

SEA GRANT

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By

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If you favor a dozen or so Alabama oysters, you probably already know that the oyster harvest in Alabama has been catastrophically low for over a year. Preliminary data from the Alabama Marine Resources Division of the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources shows landings of less than 73,000 pounds of oyster meats in 2008. To put that in perspective, over 759,000 pounds of meat were harvested in 2002 in the second worst year from 2001 to present, and over 1 million pounds of oyster meats were landed in 2005. Landings are not projected to be much better for 2009, based on conversations with some oyster catchers. That's a bitter pill for the men and women who make a living harvesting oysters.

Why the drop in catch and will it come back? The answer to the first question seems to be that we (meaning those of us who cannot get enough oysters) are not alone in our love for oysters. The oyster drill, also called a conch and more formally *Stramonita haemastoma*, is a voracious predator of oysters. This predatory snail hunts down bivalve prey (including oysters), using a keen sense of 'smell', picking up the chemical cues wafting into the water from the shellfish that they crave. Once they've found their prey, the snails proceed to either drill a hole into the oyster (with a toothed drilling mechanism, called a radula) or chip away at the thin bill of the oyster, until they get inside and can feed on the animal's soft tissue.

These snails also excel at reproducing. Females will deposit batches of fertilized eggs, contained in small capsules, on hard surfaces. These capsules are often less than 1/2" long, begin

milky white in coloration, become yellowish brown with age, and usually occur in clusters. The eggs number several hundred to several thousand per capsule and eventually hatch, releasing microscopic, swimming larval snails. If conditions are right, these young snails survive and become the next generation of oyster predators.

There are, of course, limits to oyster drills (or we wouldn't have any oysters at all, would we?). So, the answer to whether oysters will come back is yes. The dry conditions in recent years allowed Mobile Bay and Mississippi Sound to get much saltier, a condition that favors the oyster drill. The drills moved up and onto the oyster reefs and wreaked havoc on the oyster population, and by default, on oyster catchers. The rains this year, though, have appeared to drop the salinity back down to a level that killed or drove off the oyster drills, allowing this year's young oysters to survive and begin the repopulation of the oyster reefs. (Oysters, by the way, aren't bothered by high salinity at all, and can thrive in salty conditions when protected from predation.)

In closing, I asked you in my last article to let me know where you think the best Eastern oysters are harvested from and why you think so. I've gotten some wonderful answers so far – with very different but very strong opinions about the best oysters! I'm hoping to hear from more of you oyster-lovers – at least of the human variety! E-mail your oyster preferences and recommendations to me, Bill Walton, at gulfoysters@gmail.com.