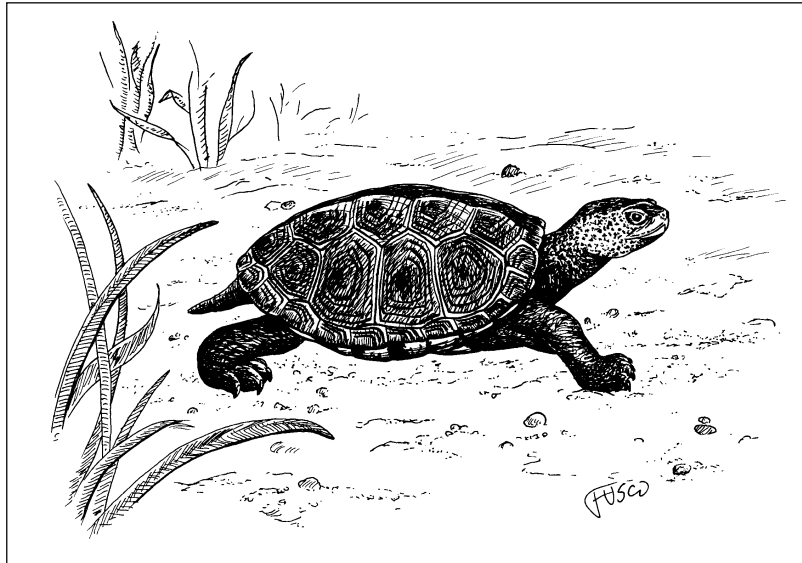


# WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

## INFORMATIONAL SERIES

### NORTHERN DIAMONDBACK TERRAPIN

*Malaclemys terrapin terrapin*



**Habitat:** Brackish water of salt marshes, estuaries and tidal creeks.

**Weight:** Males, 0.5 pounds; females, 1.5 pounds.

**Length:** Males, 4-5.5 inches; females, 6-9 inches.

**Life Expectancy:** 25-40 years of age.

**Food:** Fishes, marine snails, invertebrates, marine and tidal mollusks, carrion, clams and worms.

**Status:** State regulated.

**Identification:** Diamondback terrapins have a gray, light brown or black top shell (carapace) that is broad and patterned with concentric rings or ridges. The carapace is also wedge-shaped, and when viewed from above, the widest part is in the rear. The under shell (plastron) can range from yellowish to greenish gray, with or without bold, dark markings. The large feet are webbed, and the head and limbs may be spotted.

**Range:** The northern subspecies occurs along the Atlantic coast from Cape Cod to Cape Hatteras. Other subspecies are found from Cape Hatteras south to the Florida Keys and west along the Gulf Coast and the Texas coastline.

**Reproduction:** Adult terrapins nest on sandy borders of coastal salt marshes or in dunes from June to July. Maximum egg-laying activity usually occurs at high tide,

ensuring that the eggs will be laid above the high water level. The females dig cavities 4 to 8 inches deep, depositing 4 to 18 pinkish white eggs (average 9), which are about 1.5 inches long, leather-like and thin-shelled, with a blunt end. The eggs hatch in 9 to 15 weeks. The 1 to 1.25-inch hatchlings are patterned similar to the adults, but brighter. Occasionally after hatching, the young may remain in the nest for the first winter, emerging in April and May to head for brackish waters. It is not known whether wild terrapins nest more than once in a season. Females reach sexual maturity in about 7 years; males mature earlier.

**Reason for Decline:** In the early 1900s, diamondbacks were a popular gourmet food. Their numbers declined with unregulated harvesting and habitat loss through coastal development. Motorboat propellers

have been responsible for inflicting serious wounds to terrapins, usually causing death. Terrapins also become trapped and then drown in submerged crab and lobster pots. During the nesting season, many females are killed as they attempt to cross coastal roads in search of nesting areas.

**History in Connecticut:** Diamondback terrapins are most abundant in tidal estuaries west of the Connecticut River. They are tolerant of some pollution and are known to congregate at warm water discharge outputs of power stations along the Connecticut shoreline.

**Interesting Facts:** The diamondback terrapin is the only marine species of turtle that regularly occurs in Connecticut. The turtles hibernate during the winter submerged in the mud of tidal creeks.

During the early 1930s, when terrapin numbers decreased, the popularity of this turtle as a food item faded. Terrapin populations have since rebounded dramatically with the lack of harvesting pressure.

Adult terrapins are often seen basking on mud flats.

The excess salt that terrapins consume in their diet is excreted through special glands at the eye.

Recent research indicates that diamondback terrapins have temperature-dependent sex determination. Artificial incubation of eggs at low temperatures has produced all male hatchlings, while incubation at higher temperatures has produced all females.

Diamondback terrapin nests are depredated by skunks, raccoons and foxes. Upon emerging from the nest,

young hatchlings are often eaten by gulls, crows and black-crowned night-herons. Although the hatchlings are less vulnerable to predation when in water, they can still be preyed on by herons and predatory fish.

**Protective Legislation:** *State* - Connecticut Regulation 26-66-14d. According to the regulation: "The open season for taking diamondback terrapins...shall be from August 1 through April 30. During the open season only diamondback terrapins having a straight line upper shell length between four and seven inches inclusive shall be taken. Diamondback terrapins may only be taken by hand, with a dip net, a seine net or by traps that insure the turtles will be captured alive. The possession limit shall not exceed five (5) of this species, regardless of where taken. There shall be no open season for taking eggs of this species."

**What You Can Do:** Support the protection, conservation and restoration of Connecticut's salt marsh habitats. If you are a boater, navigate carefully in tidal creeks and estuaries where large numbers of terrapins may gather in late spring to mate at the water's surface. Boaters are also reminded that it is a violation of the Federal Pollution Control Act to pump or discharge any kind of oil into navigable waters. Oil spills have the potential to devastate many coastal wildlife populations, including terrapins.

While driving on coastal roads in June and July, be aware of any turtles that may be crossing the road to nest.

## CONNECTICUT RANGE

