

Recreational Estuary Crab Fishing in the Sydney South District

Fisheries Compliance Unit

May 2025

Overview

Crab fishing is a popular recreational fishery and important commercial fishery in NSW.

This fishing guide is designed to provide key information to help:

- ensure these fisheries remain sustainable by maximising voluntary compliance with crab fishing rules
- reduce conflict between/within user groups
- answer commonly asked questions about crab fishing rules
- report illegal crab fishing and crab fishing gear theft, and
- reduce bycatch and other negative impacts

Popular crab species in NSW

There are several popular eating crab species with the main two sought after being the Mud Crab and Blue Swimmer Crab. There are many other crab species found in NSW including the Red Shore Crab, Swift Footed Crab and Soldier Crab which are popular bait species.

Mud Crab *Scylla serrata*

Distribution - Mud Crab inhabit tropical to warm temperate waters from Exmouth in Western Australia up and along the coastline of the Northern Territory and Queensland to the Bega River in southern New South Wales. They favour soft muddy bottoms below the low tide level and generally live in sheltered estuaries, mud flats, mangrove forests and the tidal reaches of some rivers.

Size - Mud Crab can reach a maximum size of approximately 24 centimetres carapace (shell) width and 3.5 kilograms in weight.

Characteristics - Mud Crab are a member of the family Portunidae. They are large crabs with a smooth, broad carapace and possess sizeable claws used for crushing and cutting prey. The two hind legs are

flattened for swimming. Mud Crabs are generally very dark brown to mottled green in colour. Juveniles feed on planktonic animals, benthic molluscs and crustaceans while adults feed on bivalve and gastropod molluscs (mussels and pipis), small crabs and polychaete worms.

Mud Crab



Blue Swimmer Crab *Portunus pelagicus*

Distribution - Blue swimmer crabs are found in coastal waters from Cape Naturaliste in Western Australia, around the top end to NSW. The Victorian border is the southern limit for distribution of the species on the east coast.

Size - Maximum length of about 21cm across the carapace (shell), and a weight of up to 1kg.

Characteristics - Blue swimmer crabs, also known as sand crabs or blue manna crabs, are swimming crabs that have their last pair of legs modified to act as paddles.

Their claws are long and slender and the shell is rough in texture. The carapace is broad, with a prominent spine on each side. The colours vary from dark brown, blue and purple, with pale mottling. Adult crabs are frequently found in large numbers in shallow bays and estuaries, particularly during the summer months. Blue swimmer crabs are highly regarded for their taste.

Blue Swimmer Crab



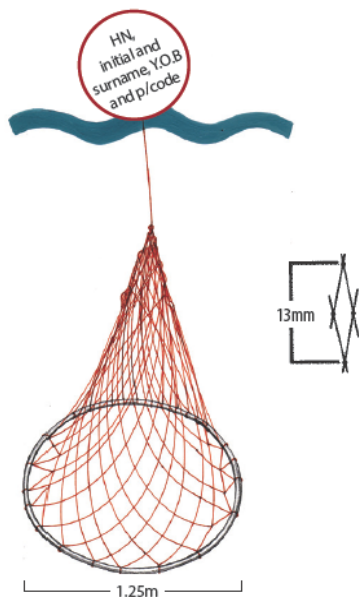
Permitted crab fishing methods

There is a range of permitted methods for taking crabs in NSW including prescribed nets and traps and other methods. The following section provides an overview of these; however, relevant bag and size limits and location restrictions apply. Check your local rules before going crab fishing.

Hoop or lift net (witches hat)

- Not more than four nets are to be used (or in possession) by any one person at any one time.
- No more than two hoops per net (no rigid frame between them).
- Diameter of hoops should be no greater than 1.25m.

Hoop or Lift Net (Witches hat)



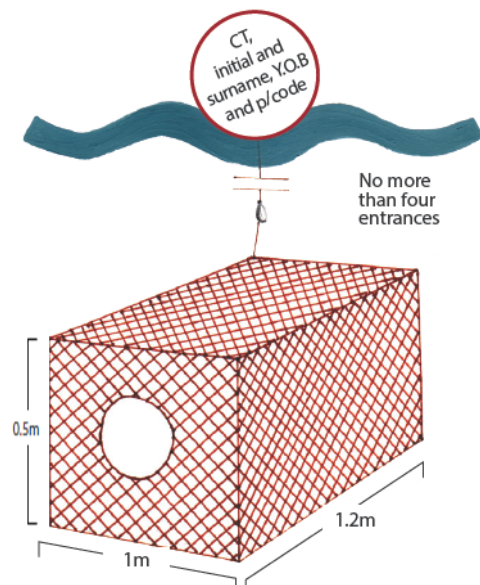
- Mesh size cannot be less than 13mm measured on the diagonal.

