



ASCENSION ISLAND



AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

Land crab harvesting is now a thing of the past, but it is not known whether the population has recovered. Predators and competitors such as rats, mice and rabbits that were introduced to the island by humans continue to threaten the future of the landcrabs. AIG Conservation is working to ensure the survival of this unique island resident.

ROAD SAFETY

Land crabs can often be seen on certain roads around the island, in particular after rain – they have little ‘road-sense’ so please take care to avoid them wherever possible.



VIEWING CRABS

While land crabs can be sighted year-round in Green Mountain National Park, there are certain nights in February – April when they can be viewed congregating at North East Bay to release their eggs. The Conservation Department is able to accurately predict the nights on which mass spawning events will occur based on the moon phase, so please get in touch about tours that will be run on these evenings.

DID YOU KNOW?

Many of our species and habitats are protected by the Wildlife Protection Ordinance and Protected Areas legislation – it is an offence to deliberately harm or remove them without written authorisation.

- Land crabs are slow growing and long lived. The largest individuals may be more than 40 years old!
- Land crabs have to shed their shells in order to grow. They moult in burrows for safety and then eat the discarded shell to conserve calcium!
- Land crabs can deliberately shed and regrow limbs – a process known as ‘autotomy’. However, the regeneration takes time and requires a clean break. If a claw is forcibly removed the crab will likely die from fluid loss.
- Land crabs have gills like other crabs that have become specially adapted for breathing in air. They quickly drown if they are submerged in water.
- Female land crabs can lay as many as 100,000 eggs

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Ascension Island
Conservation Department



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ASCENSION ISLAND

LAND CRABS

OF ASCENSION ISLAND

Female land crab carrying eggs to release into the sea



LAND CRABS OF ASCENSION ISLAND

Land crabs are Ascension Island's only large, native land animal, and are one of the island's most iconic inhabitants.

The land crab species that is found on Ascension, *Johngarthia lagostoma*, only lives on four small, South Atlantic islands (including the Brazilian islands of Trindade, Fernando da Noronha and Atol das Rocas), of which Ascension is by far the largest. They come in a variety of colours, or 'morphs', ranging from yellow-orange to deep purple, but they are all the same species.

Land crabs spend most of the day in burrows, preferring to come out at night when it is cooler. In fact, they can stay underground for weeks at a time waiting for rain. So, keep a special watch out for them in the evening and after wet weather!



Land crabs congregating to spawn



Male land crab in Green Mountain National Park



MOUNTAIN DWELLERS

Ascension Island's land crabs are amongst the most terrestrial crabs in the world, both in terms of the dryness of the climate they inhabit and the distance that they live from the sea. They are omnivores, meaning they will eat both plants and animals if given the opportunity, but their diet mainly consists of leaves, fruits and flowers. Because most coastal areas around Ascension are hot and barren, for much of the year the crabs are confined to the mountainous interior of the island where higher rainfall supports more vegetation. However, like all crabs, they are still tied to the sea by the need to breed!

INCREDIBLE JOURNEY

Every year between February and April thousands of crabs begin the long journey down from the mountains to spawn. They tend to travel at night and may migrate several kilometers to reach their spawning grounds along the southern and eastern coastlines. At some sites, such as North East Bay, they gather in huge numbers creating one of Ascension's most impressive wildlife spectacles. Each female can lay as many as 100,000 eggs, which she incubates for about 2 weeks. Once the eggs are ripe she releases them into the sea where they quickly hatch into tiny, swimming larvae. Many of the larvae are eaten or swept away by currents, but, if they are lucky, some will return to the island as baby land crabs.

THE HUNT FOR THE BABIES!

About 2-3 weeks after spawning, baby land crabs called 'megalops' begin to emerge from the sea. Until recently, however, the only record of this event came from 1963 when tiny crabs reportedly overran houses in Georgetown! In 2013 AIG Conservation launched an intensive search to try to find the elusive babies, and discovered several in Georgetown and in the North East Bay area - not enough to attract attention but proof that they are still returning to the island!



PERSECUTED AS PESTS

The permanent settlement of Ascension Island by the British Navy in 1815 marked a change in the fortune of the island's land crabs. As well as being taken for food, the crabs were heavily persecuted for their habit of eating crops planted in the garrison's farm on Green Mountain. Between 1879 and 1887 alone an astounding 335,535 crabs were killed! Soldiers were rewarded with 1s 6d for every hundred pairs of land crab claws they bagged, and by 1887 the commandant reported that "the men have to go very far afield to get many".