

Red-Crab Invasion!

By Barbara E. Walsh

Millions of bright-red land crabs scuttle out of the rain forest and pour down the mountainside, like lava from a volcano. Several crusty critters visit Stephanie Howard's home. Some hide behind her bookcase. Others rest next to her bed. An amazing sight, Stephanie says—but not a surprise.

Stephanie lives on Christmas Island. When the first rains of the season soak the rain forests on the top plateau of the island, hordes of red crabs burst from their burrows. They take a dangerous journey to the sea to mate and lay eggs. Their young must hatch in the sea.

They follow the same path each year. They scurry over, under, around, or through any obstacle in their way. They go over roads and lawns, under cars, and through buildings, including homes and even Stephanie's school.

In the Migration Path

Jan Sullivan is a teacher. "The school is in the migration path, and during this time the



The kids on the island—like Stephanie Howard—work to help red crabs survive.

verandah is covered in red crabs," she says. "Doors need to be kept closed to prevent them taking over the classes."

But people must open the doors sometimes.

"I was watching as a seven-year-old girl used her foot to prevent a crab from scrambling into the classroom she was just leaving," Ms. Sullivan says. "The crab grabbed hold of the top of her sock, and she spent the next five minutes giggling as she tried to shake it off. Eventually, both girl and crab happily went their separate ways."

In her classroom, Ms. Sullivan uses a small wastepaper basket to scoop crabs from between cushions or under desks. Students shuffle their feet to avoid stepping on them.

When Stephanie was younger, she kept a few small crabs for a short time before letting them go. She gave them names, like "Scuttle," "Sebastian," "Jack," and "Jill."

Sometimes nips are unavoidable. "I have had plenty of nips by the crabs," Stephanie says. "They

don't hurt unless they are the really big ones with huge claws or the babies that have really small claws and pinch you."

At lunchtime, the crabs wander among the students' feet, munch on leftovers, then continue their journey.

Race to the Sea

By the time the crabs reach the ocean, they are dangerously low on water. They race into the sea.

Next, the males dig burrows for their mates—a task that leads to fights, because space is limited. After the crabs mate, the males dip in the ocean once more and return to the rain forest.

For almost two weeks, the females stay in the burrows while the eggs develop in the mothers' brood pouches. Finally, the females scuttle to the edge of the sea and crowd close together.



Once a year, they crawl all over the place.



The red crabs come out at the beginning of the rainy season—usually October, November, or December.

With claws raised high, they dance around and shake their bodies furiously as they release their eggs into the sea. Each female can release as many as 100,000 eggs. Then the females return to the rain forest, while the current carries off the clouds of red-crab eggs.

The eggs hatch right away, and the larvae feed and grow at sea. Millions are eaten by manta rays and whale sharks. About a month later, the survivors return to waters along the shore as *megalops*. They look like tiny shrimp. Within days, the megalops change into land crabs that are the size of tiny spiders.

The tiny crabs race from the water to migrate inland, dodging

birds and other hungry predators along the way. They hide under the forest growth for about four years. By then they have reached breeding size, about four and a half inches across, and they join the adults on the annual migration to the sea.

Rain-Forest Cleanup Crew

The red crabs are important to the rain forest. Their constant burrowing mixes the soil and lets air flow through it. They are the island's main composters. Like pint-sized vacuum cleaners, they sweep the forest floor clean, eating leaves, fruits, seedlings, dead crabs and birds, and giant African snails. They leave behind droppings of excellent fertilizer.

But millions of red land crabs die each season. Parks Australia, which looks after the national park, experiments with ways to

protect them. For example, plastic fences and concrete crossings direct crabs around dangerous areas without upsetting their migration paths. And roads along these paths are closed during the crabs' peak travel times.

Also, Christmas Islanders help. Students design stickers to encourage others to respect the crabs, and adults put the stickers on their cars. During the migration, many islanders leave their cars at home. They walk, bicycle, or Rollerblade carefully among the crabs. Stephanie's family runs sprinklers to give the crabs much-needed water.

Sharing space with millions of clattering crabs can be a challenge. But Stephanie feels happy that Christmas Islanders care enough about the red land crabs to help them survive the migration. 



Red crabs keep going, even if a building is in the way.