



## Pacific Leatherback Turtle

**Scientific name:** *Dermochelys coriacea shlegeli*

The Leatherback turtle is the largest reptile in the world! Leatherbacks reach a maximum size of 360 to 680 kg, and carapace (back shell) length of 2.4 m. Leatherbacks do not have scutes (scales) covering their shell, as do other turtles. Instead, as their name suggests, their narrow carapace and plastron (shell covering the belly) are covered with leathery skin. Seven long ridges run along the carapace, and five ridges decorate the plastron. Both front and back legs are modified into flippers. In fact, the hind legs are joined to the tail with webbing! The skin all over the body is olive-green, black, or grey, sometimes with light spots of cream or yellow.

Leatherbacks have been reported off of the coast of B.C. over 100 times since 1931. They wander further than any other turtle and are capable of travelling more than 15,000 km in a year, making them a truly awe-inspiring nomad of the sea.

### **Making a living**

Leatherbacks spend their lives in the open sea, occasionally venturing into shallow bays and estuaries. Leatherbacks are entirely marine. Males do not return to land after hatching and leaving their sandy nests, while females return to land only to lay eggs. There are no breeding sites in B.C. Leatherbacks mainly breed off of the coast of Malaya and French Guiana.

Mating rituals and patterns are quite similar to that of the Green Turtle. However, there is evidence that female Leatherbacks occasionally breed with more than one male during a season, a behaviour rarely seen in Green Turtles. Female Leatherbacks lay multiple clutches (batches of eggs) in a season, each clutch made up of between 90 and 150 eggs.

Soon after mating, the female hauls herself up on land to lay her first clutch. They dig their nests and lay their eggs on sandy beaches. Like Green Turtles, Leatherbacks make groaning and sighing sounds during their ventures onto land. Up to 1600 females may nest at a single rookery (nesting site) – that can add up to quite a commotion! The whole process is repeated every few weeks, as Leatherbacks lay multiple clutches.

Hatchlings (newly hatched turtles) face many predators during their first hours of life, as rats, crabs and gulls all prey upon the little turtles.

### **What's for dinner?**

Leatherbacks are thought to be jellyfish specialists. They congregate at schools of jellyfish, apparently immune to the stings of their tentacles. To aid in swallowing this slippery prey, Leatherbacks have backward-projecting spines in their throats.

### **Places and spaces**

Leatherbacks nest in tropical and subtropical areas. Once a turtle is a few years old, it can travel to colder waters such as the Pacific and Atlantic oceans Canadian coasts. Leatherbacks can generate body heat through muscle activity (an ability that is quite rare among reptiles). Their large mass and relatively small surface area allow them to retain that heat, and maintain a cosy, warm body temperature in cool waters. This probably explains why Leatherbacks can venture further into cooler waters than other sea turtles.

### **Past, present, and...future?**

Pacific Leatherbacks are listed as endangered under the Canadian Species at Risk Act, and are considered critically endangered on a global scale. They are at risk of becoming extinct if current trends do not reverse.

Leatherback rookeries have been lost due to human disturbance, and the eggs have been over-harvested as a food source and aphrodisiac. As adults, Leatherbacks are at risk of dying due to accidental capture by fishing gear on large fishing boats, collisions with boats, and ingestion of garbage mistaken as food.

Please report any sightings of Leatherbacks to one of the contacts below. The Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans is working with other

organizations to keep track of all sea turtle sightings – your help is greatly appreciated. Because biologists feel this species is at risk of global extinction, knowledge of their habitat use and population size is very important.

Telephone:

British Columbia Cetacean and Sea Turtle Sightings Network (BCCSN)  
1-866-I SAW ONE (1-866-472-9663)

Email:

Vancouver Aquarium  
[turtle@vanaqua.org](mailto:turtle@vanaqua.org)

Online form for reporting sightings:

<http://www.wildwhales.org/network/turtlesightings.htm>