

Coconut Crabs

The coconut crab is the world's biggest land invertebrate (animals without a backbone) – in the sea, only a handful of molluscs and crustaceans are bigger, but on land nothing beats them.

Coconut crabs may weigh up to 4 kilos (8.8lb) and their legs span up to a metre (39 inches). Coconut crabs of this size are old animals though – they grow very slowly, and it takes from 40 to 60 years before the crabs reach their maximum size. The hard shells protect the crabs from predators, but their formidable claws are also used as a deterrent – if you watch for long enough you'll see them warding off foolhardy rats which try to approach. Any challengers are dicing with death: recent science has shown that the crushing strength of these claws is over 1700 Newtons. That's equivalent to over 380 pounds, similar to an adult lion and greater than almost any other animals.

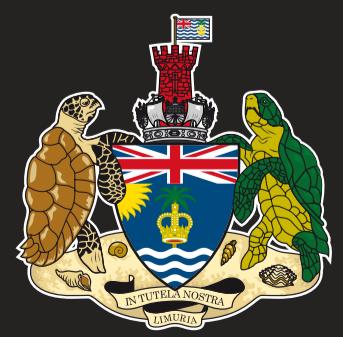
The main use for their incredible crushing strength is to break into coconut shells, so that the crabs can scrape out the meat for food. Coconut crabs aren't fussy however and will eat a huge variety of fruits and other animals, actively hunting land crabs, scavenging on roadkill and even eating animal faeces, which has high levels of proteins. This broad diet means that the crabs are very inquisitive, regularly examining new items to determine if they may be a food source. Charles Darwin described them as 'robber crabs', as he watched them drag away any novel object they found, whether it be a whiskey bottle or a watch!

Coconut crabs are solitary and live alone between a number of underground burrows which they dig in sand or loose soil, often between the roots of trees. It's easy to spot the burrows as the area outside will often be scattered with the husks of coconuts. The crabs will often hide from the heat of the day in these burrows. They emerge during the evening and night, but may also become active during cooler or wetter days. They move slowly, walking on the long needle-like tips of their legs, and easily climbing up vertical surfaces such as tree trunks or rocks.

Although they spend all of their adult lives on land, coconut crabs rely on the ocean to reproduce. The female carries the eggs with her until they are ready to hatch, but the young must be released into the water. Here they spend a few weeks as small, free-swimming larvae, before the tiny shrimplike young migrate ashore and transform into juvenile crabs. Coconut crabs are also a type of hermit crab – the young crabs, newly arrived on land, use a shell for armour, but after a few years they are big enough, with no predators strong enough to threaten them.



Tim Bernhard 2017



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