

Texas Diamondback Terrapin

Malaclemys terrapin littoralis



PHOTO BY TOBY J. HIBBITS



Texas diamondback terrapins were once hunted to the brink of extinction because many people thought that they were especially delicious in soup.

Coastal Wetlands

Texas Diamondback Terrapin

Malaclemys terrapin littoralis



APPEARANCE

Shell length: Females: 6 to 9 inches (15 to 22 cm);

Males: 4 to 5.5 inches (10 to 14 cm)

Distinguishing Characteristics

- Dark *carapace* (upper shell)
- Pale *plastron* (lower shell)
- Diamond-shaped *scutes* (plates that form the carapace)
- Strongly webbed feet and unusually large back feet

LIFE HISTORY

Range: From Louisiana to Corpus Christi Bay

Diet: Crabs, shrimp, bivalves, fish and insects

Predators: Humans, raccoons, skunks and crows

Sexual maturity: Males at three years, females at six years

Mating: Spring

Nesting: After mating in the water, females come ashore and dig a tear-shaped nest in the sand above the high-tide line.

Eggs: Four to 18 eggs

Incubation: 60 to 100 days depending on local conditions, especially temperature

Young: If temperatures are warmer, her nest will produce more females; if temperatures are cooler, then the nest will produce more males. If the eggs do not hatch before winter sets in, the hatchlings will spend the winter in the nest and will emerge when the weather warms.

Life span: Up to 40 years

HABITAT

Diamondback terrapins prefer brackish or salt water. They are the only turtle found in estuaries, tidal creeks, and saltwater marshes where the salinity comes close to that of the ocean.

BEHAVIOR

Texas diamondback terrapins are solitary except when breeding. An individual female breeds every four years or so. Occasionally, adult diamondbacks may dig into the mud to hibernate over the cold winter months. During the day terrapins spend most of their time in the water or basking in the sun. At night terrapins bury themselves in mud.

NOW YOU KNOW!

- Diamondbacks can adjust their water needs depending on how salty the water is. When their systems become too salty, diamondbacks secrete salt from their tear ducts to help regulate their salt levels.
- Texas diamondbacks are one of seven subspecies of *Malaclemys terrapin* recognized by scientists.

TEXAS DIAMONDBACK TERRAPINS AND PEOPLE

Some believe that Prohibition helped save terrapins. Turtle soup was made with wine during the 1920s. When Prohibition laws made possessing wine illegal, turtle soup fell out of favor and thousands of trapped turtles were released into the ocean. Today, most terrapins are killed by speeding cars or become trapped in baited blue crab traps and drown.