

LEVELED BOOK • M

Hermit Crabs



Written by Amy S. Hansen

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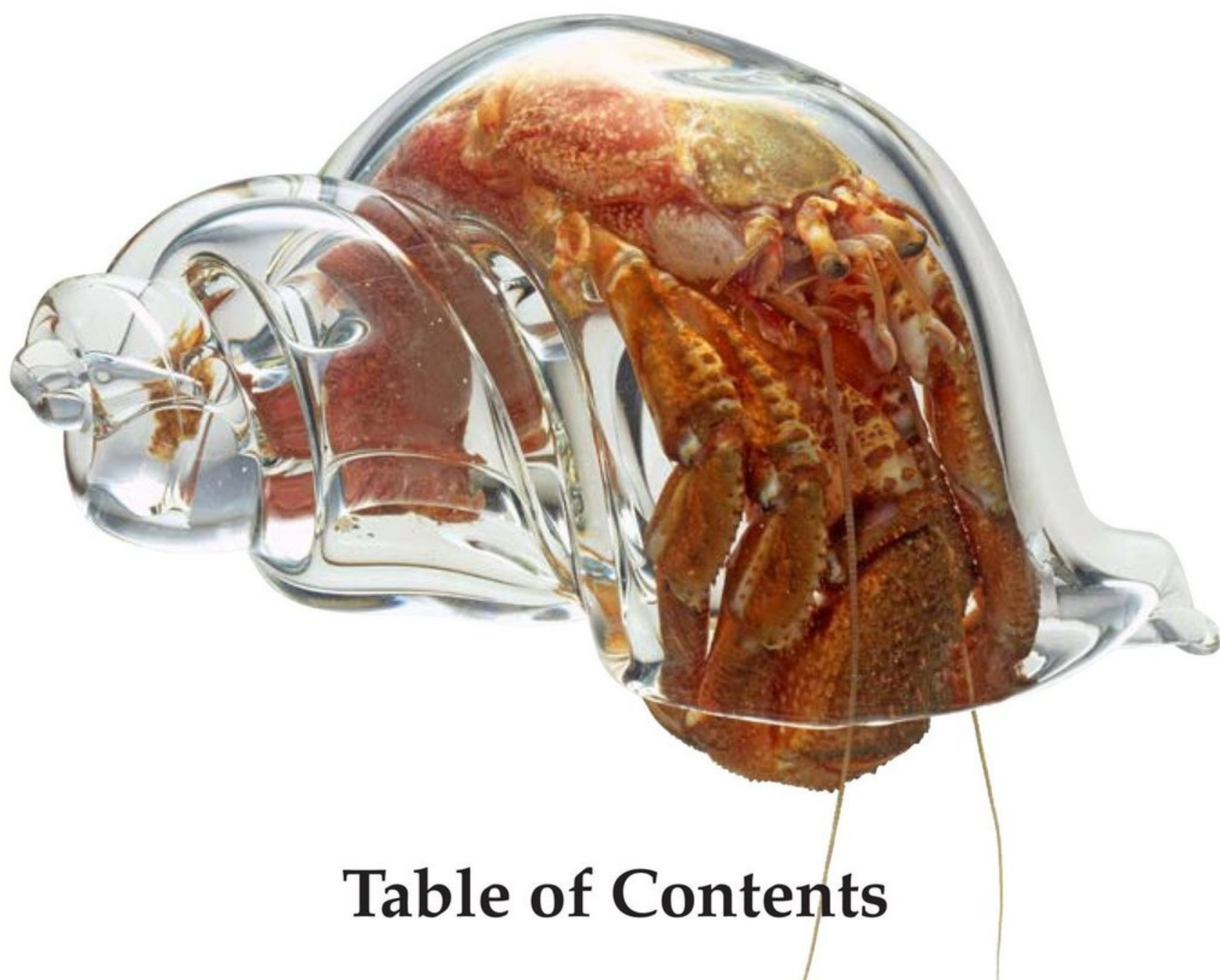