- Drop (length of net) cannot be more than 1m.
- A float/buoy to be labelled with the letters HN, initial and surname, year of birth and postcode of the person who sets, uses or lifts the fishing gear. The float being at least 100mm in diameter and 50mm above the water with all letters to be a minimum of 15mm in height, clearly visible and in a contrasting colour to the buoy.
- Hoop nets or lift nets must not have any rope floating on the surface of the water.
- The net must be dropped and raised vertically through the water by hand.
- The net must not be used in ocean waters.
- Any rock lobsters or fin fish which are subject to a size limit must be immediately returned to the water unharmed if caught.
- The same rules apply for witches hats as for hoop nets.
- Avoid using nets and traps in areas of high boat traffic or navigation channels.
- Avoid setting gear in fast flowing tidal areas.

Crab trap

- Not more than two traps (and four witches hats) to be used (or in possession) by any person at any one time.

Crab trap



- Maximum dimensions – 1.2m length x 1m width x 0.5m depth or has a diameter not exceeding 1.6m at the top or bottom.
- Minimum mesh size 50mm.
- No more than 4 entrances (none of which are on the top of the trap).
- A float/buoy to be labelled with the letters CT, initial and surname, year of birth and postcode of the person who sets, uses or lifts the fishing gear.

- The float being at least 100mm in diameter and 50mm above the water with all letters to be a minimum of 15mm, clearly visible and in a contrasting colour to the buoy.
- There must also be a 50 gram weight attached no less than one metre below the buoy so that no rope/line is floating on the surface of the water.
- Must not be made of entanglement material.
- Must not be set to impede the free passage of fish (2 traps cannot be set closer than 3m apart).
- Do not set gear in areas of high boat traffic or navigation channels.
- Only crabs can be taken with this trap.
- Crab traps must not be used in inland or ocean waters.
- Check your crab trap regularly. Reducing set time for any fishing gear reduces the chances of harm to accidentally caught aquatic animals such as platypus and turtles.

Dip or scoop net

- Maximum diameter of hoop or ring 0.6 metres.
- Minimum mesh size 20mm measured across the diagonal.
- Drop (length of net) no more than 1.25 metres.
- Must be used by hand and not staked or set.
- Must not be joined or placed with any other net.
- Only one net per person at any time.
- Other fish (including crabs) caught while legally fishing for prawns may be kept, however, bag and size limits apply.

Line fishing

- A maximum of four rods or lines can be used by any one person at any one time.
- If any rods or lines are left unattended, they must be clearly marked with the fisher's name and address or name and boat registration number.
- A maximum of three hooks or three gangs of hooks can be attached per line. A gang of hooks should have no more than five hooks.
- One line may have six single hooks with a lure attached to be used by the method of hand jigging only.
- A maximum of three treble hooks can be attached to a lure.

Landing net

- May only be used as an ancillary aid for retrieval of fish (including crabs) caught when line fishing.

Hand picking

- Hand picking may be used to take crabs, gloves are permitted.

- You may use a snorkel (not SCUBA) when taking crabs.

Red Shore Crab – a popular bait species

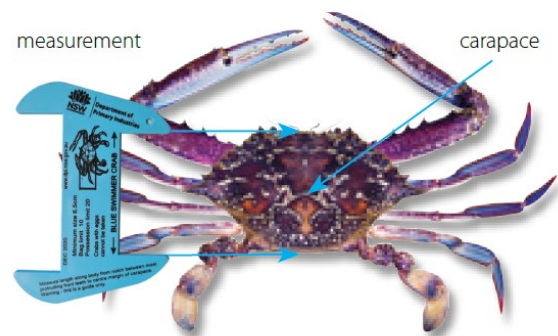


Spearing

- Spears may be used to take crabs but not with the aid of a light.
- You cannot spear crabs on rock platforms.
- Care must be taken not to mutilate any crab with a size limit. A fisheries officer must be able to measure the carapace of any crabs with a size limit in your possession.

How to measure a crab

Blue Swimmer and Mud Crabs are measured along the body from the notch between the two most protruding frontal teeth to the centre of the posterior margin of the carapace or shell.



Bag, size and possession limits

Blue Swimmer Crab: Legal length: 6.5cm. Daily bag limit: 10 (20 in possession).

Mud Crab: Legal length: 8.5cm. Daily Bag limit: 5.

