

Diamondback Terrapins and the Department of Defense



Picture by: J.D. Wilson

The Diamondback Terrapin (*Malaclemys terrapin*) is the only turtle species to live entirely in coastal salt marshes. Its common name comes from its diamond-shaped growth rings on its carapace (top shell). It is the Maryland State reptile and the University of Maryland mascot.

Description: Adult males (maximum shell length of 5.5 inches [14 cm]) are significantly smaller than females (shell length up to 11 inches [28 cm]). Shell color ranges from medium-gray to nearly black and consists of concentric, diamond-shaped markings and grooves on the scutes (plates) of their carapaces. Skin is pale gray or pink to black with dark spots, blotches or stripes. No two individuals are exactly alike in coloration and pattern.



Range: Populations can be found along the U.S. Atlantic and Gulf Coasts from the Florida Keys north to Massachusetts and west to Texas. Several subspecies are recognized. The species has declined significantly from historic levels, in part due to 19th and 20th century harvesting as gourmet food.

Habitat: Shallow, subtidal and intertidal estuaries and brackish marshes for feeding, overwintering, and during the spring-summer mating season. Low-elevation, coastal terrestrial areas (especially near-shore barrier islands) are used for nesting.

Behavior: Diamondback Terrapins in the Chesapeake Bay area reach maturity at 4-5 years (male) and 8 years (female) of age. Eggs are typically laid in late May through August and generally take 50-80 days to hatch. Diamondback Terrapins are mainly molluscivores— feeding on snails, clams, barnacles, mussels, soft crabs, fish and carrion. Juveniles prey on insects and small crustaceans. Chesapeake Bay terrapins have been documented to live into their 30s, but could live for more than 50 years. During their spring-fall activity period, terrapins typically feed and engage in reproductive behaviors in the water during high tide, and bask or hide in the shade of vegetation on exposed land during low tide. During the cold winter months, diamondbacks hibernate in the mud at the bottom of tidal creeks.

Conservation Status: Commercial harvesting of Diamondback Terrapins has been banned in all states within the species range. Several states have laws/regulations requiring that crab pot traps be fitted with exclusion or escape mechanisms to prevent bycatch of terrapins. This turtle is listed as a species of concern in many states and Threatened in Massachusetts. NatureServe lists this species as G4 – Apparently Secure, and the IUCN Red List ranks the species as Near Threatened. Lastly, this species have been given protections by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) under Appendix II.

Threats/Planning Considerations: Commercial harvest (historically), bycatch mortality in commercial crab pot traps, loss of nesting habitat (erosion, land subsidence and shoreline hardening, residential development), nest and hatchling predation, vehicle strikes (boats and cars) and water quality degradation. Planning considerations may include protection of coastal habitats, shoreline erosion control through living shoreline construction that doesn't prevent terrapins from accessing beach areas, and road signage to prevent vehicle strikes.

Occurrence on Military Lands

Confirmed	Potential
Confirmed present on 10 Navy, 1 Air Force and 3 Marine Corps installation across its range.	Up to an additional 6 Army, 29 Navy, 10 Air Force and 2 Marine Corps installations across its range.

