

Blue Crab Memories

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My wife and I grew up on coastal tributaries of the Chesapeake Bay in Virginia. Catching and eating blue crabs were activities we both enjoyed and often we had family gatherings where we sat around a picnic table covered with newspaper. A mound of steamed crabs was spread on the table, and we picked the delicious white meat out of the crabs and enjoyed the feast.

Now that we live in Texas, we haven't found a good place to catch crabs, nor have we seen others crabbing. I know there are plenty of crabs in local waters, but we haven't seen crabs for sale in seafood stores in places like Port Isabel. I therefore have done a little research and found some information about crabbing in Texas.

The season for recreational crabbing in Texas is open all year and the only requirement is a Texas saltwater fishing license. Crabs in the Laguna Madre are available throughout the year, but the best crabbing occurs during the warm summer months. The Atlantic blue crab (*Callinectes sapidus*) inhabits salty or brackish waters along the southern Atlantic Coast as well as the Gulf of Mexico. These crabs are mainly found in the warm, shallow rivers and bays.



Atlantic blue crab (photo by / CC-BY-Jarek TuszyńskiSA-3.0 June 2014)

Crabs feed mainly on small fish, shrimp or other crustaceans which it catches with its strong claws. Blue crabs have a hard exoskeleton which it sheds periodically as it grows. Before shedding, a new soft shell is formed inside the old exoskeleton, and this slowly expands and hardens after the crab moves out of the old shell. For a few hours the soft crab is practically helpless and subject to predation by larger fish, wading birds, pelicans and sea gulls.

The soft crab is sought by commercial crabbers who catch them when they are about to molt, then place them in shedding tanks until they emerge as soft shells. These crabs are then sold to restaurants. Crabs must be at least five inches from tip to tip of the top shell to be legally kept. Also, female crabs carrying egg sacks on their undersides must be returned alive so that the species can replenish itself. The female mates only once in its lifetime but it can release more than two million eggs. The egg sack is orange colored and spongy. Female crabs carrying this egg sack are referred to as sponge crabs or sooks.

There are several ways to catch crabs. A recreational crabber need only have a long-handled crab net and a bucket to wade along the shore in two or three feet or water, searching for crabs on the

bottom. When an unsuspecting crab is spotted, the crabber carefully moves closer and scoops the crab up with the net. An easier technique is to tie a piece of chicken or a piece of fish on a string and toss it out in the water and wait until the crab tugs at it. When the crab starts to pull, the string is slowly pulled to the surface and the crab is netted and tossed in the bucket.

Other productive methods of catching crabs require a wire trap such as the pyramid trap with folding sides. The trap is baited by attaching the bait to the floor of the trap and dropping the trap from a cord to the bottom, letting the sides drop so the bait is accessible to the crabs. When the crab starts feeding, the cord is pulled tight trapping the crab inside and the trap is pulled up and the crab emptied into the bucket.

Another method is to use a commercial crab pot. These are square-shaped traps made of wire which are dropped in deeper water and tied to a pole or a small buoy. The bait pocket located in the middle of the crab pot is filled with chicken meat or oily fish such as menhaden or mullet which will attract crabs to enter the trap through funnel shaped openings located low on the sides of the pot. Crabs cannot escape once inside the pot. This method is also used by commercial crabbers who often put out a hundred or more pots and work the pots from their boat. The crabber pulls the pot onto a flat surface called a culling board where the pot full of crabs is emptied and the crabs are sorted by size. Small crabs and sponge crabs are returned to the water and the rest are taken to market.

Cooking methods and seasoning of crabs vary by region and personal preference. Hard crabs are washed off and either steamed or boiled. I like to steam them in a fairly large cooker I obtained from Bass Pro Shops. It consists of two pots with the bottom pot filled with water (or beer) and the top pot filled with crabs. I place this on a propane cooker after seasoning the crabs with a red pepper seasoning such as Old Bay. I steam the crabs for about thirty minutes or until their shells turn a rosy red. In Louisiana, the crabs are usually boiled and sometimes mixed with other meats such as sausage or shrimp. This is seasoned with mesh sacks of special Cajun spices.

Crab meat is not only tasty, it is also a healthy food source containing vitamins, protein, amino acids and minerals. Restaurants such as Joe's Crab Shack might be a good place to learn to eat crabs for those not accustomed to it. Crab meat is also used to make crab cakes and crab cocktails. Any way its fixed, it tastes good to me!