



Diamondback Terrapins – Maryland’s official State reptile

What are they?

Diamondback terrapins are part of the turtle family. They are the only North American turtle that spends all its life in brackish water. There are seven different kinds of diamondback turtles that can be found along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts.

What do they look like?

If you ever see diamondback turtles, you will immediately know how they got their name. Their scutes, or plates that make up its top shell, appear to form diamond-shaped rings. Scutes are made up of the same protein that you have in your hair and nails—keratin. Each turtle has a slightly different pattern on its shell, just as you have slightly different fingerprints.

Where can you find them?

In winter, you won't be able to find any terrapins. They hibernate in layers of mud along creeks and rivers. However, around May, they come out, living in salt marshes and other shallow waters of the Bay. These turtles like to sun themselves from time to time, so you might find them on a log or sandy beach on a sunny day.

How do they behave?

Diamondbacks are strong climbers and fast swimmers. Their webbed feet give them extra speed in the water. They like to stay close to the sandy beaches where they were born. These gentle creatures may live as long as 50 years. The skin on their legs is rough.

Female diamondbacks grow larger than the male members of its family. Male turtle range between 4 to 6 inches long. Females can grow as large as nine inches long. Females have wider heads, taller shells, and shorter tails than the males.

What do they eat?

Diamondbacks eat a variety of animals (mollusks such as clams, snails, and mussels), worms, and plant material.

What eats them?

Although diamondback turtles can live a very long time, many of them don't ever reach adulthood. They are eaten by small animals (such as raccoons, crabs, and rats) and birds (such as gulls, crows, and herons) as they hatch out of their eggs.

Raccoons also eat female terrapins as they are nesting to lay their eggs.

Creature Feature

Terrapins have been a part of the Maryland scene for many years. Native peoples prepared terrapin for Maryland's first colonists, roasting them live on a hot fire. In fact, the word *terrapin* originated with the Algonquin. It was their word for edible turtles that live in brackish water.

Today, University of Maryland sports fan are familiar with Testudo, the school's official mascot. Testudo is a giant diamondback turtle. Beginning in 2002, the University began to give a portion of their sales of "Fear the Turtle" merchandise to the Department of Natural Resources. The Department uses the money to fund research and conservation efforts for the diamondbacks.



Photo Source: NOAA

