

Hermit crab fact sheet



All crabs have their skeleton on the outside. This is called an exoskeleton. It is like armour on the outside. Their muscles, heart and stomach are inside their hollow skeleton. If they have spikes on their legs, like this hermit crab, it is even more difficult for other animals to eat them.

There are about 1100 types of hermit crabs around the world. Most live in the sea.

Hermit crabs have gills hidden under their body where the legs join. The gills get the oxygen from the seawater. They have ten legs. The first two legs have powerful pinchers. Only six legs including the pinchers can be seen poking out of the shell. They have four feelers also called antennae on their head. Their two eyes are at the end of stalks.

Without the shell, hermit crabs look more like a lobster. The back of their body is soft, long and curled. It is not round and flat like a crab. The body of the hermit crab needs protection, so these animals find an empty snail shell to live in. As the hermit crab grows it will replace the shell with a larger one. Some hermit crabs are very picky about what shell they will live in.

Hermit crabs use six of their legs to walk and crawl. They don't swim. Some hermit crabs live along rocky shores and hide under rocks when the tide is out. Some can venture on land, but most live in the sea. They like to feed at night. The hermit crab in the poster lives in deeper water.

As they walk about they pick around looking and feeling for food. They will eat plants, small animals or anything that has died.

They lay lots of eggs. Some types of hermit crabs look after their eggs and the hatchlings for the first two weeks. The small hatchlings will spend their first months floating in the water.

Some of the hermit crabs, called land crabs, are sold as pets. They also have gills and need to stay damp.

To protect Hermit crabs we must keep the sea clean. Most of the pollution in the sea comes from the land and is washed in after rain.

Additional teacher notes

- The name hermit crab refers to these animals using second hand shells.
- Hermit crabs are not classified with normal crabs. The hermit crab abdomen is soft, long and curled and very vulnerable to attack.
- The gills of crabs, shrimps, lobsters etc. are hidden at the base of the legs where they are protected, but still can have adequate water moving across them.
- Crabs, shrimps, lobsters etc. all have ten legs and four antennae. The body is divided into a head, thorax (chest) and abdomen (stomach region). All legs are on the thorax. True crabs have a small curled up abdomen which is difficult to see unless the crab is turned over.
- Crabs, shrimps, lobsters, spiders, insects etc. all have exoskeletons. As they grow they must shed their skeleton. A new soft skeleton grows under the old one before the animal moults. When the old skeleton moults, the new soft one expands and takes some time to harden.
- Shellfish can't shed or leave their shell. Their shell grows along the rim as the animal grows. Empty shells are the remains of dead shellfish.
- If students do a search for information on hermit crabs, most the information will be about pets. These hermit crabs are unusual and are not a good representation of the vast majority of this group.