

## VOCABULARY

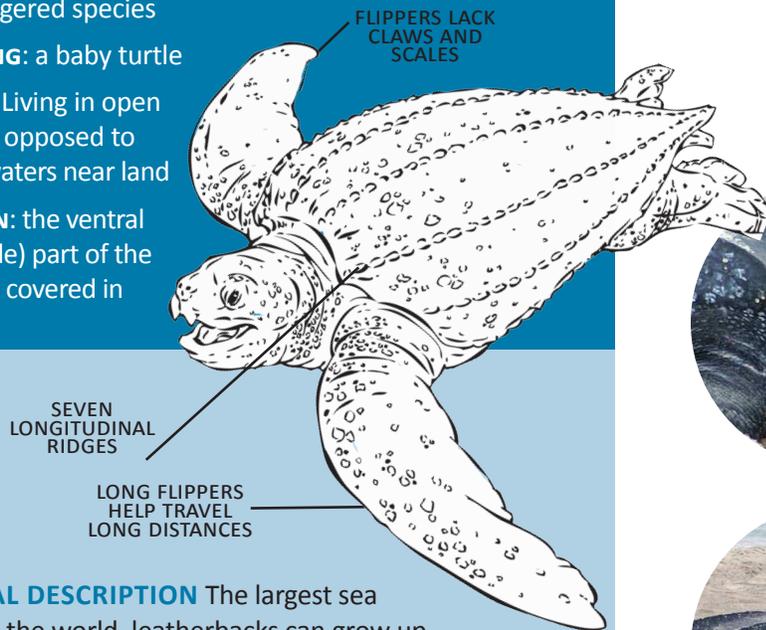
**CARAPACE:** the dorsal (upper) part of the shell, covered by bony external plates called **SCUTES**

**CRITICAL HABITAT:** Locations mandated for the conservation of endangered species

**HATCHLING:** a baby turtle

**PELAGIC:** Living in open ocean as opposed to coastal waters near land

**PLASTRON:** the ventral (underside) part of the shell, also covered in scutes



**PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION** The largest sea turtles in the world, leatherbacks can grow up to 6.5 feet long and weigh close to 2,000 pounds. Adults are black with pink and white speckled **plastrons**, with similar coloring on the tops of their heads. Their **carapaces** are covered by thick, leathery tissue and has seven longitudinal ridges. Flippers lack claws and scales.

**DIET** These foragers migrate long distances to find food. Their mouths have pointed, tooth-like cusps with sharp-edged jaws perfectly designed for eating soft prey. They feed mostly on jellyfish, but also eat octopus and tunicates.

**LIFE HISTORY** They mate in tropical coastal waters near nesting beaches, where females lay their eggs in the sand. **Hatchlings** emerge 60-65 days later and make their way to the ocean.

**GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION** Leatherbacks are the world's most wide-ranging sea turtles. They are **pelagic** but often forage in coastal waters. Many U.S. waters, particularly on the west coast, are designated as **critical habitat**.

**LOCAL INFORMATION** They are occasionally found along the Atlantic coast and in the Chesapeake Bay as well as its tributaries.

**STATUS** The Endangered Species Act lists leatherbacks as endangered, which means they are at risk of extinction. Federal and state agencies strive to reduce bycatch, and devices called turtle excluders safely remove sea turtles from trawl nets. Floating debris poses another major threat, as turtles often mistake plastic bags and other trash for food.

# LEATHERBACK SEA TURTLE

(*Dermochelys coriacea*)

**CLASS:** Reptilia

**ORDER:** Testudines

**FAMILY:** Dermochelyidae

**GENUS:** *Dermochelys*

**SPECIES:** *coriacea*



Leatherbacks are the only sea turtles that lack hard, bony shells.



In a single nesting season, females lay about 100 eggs at as many as nine different locations.



Hatchlings have distinct white markings along their carapace ridges.

**TO REPORT A STRANDED MARINE MAMMAL OR SEA TURTLE, CALL THE 24-HOUR HOTLINE AT 800-628-9944**



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