

THE STORY OF THE CALIFORNIA DIAMONDBACKS

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In using the generally available sources to do research on the Chelonian life in California, one is likely to run across a number of puzzling differences in information. For example, it is the position of many of these sources that only two types of turtles are found in the Golden State: the Pacific Pond Turtle (Clemmys marmorata), and the Desert Tortoise (Gopherus agassizi). Whether it is stated just that way or is merely implied, this is a false situation. The Colorado River apparently harbors two elusive members of the family Kinosternidae; the Sonoran Mud Turtle (Kinosternon sonoriense) and the Yellow Mud Turtle (K. flavescens). In addition there is the Texas Spiny Softshell (Trionyx spinifer emoryi), which was introduced into the river from New Mexico at about the turn of the century. It has fared quite well, and due to its ability to navigate man's irrigation ditches it has now found its way into the interior of some portions of the state. Since the Colorado River runs along a considerable distance of the California border, it may be reasonably assumed that its denizens are to be afforded the honor of citizenship in said state. Thus we have now listed FIVE turtles eligible for residency in California. AND THEN there is the DIAMONDBACK.

The Diamondback Terrapin (Malaclemys terrapin) is a very interesting turtle. It is a dweller of salt marshes, bays and brackish water in general. It occurs in seven different forms (subspecies) all along the Atlantic Coast of the U.S. from the northern states down around the tip of Florida, and all along the Gulf Coast to the tip of Texas. Its fame lies in its flavor, as the Diamondback is known world-wide as one of the best of the "soup" turtles.

But what has this got to do with California? The California State Fish and Game Code section 5020 states the following: "It is unlawful to take diamondback terrapin (Malaclemys) at any time." This seems odd because, as we have seen, the diamondback does not even occur here. But it seems unlikely that California would enact, without apparent reason, a law protecting an animal not found within 1500 miles! The plot, as well as the soup, thickens.

Having failed in all attempts to discover any printed information on the reasons for the Diamondback's mysterious western protection, I finally directed my attention to the original source of the problem - the State Department of Fish and Game. Why, I asked them pointedly, is a non-native animal given protection here? I know that the terrapin is a turtle of good taste and has been widely shipped to the restaurants and markets of the world, but this would hardly prompt its total protection, particularly in a state where it is not found!

One week later I had my answer, and the Great California Diamondback Terrapin Mystery was solved!

As has been stated, the Diamondback has long been admired by those who feel that a reptile's place is in the pot. So in 1896, some enterprising individual whose name shall be lost forever in the obscure depths of history, hit upon the idea of introducing the shelled delicacy into the brackish waters of the Golden State.

CALIFORNIA DIAMONDBACK TERRAPIN Cont.

As a result, 129 turtles were planted in an unrecorded locality in the San Francisco Bay region.

The planting was a failure, but the idea was not forgotten.

In May of 1943, a transplant on a grander scale was attempted. Two groups of turtles were planted on a small, unnamed island, again in San Francisco Bay. The island was located just offshore of Radio Station KPO in the southern part of the Bay. Lying between the mouths of the Belmont and Steinbergen Sloughs, and being greatly affected by the tides, the area was nearly identical to that habitat in the East which the turtles inhabit. The first lot, planted on May 13, consisted of 485 yearlings. The second lot, planted on May 30, consisted of 77 adults (52 females and 25 males). The turtles were made available through the generosity of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, which had raised the yearlings at its compound in Beaufort, North Carolina; the adults were purchased from dealers in the same area. The idea for the project, as well as the funds which made its accomplishment possible, were provided by the Consolidated Sportsmen's Clubs of the Peninsula.

The law (sec. 5020) was enacted at this time to afford full protection to the newly-planted terrapin colony.

The island on which the terrapins were planted was about 1700 yards long and 350 yards wide, except at high tide when all but the westernmost end was submerged. Food was readily available in the forms of the greatly abundant snails, mussels and crabs. The island was thickly carpeted with marsh vegetation in which the turtles could easily and effectively hide.

On October 9, 1943, two observers made a careful search of the island over the western end and the offshore side, but they found no signs of terrapins. Although the planting was carefully regulated and closely followed to determine its success, the turtles apparently disappeared.

And so we still have a law on the books protecting the Diamondback. Of course, it can't hurt since the turtle isn't here anyway, and if the Fish and Game Code ever undergoes any extensive revision, it is more than likely that this section will be removed. Meanwhile, the only Diamondback Terrapins in California are those that occasionally are sold in pet stores, and maybe one or two that still show up in somebody's soup!

- Stebbins, Robert C. A Field Guide to Western Reptiles and Amphibians
- Pope, Clifford H. Turtles of the United States and Canada
- State of California, Fish and Game Code, Division 5 (Reptiles) Article 2, sec. 5020
- California Fish and Game, Vol. 30, No. 2, April 1944, pp. 101-102, "Diamond-back Terrapin Introduced into California."