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LAYING EGGS

THE OTHER TURTLES ON THE BEACH

SMALLER AND NOT SO GLAMOROUS

Diamondback Terrapins (*Malaclemys terrapin*) share the beaches with their larger cousins the Sea Turtles. Diamondbacks are estuarine turtles that never venture far off shore. They possess a nasal salt gland used for excreting excess salts, which allows them to live in salt and brackish waters.

These terrapins are medium-sized turtles whose carapace (upper shell) can be up to 9 inches long. The female is quite larger than the male. The carapace is smooth. It is covered with gray scutes, (horny plates that make up the shell) The scutes are unique to each terrapin, like fingerprints are with humans. They look like they form diamond-shaped

concentric circles over the top of the terrapin's shell. The plastron (lower shell) is yellowish or greenish-gray. The skin is gray with an irregular pattern of small spots on the head and limbs. The jaws are yellow which makes it look like they are always smiling.

They mainly eat mollusks, such as mud snails, but will also eat crustaceans and worms.

Diamondback terrapins breed in the spring and summer. They mate in water, at night. Nests are holes dug in sand, or in dirt. The eggs take 60 to 100 days to hatch. Hatchlings that do not emerge by the onset of winter, may overwinter in the sand and hatch the following spring. Terrapins overwinter in the mud in channels and tidal flats.

Once these reptiles were highly prized for food and were almost hunted to extinction. They are still hunted for food in some states and are sold to Asian markets for over \$20 a pound.

Other major dangers for terrapins are blue crab traps and automobiles. Crab traps can capture and drown terrapins. A simple turtle exclusion devise added to the mouth of the trap keeps turtles out and still lets crabs in. One should be added to your crab trap. Also watch out when you are driving the Terrapin Crossing signs on Rt 21 aren't there just to be cute.



TERRAPIN EXCLUDER

PHOTOS BY JOHN ALBERT

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Sources
<http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/information/?s=030067>
http://www.chesapeakebay.net/diamondback_terrapi.htm