

Carroll County Times

Albino crab: Once-in-a-lifetime catch

BY PENNY RIORDAN, TIMES STAFF WRITER

For the first time in 40 years of crabbing, the Leister family's catch of blue crabs on Sunday were not all blue - one was as white as snow.

Earlier this week, Richard Leister of Westminster picked up the 7 1/2-inch male blue crab out his freezer from right next to the trout line he used to catch it.

"You don't catch many of these," he said, pointing to its white legs and body. Despite the frost on the male crustacean, his lungs were visible through his shell.

"Some people thought it was fake," said Babette Leister, recalling the man who questioned its authenticity at a bait shop in Reisterstown. At that time, the crab was still alive and it snapped back at the doubting spectator.

Indeed the all-white male crab looks a little like a plastic toy in its frosty state, with the only color being the two round specks of black eyes jutting out. Rub away the frost, though, and there are its insides, staring right back at you.

The Leisters started crabbing at sunrise Sunday. They were on the Rhode River in Anne Arundel County on the Western Shore of the bay.

They caught the albino toward the end of their trip, around 8 a.m. The crab was pulled up on the line into the boat, and at first the couple thought it was on its back, because it was white.

They turned it over and found that it was white all over.

The Leisters would like to mount the crab, and they are looking for someone who is an expert at mounting crabs.

Albino crabs, like other albino species, are exceedingly rare. The state Department of Natural Resources receives between three to four reports a year of albino crabs.

In fact, the department does not keep records on the crabs, as their occurrence doesn't mark anything serious about the wildlife in the Chesapeake Bay, said Lynn Fegley, a fishery biologist with the department.

But their lack of pigmentation may hold the key to why blue crabs are blue, said Yonathan Zohar, director of the center of marine biotechnology at the University of Maryland Biotechnology Institute in Baltimore. The center has a blue crab program, and Zohar and a team of researchers are breeding blue crabs in an effort to learn more about their genetic makeup.

Roughly two years ago, an albino crab caught in Kent County was donated to the center. The crab's genes were sampled and the crab is still frozen at the center, Zohar said.

In all of the millions of crabs that have been bred at the center, only one crab came out partially albino, he said.

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