

Pacific Leatherback Turtle

Dermochelys coriacea

Critically Endangered



UPWELL

Species Identification

- Largest of all sea turtles: adult weight 250-900 kg (550-2000 lbs), length 1.2-2.4 m (4-8 ft)
- Black/dark gray with white spots/patches that may appear pink with increased blood flow
- Leathery, hydrodynamic shell (carapace) with 7 longitudinal ridges (5 dorsal ridges and 2 on sides)
- Median ridge is highest of 5 dorsal ridges and all ridges may feature bumps at intervals
- Notched upper jaw with cusps adapted for feeding on soft-bodied prey like jellyfish
- Unpigmented "pink spot" or "pineal skylight" on dorsal head for sensing changes in light

Ecology

- Highly migratory, some traveling more than 16,000 km (9942 mi) in a single year
- Thermoregulatory adaptations to water temperatures ranging from warm tropical nesting grounds to cold temperate foraging habitats
- West Pacific leatherbacks, nesting from May-September in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Indonesia, migrate to foraging grounds in the North Pacific and in the California Current
- East Pacific leatherbacks, nesting from October-March principally in Mexico and Costa Rica, migrate to foraging grounds in the Peru/Humboldt Current off South America

Amazing Leatherbacks

- Adult leatherbacks can fulfill daily energy needs on prey intake equal to 20-40% of their total body mass, but leatherbacks in the Northwest Atlantic were observed ingesting up to 184% of their body mass in jellyfish in a single day!
- The spines (papillae) lining a leatherback's throat and elongated esophagus enable efficient digestion of prey composed of 90% water but prevent it from coughing up plastic bags mistaken for jellies!
- Leatherbacks grow faster than any other turtle and reach maturity in 13-20 years; hatchlings increase 10,000x in size and can consume up to 300 metric tons of prey by the time they mature!
- Leatherbacks primarily use the top 300 m (984 ft) of the water column and dive for 20-30 minutes at a time but sometimes make very deep dives over 1200 m (3937 ft) and can remain underwater for 86 minutes on a single breath!

Help Save Pacific Leatherbacks!

- If you eat seafood, make sure it was captured using selective methods.
- Avoid single-use plastics; bring your own reusable bags, to-go containers and utensils, and clean up stray plastics before they end up in the ocean.
- If you encounter a sick, injured, entangled, stranded or dead turtle, please call NOAA's West Coast Regional Stranding Hotline at 1-866-767-6114



Critically Endangered

Leatherbacks are facing extinction in the Pacific Ocean. In the past few decades, the West Pacific leatherback population has declined by more than 78% and the East Pacific leatherback population has declined by more than 90%. The only other population of leatherbacks in the Pacific Ocean, the Malaysian leatherback population, was declared extinct in 1996.

For references and more amazing facts, visit www.upwell.org