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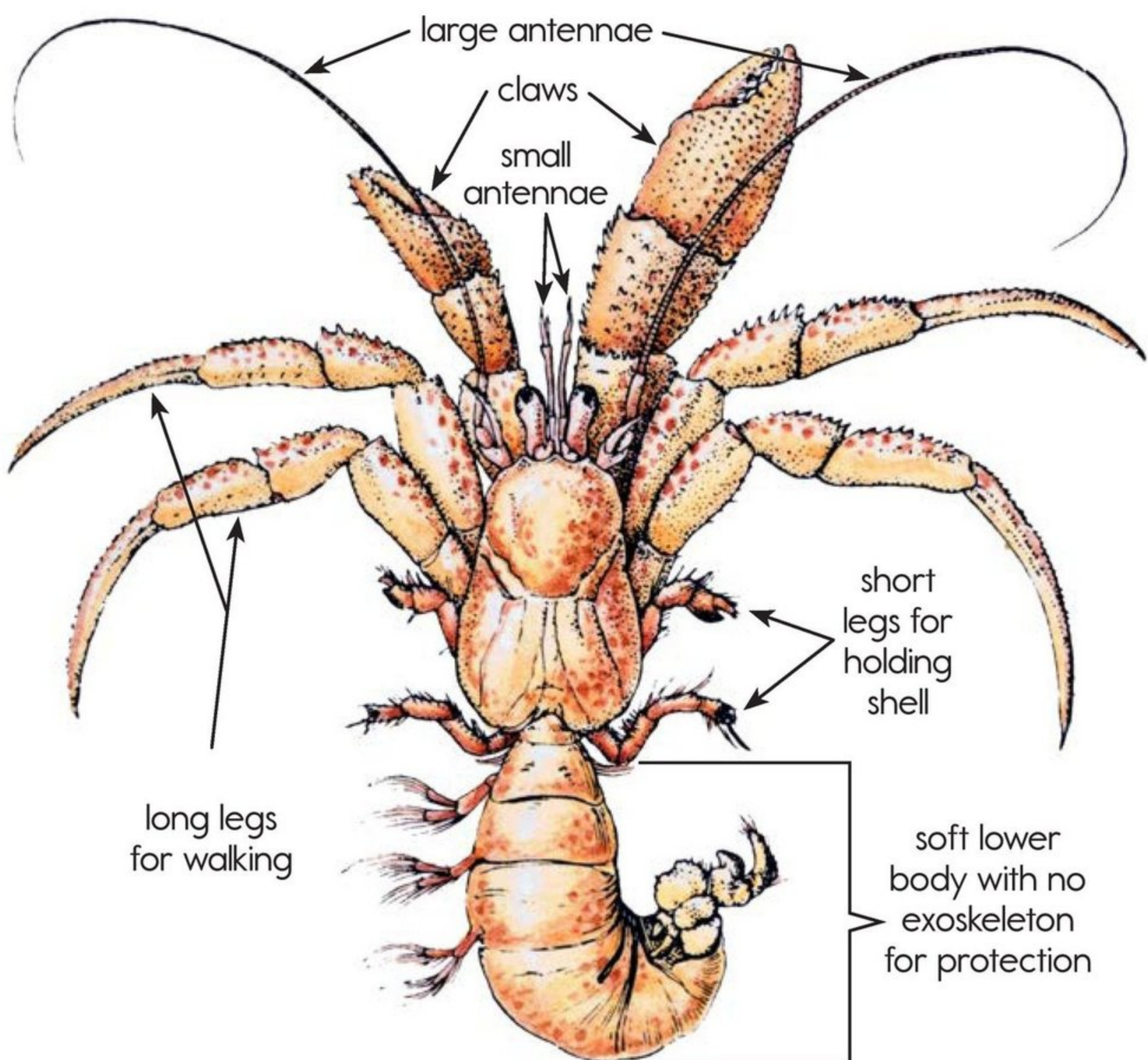
A hermit crab gets ready to move into a bigger shell.

Shell-Changing Night

A hermit crab hurries across the beach. An empty shell just washed in. The shell is a little bigger than the one he's been using. He grabs the new shell with his claws. Then he pokes his head inside. It's empty. He stands on two legs. Then he slips his body out of his old shell and into the new one. He's in!

What Do Hermit Crabs Look Like?

Hermit crabs are related to other crabs and also to lobsters and shrimp. A hermit crab has its own hard outer shell, called an **exoskeleton**. But the exoskeleton only covers part of its body. A hermit crab wears an old seashell to protect its soft parts.



A hermit crab has five pairs of legs. The first pair of legs ends in claws. The second and third pairs are for walking. The fourth and fifth pairs are short. The crab uses the little back legs to hold onto its shell home.

