

# LEATHERBACK TURTLE

(*Dermochelys coriacea*)



## Identification:

- Adults up to 2 m in length and can weigh up to 600 Kg. World's largest turtle.
- No obvious shell. Bony plates set along distinct ridges down the back.
- Dark in colour with white and pink spots.
- Females have a characteristic 'pink spot' on the top of their heads.
- Large front flippers.



Photo: Paul Mannix

## Distribution:

- Considered native to the UK but do not breed here.
- Recorded as far north as Alaska and as far south as the tip of South New Zealand.
- Follow the Gulf Stream feeding on jellyfish.
- Loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*), Green (*Chelonia mydas*), Hawksbill (*Eretmochelys imbricate*) and Kemp's Ridley (*Lepidochelys kemp*) turtles are also visitors to UK waters.

## Life cycle:

- Leatherbacks do not breed in the UK.
- Mating takes place in water and nesting occurs between February and August depending on location.
- Females haul themselves on to beaches in the tropics to dig holes in the sand, in which they deposit 80-130 eggs.
- Nest several times throughout



Photo: SR Livingstone



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breeding season.

- Eggs incubate for 50 to 75 days.
- Hatchlings emerge from sand and immediately head towards the sea. Many hatchlings are lost to predators.

#### Ecology:

- A strictly marine species.
- Males never leave the water once they enter.
- Strong and fast swimmers. Undertake long journeys (some are known to cross the Atlantic).
- Deepest-diving turtle. Can reach depths of over 1 km.
- Primarily feed on jellyfish.

#### Predators and other threats:

- Classified as 'critically endangered' on the IUCN Red List.
- Primary threats include fishing, erosion of nesting beaches and pollution/litter.



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