



SHELLFISH AND AQUACULTURE SERIES

The good, the bad and the ugly: Crabs of the Great Salt Pond

As lovers of the Great Salt Pond, many of us are familiar with the joy of harvesting and eating its quahogs, mussels, bay scallops and oysters. Fewer of us are familiar with harvesting our plentiful crabs for food and other uses. Here is a classification of some of the Pond's most common crab species, with apologies to a well-known western.

THE GOOD (and tasty)

The **Atlantic Rock Crab** (*Cancer irroratus*), also called peekytoe crab and sand crab, is a native species that concentrates in the Pond after the water temperature drops in the fall. Its shell (carapace) size ranges up to about 5 inches, making it just large enough for picking. The meat of the rock crab is prized for its sweetness. It is a close relative and similar in appearance to the larger **Jonah crab** (*Cancer borealis*), which is commercially fished offshore.



The **Blue Crab** (*Callinectes sapidus*) is a native species well known for its culinary appeal. To harvest them legally from the Pond they must have a shell size of at least 5 inches tip to tip and you must be a Rhode Island resident.



THE BAD (and tasty)

The **European Green Crab** (*Carcinus maenas*) is an invasive species that arrived on our shores more than 100 years ago. Incredibly prolific, they decimate soft-shell clam beds and damage eelgrass and marshy shorelines. Too small for a pick-fishery, as most are less than 3 inches in shell size, they nevertheless yield an umami-rich crab stock which is becoming popular with chefs. Soft-shell (molted) green crab is considered a delicacy in its native Venice and is a developing fishery in New England. In addition to culinary uses, much greater numbers of green crabs are used as bait in the local whelk and tautog fisheries. There are no Rhode Island regulations governing the harvest of green crabs.



THE UGLY (unwanted)

The Portly **Spider Crab** (*Libinia emarginata*) is a native species, euphemistically called a "decorator crab" because of its habit of adding camouflage material to its shell as a defense against predation. It often fills traps in the Pond to the dismay of fishermen seeking other species. Unfortunately, there are no culinary or bait markets for the crab so it remains "unwanted," even if it has an important ecological niche.



OUR MISSION: To protect and enhance the environmental quality of the Great Salt Pond, including its shorelines and wetlands, and to promote appropriate and productive uses of the Pond's resources by residents, visitors and local businesses.

FUNDING: Individual contributions, membership dues, special events, program grants. IRS 501(c)3 non-profit. Contributions are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.

Please consider becoming a member of The Committee for the Great Salt Pond. For information and details, visit our website at cgspblockisland.org.