

HAWKSBILL TURTLE

Eretmochelys imbricata

Order: Testudines
Family: Cheloniidae
FNAI Ranks: G3/S1
U.S. Status: Endangered
FL Status: Endangered

Status applies to eggs as well as turtles. Shrimp trawlers must be fitted with excluder devices to release marine turtles. Some local ordinances regulate beachfront lighting and beach driving.



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hatchling
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Description: A medium-sized sea turtle with a brown, somewhat heart-shaped upper shell (carapace), often marked with “tortoiseshell” pattern of light and dark streaks. Front limbs modified as flippers, upper jaw narrowly pointed as a beak, two pairs of scales (prefrontals) between eyes. Unlike other sea turtles, large scales of carapace overlap except in very young and very old. Carapace bears central ridge (keel) and only four large scales (costal scutes) on each side, the first not touching the nuchal (small scale over neck). Lower shell (plastron) white to yellow, sometimes with dark

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blotches. Adults 25 - 37 in. (63 - 94 cm) shell length, 95 - 165 lbs. (43 - 75 kg), record 280 lbs. (127 kg). Hatchlings brown to black above, 1.5 - 1.9 in. (38 - 48 mm) shell length, with one central ridge on back and pair of ridges below.

Similar Species: Green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*; see species account) also has four pairs of costals and lacks costal-nuchal contact, but has non-overlapping carapacial scales and only one long pair of prefrontal scales between eyes; jaws are U-shaped rather than sharply pointed, and bear small ridges along inner surfaces. Loggerhead and Kemp's ridley (*Caretta caretta* and *Lepidochelys kempii*; see species accounts) have five or more costal scales on each side, the first touching the nuchal.

Habitat: Marine coastal and oceanic waters, commonly associated with coral reefs, keys, and mangroves. Nests on coastal sand beaches, often in vegetation.

Seasonal Occurrence: Present year-round in southern Florida. Nests late spring through fall; hatchlings emerge late summer and fall.

Florida Distribution: Southern half of Florida, chiefly Florida Keys and reefs along southeastern peninsular coast. Nesting infrequent (1 - 4 per year) but recorded from Volusia County to the Marquesas.

Range-wide Distribution: Tropical and subtropical marine waters worldwide. In U.S., principally Florida.

Conservation Status: Some small island nesting beaches are on federal land, especially Key West National Wildlife Refuge.

Protection and Management: Worldwide, populations have plummeted from centuries of harvest, principally to make jewelry; ending this trade is critical. Florida reef habitats and Keys and surrounding waters must be protected from further development, pollution, dumping of debris, and other degradation. Oil tankers should not operate within 15 mi. (25 km) of the Keys and lower southeast coast.

Selected References: Ashton and Ashton 1991, Bartlett and Bartlett 1999, Conant and Collins 1991, Ernst et al. 1994, Meylan 1999, Meylan and Donnelly 1999, Moler (ed.) 1992, Witzell 1983.