

## NOTES

### COCONUT SHELL AS A 'HOUSE' OF HERMIT CRABS IN SUHEL PAR, LACCADIVES

It is a lifelong job for hermit crabs to hunt for new 'houses', for at intervals they must find successively larger shells to accommodate their growing body. There has been some doubt whether or not these 'hermits' have the grace to wait until a gastropod is dead before making off with its shell. But recent observations seem to favour the view that they do not kill the snails thereby obtaining in one stroke a meal and a new home. Whatever be the means, the end remains a problem particularly to those species which grow to large sizes.

One of the unforgettable sights of Suheli Par ( $10^{\circ}02' N$ :  $72^{\circ}14' E$ ) is the hordes of hermit crabs especially *Coenobita* sp., which can be seen staggering about all over the island. These gregarious hermit crabs live mostly on shore among the stilted



roots of trees and inside the large holes and crevices at the bottom of tree trunks, etc. While the smaller ones are found inhabiting a wide variety of gastropod shells, the larger ones are often seen housed in coconut shells as shown in the photograph. Alcock (1902) reported of having seen at Minicoy one individual of *Coenobita rugosa* of such a large size that it could not find a shell big enough for a house, and so had

accommodated itself with an empty coconut. Another individual was so big that it seemed to have given up hope for finding a house, and was wandering about with its tail unprotected just like a little *Birgus latro*. The shells provide protection to the crab and when they are disturbed they quickly withdraw their body into the shell for safety, the chaelae efficiently blocking the opening of the shell. In those cases where coconut shells are used, the protection given by the house is not efficient as the animals cannot completely retreat into the shell. Further, it does not get a firm hold on the house as in the case of gastropod shells. The coconut shell protects only the soft abdomen and it is likely that the other parts do not require any such additional protection as they are very hard.

MacGinitie and MacGinitie (1949) observed that hermit crabs when hard pressed for 'houses' will use almost anything that is hollow that can be made to serve until they find something better. As already mentioned the large *Coenobitas* were usually found housed in coconut shells. Examples of hermit crabs habitually using 'houses' other than gastropod shells are known. One such case is that of the deep sea hermit crab, *Pylocheles miersii* found in the Indian Ocean which inhabits pieces of bamboo or hollow twigs of mangrove. The present one seems to be another instance in which the hermit crab habitually uses a coconut shell instead of the conventional gastropod shell for its house.

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