

Leatherback Turtle

Dermochelys coriacea

General Description

The leatherback turtle, also known as the leathery turtle or trunkback, is the largest and most distinctive of the sea turtles.

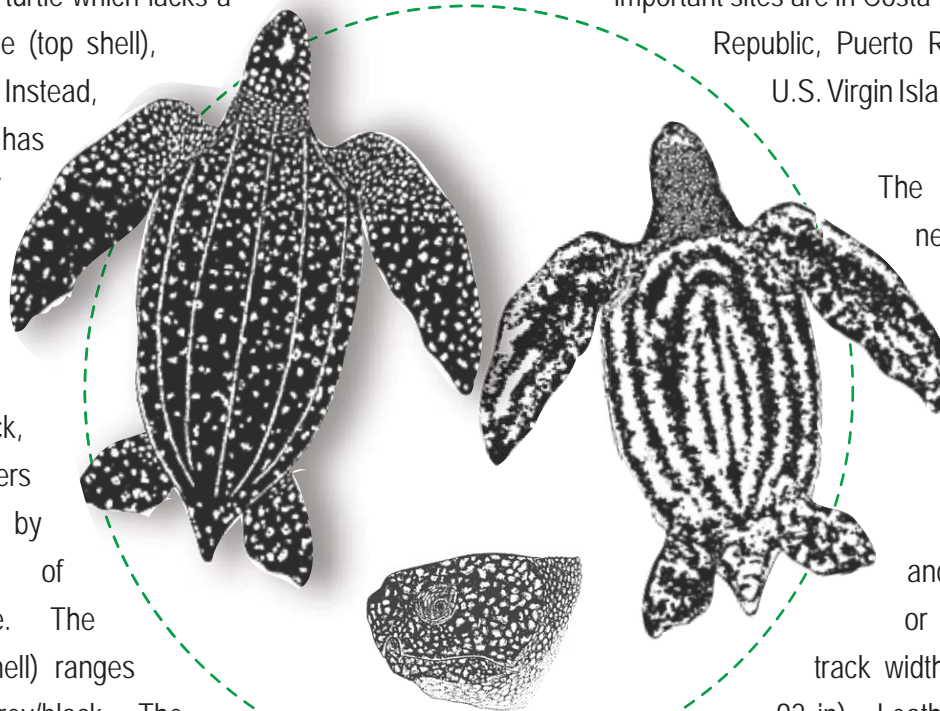
It is the only sea turtle which lacks a hard, bony carapace (top shell), scutes and claws. Instead, the leatherback has a rubbery "shell" which is strongly tapered and characterized by seven prominent ridges. The back, head and flippers are often marked by irregular blotches of white or pale blue. The plastron (bottom shell) ranges from white to grey/black. The dark upper and lighter lower surfaces in combination with the mottled coloration is effective camouflage for this open-ocean inhabitant. The leatherback has a deeply notched upper jaw.

While hatchlings are about 60-65 mm (2.4-2.6 in) in carapace length, adult females grow to 130-165cm (55-71 in) and weigh 260-500 kg (573-1102 lb); males can tip the scales at 916 kg (2015 lb)!

Nesting Distribution and Behavior

Leatherbacks are the most migratory of the sea turtles, are globally distributed, feed in temperate waters, and nest on tropical shores. The major Caribbean nesting beaches are in Trinidad and French Guiana. Other important sites are in Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Suriname, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Venezuela.

The main Caribbean nesting season begins in March and continues to July. Leatherbacks like beaches with deep, unobstructed access and avoid abrasive rock or coral. The nesting track width is 180-230 cm (82-92 in). Leatherbacks nest every 2-5 years or more, laying an average of 5-7 clutches per nesting season at 9-10 day intervals. Typically between 70-90 fertile (yolked) eggs are laid, as well as a variable number of smaller, infertile (yolkless) eggs. After an approximately 9 weeks, the hatchlings emerge and crawl to the sea. Virtually nothing is known of the post-hatchling and juvenile life stages--hatchlings disappear, not to be seen again until adulthood!



Did you know that...

- Leatherbacks are the only turtles that have a pink spot (a light window) on top of their heads!
- Leatherbacks dive deeper than any other sea turtle!
- Females and males frequently cross entire ocean basins to feed and reproduce!
- No one knows the age at maturity or life span

Diet

Leatherbacks forage in temperate waters, and even venture into subarctic latitudes. The mouth and throat are lined with backward-facing spines that help keep their primary food, jellyfish and other soft-bodied invertebrates, from escaping. Highly venomous jellyfish, including the Portuguese Man-O-War, are considered a delicacy! Leatherbacks feed both at the surface and at great depths in the sea.

Why Are They Threatened?

Leatherbacks are killed (mostly illegally) for meat, eggs, and the oil in their "shells" which, according to traditional lore, has medicinal value. Adult leatherbacks migrate thousands of miles every year, and can dive to depths exceeding 1000 m (3250 ft). They are vulnerable to incidental catch on long lines, in shrimp trawls, and in coastal gillnets throughout their range. Ingestion of marine debris such as plastic bags, styrofoam chunks and tar balls can be fatal. Modification or destruction of sandy beaches throughout the Caribbean region has diminished nesting habitat. Beach sand mining, commercial development and coastal lighting have also contributed to declining leatherback populations.

What Can You Do To Help? Please:

-  Do not buy or sell sea turtle products. Remember, international law prevents the transport of sea-turtle parts and products across national borders.
-  Do not harass sea turtles at sea or on land. Do not disturb turtles in feeding areas, shine lights on nesting turtles, ride turtles, or collect hatchlings.
-  Turn off, shield, or redirect coastal lighting to prevent it from shining on nesting beaches. Artificial lighting can fatally disorient nesting and hatching sea turtles.
-  Obey all regulations regarding the protection of coral reefs, seagrass, and natural beach vegetation.
-  Do not drive your car on the beach; incubating eggs can be crushed and tire ruts trap crawling hatchlings.
-  Support local and national conservation efforts. Be familiar with existing legislation, and encourage new legislation to strengthen protection for sea turtles and their habitats.

WIDECAST

With Country Coordinators and partner organizations in more than 40 Caribbean nations and territories, the Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network (WIDECAST) is an innovative, proactive and inclusive mechanism for sustainable development on a regional scale. By bringing the best available science to bear on decision-making, emphasizing information exchange and training, and encouraging harmonised practices, the network promotes strong linkages between science, policy, and public participation in the design and implementation of sea turtle management programmes.



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