

Blue Crab

Callinectes sapidus



The blue crab is the most common edible crab along the east coast of the United States and the Gulf of Mexico. Blue crabs, like shrimp, crayfish and lobsters, are members of the crustacean family.

Coastal Wetlands

Blue Crab

Callinectes sapidus



APPEARANCE

Width: *Carapace* (or shell) is about 7 inches (17.8 cm) wide and 4 inches (10.2 cm) long.

Weight: 1 to 2 pounds (0.45 to 0.9 kg)

Distinguishing Characteristics

- Hard-shelled back is dark brownish-green and is drawn out on each side into a large spine.
- Abdomen and lower legs are white.
- Claws are various shades of blue (hence their name), but the claw tips of the female are red.

LIFE HISTORY

Range: Estuaries along the east coasts of North and South America. Has also been seen in the coastal waters of France, Holland and Denmark.

Diet: Clams, oysters, and mussels, as well as almost any vegetable or animal matter, preferably freshly dead or freshly caught food—sometimes even young crabs

Predators: Red drum, Atlantic croaker, herons, sea turtles and humans

Sexual maturity: At 12 to 18 months

Mating: Females mate only once, immediately after they have *molted* (shed their shell) for the last time. Males mate often. When the females are in their soft-shell stage (immediately after molting), the males transfer their sperm to them for storage, and then protect them until their new shells harden. The females will spawn two to nine months after mating.

Eggs: Up to two million eggs

Spawning season: From December to October with a peak in spring and summer. When females are ready to spawn, they fertilize the eggs with the stored sperm and place them on the tiny hairs of the appendages on their abdomen. While carrying eggs like this, she is called a "sponge" or "berry" crab.

Incubation: 14 days

Young: The *megalops* (or larvae), pass through eight stages in about two months before they begin to look like crabs.

Perhaps only one or two crabs survive to become adults.

Life span: Up to three years

HABITAT

Blue crabs are bottom-dwellers in every type of habitat from the saltiest water of the gulf to the almost fresh water of the back bays and estuaries, from the low tide line to waters 120 feet (36 m) deep.

BEHAVIOR

After mating, the females travel to the saltier portions of the lower bays and gulf, while males remain in the estuaries. Blue crabs burrow in soft mud or hide in sea grasses to lie in wait for prey or avoid predators. Crabs are quite aggressive—perhaps inspiring us to refer to an aggressive or unpleasant person as a "crab!"

NOW YOU KNOW!

- Blue crabs suffer in low oxygen conditions. Pollutants from farms, sewage treatment plants, chemicals, homes and cars can have serious consequences for blue crabs.
- Parasites are common on crabs. Barnacles, worms and leeches attach themselves to the outer shell; small animals called *isopods* live in the gills or on the abdomen; and small worms live in the muscles. However, most of these parasites do not affect the life of the crab.
- Crabs can *regenerate* (regrow) pinchers or legs lost while fighting or protecting themselves. The lost limb will be replaced after two or more molts.
- The blue crab's scientific name, *Callinectes sapidus*, is from Latin and Greek: *calli*, beautiful; *nectes*, swimmer; and *sapidus*, savory—beautiful, savory swimmer.
- Like insects, blue crabs have stalked compound eyes and can see in almost every direction at once.

BLUE CRABS AND PEOPLE

Many people love to eat blue crab. The crabs are sold live to processors who boil, pick, and can the meat, to fish houses, and to supermarkets for sale over the counter. From 1977 to 1989, the yearly catch of blue crab ranged between 6.9 and 11.7 million pounds, and was valued between \$1,928,000 and \$4,474,000.