

Get Crabby

Hermit crabs could be your perfect pet

By Stacey Warren with photography by Animax

It's a misleading name, Hermit Crab. It would suggest that these little critters like being on their own and are not particularly social. In reality they're very social creatures and can be found in the wild living in vast colonies. As a pet they thrive alongside other hermie crabs and enjoy social interaction.

Land Hermit crabs make great pets and are ideal for people who're busy and have little space to house a conventional pet. Although they are low cost, there should be careful consideration into obtaining them as pets, the cost of the initial set-up of their tank (crabitat) and their ongoing care. Many pet shops do stock hermit crab supplies and for added convenience you can purchase kits to help you on the way.

Get the right stuff for the right start

Setting up a crabitat doesn't take too long unlike the time needed to 'age' an aquarium. You'll need a medium glass or sturdy plastic aquarium—something that holds around 30 litres. The substrate you put on the bottom of the housing is also important and you can purchase aquarium sand from your pet store. Allow enough at the bottom of the crabitat so that your hermies can burrow—about 5-6 cms of clean sand. You'll need a ventilated covering which keeps the tank humid and to ensure your climbing crabs can't escape.

You will need three shallow dishes, two for water and the other for food. Water dishes should have small sea sponges in them. Sponges have three uses—they're beneficial to creating humidity, stop little hermies from drowning and crabs like drinking their water through a sponge. The shallow, rock-like water dishes designed for reptiles are recommended as they're both decorative and functional.

As mentioned earlier, because they're social creatures, you should consider getting at least five to six crabs and make sure they have extra shells in their crabitat. Crabs like trying on 'new' shells and as they grow bigger, they'll need larger shells. To develop a happy colony, try to find crabs that are around the same size so that territorial issues don't occur.

Hermit crabs love to climb and explore so wine vines or similar wooden branches like drift-wood can be found in the reptile section of good pet stores. You'll also need to get a 'hide-out' for them—despite being social, they also like a little privacy. A suitable hidey-hole can be an upturned, half coconut shell or one of the other more commercial looking ones available.

Hermit crabs need a humid environment and this isn't possible without a heat source. An ideal temperature range is between 24-27 degrees C. Under tank heaters that are mainly sold for reptiles are the best heat source. Over-head lamps will only serve to dry out the tank, killing the crabs. To further humidify the crabitat, mist the sides of the tank daily. Mist your crabs as well—they'll probably enjoy it.

Got Crabs?

When getting a hermit crab, do your research into the various shops that stock them. Ask questions to be sure that you're buying your hermit crabs and supplies from a store that has knowledgeable staff. Select hermit crabs that are active and outgoing. When you pick up a hermit crab, he'll naturally go back into his shell but after a couple of seconds this curious little creature will pop his head and pincers out of his shell. Steer away from hermit crabs that are lethargic or seem reticent.



Not so much a low maintenance pet

It's true that hermit crabs are lower maintenance than most pets, but they still require daily care and feeding. Everyday their water and food bowls should be cleaned and fresh water and food provided. Any uneaten and leftover food that has ended up on the substrate should be removed.

Once a week their crabitat should be wiped clean and you should check that climbing areas, hiding huts, extra shells and other surfaces are cleaned and free of foreign debris like their poo, bits of exoskeleton and food.

Food is the spice of life for a healthy crab

Variety and nutrition are just as important with hermit crabs as with other pets. There are commercially available, tinned and dry food diets on the market. But with a little planning you can provide your crabs with nutritious food daily. Offer your crabs an array of food—they like fruit, raw and cooked vegetables, canned tuna (the drained, salt water variety not the stuff in oil) and unseasoned, cooked meat. They're omnivores and are used to foraging in the wild for all sorts of leftovers. With every pet you should keep to the strict rule that if food is old then toss it—don't feed them anything that you wouldn't eat.

Get a handle on your crabs

The correct handling of your crabs is very important. Make sure that your hands are clean and free of harmful hand lotions or perfume. Grasp the back of the shell by your thumb and forefinger. Handled carefully, your crab will develop trust and will crawl out on your hands. Never try to pull your crab out of his shell as this can cause serious injury and can even be fatal.

Rub-a-dub-dub, put your hermie crab in the tube

Hermit crabs should be bathed once a week. They need baths as in the wild they're used to being rained on in their normal, humid living environments. Never bathe them more than once a week as this strips their exoskeleton of much needed oils. Just as your hermit crab needs de-chlorinated drinking water, he also needs his bath water to have the chlorine removed. Get a bowl, fill with tepid water and following the instructions on the label, put the required amount of de-chlorinating agent in. Carefully pick your hermie crab up and place him shell down (upside down) in the bottom of the bowl. When he comes out of his shell, the water will flow in and flush out any debris or dirt out of his shell. Only let your crab be immersed for a minute or so.

After you've taken him out of the water, place the little guy in a spot where he can dry off. A small box lined with a paper towel makes for a good dry-out location. After a few minutes, pop him back into his crabitat. Most hermie crabs become very active after a bath—it's almost like this activity energises their senses so don't be surprised if he goes climbing and exploring.

Night time party animals

Hermit crabs are nocturnal creatures that become most active in the wee small hours. It is suggested that their crabitat not be in a bedroom as you'll likely be disturbed by their skittering and clambering around. Don't be alarmed if, in the morning, you find that they've moved all sorts of things around. They love to 'rearrange' their furniture.

There's much more to having healthy, happy hermies and we can't possibly put it all in one article. So we recommend that you seek out specialist books and Internet sites. Suggested sites www.hermit-crabs.com; www.crabstreetjournal.com



Care kits and crabitats are available from good pet stores.