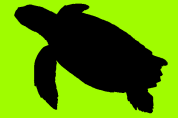


# Olive Ridley Seaturtle

*Lepidochelys olivacea* (Eschscholtz 1829)



**TAXONOMY.** Genetic studies suggest that *Lepidochelys olivacea* is phylogenetically distinct from *L. kempii* (Kemp's Ridley Seaturtle), and that Atlantic and Pacific populations of *L. olivacea* are not distinctive. No subspecies are currently recognized.

**DESCRIPTION.** The Olive (or Pacific) Ridley Seaturtle is a small, hard-shelled marine turtle with a uniformly olive-colored, heart-shaped carapace, usually less than 1 m (3.3 ft.) in length, that typically has 6 to 8 costal shields on each side. Viewed from the front, the carapace appears elevated and flat-topped, with flat, sloping sides. The plastron is light greenish yellow or greenish white in color. This species has a relatively large head with two pairs of prefrontal scales. Males have concave plastrons and tails that extend well beyond the margin of the shell.

The high costal shield count distinguishes this turtle from other hard-shelled marine turtles.

**DISTRIBUTION.** This species is found primarily in the warmer parts of the Pacific, Indian, and (less frequently) Atlantic oceans. Nesting in the eastern Pacific takes place from Mexico south to

at least Columbia. Non-nesting individuals occasionally are found in more temperate waters at higher latitudes, including southeastern Alaska, where it has been documented twice: a carcass found in January, 1986, near Yakutat; and a carcass found south of Ketchikan in June, 1991.

**NATURAL HISTORY.** Although Olive Ridley Seaturtles can range well out to sea and may even reside in oceanic habitats during the non-reproductive portion of their life cycle, they seek protected and relatively shallow water of bays and lagoons to breed and forage. Females congregate in large aggregations (called *arribadas*) each year to nest, some up to three times per season.

**CONSERVATION.** The most abundant marine turtle species in the world in terms of absolute numbers, there is growing evidence of population declines resulting from incidental take by fisherman, disturbance and development of nesting beaches, and exploitation for meat, leather, and eggs, among other factors. The Mexican breeding population is listed as



endangered, and all others as threatened, under the U.S. Endangered Species Act.

**REMARKS.** To their detriment and often demise, Olive Ridelys readily eat plastic bags, styrofoam pieces, tar balls, raw plastic pellets, and other marine debris, mistaking these items for food.

**SELECT REFERENCES.** Bowen et al. 1991, Hodge and Wing 2000, Zug and Wilson 1998.

# Leatherback Seaturtle

*Dermochelys coriacea* (Linnaeus 1766)



**TAXONOMY.** Two subspecies have been described, *D. c. schlegelii* (Pacific and Indian oceans) and *D. c. coriacea* (Atlantic Ocean); however, these are poorly differentiated and currently not recognized by most authorities.

**DESCRIPTION.** Leatherback Seaturtles are the largest living turtle, attaining a length up to 2.4 m (8 ft.) and a weight of 727 kg (1,600 lbs.). This species is easily distinguished from all other seaturtles by the smooth leathery skin with prominent longitudinal ridges on its elongated and triangular shell (the carapace is made up of many small bony platelets embedded in the skin, and lacking a rigid shell, its ribs and vertebrae, unlike those of other turtles, are not attached to the carapace). The carapace is slate to blue-black and the plastron mainly whitish. Its limbs are paddlelike and clawless. Males have concave plastrons and tails longer than the hind limbs.

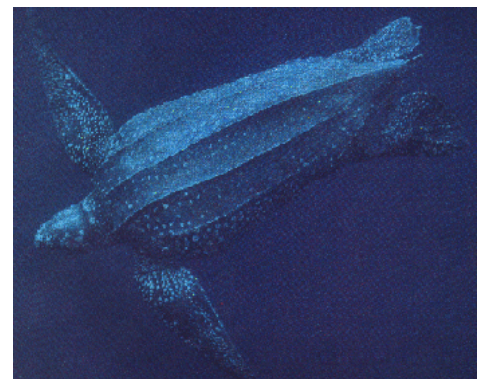
**DISTRIBUTION.** A wide-ranging species that may be seen far out to sea, Leatherbacks generally forage in temperate waters and nest on beaches in tropical and subtropical latitudes. Significant nesting areas of Pacific populations

have been found along the western continental coasts of Mexico and Central America.

A cold-tolerant species, nonbreeders are seen relatively often at high latitudes. It is the most frequently reported marine turtle in Alaska waters, with at least 19 records between 1960 and 1998 ranging from Southeast Alaska to the Alaska Peninsula. It has also been recorded at Cape Navarin, Russia, 450 km northwest of Saint Matthew Island in the Bering Sea.

**NATURAL HISTORY.** Mainly pelagic, Leatherbacks seldom approach land except for nesting. Females nest throughout the year, but individuals probably nest only every 2 or 3 years. Males accompany the females to offshore waters to mate. The females lay their eggs in sand under cover of darkness. Leatherbacks feed mostly on jellyfish, which are often abundant in the Gulf of Alaska during late summer and fall.

**CONSERVATION.** Leatherback Seaturtles are considered uncommon in Alaska waters, with peak numbers being reported in August in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This species is in decline throughout its range. The population nesting along Mexico's Pacific coast, which may



support as much as half of all global nesting, experienced a drastic decline in the 1980s and 1990s. Habitat destruction, incidental catch in commercial fisheries, and the harvest of eggs and adults are the greatest threats to the survival of this species, listed as critically endangered by the IUCN.

**SELECT REFERENCES.** Ernst et al. 1994, Hodge and Wing 2000, Pritchard 1980, Spotila et al. 2000.