

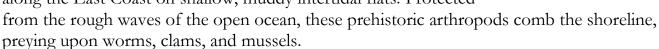
## Notes from our Naturalists

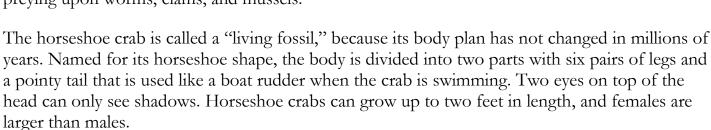
Horseshoe crab with slipper shells

## Hard-shelled Facts About Horseshoe Crabs

Written by: Sarajane Bruno, Liberty State Park Naturalist

Atlantic Horseshoe Crabs (Limulus polyphemus) can be found along the East Coast on shallow, muddy intertidal flats. Protected







High tides between mid-May and mid-June are prime horseshoe-crab spawning season. The female will dig a hole in the sand and lay her clutch of tiny, pale blue eggs, which the male will then fertilize. A month later, the eggs will hatch.

Horseshoe crabs have been referred to as a "keystone species," as their removal from an ecosystem could have devastating effects on

other species. Migrating shorebirds such as the red knot and the ruddy turnstone gorge on these eggs and bulk themselves up for long flights. Over harvesting of horseshoe crabs equals less food for the shorebirds and reduces their ability fuel their long migrations.

A component in the bluish-colored blood of a horseshoe crab, known as limulus amoebocyte lysate (LAL), clots in the presence of certain toxins. This component can be used to test newly

developed medications and medical devices for contamination before they are mass produced and sold.

