

## I've Got Crabs

Hank Hadaway, December 2023

It was the crack of dawn, time for breakfast not for me but for the swarm of mosquitos circling my head. I reluctantly pulled off the mosquito netting from my face. The bed sheets had become sodden from my sweating through the hot humid night. They stuck to my body as I peeled them off to reluctantly put my feet down on the wooden floor trying not to disturb Chessie my trusty four legged companion. He gets grouchy if he is disturbed too early in the morning. I did have to disturb Mildred, my feathered friend, to get two eggs.

I pumped some cold water into the sink and tried to wash the cobwebs of my mind away, followed by an application of Deet. Coffee! Coffee was needed, followed by something to eat to get me fairly functional. I set a pot of water to boiling and dropped the eggs into the pot then added a scoop of coffee followed by a scoop of chicory. The eggs and coffee were both done about the same time.

It was a perfect day for crabbing, a little overcast and a light breeze off the bay gently swayed the cat tails. A little kibble for Chessie and we were ready to face the day which meant we had to bait the trot line and set it out along the sandbar. Chessie has a fondness for eel and watched intently as I unbraided the rope trotline and inserted eel very three feet. I loaded the trotline and buoys into my bateau along with a bushel basket of seaweed and shoved off the mud bank into the narrow shallow inlet of the Chesapeake Bay.

I take my time going along the inlet looking for crabs sheltering in the seaweed. Thanks to the cloudy sky I could see all the way to the muddy bottom. Chessie is standing on the bow on lookout. I could tell when he spotted a crab. He would start whining and, his stubby little tail would twitch uncontrollably. He soon spotted one which I quickly dipped up. It was my lucky day. I had caught one that had just molted. A soft shelled crab. These are a highly prized delicacy. After the crab is cleaned and the so called dead men which are the gills are removed the crab is dipped in seasoned flour and fried to a crisp golden crisp. It makes a marvelous sandwich. In a few hours the shell would begin to harden and pass through a stage called paper shell which as the name implies is very much like thin cardboard and not good for eating. These are used for fish bait.

I also caught a few that were about to molt. You can tell when a crab is about to molt by examining the back swim fin. A red line will form on its outer edge of just prior to molting. These crabs, called peelers, I put them in the live box towed behind by boat. I'll check these every few hour to see if they have shed their hard exoskeleton and are now a delicious soft crab.



Out on the bay I set out the trot line and decided to go to my favorite fishing spot while I wait for the crabs to find the eels on the trot line. The fishing was a bust, but when I went back to the trot line I had about a dozen crabs including a doubler enjoying their morning breakfast of eel. A doubler is two crabs doing what come naturally and taking their time about it. Not only did I catch two crabs at once, but the female will soon be molting and thus will become a prized soft crab. I put the red clawed females in the live box and the blue clawed male in the basket.

The rest of the crabs I dipped up one at a time and threw them in the basket. Unfortunately, I missed the basket with one and it landed in the bottom of the boat. Chessie seemed to think this was a play toy and went to pick it up. The crab, however, was not in the mood to play and its pincers quickly found purchase on both sides of Chessie's lips. Chessie immediately started violently shaking his head like a raging bull and was able to shake the crab off, but it flew so far it went overboard.

A few more passes of the trotline and I have enough to steam and share with friends and enough trade for some corn on the cob and a six pack. Life is good in the land of pleasant living.

.