A hermit crab also has two pairs of **antennae**. They help the crab taste water and find food.

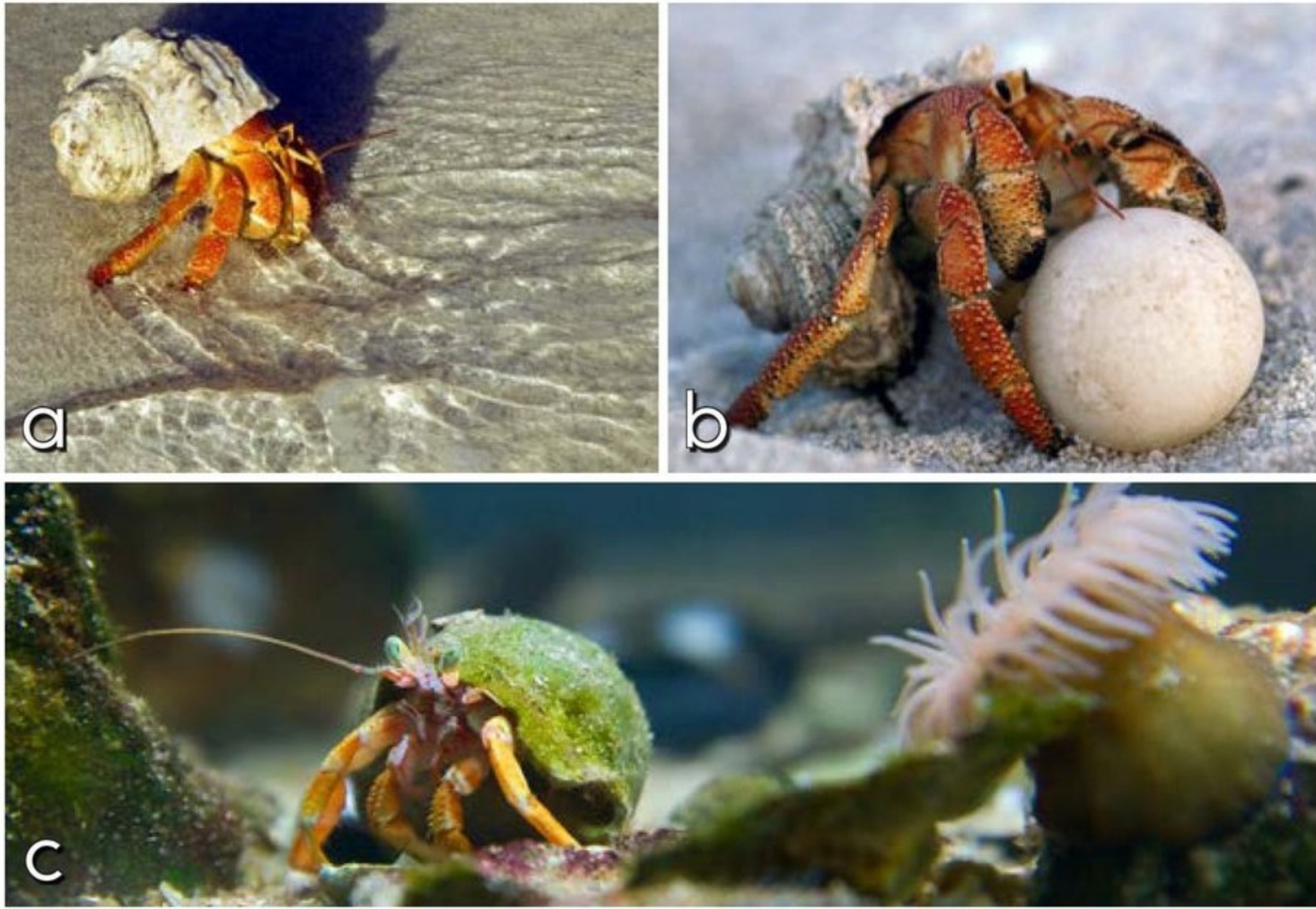
There are more than eight hundred different kinds of hermit crabs. Some are as tiny as a penny. Others are as big as a softball.



A tiny land hermit crab



A large ocean hermit crab



Hermit crabs (a) at the edge of the water, (b) taking a turtle egg for food, and (c) on the ocean floor

How Do Hermit Crabs Live?

