

Crab city: Chiayi's Haomeiliao Nature Preserve

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It is something of an irony, but just a few kilometers from southern Taiwan's most famous seafood market, there's a conservation area that's dedicated to the protection, rather than consumption, of sea creatures. Haomeiliao Nature Preserve (好美寮自然保護區) is southwest of Budai (布袋), a town that's become synonymous with its fish market.

The six-hectare preserve encompasses mudflats that have formed where two rivers--the Bajhang (八掌溪) and the Longgong (龍宮溪)--meet the sea.

There are also small lagoons, dunes and saltwater marshes. It features plant species that thrive in sand, one of South Taiwan's most extensive mangrove swamps, and beaches that abound in crab life.

If you arrive when the tide is low, find a good spot and remain still. You'll see hundreds of these creatures--few of them more than two centimeters across--emerge from their burrows in the mud. The crabs are very sensitive to vibrations. As soon as you move, they'll scuttle back underground.

There are two main species of crab here. Neither is unique to Taiwan, but in few other places around the island are they so easy to see and in such numbers.

Uca Lactea is a fiddler crab; the males are recognizable because they have one tiny claw and one massively oversized claw. *Mictyris Brevidactylus* is a soldier crab with a light blue carapace. They eat small particles of dead plants and animals, and in turn are eaten by birds. Few of the crabs have bodies more than two centimeters in diameter.

If you're lucky, you may see a much larger and rarer crab--the Three-Spine Horseshoe Crab (*Tachypleus tridentatus*). Males are usually at least 50 centimeters in length; females are a little longer.

Both sexes are a greenish gray. A previously undiscovered nursing ground full of juveniles was found in Haomeiliao in 2005, and local activists are working to protect the habitat.

In the past, the Three-Spine Horseshoe Crab was often hunted, not only for food, but also because the flesh was believed to have medicinal properties. Shells were used as utensils for scooping water or were hung on doors to repel evil.

You'll almost certainly see mudskippers. Because of their size (seldom more than 10 centimeters in length) and color (a shade of brown that exactly matches their environment), you'll probably only notice them when they're flipping across the mud.

Mudskippers are actually fish that have evolved in a way that enables them to survive for quite some time after the tide has gone out. They're lively creatures, flitting from pool to pool, feeding and defending their territories.

They move by using their fins, and they can breathe through their skin. Like crabs, they dig burrows to avoid predators. They also do this so they don't overheat, or when it's time to lay eggs.

In the Budai area, crabs and mudskippers are far outnumbered by oysters, which are raised on oyster racks made of bamboo. Tiny holes are made in empty oyster shells, which are then tied onto the racks. Undeveloped oysters take up residence, feed on plankton and gradually fatten. When they're grown, they are harvested by hand and sold to wholesalers and restaurants.

Given the abundance of food, it's no surprise that Haomeiliao is home to dozens of waterbird species, among them egrets and herons. Information boards provide details on some of the species.

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