

# the NATURALIST CORNER

Brought to you by Peggy Potts  
Coastal Master Naturalist  
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As a graduate of the Coastal Master Naturalist Program offered through the Clemson University Cooperative Extension, I would like to share my excitement and enthusiasm about the many wonders of nature that can be enjoyed and experienced in the lowcountry. Through this monthly column, I will share my observations, sightings, and characteristics about a variety of nature topics, such as common insects, migrating birds and butterflies, wildflowers and plants and more. Basically, anything in nature is fair game to learn about and explore.

I also encourage you to share your observations and experiences so that we can learn about our natural world together. Please feel free to send in pictures and/or information of anything you find interesting by emailing me, Peggy Potts, at [ppotts@charlestoncounty.org](mailto:ppotts@charlestoncounty.org).

## The Prehistoric Horseshoe Crab



About a month ago, we were monitoring the Greenbelt property of Cummings Point/Morris Island and we found so many Horseshoe crab carcasses on the beach. We wondered if they had died and what had caused their demise. We were happy to discover that Horseshoe crabs molt and shed their shells until they are about 10 years old, so what we saw were simply their empty shells.

Horseshoe crabs are pretty amazing creatures. According to the National Wildlife Federation, they have been around for over 300 hundred million years, older than the dinosaurs! They look like prehistoric crabs with a hard exoskeleton, ten walking legs under the shell, spines on the abdomen, and a long tail. The tail is not dangerous. It serves as a rudder for guiding and balancing. It gets its name Horseshoe because of its U shape, like the shoe on a horse's hoof. Horseshoe crabs can live to over 20 years of age.

Each spring and early summer large numbers of Horseshoe crabs come ashore to mate and lay their eggs at high tide following the moon cycle. They lay thousands of eggs but most are eaten before they hatch. Horseshoe crabs are an important species for a couple of reasons: Their eggs are the major food source for migrating birds, reptiles and fish, including the threatened Red Knot bird; and, their copper-based blue blood is used to test for sterility of medical equipment, almost all intravenous drugs, and ensures that vaccines are safe.

Even though most of the carcasses found on the beach are just the exoskeletons that have been shed, there may be some crabs that die during the spawning season. According to the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR), some crabs get flipped over by the tide and they need water to keep their gills wet. So, if you see a crab that's flipped over on its back, carefully turn it over and place it back in the ocean. Per SCDNR, the crabs are not dangerous and will not hurt you. Considering the benefits of the Horseshoe crab, this small gesture will help our environment in a big way.

To hear the podcast of this article go to [charlestoncountygreenbelt.org](http://charlestoncountygreenbelt.org) under "Resources")



### Charleston County Greenbelt Program

The City of Charleston's Cummings Point/Morris Island, accessible only by boat, is a good place to see Horseshoe Crabs (especially early spring and summer). The Greenbelt Program provided funding for this property. For a list of all greenbelt properties, visit the Greenbelt website at <http://charlestoncountygreenbelt.org> and follow us on Instagram and the County's Facebook page. Don't forget you can earn "Lifestyle Loot" through the Wellness Program when you visit a Greenbelt site and post pictures using #ccgreenbelt.