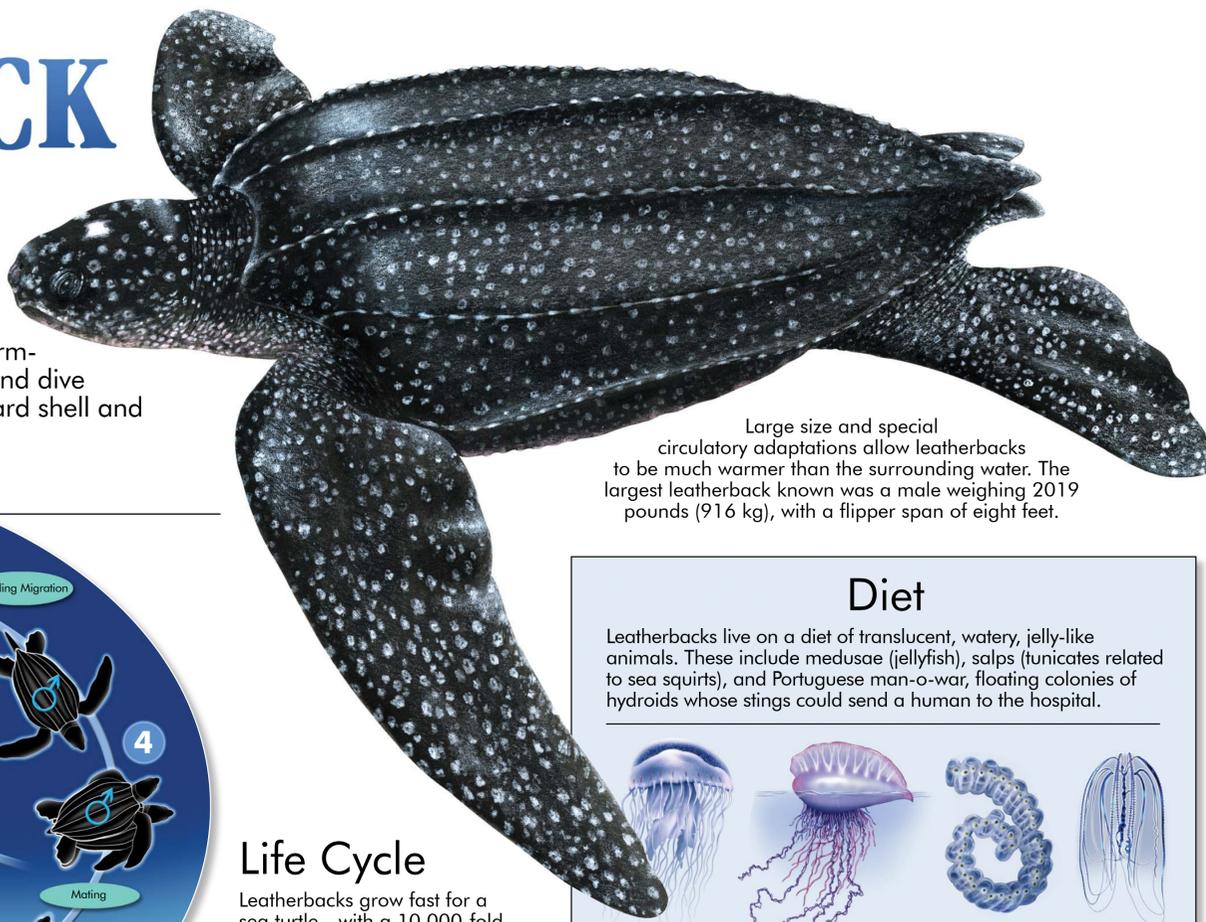


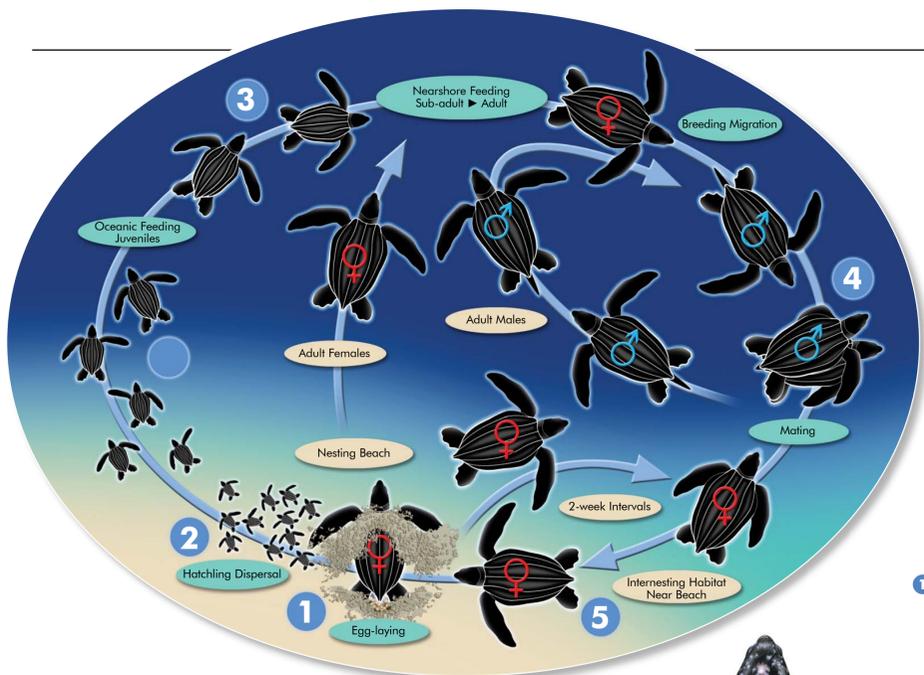
# LEATHERBACK TURTLE

*Dermochelys coriacea*

This is the largest of all turtles, with supreme adaptations for an open-ocean lifestyle. Leatherbacks are powerful warm-blooded swimmers that can endure near-freezing waters and dive almost a mile deep. As their name suggests, they lack a hard shell and are covered instead by thick, rubbery skin.



Large size and special circulatory adaptations allow leatherbacks to be much warmer than the surrounding water. The largest leatherback known was a male weighing 2019 pounds (916 kg), with a flipper span of eight feet.



**Nesting/hatching season:** March–June  
**Adult shell length:** 4.3–5.9 ft (1.3–1.8 m)  
**Adult weight:** 660–1100 lb (300–500 kg)  
**Age at maturity:** estimated 9 years  
**Status:** Endangered



## Life Cycle

Leatherbacks grow fast for a sea turtle—with a 10,000-fold change in weight over less than a decade. During this time they may travel many tens of thousands of oceanic miles.

- 1 Nests average 73 eggs, which incubate under sand for 60–75 days. Warmer sands produce mostly female turtles and cooler sands result in mostly males.
- 2 A few days after they hatch, the hatchlings emerge together from the nest at night, scramble quickly to the sea, and are dispersed by ocean currents.
- 3 Juveniles and sub-adults forage in the open ocean and are rarely seen. They are thought to live in warm tropical waters.
- 4 Adults forage over vast areas of deep oceanic waters and mate near nesting beaches.
- 5 About every 2 years, adult females make extensive migrations to the beaches where they hatched. During the spring nesting season they make 4–7 nests, separated by ten-day intervals.

## Diet

Leatherbacks live on a diet of translucent, watery, jelly-like animals. These include medusae (jellyfish), salps (tunicates related to sea squirts), and Portuguese man-o-war, floating colonies of hydroids whose stings could send a human to the hospital.



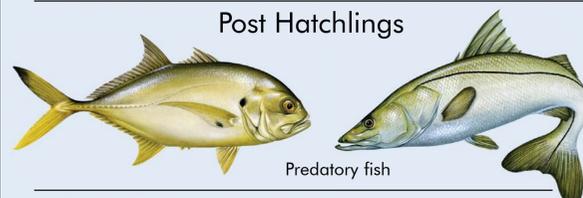
## Natural Predators

Most predation on leatherbacks occurs during their egg and hatching stage. Juveniles and adults are large enough to avoid all but the largest predators, such as killer whales and sharks.

