



Diamondback Terrapin

Malaclemys terrapin

Referred to as the “wind turtle,” some old-timers who live along the Gulf ascribe ominous powers to the diamondback terrapin. Fishermen claim that capturing a terrapin will cause the wind to blow into a squall and bad luck to befall them. In North Carolina, diamondback terrapin shell has been found in an Indian shaman’s burial site as part of his medicine kit, no doubt a sacred object.

There are seven subspecies or, as some taxonomists claim, seven races of diamondback terrapins in North America. Two subspecies, the Northern and the Carolina, are found in North Carolina.

History and Status

Diamondback terrapins were once so abundant in North Carolina that they were considered a nuisance. Fishermen were sometimes unable to haul catches due to the weight of terrapins caught in their nets. But by 1920 the terrapin was a much sought-after gourmet item, costing \$90 per dozen. The market boomed and farms were established (notably in Beaufort, Carteret County) to breed the species in captivity. After World War I the market declined because the wild populations were overharvested, and during the Depression era the terrapin was too expensive to justify as the evening meal—a diamondback terrapin dinner takes hours to prepare, traditionally by hired help.

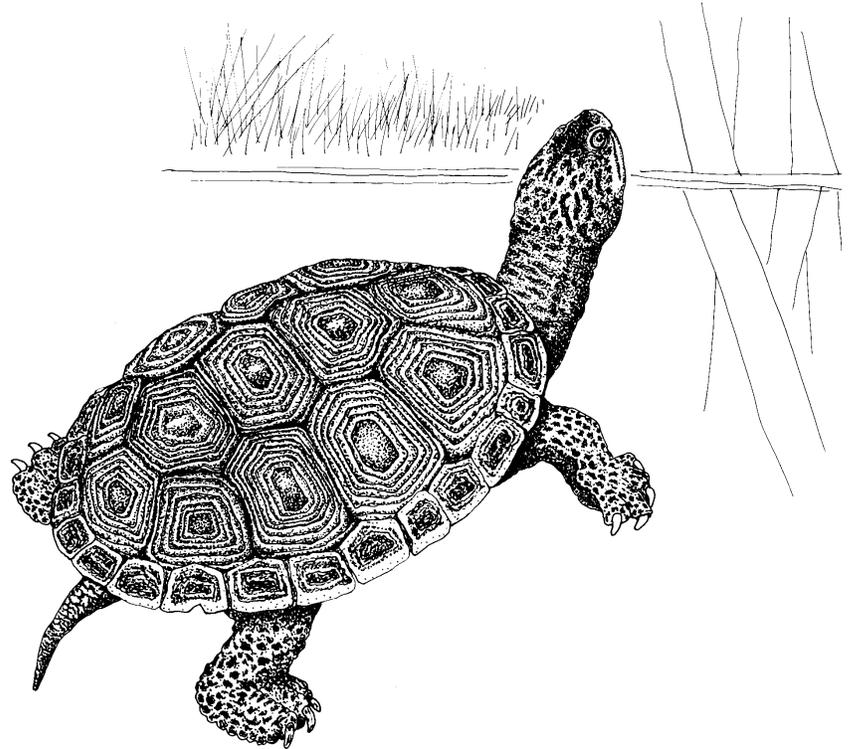
Though not endangered, the diamondback terrapin today is listed as having a Special Con-

cern status in North Carolina. Little is known about its distribution and abundance, and there are no current regulations on harvesting. Loss of habitat and mortality from incidental capture in nets and crab pots could pose a threat to the diamondback population.

Description

Often you will hear a diamondback before observing it in the marsh. The terrapin’s powerful jaws make a popping noise as the turtle eats the periwinkle snails and other mollusks found in the marsh grass. The hind legs are large, and the toes have extensive webs that are useful for its semi-aquatic existence. They are powerful swimmers and are feisty when picked up. Actively struggling, the diamondback is known to bite a toe or finger!

The diamondback exhibits a spotted pattern on the head and along the neck and legs. The carapace has a central keel that is low and inconspicuous, and there are concentric rings on the shell



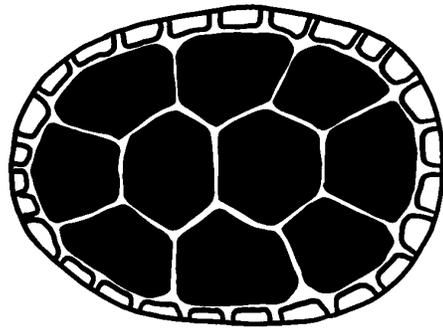
scutes, or plates. Even experts have difficulty identifying the seven subspecies. The coloration, patterns and shell characteristics vary greatly among individuals in the wild.