Frequently asked questions

Do I need a licence to go crabbing in NSW?

Yes, when fishing in NSW waters you are required to pay the NSW recreational fishing fee and carry a receipt showing the payment of the fee.

Some exemptions apply to paying the fishing fee, including people under the age of 18, holders of pensioner concession cards and Aboriginal people.

You can pay the NSW recreational fishing fee at www.onegov.nsw.gov.au or by calling 1300 369 365

Can I set or lift crab fishing gear for someone else?

No. You can only use, set, or lift your own crab fishing gear.

Can I have a few extra crab traps and or witches hats with me when I go fishing?

No. You are permitted only to have the amount of gear permissible for yourself.

If I catch a few more crabs than the bag limit, can I keep them for someone else?

No. A recreational fisher is not permitted to take fish on behalf of another; over and above the individual's daily limits.

Can I keep female crabs?

Yes. In NSW you can keep female crabs as long as they are taken and in your possession legally but not if they're carrying eggs.

Can I set crab fishing gear without a float/buoy to stop someone else from lifting it, stealing my crabs or stealing my gear?

No. It is illegal to set any fishing gear without marking it in accordance with the regulations.

What should I do if someone steals my crab fishing gear?

Taking someone else's fishing gear is theft. If you have information on or been a victim of crime on our waterways call NSW Crimestoppers on 1800 333 000.

What do I do if I see someone fishing illegally?

Call the Fishers Watch number 1800 043 536. All information received in good faith will be treated confidentially. Alternatively, report on line at www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/fisheries/compliance/report-illegal-activity

Waters closed to crabbing**Botany Bay**

Waters between **Sydney Airport runways (Figure 1).**

Alexandra Canal (Figure 1), includes no disturbance of bed sediments due to high levels of pollutants.

Penrhyn Estuary (Figure 1), from its source to its junction with the Sydney International Container Terminal (SICTL) bridge leading from Foreshore Road.

Towra Point Aquatic Reserve (Figure 2) Sanctuary Zone is closed any method of fishing. All fishing gear on these waters are prohibited.

Port Hacking

Shiprock Aquatic Reserve (Figures 3) also no disturbing, destroying or collecting marine animals or plants whether dead or alive.

Figure1. Sydney Airport, Penrhyn Estuary, Alexandra Canal and Cooks River



Figure 2. Towra Point Aquatic Reserve

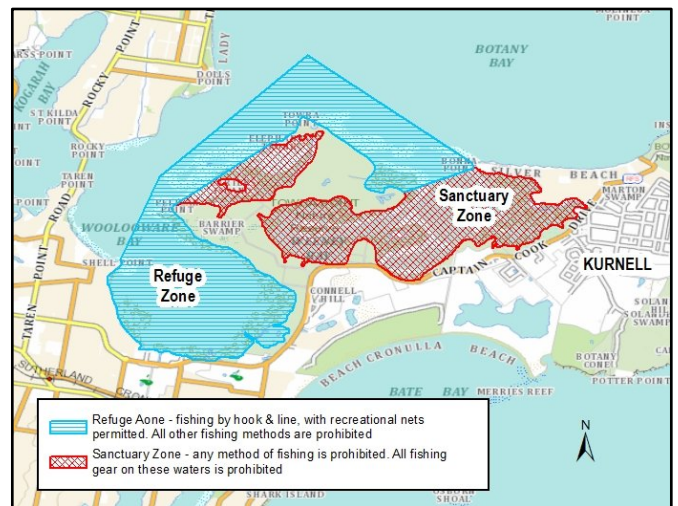
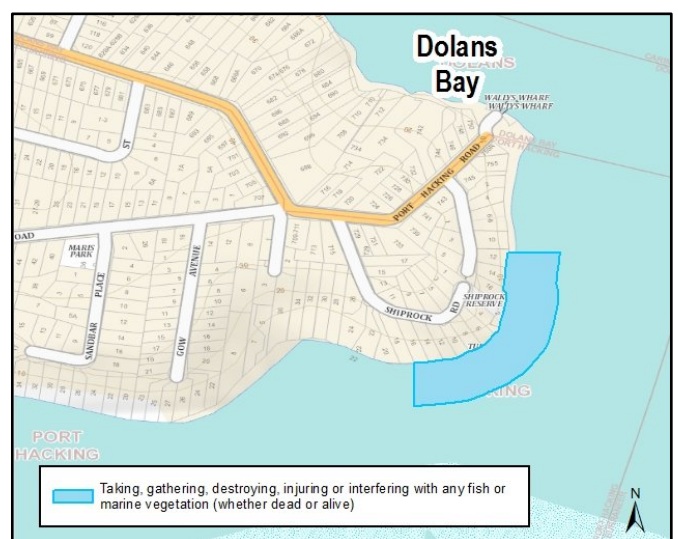


Figure 3. Shiprock Aquatic Reserve



Waters where crab traps and nets cannot be used

A person must not use a net or trap for taking any fish (includes crabs) unless its use by the person for taking those fish is declared by the regulations to be a lawful use of the net or trap.

