



Critters in Our Midst: Hermit Crabs by Carol Ellis

Hermit crabs make their way from the ground up into the trees and everywhere in between.

Often when people move to the Keys, the first thing they try to do is make their new home just like the place they left. Locals can pick up pretty quickly who these "they do it where I come from" newcomers are, but within five minutes of meeting Angela and Brian, and observing their efforts to caretake our fragile Florida Keys environment, I knew they were a good fit here.

They came down as a family when their middle child Logan was transferred to Coast Guard Station Islamorada, and once here, decided not to leave. Jokingly Brian and Angela always said, "when the kids are gone we are going to quit our jobs, run away to the Keys and become bartenders, live in a one room shack with an A/C that is halfway broken and we wouldn't care if there are roaches!" A positive twist on the old story "Come on vacation... leave on probation."

They researched house prices, and soon realized

they couldn't quit their jobs and become bartenders. Luckily, their jobs allowed them to work from anywhere, so they got more of their full dream than most anyone would want.

The house they found online, located in Harry Harris Park, from an aerial view on Zillow, was your typical pea rock yard and stilt house property. The backyard borders a natural mangrove and buttonwood preserve, which if you were



Signs by Amy's Creations of the Florida Keys give the property a Keysy flair.

to crawl a few hundred yards through the County-owned property, you could reach the shoreline.

Soon after moving in Angela noticed shells near the A/C condensate drainpipe, picked one up, and saw it was a land hermit crab (*Coenobita clypeatus*). In honor of their new-found friends, Brian and Angela named their property ~ "Crustacean Plantation."

Never having had a hermit crab as a pet, her first reaction was "I don't know how this works," but she learned. She started by counting her hermit crab encounters, and began numbering the shells. At some point past 100 crabs she stopped counting.

Hermit crabs have soft abdomens which require

protection of a shell, and who require bigger shells to suit their bodies as they grow.

She observed encounters where one crab was trying to hijack another crab's shell. A crab will approach a shell, be it occupied or not and tap on it with it's own shell. If it is occupied it will continue its incessant thumping until the resident crab gives up the shell willingly, or is evicted by force. Lost pinchers or legs found on the ground are evidence of crab shell fights. Realizing a need, Angela started purchasing shells to put out



A surveillance camera captured this opossum cruising through the shells. Squirrels, possums, raccoons, birds, lizards, iguanas, anoles, and land crabs live here. The "Transfer Station" is where Angela puts out shells for the hermit crabs who are on the quest for the perfect shell.

in a designated "Transfer Station" and almost immediately small or broken shells were traded off for the new and roomier models, kinda like a used car lot for hermit crabs. Broken shells are left vacant, as they no longer provide protection or cannot hold fresh water needed to lubricate the crab's gills.

Angela and Brian have spent hours in the garden, adding mulch and soil, making new beds for the native and

Hermit Crabs CONTINUED Photos by Carol Ellis except as noted.



Hermit crabs are social animals, despite their name, piling onto each other beneath a coral rock ledge.



Angela poses beside a hollowed out tree on the boundary between her yard and the native woods.

flowering plants, and adding water sources for the critters. Bricks and boulders line the raised beds full of soil and mulch. Hermit crabs need soil or sand substrate in order for them to molt; since the Keys doesn't have dirt, the hermit crabs must surface molt or find leaves, and bury themselves during this vulnerable time. In their new beds, Angela and Brian have seen little dig piles where a hermit crab has gone to molt. "We have provided them a "crabtat" - something they probably wouldn't normally have."

Creeping zoysia grass covers the former barren pea rock yard, leading up to an undisturbed tidal rocky area in the back of the property where the crabs



A hermit crab in the hardwood hammock sporting a tree snail shell.



A crab mistakes a plastic bottle cap for a new home. According to the Journal of Hazardous Materials, 570,000 hermit crabs die annually on two South Pacific islands from getting stuck in plastic debris. Photo by Capt. Deb Deyo.

hang out. As we approach we can hear clacking as the crabs retreat and their claw clamps shut the shell opening; hermit crabs have keen eyesight so it is hard to sneak up on one. We stare at the rocks, and soon detect movement; a shell blending in perfectly contains a hermit crab on the move. A sign "Hermit Highway" designates where the crabs cross to go to the ocean to lay their eggs, and after having done so return to the dry land to resume their lives.

The "Crustacean Plantation" is on the Garden Club of the Upper Keys garden walk, Saturday, February 17th.

(gardenclubupperkeys.org/garden-walk-tickets). It is located in the Harry Harris Park area, a hidden gem, full of natural beauty, and a livable community for those who work here, and the creatures who were here before we came.

You might want to bring along a shell or two for a hermit crab in need.



A crab blends in with the rocks and shells scattered in the woods.



Hermit crab racing is a sport imported from the Caribbean. Crabs are placed in the center a table, which has a ring painted in the center. The first crab to crawl past the outer ring is the "winner-winner, crab dinner!"



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Currently a Master Gardener volunteer, Carol has a degree in Journalism from the University of Florida and is the resident photographer /artist at Ocean Reef Club.