

DIAMONDBACK TERRAPIN

Malaclemys terrapin

Order: Testudines

Family: Emydidae

FNAI Ranks: G4/S3S4

U.S. Status: none

FL Status: none



Description: A small to medium-sized turtle (females to 8.5 in. = 216 mm shell length, males to 5.5 in. = 140 mm) of tidal and salt marsh habitats but otherwise resembling freshwater turtles. Each large scale on back bears concentric grooves and rings or dark and light markings, often with center area slightly raised and of different color than background. Colors vary among regions of Florida, which includes ranges of five races. Head, neck and legs often light with many dark dots, but sometimes streaks. Upper shell (carapace) with low, central keel, sometimes knobbed. Horny covering of beak usually broad and light, giving appearance of a smile. Hatchlings typically with large bulbous knobs down center of back.

Similar Species: Closely related map turtles (*Graptemys*: see accounts for *G. barbouri* and *G. ernsti*), which are restricted to panhandle rivers, tend to have high mid-central ridge on back (reduced in large females), olive-colored shells, and yellow streaks and blotches rather than dark dots on skin. River cooters (see *Pseudemys concinna suwanniensis* account) may enter estuarine waters but have yellow stripes on head and neck, and no knobs on back.

Habitat: Salt and brackish waters only, occurring in marshes, tidal creeks, bays, and lagoons. Often associated with mangroves in southern Florida. Sandy beaches and berms used for nesting; may bask on oyster bars at low tide.

Seasonal Occurrence: Active mostly in daytime March - December, potentially year-round in south. Large breeding aggregations have been observed in Brevard County in March and April. Nesting typically April - June, with hatchlings usually emerging in late summer and fall.

Florida Distribution: Essentially the entire coastline of Florida, including the Florida Keys, although there may be some hiatuses.

Diamondback Terrapin

Malaclemys terrapin

Range-wide Distribution: The entire Atlantic and Gulf coasts from Cape Cod, Massachusetts, to southeastern Texas.

Conservation Status: Extensively harvested for food in the past; less so today. Major threats are habitat degradation (loss of salt marsh, pollution, sea walls) and incidental drowning in crab traps, which are dispersed by the millions throughout range. Several national wildlife refuges and state aquatic preserves presumably protect some Florida populations.

Protection and Management: Maintain coastal waters and estuaries. Statewide population surveys and monitoring are sorely needed.

References: Ashton and Ashton 1991, Bartlett and Bartlett 1999, Conant and Collins 1991, Ernst et al. 1994, Moler (ed.) 1992, Roosenburg et al. 2000.



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Diamondback Terrapin

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Gulf coast © Barry Mansell



hatchling © Dale R. Jackson