



*Photo Credit: Pet Emporium



*Photo Credit: Nature Gift Store.

Terrestrial Hermit Crabs (*Coenobita spp.*)

Little Nomads

Hermit crabs are terrestrial to marine crabs belonging to a very large group of crustaceans (with at least 1100 species). Hermit crabs have a soft, vulnerable spiral shaped abdomen that is usually concealed or protected by a shell, which they will periodically abandon to search for larger, more suitable shells. Some species of hermit crabs also live their lives without shells as well. They have 5 pairs of legs overall numbering up to ten, including a pair modified into pincers. Hermit crabs can range in physical color from grayish, reddish, to reddish brown. The most commonly kept hermit crabs in the pet trade belong to the genus of terrestrial crabs, *Coenobita spp.* Hermit crabs are popular pets in the fish and aquaria, and reptile or invertebrate pet industries, but can be long lived, and are by no means cheap, or disposable “throw-away” pets, instead requiring close and proper attention to their overall enclosure and setup, temperature and humidity needs, and other aspects of husbandry in order to thrive.

Taxonomy

Life: All living, physical, and animate entities

Domain: Eukaryota

Kingdom: Animalia

Phylum: Arthropoda

Subphylum: Crustacea

Class: Malacostraca

Order: Decapoda

Superfamily: Paguroidea

Family: Coenobitidae

Genus: Coenobita

Species: *Coenobita spp.**

*Taxonomy subject to change and revision.

Lifespan and Longevity

Hermit crabs are often seen as inexpensive, disposable/throwaway pets, but some species can reach up to 20 to 30 years or more lifespan.

Distribution and Habitat

Members of this family and genus of hermit crabs have a very broad, and wide distribution throughout much of the world in coastal, tropical to sub-tropical regions. More specifically, species may be found amongst the West Atlantic, the Bahamas, Belize, southern Florida, the U.S. and British Virgin Islands, Venezuela, and the West Indies, as well as Chile and Ecuador in the New World. Other species in the Old World may also occur along the coastal regions of eastern Africa, Indonesia, the Philippines, China, Japan, Malaysia, Taiwan, Polynesia, Australia, from Western Australia, the Northern Territory, and northern Queensland. This genus of hermit crabs can be terrestrial to semi-aquatic, and can be found among seashores, tidal pools, and more inland terrestrial habitats, although still require access to saltwater.

Origin/History

Coenobita Latreille, 1829.

Hermit crabs have been popularly kept as pets since about the mid-20th century during the 1960's and 1970's. They became especially popular as beach, or tourist souvenirs, where they were commonly sold in small plastic enclosures at seaside gift shops or as "prizes" at local carnivals and fairs. During this time, this coincided with an increased interest in maintaining small, low-maintenance pets, where their unique behavior, shell switching, and relatively simple care requirements made them popular exotic pets. This unfortunately led to them also often becoming "throwaway" pets when purchased or acquired on impulse, due to their longevity.

Species

The most commonly seen hermit crab species in the pet trade include the Caribbean hermit crab (*C. clypeatus*), Australian land hermit crab (*C. variabilis*), and Ecuadorian hermit crab (*C. compressus*). Other species which are also occasionally available also include *C. brevip manus*, *C. rugosus*, *C. perlatus*, and *C. cavipes*.

Experience Level Required

Novice/Beginner to Intermediate/Moderate.

Size

Hermit crabs can vary greatly in size, and can be anywhere from only several millimeters, up to around 15 inches in length in some of the largest species. Most are within ½ to 3 ½ inches in size.

Housing and Enclosure

Enclosure System: Semi-Aquatic to Moist-Terrestrial. Hermit crabs should be housed in a secure, sturdy, adequately ventilated terrarium, aquarium, or other enclosure. Hermit crabs are gregarious, meaning they are often found in groups, and multiple crabs can be housed together provided an adequately sized enclosure is accordingly provided. At least a 10 to 20 gallon or similar sized enclosure often is suitable, depending on the size and number of crabs, usually housing three or four. Crabs that are not provided adequate space or larger shells that can be used, which can be purchased commercially, will fight and possibly kill one another for resources. A substrate that enables hermit crabs to dig and burrow, as well as maintain adequate humidity should also be provided. Sand substrates as well as coconut fibers and mixtures thereof can be used. A shallow water dish or both fresh water and salt water mixture should also be provided for hermit crabs, but should not contain chlorine or other chemicals that may cause ill effect on hermit crabs. Additional furnishings that should be provided in a hermit crab enclosure for added security and stimuli include larger and sufficient number of shells for each crab to

grow into, as well as driftwood, artificial foliage, and hides in the form of log or slab hides, clay flower pots, or other commercially designed hides and cage decor.

Temperature, Lighting, and Humidity

Adequate humidity is perhaps one of the most important factors for maintaining hermit crabs, which should be around 70 to 75%. Providing a sponge inside their water dishes can often aid in raising humidity levels as well. A temperature gradient should also be provided in the enclosure, with around 70 to 75 degrees F ambient/cool side temperature and 80 to 85 degrees F warm side using appropriate UVA/UVB and/or other incandescent lighting/heating mechanisms. For any supplemental heating that may be needed, use a low wattage UVA/UVB and/or incandescent bulb, radiant or ceramic heat emitter, or under tank heating element (or UTH). More specific lighting, heating, and humidity product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one's needs, as well as those of one's animals can be given as well.

Feeding, Diet, and Nutrition

Detritivorous to Omnivorous; In the wild, hermit crabs are omnivores scavengers, feeding on algae, small plankton, smaller invertebrates, as well as carrion and dead, decaying plant and animal matter. In captivity, a varied, rotating diet for hermit crabs is recommended. Many commercially available hermit crab foods and diets are available, with some being better and more suitable than others. Some commercially available fish foods can also be given or used. It is always a good idea to read and understand any labels and ingredients on any such diets that may be used. Hermit crabs will also readily eat many types of fruits and vegetables, dried bread/cracker material, cereals, nuts, and some other commercially available fish foods. More specific dietary and supplementary product suggestions and recommendations that can best suit one's needs, as well as those of one's animals can be given as well.

Handling

Hermit crabs can be handled carefully, although they may pinch (which is not painful or dangerous). They can be picked up and handled by their shell or be allowed to walk on one's hands. Care should be taken to not drop them, however, since this can fracture their shell and/or cause internal injury to them.

****Also be sure to practice basic cleanliness and hygiene associated with proper husbandry after touching or handling any animals or animal enclosures to prevent the possibility of contracting salmonellosis or any other zoonotic pathogens****

Contact

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