### Eggs and Hatchlings



### Post Hatchlings



### Juveniles and Adults



## Habitat

Once a leatherback leaves the beach where it hatched, its habitat is the wide-open ocean. Although these turtles wander across vast waters, they feed within specific ocean areas that gather the gelatinous animals they eat. Nesting females need soft, sandy beaches with natural dunes.

## Conservation

Conserving leatherbacks requires research on their mysterious lives and exposure to threats. One important investigation involves tracking the turtle's vast movements using telemetry. Transmitters are attached to the turtle using a breakaway harness or tethers.



## Nesting

Females take 90–120 minutes to dig an egg chamber, lay eggs, and scatter camouflaging sand in broad, lumpy mounds.



## Tracks

A margin of front-flipper slashes and a center of parallel rear-flipper prints with a tail-drag mark.



## Regional Distribution

Florida has increasing numbers of leatherback nests, but most western Atlantic turtles nest in northern South America and at the margins of the Caribbean Sea. Foraging and migrating leatherbacks are found over deep waters between the Equator and the Arctic Circle.



- Large juveniles and adults
- Major nesting beaches
- Other important nesting beaches in Florida

## Threats

**Fishing Debris** entangles and drowns turtles. Netting, and lines from trap or hook fisheries are commonly lost and discarded at sea.



Other important threats:

- Marine plastics are an ingestion hazard
- Longline Fisheries hook and drown turtles
- Light Pollution misleads and kills hatchlings
- Trawler Fisheries capture and drown turtles
- Coastal Armoring prevents nesting access
- Boat Strikes kill and injure turtles

## How to Help

Although leatherbacks are international marine animals that need help throughout their range if they are to survive, there are many things we can do for them here at home. Make informed seafood choices, hide lights visible from beaches, pick up marine litter, observe nesting turtles only with a trained guide, contribute to marine conservation organizations, purchase a sea turtle license plate, and share your interest in sea turtles with others.



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