

## LEATHERBACK SEA TURTLE

*Dermochelys coriacea*



**Order:** Testudines  
**Family:** Dermochelyidae  
**FNAI Ranks:** G2/S2  
**U.S. Status:** Endangered  
**FL Status:** Endangered

**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).

**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:** Coastal (and occasionally inshore) waters anywhere along Florida coast, especially Atlantic; most of the infrequent nesting in Florida is confined to Atlantic coastal beaches, principally south of Cape Canaveral, although two records exist for Panhandle beaches.

**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

## Leatherback Sea Turtle

*Dermochelys coriacea*

nesting beaches are on state, federal (including military), and private conservation lands on both coasts.

**Protection and Management:** Do everything possible to reduce global warming and sea level rise that is expected to accompany it. Remove and/or modify beachfront lights as needed. Close artificially maintained inlets on Atlantic coast.

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



© courtesy of Caribbean Conservation Corporation

**Leatherback Sea Turtle**

*Dermochelys coriacea*



hatchling © Blair Witherington