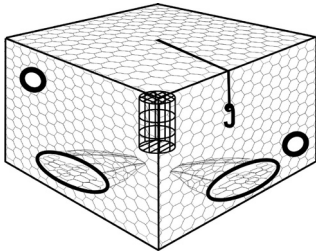


## FEEDING

Blue crabs are scavengers and will eat almost any vegetable or animal matter. They prefer freshly dead or freshly caught food of any kind. Sometimes they eat crushed young oysters and clams.

## HOW AND WHERE TO CATCH

Most of the crabs caught commercially are taken in crab traps. A trap is a rectangular wire device about 2' x 2' x 2'. It has inverted funnels in the sides, through which the crab can enter but will have difficulty leaving, and it must have at least two escape rings in each chamber at least 2 3/8" in diameter to permit small crabs to leave. In addition to escape rings, the trap must also have a degradable panel to ensure that larger crabs can escape in the event the trap gets lost. Traps are baited with freshly dead fish. In some areas, crabs are also caught in trawls and by trotlines.



In addition to the commercial fishery, there are many people who crab for fun. It is inexpensive and easy for all members of the family. There are no bag limits, but there is a 5-inch minimum body width as measured from spine to spine. It is also illegal to keep "sponge" crabs, which are female crabs with spongy masses of eggs on their abdomens.

One of the easiest ways to catch crabs is with fish heads or chicken necks tied to a length of strong twine about 10 feet in length or long enough to reach the bay bottom. Place the baited line in the water from a pier, bank or boat and wait until a crab grabs it. When you feel a pull on the end, slowly retrieve the string until you see the crab. Use of a dip net ensures safe capture of the crab. Patience is the key!

## HOW TO PREPARE FOR COOKING

Blue crabmeat is tasty and can be prepared in a number of ways. Crabmeat spoils quickly, so keep crabs on ice until they are ready to be cooked. Only live crabs should be cooked. Discard any dead crabs. Once the crabs are cooked, remove the claws by holding the body in one hand and twisting the claws off with the other hand. Next, hold the legs in one hand, insert the fingers of the other hand under the shell at back, and pull the shell up and off. Scoop out and discard the internal organs in the center of the crab, keeping the white muscle meat. Refrigerate as soon as possible.

Recipes for preparation of crab and other Texas seafoods are available by writing:

**Texas Sea Grant College Program**  
2700 Earl Rudder Freeway S.,  
Suite 1800  
College Station, Texas 77845



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4200 Smith School Road, Austin, Texas 78744 [www.tpwd.state.tx.us](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us)

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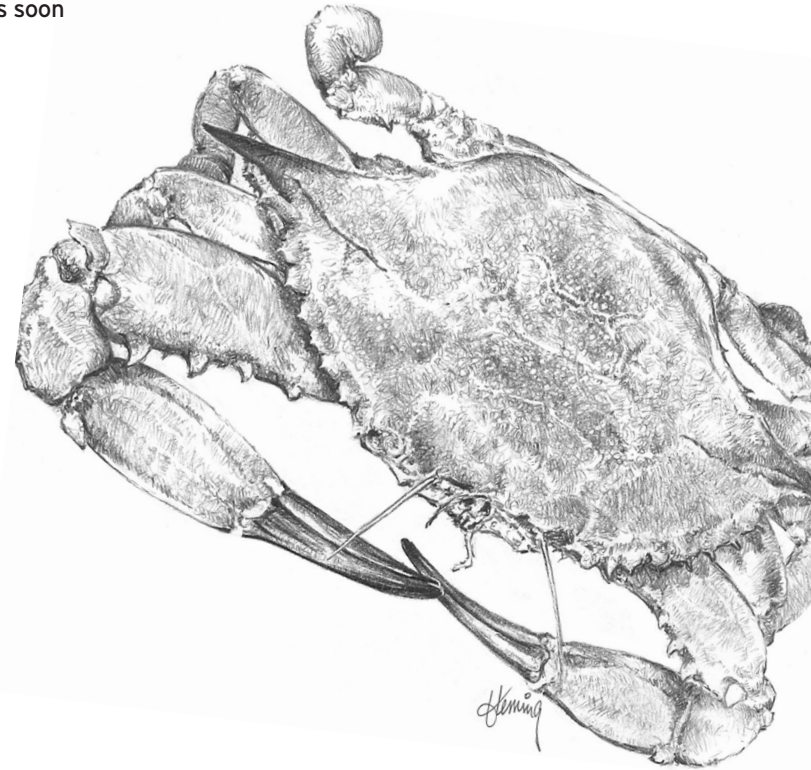
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COASTAL FISHERIES

# Blue Crabs

IN TEXAS



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The blue crab (*Callinectes sapidus*) is the most common edible crab along the Gulf and Atlantic Coasts. It ranges from Nova Scotia to Argentina and has been seen in the coastal waters of Europe. It can be found from fresh to oceanic waters but prefers brackish coastal waters for most of its life.