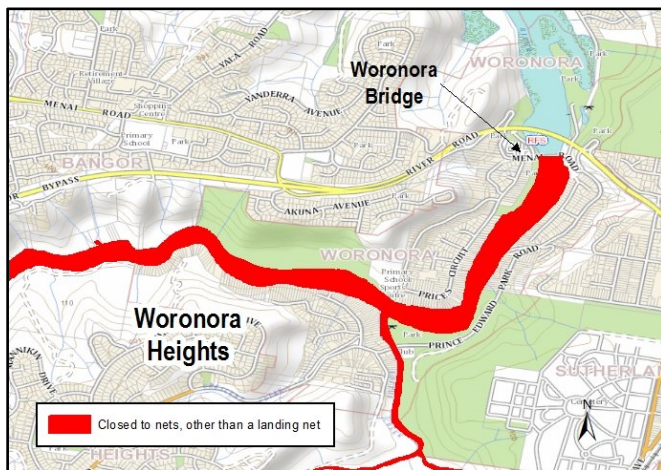
Generally, you cannot use any net or trap to take crabs near the mouths of estuaries, in protected or sensitive aquatic environments or in sanctuary zones of marine parks.

Following are net and trap closures relating to crabbing in the Sydney South Fisheries District.

Botany Bay

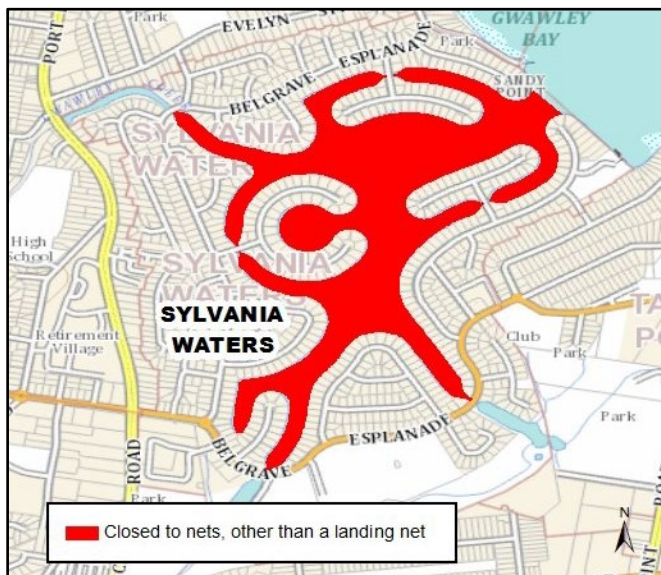
- **Woronora River (Figure 4)**, its creeks and tributaries upstream from the Woronora Bridge is closed to all recreational fishing nets, except the landing net.

Figure 4. Woronora River



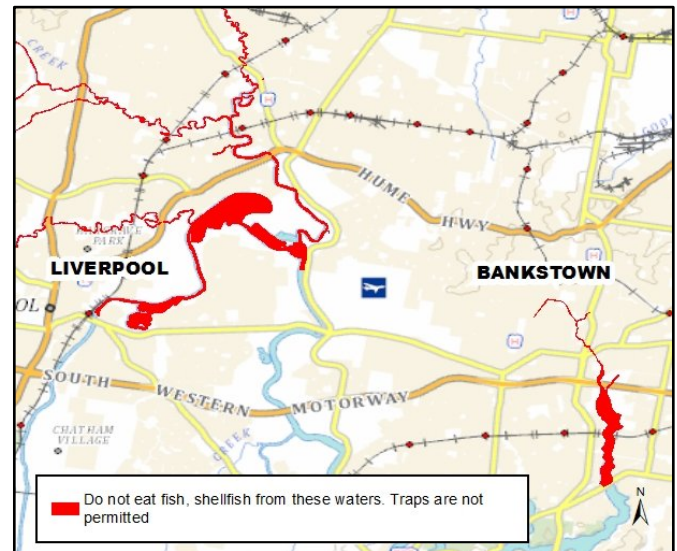
- **Sylvania Waters (Figure 5)**. All waters known as the Sylvania Waters Subdivision in Gwawley Bay is closed to all recreational fishing nets, except the landing net.