Habitat and Habits

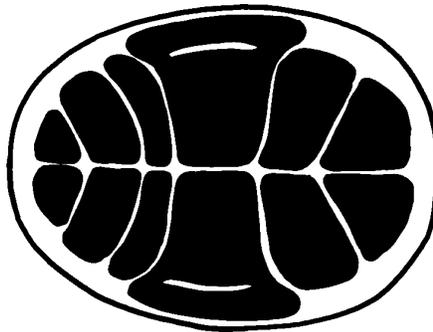
Diamondback terrapins are adapted for life in brackish and salt water. They prefer the protected waters behind barrier islands, salt marshes, estuaries and tidal flats. Wherever there is marsh or cord grass you are likely to find diamondback terrapins. They feed according to the tidal cycles. At high tide, they swim about the marshes in search of food; at low tide, they are found nearly or entirely buried in the mud or hidden under drift.



Range Map:
Occupied range ■



carapace



plastron

Sometimes groups of them are found on exposed mudflats, basking in the sun or perhaps just loafing. Mating occurs in the spring when individuals move from open lagoons into small canals and ditches. The larger female will carry her male counterpart upon her back during the courtship ritual. After hatching in the autumn, the tiny offspring may overwinter in the nest or remain buried in the mud well into the next spring. Adults also hibernate during the winter in the submerged mud of tidal creeks in deep water where the mud is less likely to freeze.

Range and Distribution

The diamondback terrapin is found along the states of the Atlantic and Gulf coasts from Cape Cod, Massachusetts, to Corpus Christi Bay, Texas. The Northern diamondback terrapin is found from the northern shore of Cape Cod south to Cape Hatteras, North Carolina. From here south to Volusia County, Florida, intergradation with the Carolina diamondback occurs.

People Interactions

Terrapins are considered aggressive if picked up and are known to bite. Humans affect terrapin populations in more enduring ways, however. For example, North Carolina fishermen are allowed to harvest terrapins, but there are no restrictions or monitoring of this indus-

try. Harvest efforts are generally limited to the large adult females with low nest and hatchling success. Thus it is doubtful that diamondback terrapins can survive long-term direct harvesting. Motorized vehicles such as boats and automobiles may also cause mortality in adults and hatchlings.

Finally, terrapins are drowned each year in crab pots. These death traps remain in the water where terrapins are attracted to the bait or to each other. If an individual enters a crab pot then others will follow and eventually drown; one crab pot contained 28 decomposing terrapins.

References

- Pritchard, Peter. *Encyclopedia of Turtles* (T.F.H. Publications, 1979).
Rudloe, Jack. *Time of the Turtle* (E.P. Dutton, 1979).

Credits

- Written by Therese Conant.
Illustrated by J.T. Newman.
Produced July 1993 by the Division of Conservation Education, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission.
The Wildlife Resources Commission is an Equal Opportunity Employer and all wildlife programs are administered for the benefit of all North Carolina citizens without prejudice toward age, sex, race, religion or national origin. Violations of this pledge may be reported to the Equal Employment Officer, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, 512 N. Salisbury St., Raleigh, N.C. 27604-1188. (919) 733-2241.

DIAMONDBACK TERRAPIN

Classification

Class: Reptilia
Order: Testudines

Average Size

Length: male 4 in. to 5 in.;
female 6 in. to 9 in.
Weight: 5 ounces at 2 years

Food

Crustaceans, mollusks, fish, insects, occasionally tender shoots and rootlets

Breeding

Mating occurs in the water in spring. Eggs are laid in late April through July. Clutch size varies from 4 to 18 oblong eggs. Eggs laid in chamber dug 6 in. to 8 in. below surface; nesting occurs in the day time, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. during high tides. Incubation periods are dependent on temperature and vary from 61 to 104 days for certain nests. Age at sexual maturity is estimated at 7 years.

Young

Called hatchlings. Just over 1 in. length; weight 6 g to 10g.

Life Expectancy

May exceed 40 years.