Economically, the blue crab is the most important crab species in Texas. The crabs are shipped live across the country, or sold to processors who boil, pick and process the meat; and to fish houses and supermarkets for public sale. Generally, production has been highest in the bays that receive the most freshwater.

## IDENTIFICATION

Blue crabs are crustaceans, a type of aquatic invertebrate distantly related to shrimp and lobsters.

The back of the blue crab is dark or brownish green and is drawn out on each side into a long spine. When fully grown it may be up to 11 inches wide. The abdomen and lower legs are white. The claws are various shades of blue; but the claw tips of the female are red, while those of the males are more orange.

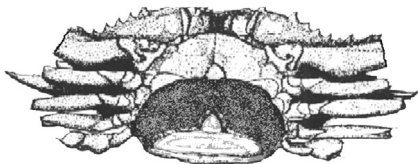
The sexes can be identified by looking at the underside of the crab. Males have an inverted T shape on the abdominal flap or apron. Immature females have a V-shaped abdominal flap, while mature females have a rounded abdominal flap.



MALE

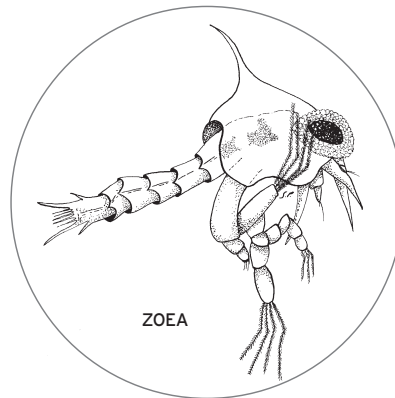
JUVENILE FEMALE

MATURE FEMALE

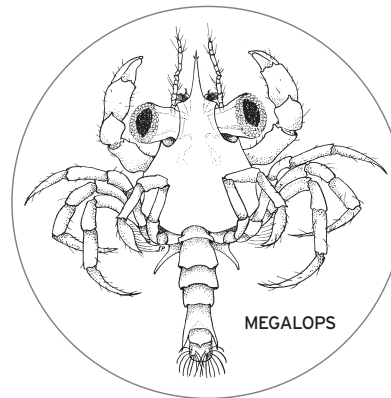


FEMALE WITH EGGS

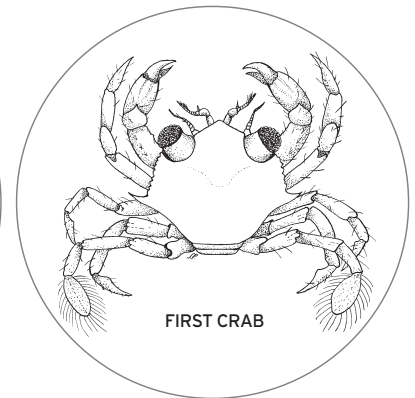
For a blue crab to grow it must molt, or shed its hard, outer shell as a new soft shell is formed beneath. After freeing itself from the shell, the crab takes in large amounts of water and expands its soft and wrinkled body. During this soft stage, the crab is easy prey and will seek a place to hide before it molts. The new shell hardens in two to three days, allowing the crab to resume its search for food. A crab may molt 20 times during its life and with each shedding may increase in width by one-fourth to one-third of its previous size. The frequency of molting depends on water temperature, food availability and the age of the crab. Crabs can replace or regenerate pinchers or legs lost while fighting or protecting themselves. The lost limb will regrow after two or more molts.



ZOEA



MEGALOPS



FIRST CRAB

## LIFE HISTORY

The male and female become sexually mature while living in the estuary after 18 or more molts at the age of 12 to 14 months. As the female reaches maturity, she will go into one final molt during which she will mate once; but a male may mate many times.

When the female is ready to mate, the male will carry the female beneath him by holding her with his first pair of legs. The pinchers are free to defend the pair, which may remain coupled two days or more.

After she sheds, the male transfers the sperm to the female and continues to hold her until she develops a hard shell. When the process is complete, they go their separate ways. The female carries the sperm internally until she is ready to spawn. Sperm will live up to a year and are sufficient to fertilize all the eggs produced in a lifetime.

After mating, the female migrates to the Gulf or saltier portions of the lower bays while the male remains in the estuary. Spawning usually takes place within two to nine months of mating, depending on the time of year. Most females spawn twice and then die. In Texas the spawning season lasts from December to October with a peak in spring and summer.

When the female is ready to spawn, she fertilizes the eggs and places them on the hairs of the appendages on the abdomen beneath the apron. The egg mass takes up about one-third of her body. An average egg mass contains 1.5 to 2 million eggs and requires about 14 days to hatch. As the larvae develop, the sponge will go from a pale yellow color to dark brown. Of the millions of eggs spawned, few survive to become adults.

The young, called larvae, look very different from the adults. After hatching, the larvae go through eight different stages (seven zoea and one megalops stage) before becoming crab-like in appearance. This process takes about two months. Young crabs move toward areas of less salty water in the back bays, where they reach maturity at about one year.