Recreational Divers Stalk Sea Scallops

Written by Jeff Walls

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MOUNT DESERT — As the sun sporadically peeks through the high clouds over Northeast Harbor, Jim Everly shovels snow off the stern of the Seal. A small crew has begun to gather on the dock next to the 51-foot green-and-white dive boat on a relatively balmy Sunday morning. At a time of year when most people wouldn't go into the frigid ocean if you paid them, this group is paying to go for the privilege.

They plan to harvest the white gold commonly known as sea scallops, not for sale, but for the sheer enjoyment of it.

Ed Monat, aka "Diver Ed" shucks his way through a pile of scallops on the stern of his dive boat, the Seal.—STAFF PHOTO BY JEFF WALLS

"I enjoy nature," says Bar Harbor resident Mike Staggs.

"I appreciate nature for what it really is," he says with a smirk. "And then eating it."

Having sworn his passengers to a vow of silence, Ed Monat pilots the Seal off to the super secret dive site. If the location is revealed, this day's divers believe their competitors will make off with all their sea scallops.

Scallops cost about $14 a pound off the shelf. A license for non-commercial scallop diving allows holders to take one gallon of shelled or "shucked" scallops. A gallon of shucked scallops weighs approximately 9 pounds. The scallops cannot be sold, but their value — all gastronomic — is not lost on this hearty group.

"Fresh scallops are so sweet right out of the shell. You can't beat it," says York resident Mike Jancovic.

The waters are flat calm. There is no wind. For January in Maine, this is an unseasonable day. The water temperature is roughly 36 degrees and air temperature is about the same. It is, the group agrees, the perfect day for scallop diving.

The Seal is crewed by Monat and Edna Martin. The divers are Jancovic, Everly, Joe Pagan and Staggs. Accompanying as additional eyes and deckhand is Lynn Beverly-Staggs.

This is the core group of divers that takes advantage of their recreational dive licenses with Monat and his weekend trips aboard the Seal.

"These guys are my bread and butter," he said.

Approaching the dive-site-which-shall-not-be-named, the intrepid scallop seekers start readying themselves to face the frigid waters. Monat has already donned his gear, which resembles an inflated superhero costume complete with bikini brief Speedo. He jumps in to check out the area.

The other divers arrange their gear grumbling about the cold and how cold it is going to be in the water.

"I hate being cold," says Jancovic. "You get down there and get cold and all of your parts shrivel up. I just hate that."

Scallops, the divers confide, are organizing to take over the world; they must be caught to prevent their worldwide domination.

"We are the scallop slayers! Let's slay 'em!" comes the battle cry as the divers prepare to submerge.

Squeezing into their drysuits — waterproof suits with fully enclosed booties and latex gaskets at the wrists and neck that keep a layer of air between the body and the cold water for warmth — takes each diver about 45 minutes, about as long as it does for Monat to drain his first tank of air.

After Monat hauls in his mesh bags chockfull of scallops, he repositions the boat to where he thinks the other divers will have the best luck. Most will stalk their prey in water 45 to 60 feet deep. Beverly-Staggs documents the air pressure in everyone's tanks as they get closer to dive time.

Jancovic, who hails from southern Maine and is a diving instructor, has tanks filled with Nitrox, a mixture of nitrogen and oxygen.

“Dive shops around here don’t fill with Nitrox, so Mike brought some with him when he came up from the south,” Pagan said as he attached his regulator to one of the tanks.

The mixture allows the divers to stay down longer because it has a higher percentage of oxygen than normal air. Regular air contains roughly 21 percent oxygen and Jancovic’s mixture has about 34 percent.

“You don’t feel as tired at the end of the dive because of the extra oxygen,” said Pagan.

One by one the divers hit the water carrying the bags they hope to fill with scallops. The bags are attached to floats, or toggles, with a long length of rope. The floats help the crew topside locate where the divers are during the dive. The bags also can be left in place for later retrieval if several divers need to come aboard at the same time.

After the divers are all underwater, Monat dumps his haul into a fish tray and starts sizing them. Regulations state that scallops must be more than four inches in diameter to be kept. Scallop harvesters attempt to fit their catch through a metal ring of that diameter; if it fits through, then it goes overboard.

Once the scallops have all been checked for size, the shucking begins. Shucking is basically sliding a thin knife into a gap in the shell of the scallop and separating the muscle that attaches the two shells to one another. The goal is to leave as little meat as possible on either half of the shell. Meat left on the shell is what the divers called a “wafer” and gets scraped off, often ending up as a snack for the shucker.

The first diver surfaces in about 20 minutes and Monat leaves his shucking station and to man the helm and retrieve the divers and their bivalve booty.

When the divers clamber back aboard the Seal, they record the pressure in their tanks again to figure out how long they can stay down on a certain amount of air. “Everybody uses air at a different rate,” says Martin. “It just helps us know when to expect the divers to come up.”

The length of the dives also are noted, mainly for certification purposes because a certain number of diving hours must be logged in order to meet requirements for advanced certifications such as dive master.

A flurry of activity engulfs the Seal’s stern as divers start shucking their catch. A variety of critters come up with the scallops, a sea-borne bounty of by-catch. The mud hake, for instance, is a slender silvery-green fish that can grow up to 10 inches long and is commonly found inside the scallop, though no one on board knows why. More than 50 percent of this day’s scallop haul contains mud hake.

The slipper snail, a flat snail something like a limpet or an abalone, is attached in mass quantities to the outside of almost every scallop harvested. Slipper snails are edible and taste similar to raw scallops. They don’t damage the scallops.

WANT TO DIVE?

To get a recreational scallop diving license, obtain and fill out the Marine Harvesting license application, which is available from the state of Maine online at maine.gov/dmr, or call the DMR licensing division at (207) 624-6550. The fee for the license is $10.

To scallop dive recreationally, you must be a certified diver. Ed Monat is a dive instructor and classes begin next week at the Mount Desert Island YMCA. Call 288-DIVE for more information.

Staggs brings up a curious animal that looks like a toad, but instead of four legs, it has six and looks like it has hairs all over its body; a toad crab.

The divers compare notes.

“You could see where the draggers had passed through leaving big scrapes on the bottom and I just worked my way along between two dragging lines where they had missed and did well there,” Everly says, heaving scallop scraps over the side.

The gang’s second dive goes even better than the first, and almost everybody gets the limit. Raves about the great conditions replace complaints about the cold, the bountiful harvest buoys everyone’s spirits.

After the second load of scallops had been shucked and gear stowed, everyone gathers around a grill that Monat keeps on board for a feast of meats and some more salty banter.

This is a tight knit group of individuals bound by their common goal, diving for scallops. Jancovic puts it seriously, which, for him, is unusual.

“I just enjoy it,” he said. “I really do.”

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