

Animals of the Mangroves - Teacher Information

Mangrove forests form the interface between marine and terrestrial environments. Consequently, animals from both these environments can be found in the mangroves. Few animals use mangroves as their only habitat. Some live primarily in the mangroves, while others move in and out of the mangroves seasonally, at different stages of their life cycle or even depending on the tide.

Saltwater crocodiles are one of the most infamous inhabitants of mangrove areas. They do not generally nest in mangroves but are found nesting in vegetation fringing mangrove areas and vegetation where rivers adjoin coastal flood plains. On the rising tide, these reptiles come into the mangroves to feed. Juvenile crocodiles feed on crabs, prawns, mudskippers, and other small fish. As they mature, their diet changes to include large mud crabs, birds, and mammals.

Sea snakes are common visitors to mangrove forests as are terrestrial snakes. Pythons tend to be occasional visitors to the mangroves, while the Little File Snake, the Mangrove Snake, and the White-bellied Mangrove Snake tend to use the mangroves as their primary habitat. The Mangrove Monitor and the Rusty Monitor, which feed on insects, fish, crabs, and sometimes birds, also use the mangroves as their primary habitat.

Mudskippers are one of the few animals which are restricted to mangrove environments. They burrow into the soil and can swim like fish, but, using their pectoral fins, can also climb tree roots and move across the soil. In contrast, most other fish species which inhabit mangrove creeks are also found in the coastal seas, entering the mangroves during a particular stage of their life cycle. For example, Barramundi spawn and spend their juvenile phase in mangrove creeks. Sea Mullet also inhabit the mangroves as juveniles. The availability of food and protection from predation are important factors influencing fish migration into, and out of, mangrove environments.

Crustaceans (sea lice, barnacles, shrimps, prawns, and crabs) are abundant in mangrove forests. One of the most distinctive crustaceans is the Mud Lobster which builds large, mud towers at the entrance to its burrow. Pistol Shrimps are responsible for the loud clicks you can often hear in mangrove forests. There are also around 60 species of crabs which inhabit the mangroves. Some crabs are predominantly leaf eaters while others feed mainly on algae and detritus on the soil surface, scooping the material into their mouthparts and discarding the inedible material as round pellets. One of the most conspicuous species is the Fiddler Crab which has an enlarged orange claw. Molluscs, like the Common Mud Whelk and the Mangrove Oyster, are often visible on the muddy soil around the base of mangrove trees. In addition to these largely surface dwellers is a fauna associated with rotting wood such as Shipworms, which are not really worms but highly adapted bivalve molluscs.

Many species of birds also depend seasonally on mangrove environments for food and shelter. Honeyeaters and lorikeets visit the mangroves for nectar during the plant-flowering season. Other species, such as the Torresian Imperial Pigeon, inhabit the mangroves during breeding. Mangroves are important habitats during annual migrations and can become important refuges during droughts and when adjacent terrestrial forest is destroyed. Water birds that visit the mangroves on a more regular basis include the Jabiru, egrets, and the Mangrove Heron while the Mangrove Robin, White-breasted Whistler, Mangrove Honeyeater, and Mangrove Kingfisher are woodland birds that are considered mangrove specialists.

Flying foxes (fruit bats) often form large colonies in the mangroves and can be seen roosting during the day. Other mammals are not often seen in mangroves, however, wallabies, rats, possums and bandicoots visit the mangroves, as do feral pigs, cattle, and water buffalo.