



Leatherback Sea Turtle Quick Fact Sheet

Common Name: Leatherback - named for its unique shell which is composed of a layer of thin, tough, rubbery skin, strengthened by thousands of tiny bone plates that makes it look “leathery.”

Scientific Name: *Dermochelys coriacea*

Description: Head has a deeply notched upper jaw with 2 cusps. The leatherback is the only sea turtle that lacks a hard shell. Its carapace is composed of a layer of thin, tough, rubbery skin, strengthened by thousands of tiny bone plates. All flippers are without claws. The carapace is dark grey or black with white or pale spots, while the plastron is whitish to black. Hatchlings are similar.

Size & Weight: 4 to 6 feet (130-183 cm). The largest leatherback ever recorded was almost 10 feet (305 cm) from the tip of its beak to the tip of its tail and weighed in at 2,019 pounds (916 kg). Adults weigh between 660 to 1,100 pounds (300-500 kg).

Diet: Leatherbacks have delicate, scissor-like jaws. Their jaws would be damaged by anything other than a diet of soft-bodied animals, so they feed almost exclusively on jellyfish.

Habitat: Primarily found in the open ocean, though recent satellite tracking research indicates that leatherbacks feed in areas just offshore. Known to be active in water below 40 degrees Fahrenheit.

Nesting: Nest at intervals of 1, 2 or 3 years. Nests between 6 to 9 times per season, with an average of 10 days between nestings. Lays an average of 80 fertilized eggs, the size of billiard balls, and 30 smaller, unfertilized eggs, in each nest. Eggs incubate for about 65 days. Unlike other sea turtles, leatherback females may change nesting beaches, though they tend to stay in the same region.

Range: Most widely distributed of all sea turtles. Found world wide with the largest north and south range of all the sea turtle species.

Status: *U.S.* - Listed as Endangered (in danger of extinction within the foreseeable future). *International* - Listed as Vulnerable in 2013 (facing a high risk of extinction in the wild in the immediate future).

Threats to Survival: Greatest threat to leatherback sea turtles is from incidental take in commercial fisheries and marine pollution (such as balloons and plastic bags floating in the water, which are mistaken for jellyfish).

Population Estimate: 34,000 - 36,000 nesting females.