

Crabbing for fun

By John Lijoi

I have been crabbing ever since I was a little boy. I can remember weekend trips with my family out to the local docks in Long Island, N.Y. There we would bait our foldable crab traps with chicken legs or place a piece of chicken on a string and cut up wire clothes hanger to “reel” the crabs in slowly and then scoop them up in a net. We would then enjoy a family feast of delicious crab salad or crabs in spaghetti sauce. This ended up being a family ritual in the summer months.

Later, while I was in college, I would drive 2 hours at night to go crabbing with my Uncle Frank at low tide in Brooklyn, N.Y. There we employed a much different method of crabbing. We would go into the bays of Brooklyn during low tide armed with a strong flashlight and a long handle net. We would stroll in waist deep water, following a twisted tortuous path, avoiding the obstacles in the bay. Bicycles, shopping carts, and even car engines! We would shine our lights into the water and scoop up the illusive blue claw crab. Occasionally we would spot a softshell crab swimming on top of the water and let out a hoot when we were able to scoop them up because they were quite a bit less numerous.

One of my favorite stories is from when we lived in New York and would take summer camping trips to the Jersey shore. One year my 21-year-old daughter, who lived in New Jersey, called, and asked me to take her crabbing on our next camping trip because she had not been crabbing in a long time. Of course, I obliged!

Here in Southeast Georgia, there is an abundance of blue claw crabs in our local waters. You will often see the commercial crab pot buoys littered about in the local rivers and creeks. Crabbing season is year-round here. Mating season is from May thru October. You can spot the pregnant female crabs by the large “sponge” of eggs attached to her abdomen. It is illegal to harvest female crabs with eggs since they control future generations of crabs. Crabs tend to “fill out” after the mating season and are larger and more plentiful during the fall months. If a crabber is older than 16 years old, a fishing license and Saltwater Information Program (SIP) permit are required to recreational crab in Georgia waters “unless you are on your own private property”. To harvest a crab, it must be at least 5 inches point to point. The recreational angler is allowed to harvest up to 2 bushels of crab per day.

The average life span of the blue claw crab is 3 – 4 years. To shed the old shell, a crab swells with water, and busts the old shell along the back edge. The crab then wiggles out through the back. The new shell has already formed and is about a third larger, but it is still soft. The crab will remain truly soft for only a couple of hours (10 – 12) in the water. A large crab will shed 3 – 4 times a year while a small crab might shed up to 10 times per year. This is the reason soft shell crabs are quite a bit more expensive than their hardshell counterpart.

To recreationally catch crabs in our local waters there are several proven methods and baits. There are differences of opinion as to when is the best time to go crabbing. It is generally thought that 2 hours before and 2 hours after low tide are the best. This is because water is minimal (low tide) and still moving so crabs can sense their food. Crabs are scavengers and will eat just about anything. Many people use chicken (the cheapest parts), or fish heads. The bait needs to have a scent, so it is recommended to change out the bait once or twice during a day of crabbing. Equipment required to catch crabs: Double ring crab net or crab lines which have a weight and clip attached or a snap trap, (triangle or rectangle). You should also have a crab net to scoop up the crabs and a 5gal bucket to place your crab bounty in. I drilled holes in my bucket and attached a rope to allow an occasional watering of the crabs. If crabs are left in water, they will drown or get too dry they will die. To handle a crab safely grab the swimming flippers with one hand, the crab won't be able to pinch you. Another safe way to handle a crab is to have your partner do it!



Open door snap traps



2 ring crab trap and long handle net

DO NOT COOK DEAD CRABS. As soon as a crab dies it starts to rot and becomes toxic. If a crab has died, dispose of it immediately. To cook crabs, you can either steam them or boil them. Many people also add a spice such as OLD BAY, but I prefer to steam my crabs without spices, steaming separates the meat of the crab from the shell. This allows for easier removal of the edible delight. The crab is loaded with meat in the shell and the body. The best tool for opening crabs is a nutcracker. First remove the carapace by grabbing one end of the shell point and gently lift off the top to expose the insides. The lungs, and green/yellow insides do not taste good and sometimes taste sour, so dispose of this part of the crab and enjoy the delectable claw and lump meat.



Happy Crabbing

