



Alice & Seig Kopinitz

# The Diamondback Terrapin: Virginia's Coastal Native



Matthew Wolak

**Diamondback terrapins** (*Malaclemys terrapin*) get their name from the concentric markings and grooves on their shells. They live exclusively in brackish saltwater marshes, coastal bays and lagoons from Cape Cod, MA, to Corpus Christi, TX. In Virginia, terrapins feed primarily on barnacles, blue crabs, marsh crabs, snails, and mussels.



Timothy Russell

**Diamondback terrapins** can live upwards of 40 years. Male and female terrapins are sexually dimorphic, which means that adult males and females are different sizes. Adult females are nearly twice as large as adult males (approximately 12 inches vs. 6 inches shell length).

Terrapins stay in the water though they can be spotted basking along marsh banks.



Matthew Wolak

During the summer, adult females lay eggs on sandy beach areas, up to 3 clutches of

eggs per female per season. Unfortunately, terrapin nests and hatchlings often fall victim to predation by raccoons, crows, rats, wading birds, and large fish species.

**Diamondback terrapins** were once abundant in the Chesapeake Bay, but their populations were decimated through the early 1900s from a commercial harvest to satisfy the demand for turtle soup. The commercial harvest ended by the 1930s due to low population and Prohibition as sherry was another key ingredient of turtle soup.



Timothy Russell

In Virginia, it is illegal to collect diamondback terrapins for either commercial or personal use (see Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries Nongame regulations at <http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/fishing/regulations/nongame.asp>).

With continued habitat loss, injuries and death from collisions with boats, and drowning in crab pots, terrapin populations are under even more pressure to survive.



Please help prevent unnecessary deaths of diamondback terrapin and other animals in your crab pots. By simply attaching BRDs to your crab pots, you can help preserve the diversity of animals within Chesapeake Bay for a healthier system, while still enjoying your blue crab catch.



Diane Tulipani

**To learn more about diamondback terrapins, their conservation, and how to make your own BRDs, visit the following websites:**

**VIMS Webpage**

[www.vims.edu/terrapin](http://www.vims.edu/terrapin)

**Diamondback Terrapin Working Group**

[www.dtwg.org](http://www.dtwg.org)

**Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries**

<http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/information/?s=030067>

[http://www.vafwis.org/fwis/booklet.html?Menu=\\_Life+History&bova=03006T](http://www.vafwis.org/fwis/booklet.html?Menu=_Life+History&bova=03006T)

**The Wetlands Institute**

[www.terrapinconservation.org](http://www.terrapinconservation.org)



Timothy Russell

Scientists agree that the greatest threat to diamondback terrapins, throughout their range, is drowning in crab pots. Male and young female terrapins can enter and then drown in commercial-style crab pots. Why do they go into the pots? Well, terrapins are carnivores, meaning they eat other animals. They enter because they, too, are attracted to the bait used to lure blue crabs into the pots. They may also enter out of curiosity or because they are looking for a safe resting place.



Timothy Russell

Recreational crab pots are typically set in the same locations where males and juvenile female terrapins live - shallow, near-shore waters along creeks and marshes. Once they get into a crab pot, terrapins will eventually drown as they are air-breathing animals.



Diane Tulipani

By attaching a **bycatch reduction device (BRD)** to each funnel opening, the majority of terrapins and other organisms can be prevented from entering the pot. Studies have shown that while effective at preventing other animals from entering, BRDs have little impact on the size and number of blue crabs found in crab pots.



Margaret Schrack