



The bivalve mollusc genus *Spondylus* common throughout Chagos
This specimen is about 12cm end to end

Molluscs in Chagos

In Chagos, most mollusc shells will be seen, not on the backs of their original owners, but protecting the soft bodies of the many hermit crabs. Others will be found washed up on beaches—beautiful remains of small invertebrate members of the reef community.

Most molluscs have a calcareous shell to protect the animal inside. The largest group have a spiralled shell and are mostly in the class called gastropods. Gastropod means 'stomach foot' and the visible part of the soft tissue of these animals is the large foot which they move around on. The rest of the body, of which the stomach is a large part, is on top of the foot within the shell. The bivalves have, as the name suggests, two halves to the shell which can close tightly to protect the animal. Octopus and squid are in a third very mobile class called the cephalopods. There are seven different classes.

The majority of mobile molluscs spend daylight hours hiding in holes in the reef or buried in sand. At night, diving or snorkelling with a torch, it is possible to see many of these when they come out to feed.

Bivalve molluscs usually remain stationary. The photograph shows a specimen of the genus *Spondylus*, a large bivalve that is quite common and can grow to 20cm in length. Its beautifully coloured mantle is visible from some distance, but as the mollusc is approached it quickly closes its valves, protecting its soft, vulnerable tissues with a thick and strong shell.

So far, 384 species of mollusc have been recorded in Chagos and of these 282 were gastropods and 99 were bivalves. Like many other groups, the greatest diversity in Chagos occurs between 10 and 20 metres deep, though abundance is never high. Analysis of the distribution patterns of the molluscan communities also shows that, on hard substrate, their distribution is more dependent on depth than on seaward or lagoonal location ¹.

¹ Sheppard, ALS. 1984. The Molluscan Fauna of Chagos (Indian Ocean) and an Analysis of Its Broad Distribution Patterns. *Coral Reefs* **3**:43-50

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