

Fiddler Crab

Uca rapax



TPWD PHOTO



Fiddler crabs are the most common crab in a salt marsh and they play an important role in the salt marsh community. They eat *detritus* (dead or decomposing plant and animal matter) and are themselves food for a number of wetland animals.

Coastal Wetlands

Fiddler Crab

Uca rapax



APPEARANCE

Carapace (shell) length: 1 to 2 inches (2.5 to 5 cm)

Distinguishing Characteristics

- Dark during the day; a lighter color at night
- Males have one large claw and one small claw.
- Females' claws are the same size.
- Move sideways rather than forward or backward

LIFE HISTORY

Range: Gulf of Mexico to South America

Diet: Algae, bacteria, fungus scraped off of sand particles and *detritus* (dead and decaying plant and animal matter)

Predators: Herons, egrets and raccoons

Sexual maturity: At one to two years

Spawning season: June through August

Incubation: 14 days

Life span: Up to 1.5 years

HABITAT

Fiddler crabs are most often found in soft sand or mud near or around the edges of shallow salt marshes.

BEHAVIOR

Fiddlers have a remarkable mating ritual: male fiddlers line up beside the tidy burrows they have dug and move their *chelipeds* (large claws) back and forth in a fiddling motion to attract females. Females, fresh from foraging, will walk past and if a male catches a female's eye, he will tap the ground with his claw. If she is still receptive to his advances, she will

enter his burrow. They mate inside the burrow and she emerges two weeks later to release her *sponge* (fertilized eggs) into the water.

The burrows provide privacy for mating, sleeping and "hibernating" during the winter months. Fiddlers also burrow into the sand to escape from predators and abandon their temporary burrow once the danger has passed. During high tide, fiddler crabs pack sand into the entrance to their burrows and wait until the tides goes down again.

NOW YOU KNOW!

- Fiddler crabs reabsorb their shells rather than shed their shells in order to grow a larger, better-fitting one.
- Fiddlers use their claws to pick up sediment and scrape food particles into their mouths. The males can only use their single small claw for feeding so they have to work twice as hard as the females do to get the same nutrients.
- If one claw is lost, the fiddler crab will soon *regenerate* (regrow) a new one. In the meantime, the claw that is left will grow bigger.
- These crabs are seen year-round in Texas salt marshes and are always moving sideways.
- Sand or mud pellets "sprinkled" around the opening of a crab burrow means that a crab currently lives there.

FIDDLER CRABS AND PEOPLE

In Spanish, the fiddler crab is called a *cangrejo violinista*, which literally translates to "violinist crab." Fiddler crabs help preserve our important coastal wetland ecosystems. By burrowing deep into the mud of the marshes, the crabs create a maze of tunnels that *aerate* (add oxygen to) the marsh grasses and underwater seagrass meadows.