

*Scylla serrata:*  
**The Humble Mud Crab**



For a creature as unattractive as the mud crab, it sure brings a premium price in the retail seafood outlets, making it difficult to afford for the average family man. So instead of forking out your hard earned bucks to treat your family to this delicacy, here are a few hints that might help you with catching, cleaning, cooking and presenting this highly sought after crustacean yourself.

*Story and photographs by Scott Shepherd*

**N**ow here is a Queensland and Northern Territory icon that surely lives up to its reputation as a gourmet delight. You would be hard-pressed finding an a-la-carte restaurant anywhere in Australia that did not feature the sweet and earthy tastes of the mud crab.

The state governments issue licences to professional crabbers to keep the supply of mud crabs to the markets, so we seafood lovers can enjoy the delicacy, albeit at a high cost to the ol' hip pocket.

There is, of course, another way of obtaining mud crabs, a way that's not as hard as you think.

Why not catch your own?

While a lot of the fishing areas are being closed down around the coastline, crabbing is still permitted in most places. It's as easy as grabbing a few pots,

**Above:** The author with an 8" buck caught in the Narrows, just north of Gladstone.

**Below:** An ol' man buck. When they're like this, they are sure full of meat.



going down to the local creek or river and getting a feed for your family for tea. This includes you southerners while you're on holidays up in the tropics or sub-tropics.

However before I get into the ways and means of catching a crab, let's first look at the 'make up' of this prehistoric looking crustacean that is *Scylla serrata*, the humble mud crab.

**What To Look For**

Weighing up to just over 2 kg but commonly caught from 1 to 1.5 kg, the mud crab can do irreparable damage to the fingers of the foolish or over confident crabber. They are deceptively fast and can fend off an attempt to pick them up the wrong way with their two powerful claws.

They are usually an olive green to muddy brown

colour, depending on their condition in relation to their moulting cycle. Every year they shed their shell, and grow bigger into a new, softer shell that progressively hardens with age.

When caught, a greenish crab (which is more than likely one that has just moulted and has a new shell) will tend to be only half full of meat, or more commonly called "a rattler".

These crabs tend to be excessively sweet to the point of being too salty to enjoy. However, they are still acceptable if you are a bit light on in the bag. Many blokes will tell you that these rattlers don't have any meat in them, but in truth they have as much as they had before moulting, if not a tad more, but it's in a bigger shell.

A crab that is browner, even verging on blackish brown, or one with barnacles on its back, is more likely to be full of meat or commonly called



"a full crab" (*original, hey!*) The meat in these tends to be very earthy and strong tasting, and this is the reason these crustaceans fetch such a high price. Being so strong tasting, makes them the ones to keep, assuming you catch enough to allow you to be picky, that is!

There are ways of checking if a crab is a rattler or full. The easiest way is by feeling the weight when you get them out of the crab pot. Another is by the colour of the shell or the condition of the claws.

If the crab has just moulted, he will have fresh sharp teeth on his pincers. On the other hand, if he has been around a bit (so to speak), his teeth on his claws will be worn down and that means he's been eating and is healthy. The best way to check however, and a dead set recipe for disaster for the beginner, is to squeeze the shell directly above the

**Above:** Good crabbing country up one of the many mangrove lined creeks in Hervey Bay, Qld.  
**Below:** Kids love this type of crabbing. Using a tinnie in the crystal clear waters of Hervey Bay, Qld.



claw socket. This is where the claw joins onto the body. He can't bite you there but he can while you're on the way to the spot! If it feels hollow, it's a rattler, and if it is solid, start boiling up the cooking pot.

Muddies are sometimes caught with only one claw or sometimes with a small claw and a big claw. This is because they have the ability to throw a claw to

escape the enemy. If they are stressed in your boat and a claw is stuck in the mesh of the crab pot, they will purposely throw it to escape. A new claw will grow back over time but this must still hinder the crab in his eating ability.

How to pick em up This is where your confidence can be friend or foe. The sand crab (blue swimmer) can be picked up holding the body from

behind because their claws do not move up and down, so can't bite above or below the body. The muddie however, has the ability to reach beyond his eyes and bite the foolish that defy their better judgment.

The only way to handle a live muddie safely is from behind by putting your foot, a bucket or lump of timber on his back to hold him, then reach down and hold his back flippers with your thumb and middle finger and place your index finger on his back (carapace). You now have total control over your captor.

**Sex**

Right, now that I have your attention, if you're new to this type of hunting you will want to know how to tell the difference between a man crab and a crabby female.

The attached photos with this story will make it easier to see.

A male crab (buck) at a