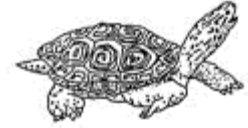


Identifying Diamondback Terrapins



Diamondback terrapins (*Malaclemys terrapin*) are the only turtle in the U.S. that lives exclusively in brackish saltwater marshes, coastal bays and lagoons from Cape Cod, MA, to Corpus Christi, TX. Of the seven subspecies of diamondback terrapins, the northern diamondback (*Malaclemys terrapin terrapin*) is found in Virginia.

Their skin coloration varies greatly from light silver or cream to dark gray or black, with small to large spots that are sometimes elongated (photos on pages 2 - 6). Shell coloration varies greatly as well, ranging from black to pale gray or brown. Though terrapins mainly stay in the water, they can be spotted basking along marsh creek banks.

Terrapins can live upwards of 40 years. Male and female terrapins are sexually dimorphic, which means that adult females and adult males are different sizes. Adult females are nearly twice as large as adult males (approximately 12 inches vs. 6 inches shell length, respectively). Male terrapins also exhibit longer and thicker tails with the cloacal vent located beyond the edge of the carapace. When spotting terrapins in the water, typically you will observe the mouth and nostrils to just behind the eyes sticking up above the water's surface. It will appear shiny, with colors ranging from black to silver (photos on pages 5 & 6).

In Virginia, the mating season occurs from April through May following emergence from overwintering in the mud of marsh creeks. Nesting season follows from June through mid-August. During this period, adult females leave the water to find sandy beaches to dig nests and deposit their eggs. Nest can be found in both open sand berms as well as amongst marsh grasses and are typically hard to find unless already depredated (photos on page 7).

A single female can lay up to 3 clutches of 5-20 eggs per nesting season. Incubation times range from 60-90 days depending on the location along their range. Similar to other turtles, terrapins have a low egg-to-hatchling survival rate (1-3%) as nests and hatchlings frequently fall victim to predation from raccoons, crows, and rats. Hatching starts in August and, once hatched, young terrapins are also predated upon by raccoons, wading birds, and large fish species.

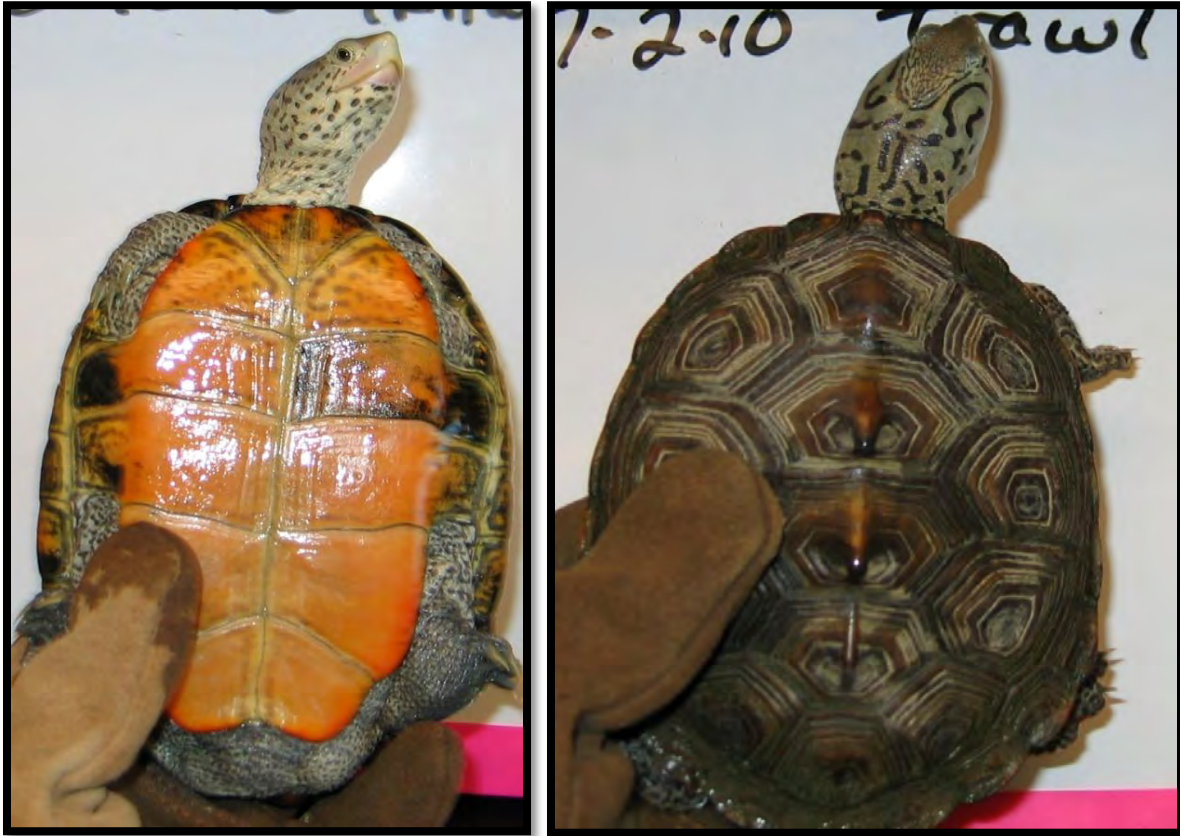
All diamondback terrapins exhibit strong site fidelity for their home range. Adult females also return to specific nesting beaches annually. In one long-term study in South Carolina, terrapins were recaptured in the exact same creek year after year for over twenty years. Terrapins mainly feed on a variety of marsh crabs, snails, mussels, clams, and barnacles depending on where they live along their range. In Virginia, they feed primarily on barnacles, blue crabs and marsh crabs, periwinkle and salt marsh snails, and mussels. The large, adult females mostly consume mussels and crabs.



