

CRABS

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SCIENTIFIC CLASSIFICATION

COMMON NAME:	crab
KINGDOM:	Animalia
PHYLUM:	Arthropoda
SUBPHYLUM:	Crustacea
CLASS:	Malacostraca
ORDER:	Decapodia
INFRAORDER:	Brachyura
FAMILY:	
GENUS SPECIES:	About 4500 species

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FAST FACTS

DESCRIPTION:	The general crab body is flat and wide. Crabs have an exoskeleton, called a carapace. This is the outer shell that protects them from predators and protects the internal organs. Like other decapods, crabs have 10 jointed legs. The first pair of legs is modified into large, grasping claws called chelipeds. The compound eyes of a crab protrude from the front of the carapace and are on the end of stalks.
SIZE:	Crab species vary greatly in size. The largest is the Japanese spider crab, <i>Macrocheira kaempferi</i> , at 4 m (13 ft.). The smallest crabs are the male pea crabs, <i>Pinnotheres</i> spp., at 0.73 cm (0.29 in.).
LOCOMOTION:	Crabs can crawl forward slowly and commonly move sideways. Most crabs cannot swim, with the exception of the Portunids. Swimming crabs have the last pair of legs modified into flattened paddles.

DIET:	Scavengers and omnivores
FEEDING:	Predatory swimming crabs use their chelipeds to grasp fishes and squids. Some crabs have large, blunt chelipeds for crushing shells. Other will scrape algal films from rocks or pick off pieces of seaweed.
REPRODUCTION:	Crabs are either male or female. Female crabs can only be fertilized when they are newly molted. The male usually molts before the mating season, and must discover a female prior to her molting so that he can be present to fertilize her eggs before her new exoskeleton hardens. The fertilized eggs are attached to the female's abdominal appendages and the embryos are brooded beneath her abdomen. Swimming larva are called zoea. After several molts into a more crablike stage in which they can swim and walk on the bottom, they are called a megalopa. Megalopas eventually molt into juvenile crabs.
RESPIRATION:	Crabs respire with gills that are protected by the overhanging carapace. Gills are located on the side of thoracic segments. The number of gills varies; Nine pairs of gills are common in marine crabs. However the little pea crab, <i>Pinnotheres</i> , has three gills to a side.
LIFE SPAN:	3 to 12 years
RANGE:	Oceans worldwide; also terrestrial and freshwater
HABITAT:	All types of habitats and to great depths

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FUN FACTS

- The order decapoda contains about one-fourth of the species of crustaceans. All decapods share the following features:
 - The first three pairs of thoracic appendages are modified as maxillipeds, leaving five pairs of legs.
 - The first pair of legs is modified as large claws, or chelipeds.
 - Most decapods are adapted for crawling. The legs are heavy and the pleopods are used for reproductive functions rather than swimming, as seen in shrimp.
 - The body is somewhat flattened and the exoskeleton is rigid.
- Some of the smallest crabs, such as the Pinnotheridae (pea crabs) are commensal, living in polychaete tubes and burrows, mantle cavities of bivalves and snails, on sand dollars, in tunicates or in other animals.
- Male fiddler crabs have one enormously enlarged cheliped, either left or right. It often weighs as much as the rest of the crab. This cheliped is not used for feeding or defense. Rather, it is waved by the male as he stands beside his burrow entrance to advertise his status and willingness to mate. Female fiddler crabs have small, equal-sized chelipeds.

4. A crabs' main line of defense is the chelipeds. However, other protective devices and habits are present. Some crabs carry sea anemones on their chelipeds. Some crabs, like the spider crabs, are covered with hooked setae to which foreign objects become attached. This is referred to as "decorating," and has become highly developed in some species.

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ECOLOGY AND CONSERVATION

Many species of crabs are consumed by humans. The crab fishing industry is very powerful and developed for the capture, farming, and sale of crabs. Potential commercial overfishing may put crab populations in danger and it is important that crab fisherman follow the regulations that are set forth.

Beachcombers, tidepoolers, and divers must remember not to disturb or collect any specimens that they may encounter. The removal of animals from an ecosystem may disrupt ecological processes and decrease the diversity in areas that are frequently visited. Because of their specific nutritional and physiological needs, certain animals, such as crabs have a much better chance for survival in their natural environment than in an unregulated home aquarium.

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