

Blue Crab

(Callinectes sapidus)

Introduction

The Blue Crab is a very edible species of seafood. Over 100 million pounds are caught each year by commercial and recreational crabbers. This species is highly adaptable and can live in everything from freshwater to high salinity ocean waters. The aggressive behavior of this crab gives it a unique personality.

What do they look like?

The Blue Crab is usually an olive-green color, with blue on the claws and legs. They have a white underside and usually the tips of the female's claws are red. They have five pairs of legs, the first set are the pincers, the middle 3 sets are the walking legs and the rear set are the swimmers and look like mini paddles. Their eyes are on stalks, which enables them to see 360 degrees, including behind them! For safety their eyes can be retracted into their exoskeleton or shell. If you look at their undersides you will be able to distinguish the sexes. The males have a sharply pointed apron and the females a rounded one.

How big are they?

The Blue Crab can get to be 9" (23cm) across from tip to tip. Usually they will grow to 5" to 6" (13cm-15cm) across the carapace.

Where do they live?

Although very adaptable, the adults tend to stay in the brackish waters of the estuary. Females travel to the inlets or out into the ocean to release their eggs. The young spend their early lives in the ocean and those that survive come back to the brackish waters near the coast.

Who eats them?

Blue crabs are a choice food for man but they are also eaten by gulls, herons, octopi, and fish. When they get into a fight, they have the ability to release a claw or leg section in order to escape. These predetermined spots do not bleed and will regenerate beneath the shell and exposed after the crab molts.

What do they eat?

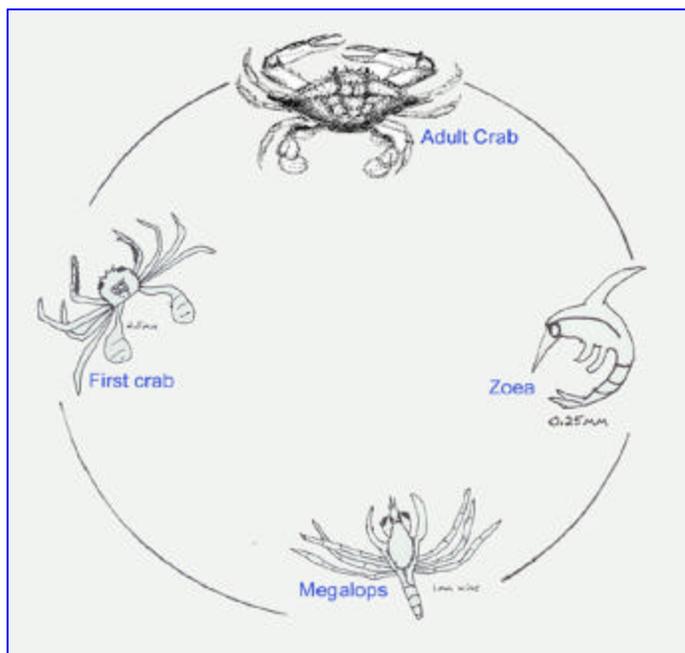
Blue crabs can swim rapidly, which is an unusual characteristic for crabs. They also can crawl on the bottom or burrow into the soft sand. They feed on plant materials, dead animals, shrimp, clams, fish, oysters, and even other crabs especially when they have molted and are in the soft-shell stage. They are very opportunistic and can usually find a meal.

How do they mate?

Mating occurs from June through October. Males and females are attracted to each other by pheromones and other chemicals they release into the water. The male will carry the female under him for several days until

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she is ready to molt her shell for the last time. They will then mate with the male depositing enough sperm for the female to have up to 15 clutches of eggs over the next two seasons. Her shell will then harden to protect her. She will females spawn from May to October. This is when you can see the sponge or egg mass on the undersurface of the female. The sponge changes in color from orange to black when closer to hatching.



Blue crab lifecycle- Adult crabs release their eggs into the ocean. They go through larval development and when they become a first crab they move back into the estuary.

What are the young like?

As the young hatch, they become tiny semitransparent zoeae larvae. These larvae are usually swept into the ocean to live as planktonic organisms. After molting several times they turn into the second larval form, the megalops. Lastly they change into new crabs. Very few make it back to the shallow estuary waters as small copies of a blue crab

because they are preyed upon while in the planktonic stage.

How long do they live?

They can live to be 3-5 years in age.

People Interactions

The most likely site most people will see these crabs is in their local seafood store or restaurant. If you frequent the coast you may see them in the water in the sound or nearshore ocean. Beware of picking them up. Their claws are sharp and can pinch or cut you. Blue crabs are highly sensitive to polluted water, so they are a good indicator species of the quality of our coastal waters.

There is a debate going on among coastal residents about the status of our blue crab stocks. Many are harvested and most scientists worry that our population is in trouble. This may be from over harvesting, changes in climate, or other factors.

EstuaryLive

www.EstuaryLive.org

North Carolina National Estuarine Research Reserve

www.ncnerr.org or tel. 252.728.2170

Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuary Program

<http://www.apnep.org/> or tel. 252.946.6481

Carolina Estuarine Reserve Foundation

www.cerf.us



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