

A Guide to Crayfish Identification

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4 Identifying types of crayfish

There are six non-native species of crayfish in England and Wales. The most common species – and the one that causes the biggest problem – is the signal crayfish.

The signal crayfish was introduced from North America in the 1970s and sold to farmers looking to diversify into new markets. Crayfish escaped from these farms and established populations in our rivers and lakes. In addition, many new populations have been established due to translocations.

Under the Wildlife and Countryside Act it is illegal to introduce non-native species without permission of Natural England. All non-native crayfish caught must be humanely destroyed.

All North American species are capable of carrying crayfish plague to which European crayfish are highly susceptible.

This section explains how to tell the different species apart.

Photos and identification text provided by David Holdich.

Native (European)

White-clawed crayfish

Length: Adults usually less than 10 cm (excluding claws) but can be up 12 cm.

Body: Usually brown or olive brown in colour. Smooth but pitted. Two pairs of ridges behind eye sockets; however, second pair may or may not be visible. Has row of sharp spines behind sides of cervical groove. Rostrum (extending point on top of head) triangular with very short apex.

Claws: Top side rough, underside dirty white to pink.

Habits/habitats: Relatively docile. Lives in streams, rivers, canals, reservoirs, water-filled quarries. Capable of burrowing.

Distribution: Found central/northern England and eastern Wales.





Non-native (North American)

Signal crayfish

Length: Adults usually about 15 cm, but can be up to 30 cm.

Body: Generally bluish-brown to reddish brown. Smooth all over. Two pairs of ridges behind eye sockets. Spines absent from behind cervical groove. Rostrum well developed with parallel sides and with long apex.

Claws: Smooth on both sides, underside bright red in colour.

Habits/habitats: Aggressive. Invasive. Lives in streams, rivers, canals, reservoirs, water-filled gravel pits. Burrows extensively.

Distribution: Found across England, especially in the south, and Wales (also present in Scotland).



Non-native (Eastern Europe)

Turkish, narrow-clawed crayfish

Length: Usually 15 cm, can be up to 30 cm.

Body: Pale yellow to pale green in colour. Sides of carapace very rough. Two pairs of ridges behind eye sockets. Rostrum well developed with parallel sides and long apex.

Claws: Long and narrow, upper surface rough, underside same colour as body.

Habits/habitats: Relatively docile. Invasive. Prefers still waters as in lakes and canals, occasionally found in rivers.

Distribution: Mainly found in south-east England and the Midlands.





Non-native (European)

Noble crayfish

Length: Adults up to 15 cm.

Body: Generally brown. Smooth. Has row of spines on carapace behind sides of cervical groove. Two pairs of ridges behind eye sockets. Rostrum well developed with parallel sides and long, saw-toothed apex.

Claws: Top side is rough. Underside is dull red.

Habits/habitats: Relatively docile. Lives in streams, rivers, lakes and reservoirs. Capable of burrowing.

Distribution: Reservoir and streams in south-western England.

Non-native (North American)

Red swamp crayfish

Length: Adults usually 10 cm, can be up to 15 cm.

Body: Generally red to reddish brown all over. Many colour varieties. Carapace rough. One pair of ridges behind eye sockets. Rostrum triangular with relatively short apex.

Claws: Red all over with spiny top surface.

Habits/habitats: Aggressive. Invasive. Prefers still waters such as lakes and canals, but can live in all sorts of waters. Capable of burrowing.

Distribution: A number of sites in southern England.





Non-native (North American)

Spiny-cheeked crayfish

Length: Adults 12 cm or larger.

Body: Pale brown (can be black in silty lakes) with brown stripes across top of tail. Prominent spines on sides in front of cervical groove. Single pair of ridges behind eye sockets. Rostrum well developed with parallel sides and long apex.

Claws: Pitted and smooth to touch.

Habits/habitats: Relatively aggressive. Invasive. Lives in rivers, lakes and water-filled gravel pits. Capable of burrowing.

Distribution: Two locations in the Midlands and one in eastern England.



Non-native (North American)

Virile crayfish

Length: Adults 12 cm or larger.

Body: Brown. Single pair of ridges behind eye sockets. Rostrum short and broad.

Claws: Broad and flattened, bordered by pale-coloured tubercles, underside pale.

Habits/habitats: Relatively aggressive. Invasive. Lives in canals, rivers and lakes.

Distribution: River Lee catchment in North London.

