

Horseshoe Crab

Limulus polyphemus

Relatives: Horseshoe crabs are more closely related to spiders, scorpions and ticks than to crabs. There are three other species of horseshoe crab in the same family that are found in the Indian and Pacific Oceans.



Appearance: Horseshoe crabs have a hard outer shell that is made up of three parts. The smooth carapace at the front of the body contains five pairs of eyes and a pair of pincers that are used to move food to the mouth. The carapace also contains five pairs of walking legs as well as the mouth, which is found between the legs. Behind the carapace is the abdomen, which contains the gills. The tail helps the horseshoe crab steer through the water and right itself if flipped on its back.

Size: Up to 24 inches in length (including the tail); females are larger than males.

Range: Along the Northern Atlantic coast of North America south through the Gulf of Mexico.

Habitat: Shallow coastal waters with sandy or muddy bottoms.

Feeding: Feed on bottom-dwelling creatures, such as mollusks, worms, and bits of fish. They have no jaws, so they grind up their food with special bristles on their legs. They also have a gizzard with sand and gravel to help them digest their food.

Breeding: The male horseshoe crab grabs onto the female's back with a special structure on his front claws. He may hang on to her for months at a time. The female lays 15,000-64,000 eggs in a nest in the sand, after which the male fertilizes them. They reach sexual maturity at about 11 years of age.

Behavior: Horseshoe crabs move by swimming or crawling along the bottom. They must molt, or shed, their exoskeleton in order to grow. They may molt 16 to 17 times before they reach their adult size. After this, adults very rarely molt.

Predators: Eggs and larvae are eaten by shrimp, crabs, fish and birds; Adults are preyed upon by sharks, sea turtles and gulls.

Lifespan: Up to 19 years

Conservation: Horseshoe crab numbers are currently stable. They play an important role in the food web for their particular ecosystem, being a food source for many fish, shorebirds and sea turtles. The spawning areas of the horseshoe crab are vulnerable to shoreline development and habitat loss.