

SEA GRANT

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Beach goers along the Gulf Coast normally see ghost crabs, smooth clams (coquinas), several kinds of snails, hermit crabs and maybe some barnacles attached to a log. If they look a little harder, they might see beach fleas and sand fleas. Neither are really fleas but are crustations which means they belong in the group of organisms that includes shrimp, crab, and lobsters.

The beach flea is a very small shrimp-like animal that lives under drift wood or within decaying seaweed. They require the moisture often found under a board or within a pile of sea grass to survive. If disturbed, they use their powerful hind legs, which are flea-like, to jump up to 50 times their own body length.

Sand fleas on the other hand, are small crabs that when fully grown are about the size of your thumb. Sand fleas, often called mole crabs, live in the surf where waves break on sandy beaches. They burrow backwards into the shifting sand just below the surface. As the water from a wave recedes, they stick feathered antennae into the water to catch microscopic particles of food. The antennae are then drawn across their mouth parts to extract the food particles.

Mole crabs always face the sea and when their antennae are extended, little V-shaped patterns can sometimes be seen in the film of receding water. I've only rarely

observed the little Vs along our beaches, but they are quite obvious on the wider, flatter beaches of the east coast and are a good clue for catching mole crabs.

Mole crabs are good bait for pompano and other fish found in the surf so there is good reason to try and catch them. Sand flea rakes found in local bait stores work well. If you cannot spot the little crabs, random raking in the surf zone will eventually turn them up. Since they tend to be gregarious, there are usually several in the same small area.

Experienced flea catchers do not need a rake; they simply walk down the beach and somehow see the little critters in the water. Once spotted, they leap into the surf, thrust both hands into the sand, and invariably come up with a sand flea. Children also seem to find this method particularly satisfying.

Large sand fleas are probably females and have bright orange eggs underneath their curled tail. Very small sand fleas found close to larger females are most likely the diminutive males.