

# HOLEY MOLEY!

by Lyn Sirota

**I**MAGINE IT'S A summer afternoon at the beach. Your friends bury you in wet sand right up to your neck. The sand sticks to sunscreen lotion on your skin like peanut butter sticks to bread. The foamy ocean water dances right up to the tips of your toes. Just as your friends finish patting the last bit of sand, you feel something. It's itchy. Yikes, it's tickling your rear end. . . . No, it's crawling up your bathing suit!

You scream! You can't stand up because the wet sand is heavy, so you wiggle your way out and grab this thing out of your bathing suit with lightning speed. What is it? It looks like a cockroach or a gray beetle. It seems to be walking backward in your hand. It has ten legs. Holey moley—it's a crab! It's a mole crab.

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See? The creature from your suit isn't so big. The Atlantic mole crab, which can be found along the coast from Massachusetts to Florida, is one of the smallest crabs around. Females grow to only one to one and a half inches, and males grow to about half an inch.

These crabs can't hurt you because they don't have pincers like many other crabs. And since it isn't easy to know which end of a mole crab is the front, here's a hint: watch the direction in which the crab moves. Mole crabs actually move backward.

Even when you've figured out which end its mouth is on, you don't need to worry about the crab snacking on your toes. Mole crabs eat only small creatures from the ocean, such as plankton and bacteria. These crabs have feathery antennae that trap tiny pieces of food. They filter particles in the water and then use their antennae to remove the food and brush it into their mouths.

HOW ABOUT BETTING  
A BOWL OF  
PLANKTON +  
TINY PLANTS AND  
ANIMALS THAT FLOAT  
NEAR THE SURFACE  
OF WATER +  
THAT I FIND HIM

22 FIRST?



WHY NOT A  
LIFETIME SUPPLY  
OF MIMO'S BANANA  
BACTERIA +  
TINY LIVING THINGS  
THAT CAN BE SEEN  
ONLY WITH A  
MICROSCOPE +  
PLIDDING?

YOU LITTLE  
DEARS NEED  
SOME  
PATRIOTISM.

I'LL PAINT  
YOU WHITE  
AND YOU  
RED...


JUST LIKE  
THE FLAGS OF  
AUSTRALIA AND  
CUBA AND  
ICELAND...



When they're ready, each female mole crab lays thousands of tiny, bright orange eggs. The mother carries these eggs attached under her body for months. After they hatch, mole crab babies, or larvae, are on their own. The larvae don't look like their parents; they are tiny, spiny, see-through creatures with big heads and bulging eyes. As the larvae grow, they molt, which means they shed their entire outer layer of skin. During the larval and molting stages of young mole crabs, some are washed ashore while others float out to sea with the currents.

Mole crabs protect themselves by digging underneath the sand as seawater washes over them. Hiding helps them avoid being eaten by shorebirds, larger crabs, or fish. Sometimes fishermen with mesh wire nets attached to poles gather mole crabs to use as bait.





You can gather mole crabs, too! Instead of waiting for one to climb into your bathing suit, grab the biggest bucket you can find. A yellow or white bucket is best because dark colors get hotter faster than light colors. The last thing you want to do is make these wonderful creatures overheat.

Have you ever seen tiny holes in the sand where the seawater meets the beach? Find a spot close to the water near these holes. Use your hands to dig down as wide and as deep as you can. You might even dig a mole crab right into your hands! Don't get frustrated when seawater pools into your sand hole. And be on the lookout—the mole crab's gray shell camouflages it in the sand. When you find one, feel its silky shell and its prickly legs. It's fun to race crabs or hold them gently to admire their delicate beauty, but be sure to release them back into a seawater pool when you're finished.

Next time you're at the beach, looking for something to do, see if you can find some crabs before they find you! 🌞



WE'LL NEVER  
FIND SPIKE  
HIS SHELL  
CAMOUFLAGES,  
DISGUISES AND  
HIDES HIM SO  
WELL.



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