

# Hawksbill Turtle

*Eretmochelys imbricata*

## General Description

The hawksbill turtle is easily identified by its strikingly beautiful carapace (top shell) which is a mosaic of brown, gold, orange and red speckled scutes that overlap each other like shingles on a roof. The oval carapace is posteriorly serrated. There are two pairs of scales, called prefrontal scales, between the eyes and two claws on each front flipper.

Adult hawksbills grow to 70-95 cm (27.5-37.5 in) and weigh 60-80 kg (132-176 lb). Hatchlings are 40-45 mm (1.6-1.8 in) in carapace length, and are uniform in color, usually grey or brown, above and below.

## Nesting Distribution and Behavior

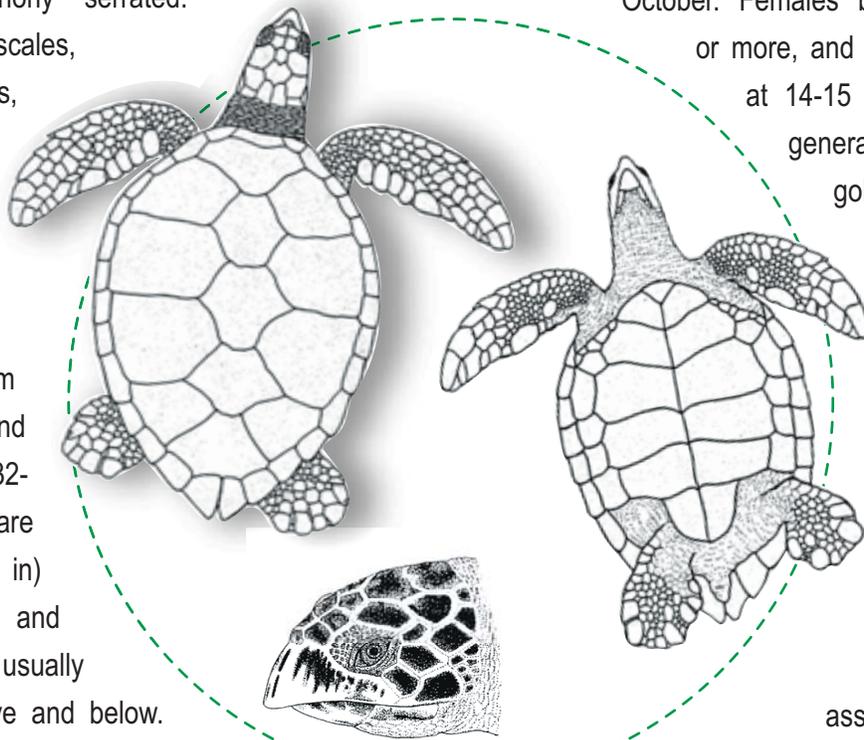
Hawksbills nest in generally low densities throughout the Wider Caribbean. The largest known nesting populations are found in Antigua & Barbuda, Barbados, Cuba, Mexico (Yucatan peninsula), Panama, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela, with

important nesting areas in Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

Hawksbills nest at night, often on beaches flanked by coral reefs and rocks, and mainly between June and October. Females breed every 2-3 years or more, and typically nest 4-5 times at 14-15 day intervals. A clutch generally consists of about 150 golf ball-sized, white eggs.

The female hawksbill carefully selects her nesting site well above the high water mark where the eggs will remain dry for the next 8-9 weeks until they hatch. The asymmetrical track she leaves behind is 70-85 cm across. Hawksbills like to nest amongst

vegetation, perhaps because their nests are quite shallow ( $\leq 10$  cm to top layer of eggs), and vegetation helps to shade the buried eggs from the scorching sun. Unfortunately, shallow nests are also more vulnerable to predators. Hatchlings emerge at night and use natural light to find their way to the sea.



### Did you know that...

- The hawksbill sea turtle is the Caribbean's only major sponge predator!
- The Caribbean sea supports 20-30% of the world's hawksbill population!
- A female hawksbill is two decades old (or more) before she nests for the first time!

## Diet

As the name suggests, the hawksbill has a narrow pointed head and a "beak" which is used to pry prey from reef crevices and take clean bites out of marine sponges. They specialize on sponges in the Caribbean Sea, and to a much lesser degree will also eat hydrozoans, crabs, clams, gastropods, tunicates, and plants.

## Why Are They Threatened?

The hawksbill turtle is amongst the most endangered of the six species of sea turtle found in the Wider Caribbean. The beauty of this turtle's shell (also called tortoiseshell, carey or bekko), and its use in the manufacture of hair combs, jewelry and other ornaments, is the main reason for the heavy exploitation of this species over the years. For example, Japanese Customs data show that shells from more than a quarter-million hawksbills were imported from the Caribbean from 1971-1989. Japan ended this trade in 1993. Hawksbill eggs and meat are eaten as delicacies in many Caribbean territories. Destruction of coral reefs (foraging habitats) through pollution, dynamite blasting and careless diving and anchoring, as well as degradation of sandy beaches (nesting habitats) due to increased coastal development, have further contributed to the decline of hawksbill populations in the Caribbean.

## 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.



# WIDECAST

Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network