

ASK the AQUARIUM

Q. What are those little gray bug-like things that dig into the sand where the waves break on shore?

A. Those are mole crabs (*Emerita talpoida*), often called sand fleas, sand fiddlers, sand bugs or sand hoppers. They are early spring arrivals on our beaches.

Pinkish-gray in color, these little crustaceans measure only an inch to an inch-and-a-half-long and live in large groups. They're harmless and are often sought after by fishermen, who use them as bait.

As you mentioned, mole crabs live in the pounding surf zone - a tough habitat. They move up and down the beach with the rise and fall of the tide, and their lives are fairly short, made up of a summer, a winter and a summer.

Looking more like insects than crabs, they begin life as tiny, free-swimming larvae, hatched from an orange-colored egg mass carried beneath the flap-like tail of the female. As larvae, they can be carried as far as 200 miles off shore.

After their first molt, they seek the bottom in the turbulent surf zone near shore. Toward summer's end, they molt again, this time transforming into adults.



Mole crabs have an interesting way of feeding. Each time a wave approaches, they quickly burrow backward into the sand. Because their eyes are small and practically

useless, they orient toward the sea so their antennae can filter water for plankton as the waves go out.

After the wave crashes on shore, the crab extends its antennae into the backwash to trap plankton, then draws the antennae through the appendages surrounding its mouth to pick off the captured food.

Several times during the rising tide, entire beds of mole crabs shift position. The sand "bubbles" as a wave sweeps over them and carries them higher onto the beach. When the wave slackens, they quickly dig into the sand, using a whirling motion of their tail.

Spring is mating season for the little crabs, and by July most or all of the males hatched the preceding summer have died. The females carry their egg masses for several months until the young hatch. Before winter, all the females will have died and only a single generation remains on the beach. Mole crabs are active until the sand becomes too cool. When winter approaches, they go out beyond the low tide zone to pass the cold months beneath a fathom or more of water.

The Isaksons

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the Air Force, Kevin prefers to place his focus on the men and women he worked with throughout his career and attributed his successes to their efforts. He identified Jodi as the single, consistent source of encouragement and support that allowed him to accomplish what it did during their 29 years with the Air Force.

When asked about her feelings about being an Air Force bride and wife of a career Airman, Jodi smiled and told of one of her experiences. At one of the ten bases they were stationed during the 29 years of service, Jodi was asked what it was like to be a "military spouse." She responded that it was like living in rainbow. She explained when she envisioned her colleagues - other military spouses - she saw males as well as females; people of all colors, races, and religious orientation; individuals with a wide range of formal education; a variety of personal traits and characteristics; and people from all over the United States as well as other countries. In spite of the vast diversity, all seemed bound to a common set of experiences. And all were alike in sharing their spouses' commitment to serving and protecting our country. Jodi indicated that living in this rainbow was an experience that she cherishes and hopes that she is able to maintain closeness to that rainbow even after retirement.



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