

# Leatherback Leatherback Sea Turtle Sea Turtle

Las Baulas  
(Spanish)

*Dermochelys coriacea*

Class: Reptilia  
Order: Chelonia  
Family: Dermochelys  
Genus: Dermochelys  
coriacea

## Distribution

This sea turtle ranges further than any other reptile. They are found in tropical, temperate, and boreal waters of the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans, also the Mediterranean Sea.

## Habitat

They inhabit warm open seas throughout the world. Coastal habitats are also global.

## Food

It feeds extensively on jelly fish, providing a natural control of jelly fish populations.

## Reproduction

Mating takes place at sea. Females usually return every two to three years to their preferred open access nesting beaches. They nest five to seven times within a season. Clutch size varies.



These turtles migrate across entire ocean basins. The northernmost recorded latitude is 71°N and the southernmost is approximately 27°S. In Canada, the leatherback sea turtle can be found on the coasts of British Columbia, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island. There have been records of turtles off Baffin Island and in the Gulf of St. Lawrence near Québec City. It is by far the most common sea turtle recorded in Nova Scotian waters. They do not nest in Canada.

Scientists are still in the early stages of understanding the migration routes leatherbacks take to get from tropical waters near their nesting beaches to the waters where they forage, or search for food. More is known about females. Males, after hatching, spend their entire lives at sea.

Leatherbacks are the most pelagic of turtles, feeding in the open seas. They migrate north to feed on jellyfish, their principal prey. They will also eat other soft-bodied creatures, such as salp. Salps are gelatinous, free-swimming marine invertebrates with a transparent barrel-shaped body.

The average interval of time between nests is nine to ten days. Nests are constructed at night. It is a labour intensive process, lasting almost two hours. Hauling herself up by her front flippers she chooses her nest site and creates a body cavity for herself. Using her rear flippers she excavates a chamber and lays between 60 and 90 yolked eggs. On top of these an additional number of infertile eggs are laid. She covers the eggs with sand, packs it down, then disguises the nesting area before returning to sea.

### Development

Eggs hatch 60 to 65 days later. They begin to rise to the surface by scrambling around. Sand falls into the nest, helping to raise the tiny turtles to the surface. Hatchlings have a carapace length of 5.1 cm to 6.8 cm.

### Characteristics

It has a smooth-skinned carapace which is teardrop-shaped, tapering to the rear. Its colour is a dark bluish-black. The carapace, neck, head, and front flippers usually have bluish-white blotches. The plastron is pinkish-white with some dark blotching. Flippers are without claws, the front ones are long and powerful.

### Adaptations

Strong swimmers and deep divers. Can tolerate cold water. It is able to stay underwater for up to one hour. They have a unique system of blood supply to their bones and cartilage. They have countercurrent heat exchangers in their flippers. They have an upper and lower cusp on the jaws, used to grab food.

### Status/Threats

IUCN Red List. Critically Endangered. Hatchlings are heavily predated on their journey to the sea and as young turtles at sea. Marine pollution is a constant threat to all marine life.

### Sightings at Caño Palma

Nesting occurs yearly on the nearby beach area.

### References

<http://www.turtles.org/leatherd.htm>  
<http://museum.gov.ns.ca>  
<http://www.hww.ca>

They emerge from the nest and head to the sea. It is a dangerous journey. They are black with ridges along the back, clearly outlined in white. Flippers are margined in white. Recent research suggests hatchlings remain in tropical waters until their carapace is 1m long. The carapace can grow to be 2 m in length. A large adult can weigh more than 900 kg. The largest leatherback on record was a male stranded on the coast of Wales in 1988. He weighed 916 kg. Weights can range from 320 kg to 900 kg. These are bigger than all other marine turtles.

It is named for its leather-skinned shell, which has seven longitudinal ridges or keels. It is slightly flexible with a rubbery texture. It is the only sea turtle that does not have a hard shell or scales. A matrix of small bony plates fit together underneath a layer of fat and connective tissue beneath this outer skin. The flexible internal shell allows them to withstand water pressure when diving. They also have five longitudinal ridges on the underside. The large front flippers are usually half as long as the carapace. They can span 2.7 m from flipper tip to tip. No sharp ridge exists between the carapace and the plastron, creating more of a barrel shape for this species of turtle. Leatherbacks have a pink patch on the top of the head. Each pink spot, like a human fingerprint, is unique. The function is uncertain; some scientists believe it helps to sense light and location.

They are known to have crossed entire oceans. Strong front flippers propel them through water. Average speed is 2.5 km per hour, but has been recorded at 9.3 km per hour. It has been recorded at a dive depth of 1,270 m. It usually does not spend much more than half an hour beneath water. A combination of dark colour, thick layer of fat and small surface area to body mass ratio allows this turtle to retain body heat. It can keep a core body temperature several degrees higher than the surrounding water. To aid in feeding the throat is lined with backward-pointing spines enabling it to hold on to and shred jellyfish. Females lay several yolkless eggs on top of the fertile ones, possibly to allow oxygen to circulate by stopping sand from falling on the fertile eggs.

Having survived for more than a hundred million years it now faces extinction. Numbers have been drastically reduced in the past few decades. Humans are to blame and for several reasons: Exploitation of eggs and meat, entanglement in commercial fishing gear - specifically longline and gill-nets, loss of nesting habitats, ingesting marine debris: plastic bags, styrofoam, balloons etc - mistaken as food items. Often hatchlings become confused by light from human development.

Beach patrols are put into effect by COTERC throughout the nesting season. Nesting sites are carefully monitored. Pertinent data is collected and turtles are tagged. Conservation measures are supported by various other agencies.

Canadian Organization for Tropical Education and Rainforest Conservation  
[www.coterc.org](http://www.coterc.org)

