



BAY CRITTERS: Blue Crabs 101

Watch the [Blue Crabs 101](#) video.

cbf.org/news-media/multimedia/video/cbf-education-videos/blue-crab-101.html

Investigation Questions

1. How does the blue crab develop over time in the Chesapeake Bay?
2. What are some adaptations that help the blue crab survive?

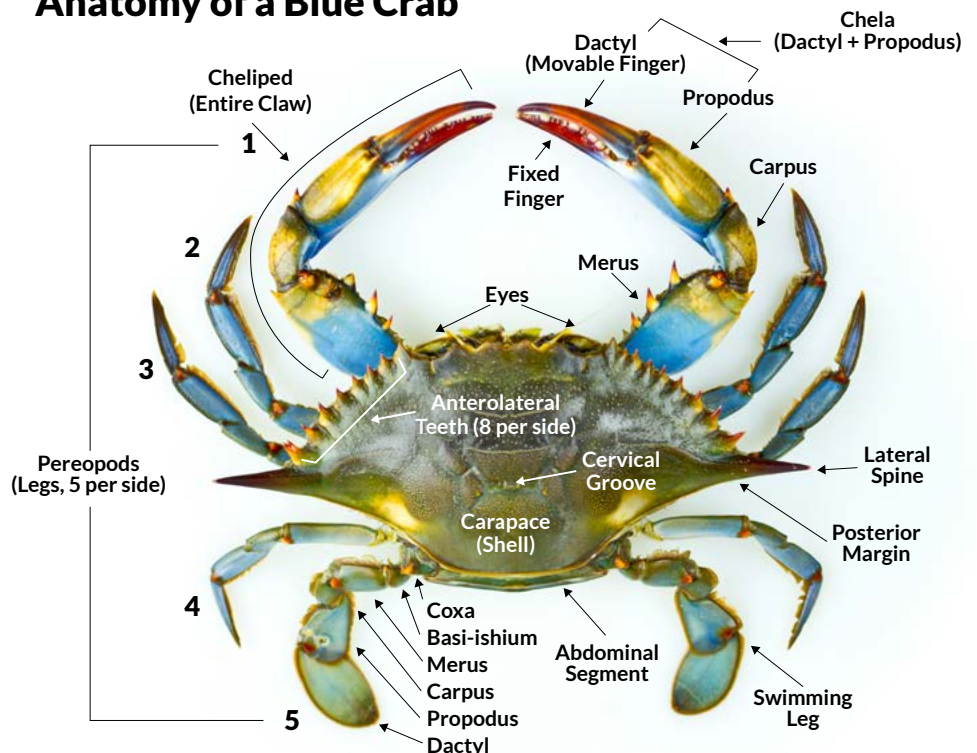
Blue crabs (*Callinectes sapidus*) are one of the icons of the Chesapeake Bay and an important fishery for Maryland and Virginia. Many people in the Chesapeake Bay watershed love to eat this delicious animal but are unaware of its complicated life cycle.

The blue crab starts its life as zooplankton in the Atlantic Ocean before settling in the Chesapeake Bay to continue its development. The crab retreats to underwater grasses, where it can hide from predators, such as drum fish and other blue crabs, and scavenge for food. A blue crab's diet consists of anything it can find. You can find them feasting on clams, oysters, mussels, the remains of dead plants and animals, and even smaller crabs!

As the blue crab grows throughout its life in the Bay, it will molt. Because blue crabs are crustaceans, they have a hard exoskeleton known as its carapace, or shell. It will need to shed its exoskeleton in order to grow into a larger shell. A blue crab will molt several times before it reaches maturity.

Once fully mature, blue crabs mate in the safety of underwater grasses. The female crab then starts her 14-day journey to the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay, where it meets the Atlantic Ocean. When she arrives at the mouth of the Bay, the female crab wipes off her eggs. The eggs float out into the ocean where they will hatch and the life cycle of the blue crab begins again.

Anatomy of a Blue Crab



Check Your Understanding

3. What is the blue crab's number one habitat?

4. Why is this habitat important?

5. Can you name any threats to this habitat?

6. What makes the blue crab a unique animal?

7. What are some of the specialized body parts that make the crab so successful?

8. Name differences between a male crab and female crab.

9. What do blue crabs eat?

10. What are some adaptations that help the blue crab eat?

11. What do you call the hard outer-shell on a blue crab?

12. How does a crab grow bigger?

13. What are some other animals that have a similar adaptation?

14. How do we categorize other animals that specialize in the same niche of the food web?

DIVE DEEPER:

Backyard Crustacean Hunt

If you are able, go out into your backyard or just outside where you live. Look for rocks and stones. Even logs or some other item that has been lying on the ground for a while will work.

Pick up these objects and look for small animals underneath. More than likely you will find sow bugs (also called pin bugs or “rolly-pollies,” because they roll up in a ball for protection). Like crabs, sow bugs are crustaceans because they have an exoskeleton.

If you are able, do some research online about the sow bug, (pill bug, roly-polly) and find some similarities to the crab. What are some differences?

Check Out a Video

Watch this excellent video about blue crabs.

[Blue Crab Video](#)



**CHESAPEAKE BAY
FOUNDATION**
Saving a National Treasure

INVESTIGATION

LEARN OUTSIDE | LEARN AT HOME | [CBF.ORG/LEARNATHOME](https://www.cbf.org/learnathome)

BLUE CRABS *Callinectes sapidus*

A blue crab's paddle-shaped swimming fins can rotate up to 40 times per minute.



Crabs are scavengers, eating everything from fish, oysters, clams, snails, shrimp, and worms to other crabs.



THE NAME GAME

Jimmy—an adult male

She Crab or Sally—an immature female

Sook—a mature female

Doubler—a male crab carrying an about-to-become-fertile female

Peeler or Buster—a crab about to molt

Sponge Crab—a mature female carrying a mass of fertilized eggs on her abdomen



You can tell the difference between a **male** and **female** crab by the shape of the "apron" on its underside. The female apron is shaped like the U.S. Capitol dome and the male apron looks more like the Washington Monument.

Females crabs migrate to the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay to spawn and can produce up to 3,200,000 eggs per brood.

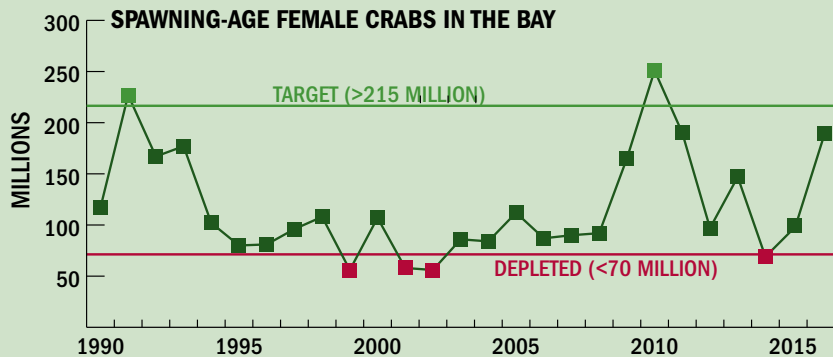


Blue crabs use **underwater grasses** for shelter from predators and a place to feed on small invertebrates and plant matter.

The blue crab population in the Chesapeake Bay fluctuates due to several factors. Healthy crab populations require clean water, abundant underwater grasses, managed harvests, and the maintenance of sufficient numbers of female crabs.



CBF.ORG



Source: Chesapeake Bay Program Winter Crab Dredge Survey