



Barnacles

What are they?

Despite what they look like on the surface, barnacles are actually arthropods. Like their cousins, blue crabs, barnacles have their skeleton on the outside of their body. They also have very thin jointed legs.

In the 19th century, a Harvard biologist described them this way: “[A barnacle is] nothing more than a little shrimp-like animal standing on its head in a limestone house and kicking food into its mouth.”

What do they look like?

The barnacles you see attached to piers, rocks and jetties (and sometimes boats) around the Bay are acorn barnacles. Acorn barnacles are one of the two major types of barnacles. These creatures look something like igloos. They have six protective plates overlapping one another. They form a little dome. The gap at the top of the plates is covered by two valves when these barnacles are out of water. When they are covered by water and want to eat, the valves open. Six tiny pairs of legs called cirri emerge from the “igloo” and sweep about to capture food.



Photo Source: Cal Images

Where can you find them?

Barnacles attach themselves to places such as piers and the bottom of boats.

How do they behave?

Barnacles grow by adding calcium to their plates. This adds to the interior space inside their dome. However, they also have to shed their “shells” at some points, just like the blue crab. This is called molting.

What do they eat?

Barnacles eat small floating bits of plants and animals. The cirri sweep phytoplankton and zooplankton into barnacles' interior.

What eats them?

The oyster flatworm is the greatest predator of barnacles. When a barnacle opens to eat, a flatworm sticks a part of itself into the holes. Of course, the barnacle closes immediately. However, it eventually gets very weak and opens completely, letting the flatworm inside.

Whelks, a kind of mollusk, also cover barnacles and force them to open their valves. Larval barnacles (which swim on their own) are eaten by many different kinds of fish.

Creature Feature

Barnacles often grow on boats' bottoms. This extra growth harms the boat and slows it down in the water. Because of this, boat owners have to spend a great deal of time scraping off the barnacles and repainting their crafts. Sometimes they also apply chemicals to prevent barnacles from growing on their boats. Some of these chemicals can be very harmful to Bay plants and creatures.

