

# Jimmys, Sooks and Peelers

*Checking crab pots and shedders at a Manns Harbor fish house*

*Text and photos by Kent Priestley*



*You can identify a jimmy (male) by the narrow, missile-shaped abdomen.*



*This crab is shedding its shell.*



*The Rippons family of Benny's Seafood (from left): Rip, Benny, Tasha, Paige, Lisa, Ben and Diana.*

A southwest breeze roughens the surface of Croatan Sound, whipping up streaks of foam that point to a gray horizon. It's a queasy afternoon on the open sound, but at Manns Harbor, on the mainland side, the water is slick calm.

Manns Harbor is the traveler's first landfall west of Roanoke Island and the Outer Banks. The mainland community stretches along a thin slice of marsh and sound shoreline, and is backed by miles of federal wildlife refuge. The village has long had ties to the water, and it's easy to see what pays the bills these days. Along the canals, wire crab pots, stacked five or six high, form long rows, each one fitted with a plastic float branded with the owner's name.

At Benny's Seafood, a sagging seafood house set just back from the Manns Harbor sound front, Benny "Rip" Rippons Jr. culls a day's catch of blue crabs, sorting bushel baskets full of the clattering crustaceans by size and plumpness.

Minutes before, Rip was nosing the "Tasha," a workboat named for his sister, to the dock after a day spent pulling his crab pots. Now, he thrusts a gloved hand into a basket, lifting crabs out one by one and examining them for marketability. Small crabs are returned to the water; regulation crabs are sorted according to size.

Most valuable among them are the "peelers," immature crabs poised to loosen their old shells and form new ones. Crabs perform this molting process as many as 25 times before reaching their adult dimensions. Free of their hard domes, crab bodies are limp and exceedingly vulnerable to predators. Which is bad news for crabs, but good news for people. Soft crabs are a seasonal must-have on menus all along the Eastern seaboard. Fried, broiled or sautéed, the tender, delicately flavored crabs can fetch more than \$1 apiece wholesale, and have become a bread-and-butter market item for Outer Banks fishermen coming off the lean winter months.

Blue crabs begin to shed their shells in late April, and the heaviest harvesting comes in May and June. Shedding continues through mid-September, and sometimes goes on longer if the weather stays warm and the crabs don't migrate to deeper water. But on this day, few peeler crabs have made their way into Benny Rippons' pots.

"There ain't many peelers on the bottom," Rip sighs. "This is the worst season I've seen."

Since he last checked them, his 60-odd pots have scared up only a half-bushel worth of peelers. Swings in the harvest come as little surprise to Rip, though. At 33 he's crabbed nearly half his life, but readily concedes that the hunted, not the hunter, holds most of the answers. "Anytime I think I know something, it doesn't work," he says. "I try to do the same thing every year, but it ain't never the same."

Typically, hard crabs are lured to wire pots with a piece of menhaden, an oily fish they find irresistible. Peeler crabs, though, are different. Peelers are coaxed into the traps by love, or something like it. Rip baits each pot with a male crab, called a “jimmy,” before lowering it into the sound. Female crabs, called “sooks,” lie below, waxing amorous, their claws tinged with streaks of lipstick red. Ready to shed one last time before reaching sexual maturity, they scuttle into the peeler pots for safe haven and the promise of a mate.

During mating, called “doubling,” a jimmy crab will cradle a soft female for a love act that can take as long as 12 hours to complete. Fooled into Rip’s pots, though, the poor ladies never reach their man. Instead, they’re caught, brought to shore, and placed in shallow tanks called shedders. Peelers are inspected regularly over a period of days, and ones that have shed are chilled and packed for sale. Tending crabs starts before sunrise, and continues until well after dark.

Rip’s father, Benny Rippons Sr., was born on Hoopers Island, along Maryland’s Eastern Shore. At 56, he has built a life around the bad-tempered shellfish. “I don’t know nothing else but crabbing,” he says. “It’s all I’ve ever done my whole life. My son’s the same way, and my grandson will be the same way.”

Prior to the 1960s, crab shedding was typically done in dockside canals, creeks or other calm waters. Mesh-bottomed trays, tethered to pilings, were filled with rank peelers. Those old-school shedders rose and fell with the tides, keeping crabs cool as they molted. Benny remembers poling a tiny skiff around his grandfather’s floating shedders, helping the old man tend his peelers.

Since then, dock shedders, typically fashioned from wood, plastic, or fiberglass, have replaced floating shedders. Set on stands for ease of access, dock shedders rely on electric pumps to cover the crabs with a constant stream of cool, oxygen-rich water. A new Tideland EMC electrical substation at Manns Harbor, completed in January 2003, ensures that Rippons’ peelers are kept alive by some of the steadiest power around.

### *The rising demand for soft crabs*

Not many local people were shedding crabs when Rippons moved his family to nearby East Lake in 1973. Times have changed, and with them the demand for soft crabs. “It’s a big thing anymore. Used not to be, but it is now,” Rippons says. The family’s docks are crowded with more than 100 shedders, capable of holding up to 50,000 peelers during the peak season. They’ll keep shedding crabs until well into fall (“enough to keep the pumps running,” Benny says), but seldom again see the abundance of the first spring and summer runs.

Most of the catch is shipped north, to buyers in Baltimore and New York City. Sizes range from smaller soft crabs, called “primes,” to “jumbos.” Topping the list are “slabs” or “whales” — big jimmies whose shells measure 6 inches or more across.

There’s opportunity in soft crabs, and it doesn’t take many peelers — three or four to a pot each day — for a crabber to cover costs. More than that is money in the bank. Benny says he draws 40 percent of his annual income from the tender harvest.

Coaxing a living from the water, by nature’s rules, is hardly easy. But crabs keep the Rippons family together, working side-by-side daily at their Manns Harbor enterprise. Benny’s daughter, Lisa, manages the business office and keeps all the commercial accounts straight, and his wife, Diana, is secretary. Grandkids pitch in where needed, along the docks or on the water.

It’s clear what keeps them crabbing. “You’ve got to love it,” Benny says. “Nobody can make it in this racket unless they love it.”

*Kent Priestley is a writer who lives in Manteo.*

*Steady electric power from a new Tideland EMC substation ensures a constant pumping of cool, oxygen-rich water for the shedding tanks.*



*Lisa tends the shedders.*



*Rip sorts the peelers.*