Identifying Diamondback Terrapins



Photos: Front right side view of male diamondback terrapin (upper) and front view of juvenile female terrapin (lower). The upper “beak” of the mouth may have dark markings resembling a “moustache” in appearance. Both males and females can have this marking.



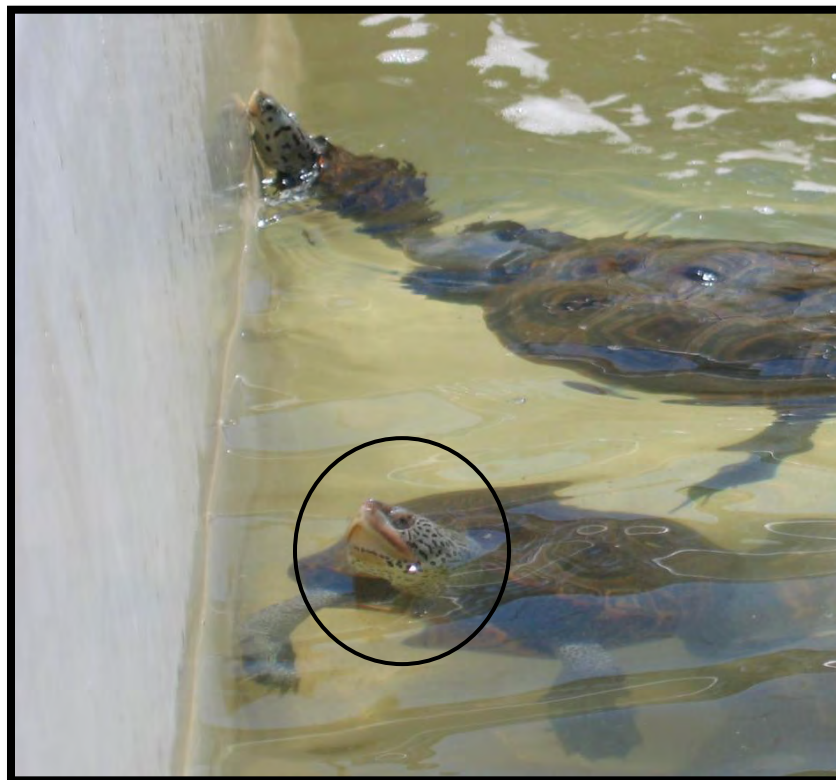
Photos: Ventral view of plastron of male diamondback terrapin (left) and dorsal view of carapace of juvenile female terrapin (right). Notice the concentric rings on the individual scutes of the carapace.



Identifying Diamondback Terrapins



Photos: Adult female terrapins (both). Adult females are substantially larger than males, with broader heads. Females over 10 years of age tend to have smooth shells having lost the ridges that juvenile terrapins have yet they retain the concentric ring pattern on the scutes (right).



Photos: Diamondback terrapins with wider head width are adult females (circled).

Identifying Diamondback Terrapins



Photos: In water photos of diamondback terrapins.

Identifying Diamondback Terrapins



Photo: C. Bennett



Photo: L. Hardin



Identifying Diamondback Terrapins

Photos: In water photos of diamondback terrapins. You will typically see them singly similar to the upper photo. They only aggregate for mating season through May. Turtles with wider head width are adult females (circled).



Photos: Juvenile diamondback terrapins swimming in shallow near-shore areas of marsh.



Photos: Female terrapin depositing eggs in nest dug in a sand berm fronting salt marsh (upper left). A depredated nest amongst marsh grass (upper right). Newly laid terrapin eggs in nest excavated by researchers; nest was then reburied (bottom). Newly deposited eggs are pinkish in color.

Identifying Diamondback Terrapins



Photo: Diamondback terrapin tracks on beach on the Eastern Shore of Virginia (photo: C. Hopper-Brill).