Hermit crabs live in warm oceans all around the world. Some hermit crabs live on beaches or in **tidal pools**. Others live in the water.

All hermit crabs are **scavengers**. They will eat just about any food they can find. Seaweed? Love it. Dead fish? They're great. Rotting wood? Dinner is served.

Hermit crabs are mostly **nocturnal**, which means they move around at night. They hide in their shells during the day.

Baby Hermit Crabs

Hermit crabs start as eggs. The eggs hatch in the water, and **larvae** (LAR-vee) float out. The larvae look like tiny shrimp. For a few months, they grow and change shape. When they are big enough, they find an empty seashell and join the **colony**.



Hermit crab larvae look different from adults.

As young hermit crabs grow, their exoskeletons don't get any bigger. So every year or so, they **molt**. They get rid of their old exoskeleton and grow a new one that's the right size. Hermit crabs can live to be thirty years old, but most live six to ten years.

Danger!

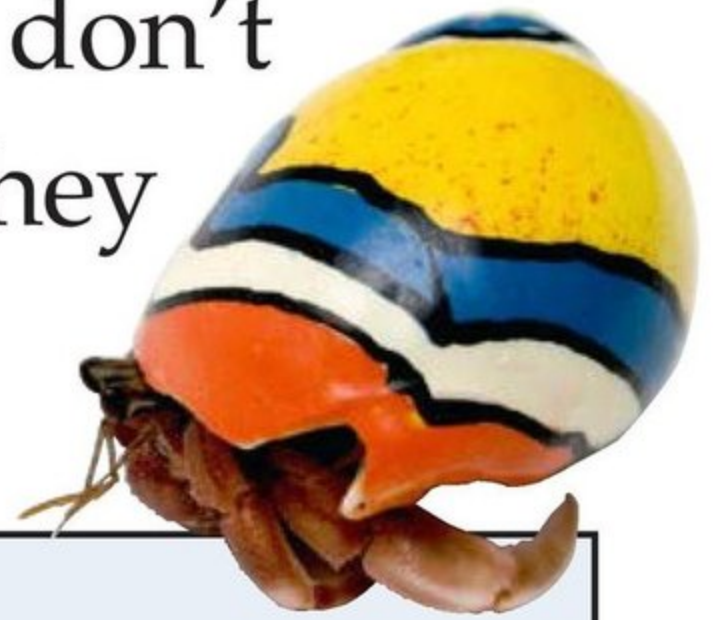
Birds, octopuses, fish, and other animals will eat hermit crabs if they can. If a crab senses danger, it pulls into its shell and sits still.



Rats and seagulls are two animals that eat hermit crabs.

Not Really Hermits

Hermit crabs got their name by mistake. Hermit crabs hide inside their shell “homes” when they are scared. People thought this meant they wanted to live alone, like hermits. But these crabs don’t like to live alone at all. They like to live in groups.



Hermit Crabs: Not Easy Pets

Many pet stores sell hermit crabs. But hermit crabs can be tricky to care for. The crabs need a moist area. They need to be calm. They need places to dig. And they need other crabs. Hermit crabs that don’t get the right care suffer and sometimes die. If you want to keep hermit crabs as pets, please learn to give them what they need to be healthy and happy.



Watch Them Run!

Hermit crabs look funny when they run across the sand. But they do more than make us smile. Hermit crabs have important jobs to do. They keep beaches clean by eating dead fish and plants. Seeing hermit crabs is usually a sign that a beach is healthy.

Glossary

antennae (<i>n.</i>)	thin feelers on the heads of some animals that help them feel and smell (p. 6)
colony (<i>n.</i>)	a group of animals that live together (p. 8)
exoskeleton (<i>n.</i>)	a hard external skeleton that covers the body of some animals without backbones (p. 5)
larvae (<i>n.</i>)	baby animals that go through major body changes before they look like adult members of their kind (p. 8)
molt (<i>v.</i>)	to shed skin, hair, feathers, or a shell before growing something new (p. 9)
nocturnal (<i>adj.</i>)	active at night rather than during the day (p. 8)
scavengers (<i>n.</i>)	animals that find and eat scraps of garbage or animals that are already dead (p. 7)
tidal pools (<i>n.</i>)	pools of water that remain on a coastline after the tide becomes lower (p. 7)

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Table of contents: A hermit crab makes its home in a human-made glass shell.

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