

# LEATHERBACK

*Dermochelys coriacea*

**Order:** Testudines  
**Family:** Dermochelyidae  
**FNAI Ranks:** G3/S2  
**U.S. Status:** Endangered  
**FL Status:** Endangered

Status applies to eggs as well as turtles. Shrimp trawlers must be fitted with excluder devices to release marine turtles. Some local ordinances regulate beachfront lighting and beach driving.



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hatchling  
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**Description:** A huge sea turtle with a dark gray to black body covered by leathery skin and bearing seven prominent longitudinal ridges; five similar ridges occur on the mostly white lower shell (plastron). Front limbs modified as flippers. Adults typically reach 53 - 70 in. (135 - 178 cm) shell length and 650 - 1300 lbs. (295 - 590 kg). Young are black dorsally with white ridges and are covered by small beady scales; hatchlings measure 2.4 - 3 in. (61 - 76 mm).

## LEATHERBACK

*Dermochelys coriacea*

**Similar Species:** None. The shells of all other sea turtles are covered with a series of hard plates (scutes).

**Habitat:** Oceanic waters; nests on coastal sand beaches. Leatherbacks are rarely seen in coastal waters except as hatchlings dispersing from nesting beaches and as adult females approaching the beach to nest.

**Seasonal Occurrence:** Present in Florida waters year-round, though concentrations of adults are known to occur from Nassau through Brevard counties from fall through early spring. Nests from early spring through early summer, with hatchlings emerging and heading toward sea in late spring and summer.

**Florida Distribution:** Entire coast of Florida, with nesting known from every Atlantic coastal county and in panhandle. Approximately half of Florida nests are in Palm Beach County.

**Range-wide Distribution:** Tropical and temperate marine waters worldwide, but venturing farther into cooler waters than other sea turtles. Nesting in U.S. confined principally to Florida and St. Croix, Virgin Islands, with a few nests in southern Georgia.

**Conservation Status:** Believed to be in severe decline worldwide. Some Florida nesting beaches are on state, federal (including military), and private conservation lands on both coasts.

**Protection and Management:** Protect beaches and adjacent uplands statewide from development and coastal armoring. Protect coastal and oceanic waters from pollution, dumping of plastic debris which leatherbacks mistake for their jellyfish prey, dredging, overuse by boats and ships, and other disturbance. While Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs) have reduced general sea turtle mortality in shrimp nets, their openings must be enlarged to allow leatherbacks to escape as well. Enact or strengthen beach lighting ordinances in all counties that support nesting to reduce deaths of newly emerged hatchlings that become distracted by artificial lights.

**Selected References:** Ashton and Ashton 1991, Bartlett and Bartlett 1999, Conant and Collins 1991, Ernst et al. 1994, Moler (ed.) 1992, Spotila et al. 1996.