The Diamondback Terrapin

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Among the most interesting of Florida turtles are the diamondback terrapins. They are inhabitants of salt marshes, tidal creeks and estuaries, mangrove swamps, and coastal mud flats. Sometimes they swim upstream for a long distance, but they are seldom ever found in truly fresh water.

For many years, diamondback terrapins were of considerable economic importance. Thousands of these were gathered and sold in the markets, or else were canned. For some reason, the southern diamondback terrapins are said to be not quite as tasty as the northern ones; and so the terrapin industry has always been more important along the Middle Atlantic and New England coasts than in Florida. Many of our readers will remember the time when diamondback terrapins were considered the greatest of delicacies. The live turtles once sold for as much as $90.00 a dozen, and the experts claimed that Delaware Bay terrapins were better than Chesapeake ones, the latter better.

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than Long Island ones, etc. As a matter of fact, however, there is not much difference in flavor between one terrapin and another, or even between the diamondback terrapin and water turtles!

In some parts of the country, diamondback terrapins were practically exterminated by the constant hunting, and so various people began to operate terrapin farms. The farms proved to be very successful, and some are still in operation although the terrapin "fad" has died down in recent years. Today, diamondback terrapins from Florida can be bought at 30 cents each.

Four closely related kinds of diamondback terrapins inhabit Florida. The southern diamondback terrapin occurs on the Atlantic Coast. In extreme southern Florida and around the Keys, is found the mangrove terrapin. Most of the Gulf Coast is inhabited by the Florida diamondback terrapin, while the Mississippi diamondback terrapin ranges westward from the vicinity of Pensacola. The Florida diamondback terrapin is the kind shown in the accompanying photographs. These four terrapins are all rather similar in habits, as far as is known.

In spring or summer, the female terrapin leaves the water and hunts for a sandy spot in which to deposit her eggs. She scoops out a hole about six inches deep, lays eight or ten eggs, and covers the hole up again. Raccoons often dig up the nest and eat the eggs. However, the same female may lay several times during a season, and at least one of her nests is apt to escape the raccoons and other predators. In about three months, the babies hatch and make their way to the water. Growth is fairly rapid, the turtles becoming mature in five or six years. The females reach a much greater size than the males. The latter are seldom more than five inches in shell length, while the females reach eight or nine inches.

These turtles feed mainly upon snails. They also eat small crabs and other sea creatures, and occasionally they nibble at salt-water plants.

Diamondback terrapins are commonly found with barnacles on the shell. Recently, however, the Reptile Institute received a terrapin with a heavy growth of oysters. The oysters weighed the turtle down, so that it was forced to swim in a vertical position. In spite of this, it seemed to be quite healthy and well-fed.

Some wit remarked that here were the makings for an oyster stew and turtle soup, all at the same time. This remarkable specimen is shown in an accompanying photograph.

The oyster-incrusted terrapin was photographed by Tony Stevens, and the other terrapin by Bruce Mozert.