



## Blue Crabs – The Bay’s Beautiful Swimmers

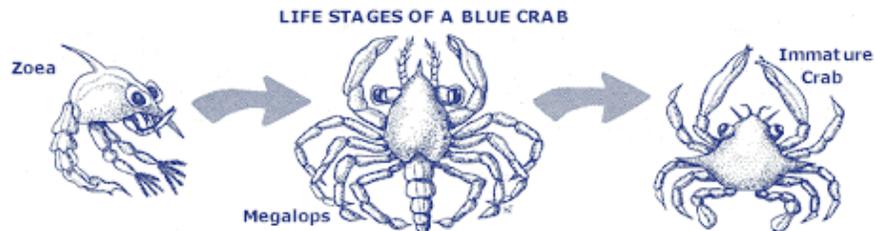
### What are they?

Blue crabs are probably the most well-known creatures of the Bay. They are crustaceans. These kinds of animals have hard shells and jointed legs.

### What do they look like?

Blue crabs are called that because their claws are blue. The main part of their body is bluish-green.

Blue crabs go through several stages until they reach the familiar adult shape many of us recognize.



Adult female crabs release the larvae (called zoea) near the mouth of the Bay. Zoea drift along, developing over a period of 30 – 45 days, eating other zooplankton and plant materials. The zoea then become megalops, and ride the currents up into the more northern parts of the Bay. They settle in meadows of underwater Bay grasses, where they can hide. Depending on the salt content of the water and the temperature, the megalops shed their first “skin” after 6 – 20 days. They now look like miniature adult crabs. Blue crabs mature in 12 – 18 months.

### Where can you find them?

Both young and adult crabs love to stay in underwater meadows of Bay grasses. The young are protected there and the older crabs find a great deal of food to eat there. Female blue crabs prefer the saltier waters of the lower Bay. Males usually go much further up into the Bay.

### How do they behave?

On land, crabs walk sideways, using its middle pairs of legs. Crabs use their front claws to defend themselves and hold on to their food.

### What do they eat?

Adult blue crabs eat both plants and animals. They eat bivalves like soft shell clams, other crustaceans such as shrimp, fish, marine worms, and anything else they can find, including dead plants and animals. They even eat younger blue crabs!

### What eats them?

Eel, drum, spot, Atlantic croaker, striped bass (rockfish), and catfish all eat crabs when they are very young (as zoea and megalops). Some sharks and cownose rays eat the larger adult crabs, as do Atlantic Ridley sea turtles that come into the Bay every summer to feast on crabs, their favorite food.

### Creature Feature

Blue crabs are so important to the people of the Chesapeake Bay that a whole language has developed about them. Male crabs are known as jimmies, and adult female crabs are called sooks. When they are young, people call the females she-crabs. Large male crabs are also called channelers.

