

# Stone Crab

*Menippe mercenaria*



Stone crabs have huge, tan, black-tipped claws. These bulky claws are strong enough to crush an oyster shell, and make these crabs valuable for their meat.

Coastal Wetlands

# Stone Crab

*Menippe mercenaria*



## APPEARANCE

**Carapace (shell) length:** 3 to 3.5 inches (7.6 to 8.9 cm) long and about 4 inches (10 cm) wide

### Distinguishing Characteristics

- Brownish red with gray spots and tan underneath
- Large and unequally-sized pincers tan with black tips
- Females have a larger *carapace* (the top outer shell), but males usually have larger claws than females.

## LIFE HISTORY

**Range:** Along the Gulf Coast

**Diet:** Oysters and other small mollusks, polychaete worms and other crustaceans.

They will also occasionally eat seagrass and *carrion* (remains of dead animals).

**Predators:** Horse conch, grouper, sea turtles, cobia, octopi and humans

**Sexual maturity:** At one year

**Spawning season:** All spring and summer

**Eggs:** 500,000 to 1 million

**Young:** The larvae go through six stages in about 36 days before emerging as juvenile stone crabs.

**Life span:** Seven to eight years

## HABITAT

Stone crabs prefer bottoms of bays, oyster reefs and rock jetties where they can burrow or find refuge from predators. Juveniles do not usually dig burrows, but instead hide among rocks or in seagrass beds.

## BEHAVIOR

The male stone crab must wait for the female to shed her exoskeleton before they can mate. After mating, the male will stay to help protect the female for several hours to several days. The female will spawn four to six times each season. Adult stone crabs make burrows in mud or sand below the low tide line, lying in wait for prey.

## NOW YOU KNOW!

- The stone crab loses its limbs easily to escape from predators or tight spaces, but their limbs will grow back. When a claw is broken in the right place, the wound will quickly heal itself and very little blood is lost. If, however, the claw is broken in the wrong place, more blood is lost and the crab's chances of survival are much lower. It only takes about one year for the claw to grow back to its normal size. Each time the crab molts its exoskeleton, the new claw grows larger.
- The larger of the two claws is called the "crusher claw." The smaller claw is called the "pincer claw." If the larger crusher claw is on the right side of the crab's body, the crab is "right handed." If the crusher claw is on the left side of the crab's body, it is "left handed."
- Since crabs' eyes are on stalks, they can see 360°.
- A large crab claw can weigh up to half a pound.

## STONE CRABS AND PEOPLE

Many people prefer to eat stone crab claws instead of blue crab claws. The stone crab's meat is supposed to taste like lobster. Because their claws can be regenerated, most states require that only one claw be removed and the crab be returned to the water. This way, over-harvesting of the species is prevented.