town shares

Massachusetts law sets baseline daily limits — and most Cape towns adopt them with minor tweaks:

- **Quahogs (hard clams):** 10 quarts per permit per week, in-shell
- **Soft-shell clams (steamers):** 1 peck (8 quarts) per week
- **Oysters:** 10 quarts per week (where allowed recreationally)
- **Bay scallops:** 1 bushel per week, season usually Oct–Mar
- **Mussels and razors:** vary by town; some unlimited, some closed

Everything must measure up. Quahogs need a 1-inch hinge thickness (the “growth ring” test — if it slides through a culling gauge, it goes back). Oysters must be 3 inches across. Scallops need a defined growth ring. Constables carry calipers. So should you.

2026 Permit Fees & Rules by Town

Town	Resident Fee	Non-Resident Fee	Sold To Non-Residents?	Notable Restriction
Barnstable	\$50	\$200	Yes	Sunday-only at some flats
Bourne	\$25	\$75	Yes	Closed sections in Pocasset
Brewster	\$50	\$135	Yes	Capped non-res permits
Chatham	\$60	\$235	Yes (summer lottery)	South Beach flats restricted
Dennis	\$35	\$135	Yes	Sesuit Creek closed Jun–Aug
Eastham	\$50	\$175	Yes	First Encounter requires tide chart
Falmouth	\$50	\$200	Yes	West Falmouth Harbor oyster ban
Harwich	\$45	\$150	Yes	Round Cove resident-only
Mashpee	\$40	\$200	Yes (capped)	Popponesset closed Jul–Aug
Orleans	\$60	\$200	Yes	Nauset Estuary mooring rules
Provincetown	\$50	\$100	Yes	Limited productive areas
Sandwich	\$35	\$125	Yes	Spring Hill Beach restricted
Truro	\$40	\$125	Yes	Pamet River seasonal
Wellfleet	\$75	\$400	Yes (limited)	“Family” permit available

Town	Resident Fee	Non-Resident Fee	Sold To Non-Residents?	Notable Restriction
Yarmouth	\$40	\$160	Yes	Bass River flats high-yield

Senior pricing (typically 62+) cuts most resident fees by 50–75%. Many towns offer a free “over-70” or disabled veteran permit — ask at the town clerk’s office, not the harbormaster.

Which towns are actually worth the permit

Buying a permit in every town isn’t realistic at non-resident rates. Pick based on what you want.

For quahogs: Barnstable and Chatham

Barnstable’s **Cotuit Bay** and **Three Bays** systems are forgiving for beginners. The bottom is soft, the water’s shallow, and at a hard low tide in June you can rake up your limit in under two hours. Cotuit Highground and the flats off Loop Beach are the classics. Chatham’s **Pleasant Bay** side, particularly **Strong Island** and the **Crows Pond** edges, produces bigger quahogs (cherrystones and chowders) but takes more time to read the bottom.

For soft-shell clams (steamers): Wellfleet and Eastham

This is where Wellfleet earns its \$400 non-resident sticker. The flats at **Indian Neck**, **Mayo Beach**, and the inside of **Great Island** at the right tide stage are the most productive recreational steamer flats on the East Coast. Eastham’s **First Encounter Beach** and the Cape Cod Bay side of **Sunken Meadow** are nearly as good and a third of the price. Bring a short-handled clam rake (not a quahog rake) and a peck basket.

For oysters: Wellfleet and Brewster

Recreational oyster harvest is allowed in fewer places than diggers assume. Wellfleet permits oysters on designated flats from October through April; Brewster opens parts of **Quivett Creek** and **Paine’s Creek** in a similar window. Falmouth and Mashpee mostly reserve oyster grants for commercial farmers — don’t take wild oysters there even if you see them.

For bay scallops: lower your expectations

Painful truth: Cape Cod’s wild bay scallop population is a shadow of what it was. A handful of towns (notably Orleans and Chatham) still run a short recreational season starting in October or November, but limits are tight and finding a bushel takes serious local knowledge. If scallops are your goal, Nantucket and Martha’s Vineyard are still the move.

Seasons: when each species actually opens

People assume shellfishing is a summer activity. The opposite is closer to true.

Species	Best Months	Avoid
Quahogs	Year-round, peak Apr–Jun	After heavy rain (rainfall closures)
Steamers	May–Oct	Closed flats during red tide
Oysters	Oct–Apr (recreational)	Summer — closed in most towns
Bay scallops	Oct/Nov – Mar 31	Outside posted season
Mussels	Sep–Apr	Summer warm-water closures

Rainfall closures are the silent killer. After roughly 1 inch of rain in 24 hours, most Cape towns automatically close flats for 5–7 days due to bacterial runoff. Check your town’s shellfish hotline before you drive — Barnstable,

Chatham, and Wellfleet all publish daily status pages. You can lose a Saturday morning to a Tuesday thunderstorm and not know it until a constable turns you back.

How to actually buy a permit

Most towns now sell online through their town websites or a service called Viewpoint Government Solutions. Sandwich, Wellfleet, and Brewster still want an in-person visit to the Natural Resources office or Town Hall (bring ID and proof of residency — utility bill, lease, or registration). Permits run from the date of purchase for one calendar year in some towns, and on a fixed April–March cycle in others. **Read the dates on the sticker** — buying a Chatham permit in July means it likely expires the following April, not the following July.

What to bring on your first dig

The gear separates people who go home with dinner from people who go home with backaches.

- **Short-handled clam rake** for steamers (the four-tine “basket rake” is best); long-handled **bull rake** for quahogs in deeper water
 - **Culling gauge** — required by law in most towns; constables check
 - **Peck basket** or mesh bag; many towns prohibit five-gallon buckets because they trap undersized shellfish
 - **Tide chart** showing low tide for your specific flat, not just “Cape Cod” — flats can differ by 45 minutes
 - **Wading boots or barefoot tolerance** — flat mud will own a pair of sneakers
 - **Your permit visible** on your person; tucking it in the car doesn’t count
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Don’t-miss tips

1. Time your tide, not your clock. Productive shellfishing happens in roughly the 90-minute window before dead low tide. A 6 a.m. low means you should be on the flat by 4:30 a.m. with a headlamp. Showing up at 7 a.m. for a 6 a.m. low means you’re chasing rising water for nothing. Cape Cod Bay tides run roughly 50 minutes later each day — plan the week, not the morning.

2. Don’t assume your permit covers the next town over. A Barnstable permit gets you nothing in Yarmouth, even though the line between Cotuit and Bass River is invisible on the water. Constables from neighboring towns work the boundary flats specifically because so many people get this wrong. If you’re a non-resident who fishes both shores, the combined cost of two permits (\$300+) starts to make a “family-of-four ocean weekend” math very differently than people expect.

Warning: red tide closures are not advisory. When Massachusetts DMF posts a PSP (paralytic shellfish poisoning) closure — which happens somewhere on the Cape most summers — that flat is hard-closed regardless of your permit. Steamers and mussels concentrate the toxin; eating shellfish from a closed flat can be fatal, not just illegal. The state’s shellfish closure map updates daily at mass.gov/dmf — bookmark it before the season starts, not after.

The right permit, the right tide, and the right flat will produce more clams in two hours than any restaurant will serve you for less than \$80. The wrong combination will get you a ticket and a long drive home. Now you know which is which.

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