

Fishing & Hunting



By Richard Seale

Buying blue claw crabs

The full moons of July, August, and sometimes September are very special in the lives of our NC blue crab populations. It is during these times, in the estuaries of the Neuse, Pamlico and Albemarle waters that millions of female crabs become sexually mature and are mated by male crabs.

The process begins with the female crabs sending out chemical signals, pheromones, which inform the males that females are matured. The apron on these mature females changes in color from creamy white to blue and orange. The male crabs have been preparing for this by fattening up as best they can. Why? Because the male crabs take on the task of protecting a mature female for about a week, carrying her under him before she molts. Crabs are cannibalistic and soft shell crabs are normally lunch to other crabs, as well as many other predators, including humans. However, in this mating period, the male crab protects the female as she undergoes the final lifetime molt of her shell. At that point, the male rotates the female into an upside down position and mates her, after which he rotates her back right-side up and carries her under him until her shell hardens.

As is usual in nature, males vie for females, so there are battles between males and thus bigger, stronger males get the better mate choices. Also during the "carrier" or "doubler" period, the males do not feed, but live on stored fat and muscle tissue. Knowing these facts can help us buy the best and tastiest crabs for a steamed crab feast.

Crabs store fat under the points of their shells and in the center of their body cavities behind the eyes. The crabs with stored fat reserves have the most meat, and the meat has a better flavor. To determine if the crabs we are to purchase are "full," a simple thumb and index finger "squeeze test" of the area under the shell point works well. Crabs that are "empty" have a shell point underside that flexes, while crabs that are full have shell point undersides that are very firm. Crabs about to shed could have a separation split that would crack along a straight line. Holding the crab at the base of the swimmer leg is the only safe place to hold a live blue claw crab to perform this test (see accompanying photo). The first part of the selection process is to determine if the crabs for sale are full or empty, regardless of size. Empty crabs are also known as "white bellies."

Legal crabs must be at least five inches from shell point to shell point. Crab market sizing is not standardized legally, but there are sizing charts that run in about half-inch increments up to about seven inches. Prices go up as the size increases.

Size description	Size in inches	Crabs per bushel
Small	5" to 5½"	84-96
Medium	5½" to 6"	72-84
Large	6" to 6½"	60-72
Jumbo	6½" to 7"	48-60 (not very easy to come by)

Generally, the Baltimore Jimmy designation, so revered on Maryland's and Virginia's Delmarva Eastern Shore, has been reserved for full male crabs that are six inches or larger. Crab cracking houses there are not averse to charging \$75 or more per dozen for such crabs. A crab salad made with fresh picked crab meat, mayonnaise and seasoning salt, and spread on an open-face toasted English muffin, is what my father called "nectar of the gods." We are well blessed to have recreational access to Callinectes sapidus, our "beautiful swimmers."

Revisiting stone crabs. My article last month on stone crab claw harvesting brought me a phone call from Wally Lawrence of Beaufort. He wanted to remind

me that it would be good to mention that stone crabs have a closed season from June 15 to August 15. My article noted that none of that information is in the official NC Division of Marine Fisheries Recreational Fishing Guide sheet. In fact, that data is *only* in the DMF 328-page "rules" book, well hidden on page 44, and is not something most recreational fisherman obtain or reference. I called the DMF and was passed on to Officer Steven Anthony, our local Marine Patrol officer.

He did not realize the official sheet did not contain any stone crab information. He agreed this was not a good thing. I have written to all the members of the NC Marine Fisheries Commission, making them aware of the situation and making some suggestions for their consideration. I will keep you posted as to what I learn.

Hunting seasons are upon us. Although I find it hard to believe, the 2016-17 hunting seasons are upon us. Dove season opens on September 3, and deer archery season opens September 10, as does the September teal season. Where does the time go? If you intend to hunt teal, remember to get your NC license (if you do not have an NC lifetime hunting license) and federal duck stamps (everyone needs one of these)—and to plug your shotgun to the three shot load limit. The same shotgun load limit applies to dove hunting. Have fun and be safe.

Remember *every* gun must be treated like a loaded gun, so make sure it is *always* pointed in a safe direction, away from people. Unload the chamber and open the breech if you crawl under fences or jump ditches. In dove hunting, be sure you shoot up into the sky only, with 7½ or smaller shot. Wear glasses to protect your eyes from falling shot. At the end of the hunt make doubly sure your gun's chamber and magazine are truly empty, and leave the action in the open position.

The opening of dove season is a traditional social event in North Carolina and, thus, there can be some pretty infrequent and inexperienced hunters in the field around you. The opening day is often called a dove shoot, not a hunt. Only go into fields you have permission to hunt and do not shoot toward any houses—and all will be well.

Fileted breast of dove is not an inexpensive meat. A common estimate is that seven shots are not uncommon per dove. At less than 3/4 of an ounce per dove, it could take 22 doves to provide a pound of meat (the daily limit, however, is 15 doves), which could require about six (25-shot) boxes of shells. At perhaps \$4.50 a box, a pound of dove filets could ring up a tab of \$27.



Demonstration of technique for checking a 7" Baltimore Jimmy for "fullness," though this crab has been cooked.

—Photo by Richard Seale

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