

## Coconut crab-*Birgus latro*



Order: Decapoda  
Family: Coenobitidae  
Genus: *Birgus*  
Species: *latro*

The coconut crab, *Birgus latro*, is a species of **terrestrial hermit crab**, also known as the **robber crab or palm thief**. It is the **largest land-living arthropod in the world**, and is probably at the upper size limit for terrestrial animals with exoskeletons in recent Earth atmosphere, with a weight of up to 4.1 kg (9.0 lb). It can grow to up to 1 m (3 ft 3 in) in length from leg to leg. It is found on islands across the Indian Ocean and parts of the Pacific Ocean as far east as the Gambier Islands, mirroring the distribution of the coconut palm; it has been extirpated from most areas with a significant human population, including mainland Australia and Madagascar. The coconut crab is the only species of the genus *Birgus*, and is related to the terrestrial hermit crabs of the genus *Coenobita*. It shows a number of adaptations to life on land. Like hermit crabs, juvenile coconut crabs use empty gastropod shells for protection, but the adults develop a tough exoskeleton on their abdomen and stop carrying a shell. Coconut crabs have organs known as “**branchiostegal lungs**”, which are used instead of the vestigial gills for breathing. They cannot swim, and will drown if immersed in water for long. They have developed an acute sense of smell, which has developed convergently with that of insects, and which they use to find potential food sources. Mating occurs on dry land, but the females migrate to the sea to release their fertilized eggs as they hatch. The larvae are planktonic for 3–4 weeks, before settling to the sea floor and entering a gastropod shell. Sexual maturity is reached after about 5 years, and the total lifespan may be over 60 years.

The species is threatened with extinction across most of its range and in India it is found only on a few islands in the Andaman and Nicobar archipelagoes. Although the coconut crab is legally protected under the Indian Wildlife Protection Act. It occurs on oceanic atolls and islands in the Indo-Pacific region and is reported to grow up to 35 cm in length and weigh up to 5 kg. The species' only dependence on the sea is for releasing eggs, which hatch in contact with seawater; the planktonic larvae then migrate onto land where they develop into long-lived adults (Reese & Kinzie, 1968). In many parts of its range the coconut crab is hunted for consumption. A slow growth rate and long life span combined with high levels of exploitation and habitat degradation make the species susceptible to overexploitation (Fletcher & Amos, 1994) and in many countries the crab is virtually extinct (Schiller, 1992). The coconut crab is afforded the highest level of legal protection in India, categorized under Schedule-I of the Indian Wildlife Protection Act.