

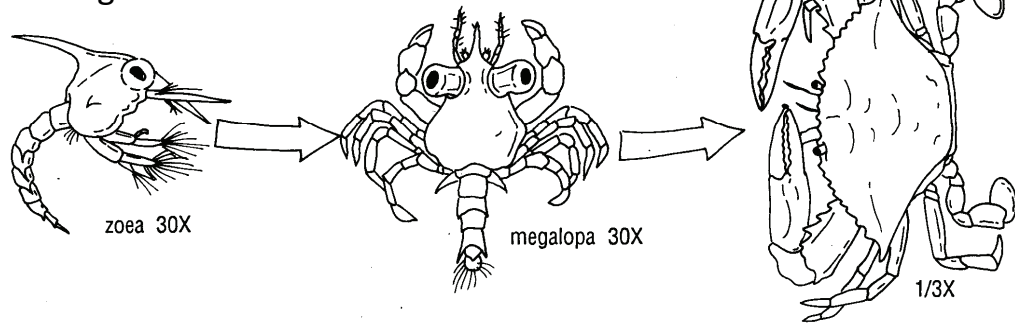


The Atlantic Blue Crab

The Atlantic blue crab is one of the most popular and well-known animals in the Chesapeake Bay today. As one of the Bay's last major fisheries, the crabbing industry provides millions of pounds of meat each year to crab houses in the area, which in turn feed residents and tourists who love to eat these tasty crustaceans. The money generated by "crabbing" is very important to the economies of Maryland and Virginia.

Blue crabs begin their lives as tiny larvae which look a lot different than the mature crabs we see at the dinner table. Crabs mate in late summer, when females ("sooks") migrate up the Bay to find large males ("jimmies"). When a match is made, the male will carry the female beneath his body until she sheds her shell, or molts. The two crabs mate while the female's new shell is still soft.

Life Stages of the Blue Crab



In early fall, each female carries as many as two million fertilized eggs to the saltier waters at the mouth of the Bay. When the eggs hatch, small larval crabs called zoea are released. Zoea are at the mercy of the current and are considered zooplankton. Many of these small crustaceans are swept into the Atlantic Ocean, where they are eaten by predators. The lucky ones get carried back into the Bay by winds and tides, and soon grow into another larval form called the megalopa (*see image above*). After several more molts, the crab's body takes its final form. Crabs reach sexual maturity at twelve to sixteen months and grow to an average length of five inches. Most crabs live for three years.

Atlantic blue crabs have ten legs, each with its own function. The two front claws are by far the largest and used to grab and tear food. One of these claws is bigger than the other and has larger, more rounded "teeth". The smaller front claw has sharp, razor-like teeth and is adapted for tearing and cutting. Crabs can be "left-handed" or "right-handed", depending on which side of the body the larger claw is located.



The Atlantic Blue Crab

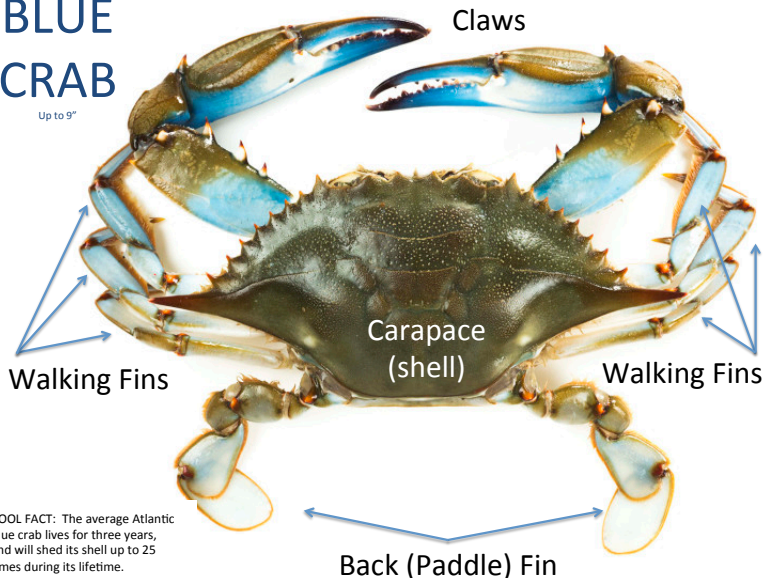
The second, third, and fourth pairs of legs behind the front claws are used for walking along the bottom. These claws also have small hairs which help the crab find its way around the murky bottom. The fifth pair of legs are called “paddle fins” because they are formed in the shape of small paddles and used for swimming.

The blue crab’s shell is like a coat of armor. This shell, or exoskeleton, is hard and covered with pointy ends which provide protection from predators. All crabs grow by shedding their shells. This process is called molting. After a crab molts, its new shell is soft. During this period, the crab is defenseless. “Soft crabs” immediately seek out shelter in grass beds or

bury themselves in muddy or sandy bottoms until the new shell hardens. Soft shelled crabs are eaten by many fish as well as human beings! Crabs live on the bottom of the Bay and a variety of foods including soft shelled clams, oysters, fish, and plants. Crabs also eat each other! When food is scarce, crabs will eat just about anything. Watermen have been known to catch crabs with bull lips, chicken nets, hot dogs, eels, and fish for bait.

BLUE CRAB

Up to 9"



COOL FACT: The average Atlantic blue crab lives for three years, and will shed its shell up to 25 times during its lifetime.

Scientists think that up to 75% of the legal sized blue crabs in the Chesapeake Bay are caught and eaten each year. To help limit the amount of crabs caught in the Bay, the state of Maryland has experimented with several policies. These include increasing the minimum size of a legal hard crab from 5” to 5 ¼”, closing recreational crabbing on Wednesdays, and limiting the amount of crabs people are allowed to keep. Future choices made by state agencies may have a big impact on the future health of the blue crab fishery. One thing remains certain: the Atlantic blue crab is one of the most interesting and important creatures living in the Bay today.



The Atlantic Blue Crab

NAME: _____ DATE: _____

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

DIRECTIONS: Read the text on the previous page, then answer the following questions in complete sentences. Write your answers on the lines provided.

1. What is a zoea?

2. What is the crab called during the second stage of its life cycle?

3. How many claws does a blue crab have?

4. How do blue crabs grow?

5. What are three ways the state of Maryland limited the amount of crabs caught?