Figure 5. Sylvania Waters



- **Georges River and Salt Pan Creek (Figure 6)**. Georges River from Rabaul Road boat ramp at Georges Hall upstream, including Prospect Creek, Cabramatta Creek and Chipping Norton Lake and Salt Pan Creek from Henry Lawson Drive Road Bridge upstream is closed to all recreational fishing traps. Do not eat fish or shellfish from these waters due to high levels of industrial pollutants. You should release your catch.

Figure 6. Georges River and Salt Pan Creek

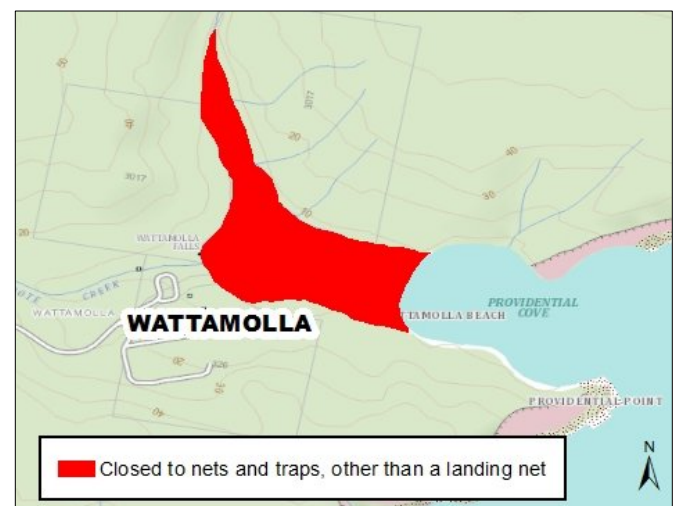


- **Cooks River (Figure 1)** and its tributaries are closed to nets and traps. Do not eat fish or shellfish from these waters due to high levels of industrial pollutants. You should release your catch.
- **Towra Point Aquatic Reserve (Figure 2)** Refuge Zone fishing by hook and line, with lawful recreational nets permitted. All other fishing methods are prohibited.

Wattamolla Lagoon (Figure 7) Royal National Park

- Wattamolla Lagoon is closed to all recreational fishing nets and traps, except the landing net.

Figure 7. Wattamolla Lagoon



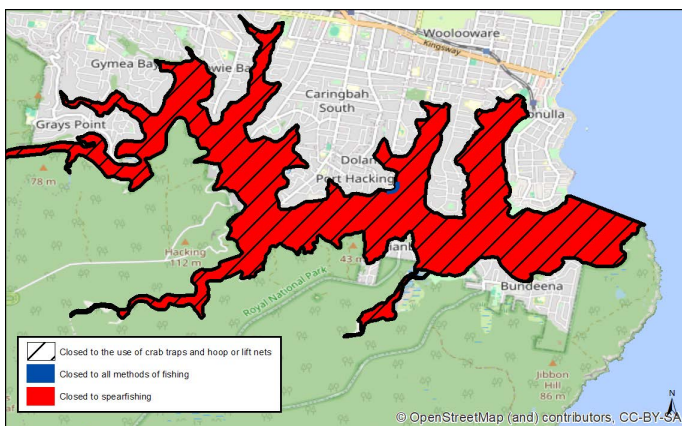
Port Hacking

- **Port Hacking (Figure 8)** and its tributaries upstream of a line drawn southerly from the southernmost extremity of Hungry Point to the northernmost extremity of Cabbage Tree or Pulpit Point is closed to all recreational fishing nets and traps, except the dip/scoop net, landing net and bait trap. Waters east of Hungry Point are classed as ocean waters and are closed to the use of crab traps and hoop or lift nets.

Waters Closed to Spearfishing

- **Port Hacking (Figure 8)** and its tributaries, inlets and bays west of a line drawn from the eastern extremity of Glashier Point to the northern extremity of Port Hacking Point

Figure 8. Port Hacking



Penalties

Penalties apply to persons who take or possess fish (including invertebrates, shells, etc.) taken in contravention of fishing closures, including aquatic reserves and intertidal protected areas.

Further information

For more information about fishing restrictions that apply to Sydney South waterways and beaches, please contact the;

Sydney South Fisheries Office.

2 Water Street

Sans Souci NSW 2219

Phone: (02) 9529 6021

Web: www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/fisheries

For more information relating to fishing restrictions go to www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/fishing/recreational/resources

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