

Basic Information on Hermit Crabs

Hermit crabs (*Coenobita clypeatus* - purple claws from the Caribbean and *Coenobita variabilis* - brown claws from India) come from tropical regions throughout the world. They are not aggressive and can be easily handled. They respond to gentle care and will learn to trust their keeper. With proper care, good nutrition, and plenty of shells for shell changes, they may live up to 30 years.

In the wild, hermit crabs are not "hermits" at all! In fact, they are very social and live colonies ranging from a few dozen to over a hundred. They do not do well when kept alone; so, it is very important to keep more than one hermit crab. We recommend keeping at least three to keep them from getting lonely when one of them has gone underground to molt. Hermit crabs communicate by sound and it is not uncommon to hear them talking ("chirping") to each other! Other than the occasional shell dispute, the docile crabs rarely fight.

Equipment Needed:

- Tank & Screen Top
- Substrate - Mix of sand and coconut husk (enough to provide a 6" layer)
- Sea salt mix (or you can purchase ready made saltwater by the gallon from us)
- Crushed oyster shell
- Under tank heater
- Thermometer
- Climbing logs (hermit crabs LOVE to climb)
- Plastic plants and other decorations
- Spray bottle
- Shallow food dish
- Two water dishes - one for saltwater and one for freshwater (deep enough to submerge in, but needs a ramp so crab can get in and out)
- Staple food & treat food
- Extra correctly sized shells for molting
- Dechlorinator



Habitat & Substrate

A ten gallon tank is a good starter sized enclosure for a group of small crabs. Remember to include many different decorative items so that your crabs have a choice of play items. The comfort zone for crabs is 75 - 85° F. If the temperature drops to 50 - 60° F they may hibernate. A long hibernation can permanently affect your pet. If the habitat's temperature starts to drop, use an under the tank heater.

The ideal substrate should closely mimic their natural environment. Since they are scavengers, they occasionally ingest their substrate. We suggest creating your substrate out of several different elements. The mix should include sand, a bit of coconut husk (for organic material) and finely crushed oyster shell (for calcium). Once the substrate is mixed, add saltwater (made with sea salt for saltwater aquariums - follow package directions). Add the saltwater until the sand is a good packing consistency (like making sand castles at the beach). This consistency is great for hermit crab digging. The substrate in your habitat MUST be deep enough that your crab can completely bury itself.

Digging & Molting

Crabs grow by shedding their exoskeleton. Small crabs will molt more frequently than larger crabs. During this process crabs not only increase their size but regrow any missing body parts. Make sure they have plenty of saltwater and freshwater during this time. Crabs use the salt in the saltwater to help build hydrostatic pressure during molting. This allows the old exoskeleton to break open so your crab can shed. When they molt, they will twist and stretch until the old skin splits open and they climb out in a "new suit of clothes". The old exoskeleton will look like a dead crab. Do not remove it as your crab may eat pieces of it to replenish minerals needed to harden the new exoskeleton. The new exoskeleton will harden over a period of 10 days to two weeks.

Once your crab has shed, it will either begin searching for a new shell, or bury itself down in the substrate and wait for its new exoskeleton to harden. If your crab is looking for a shell, make sure there are plenty of shells to choose from. A crab without a shell choice may not molt as readily as a crab with a large selection. Give your pet at least 3 choices; one larger, one smaller and one about the same size! The shell opening should be the same size as the crab's larger pincher claw. Even if your pet is not molting, they love to switch shells. Make sure you have at least 3 shells per crab available at all times.

The time your crab stays buried varies. Tiny crabs will stay buried for a week or two. Medium size crabs (the size of a golf ball), may stay 1-2 months and jumbo crabs (base ball size) may stay as long as 2-3 months. Don't worry, your crab is safe.

NEVER attempt to remove a crab from its shell. The crab will allow itself to be torn apart rather than give up its protective home.

Diet

We recommend a good prepared crab food in flake or cake form. This assures a balanced diet for your pet. Supplement their diet with human food items like lettuce, peanut butter, bread, apple or coconut. Other vegetable and shelled nuts are great, too! Hermit crabs are nocturnal (awake at night), so it's best to feed them in the evening. Crabs are slow eaters and eat very little. It is important to remove all uneaten food from the habitat each morning.

Water

Fresh drinking water should be available at all times. Hermit crabs also need a dish of saltwater (also with a ramp to climb out). Make this water using aquarium sea salt mix. Follow the package instructions.

Since hermit crabs need a humidity of 70%, you'll also need a misting bottle with freshwater to keep up the humidity in the enclosure.

Use an aquarium water dechlorinator to dechlorinate ANY water used in their habitat. Chlorine is toxic to crabs.

Water dishes should be deep enough for your crab to submerge themselves in but also have a ramp so they can climb out. (If submerged for more than a few minutes, they could drown.)

Handling your pet

When handling tree crabs pick them up by the shell and place them on a flat outstretched palm. It is best to avoid the big purple pincher claw. In the wild, it is used for defense, for holding onto limbs while climbing, and for balancing. The little claw is used to pass food and water to the mouth.

Activity

Crabs love to climb and get plenty of exercise. They need lots of hiding places and climbing surfaces. Some items you can use for this are sponges, cholla wood, driftwood, coconut fiber mats, reptile nets, and plastic plants. If you collect wood from outside, you will need to boil it to ensure you do not introduce any parasites or bacteria to the enclosure.

Interesting Hermit Crab Facts:

- All hermit crabs are hatched in the ocean and begin life as "free floating plankton". After numerous molts, land hermit crab's gills develop the ability to breathe air and they leave the sea to live out the remainder of their lives on land.
- Hermit crabs are thought to live 30 years in the wild.
- You can tell the sex of your crab by observing the left side of the abdomen within the shell. A female will have pleopods (3 feathery looking appendages) that are used to hold her eggs. Females also have gonopores (2 little holes) that are visible on the central underside of the hind walking legs.
- Hermit crabs have compound eyes which consist of multi faceted lenses. Always try to move slowly when approaching your crabs so that you don't scare them.
- Hermit crabs communicate by making a croaking or chirping sound. This correlates with distress of some sort such as one crab trying to steal the shell of another.

Please Note: The information in this handout is meant to provide basic information only.

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