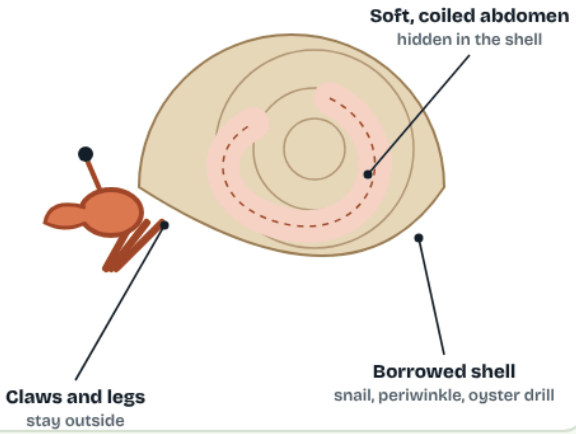
That is why

Why do hermit crabs line up to swap shells?

They can't grow a shell, so they borrow empty ones; one roomy empty shell can upgrade a chain of crabs.

A A borrowed home



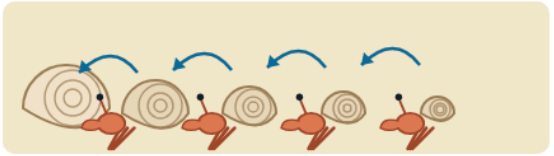
Why it keeps moving house

It grows, but the shell doesn't, so it needs a bigger one. Good shells are scarce: a crab with no shell is more vulnerable to predators, and some make do with bottle caps.

It can't make a shell of its own.

B Two kinds of chain

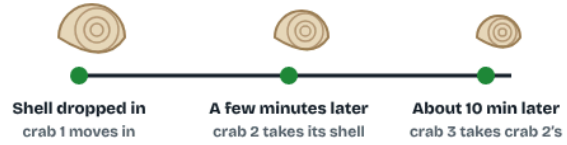
All at once (Belize)



waiting: 15 minutes to 8 hours — seconds

Up to 20 crabs line up, biggest to smallest.
When the right crab moves in, the chain fires.

One at a time (Long Island, 1986)

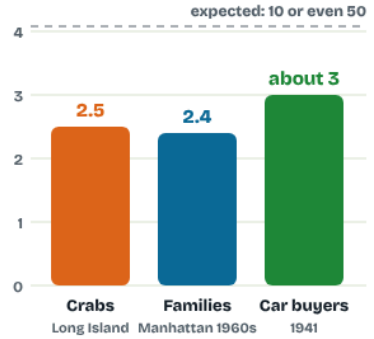


Same chain of moves, spread out over time:
each crab finds the vacancy on its own.

C Crabs and people match

Upgrades per new home

average chain length



Why they match is still a guess.

1 Costa Rica: rougher

Land hermit crabs hollow out shells, sometimes doubling the space. Crowds pull a crab out; given plain snail shells, no evicted crab survived.

No crab gets a home from nowhere: each takes the one just left.

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Diagram: https://thatiswhy.com/diagrams/why-hermit-crabs-swap-shells/ · Full guide: https://thatiswhy.com/why-do-hermit-crabs-line-up-to-swap-shells/