

Most crabs blend in fairly well with their surroundings. Some are even able to change the colour of their shells to match rocks or sand nearby. The clever hairy seaweed crab is well known for dressing up and attaching bits of seaweed to its shell as camouflage . . . but it often betrays itself by zig-zagging across the sandy sea floor — quite unlike a clump of growing seaweed!

Hermit crabs have one of the most unusual ways of protecting themselves from predators. They take refuge in empty sea-snail shells and only emerge if they feel safe. When frightened the hermit crab shoots back into its shell, using its main nipper as a front door. Like all crabs, a hermit moults or sheds its skin regularly as it grows. This is usually carried out inside its shell, but sooner or later, it becomes too big and needs to find a new home. When hermit crabs look around for a larger shell to move into they explore it carefully with their feelers and pincers, before deciding to move in. Hermit crabs occasionally use sea anemones for extra protection. The anemones with their stinging tentacles live on their shell homes. Even when the crab swaps shells the anemone usually goes with it, either moving itself or sometimes being stroked and coaxed by the crab.

Crabs have another very unusual way of avoiding capture. If one of their legs is caught by a bird or a fish they are able to shed the leg — just like a lizard sheds its tail. In time a complete new leg grows to replace the lost one.

Crabs of course have to breathe and use a pair of gills to extract oxygen from water. If their gills are full of seawater they can survive for quite long periods out of the sea and sometimes use this water-holding ability to "blow bubbles" when disturbed.

Crab eggs hatch into tiny larvae and gradually change by moulting into small versions of a mature crab. They are very vulnerable when small, especially at the moulting stages and very few of the many thousands of eggs or larvae survive to become adult crabs.

New Zealand's 'Giant Crab' is enormous and may reach a width of 20cm across the back, and its clawed arms are known to grow up to 40cm. Yet this so-called giant is a mere dwarf when compared to the massive Japanese spider crab which has legs that can spread up to 3.5 metres! 🦀

CRAB TIPS

1. If you want to look closely at a crab without damaging it or yourself — pick it up carefully across the carapace using your thumb and forefinger. Most crabs are easy to hold in this way except for the red rock crab, which forces its powerful legs against its carapace to hinder your grip.
2. A good way to attract crabs is to drop a crushed shellfish into a tidal pool.
3. If you scout along the high tide margin of a beach you may be able to find an entire moulted skin of a crab. You may only find a carapace which will keep for a long time if not exposed to sunlight or if filled with plaster-of-paris.

CRAB QUIZ!

1. Crabs belong to a group of animals known as Crustaceans. Can you name two other animals which belong to this group?
2. Which usually has the bigger nippers — the male or female crab? Which has the widest abdomen — the male or female crab? Can you find out why?
3. In some tropical countries crabs have adapted even to live in trees. Do you know the name of our special native crab which lives in freshwater?
4. How do crabs clean up the coastline of decaying organic matter?
5. To make a crab move is it best to shout at it or wave your hands at it?
6. What is the name of a person who studies crabs? Send your answers to Crab Quiz, PO Box 7115, Whangarei. The prize for the first correct entry is a book about Little Barrier Island.

