



Department of Planning and Natural Resources
 Division of Fish and Wildlife
 U.S.V.I. Animal Fact Sheet #18
SEA TURTLE IDENTIFICATION



PICTURE GUIDE TO SPECIES OCCURRING IN THE AREA

<p>2 pairs of prefrontal scutes</p> <p>a</p>	<p>scutes imbricated</p> <p>b</p>	<p>4 inframarginal scutes without pores</p> <p>c</p>	<p>Hawksbill <i>Eretmochelys imbricata</i></p>
<p>1 pair of prefrontal scutes</p> <p>a</p> <p>lower jaw</p> <p>b</p>	<p>4 lateral scutes</p> <p>c</p>	<p>d</p>	<p>Green <i>Chelonia mydas</i></p>
<p>more than 1 pair of prefrontal scutes</p> <p>a</p>	<p>5 lateral scutes</p> <p>b</p>	<p>3 inframarginal scutes without pores</p> <p>c</p>	<p>Loggerhead <i>Caretta caretta</i></p>
<p>no scutes</p> <p>a</p> <p>head</p>	<p>ridges</p> <p>b</p> <p>carapace</p>	<p>c</p> <p>plastron</p> <p>(hatchling)</p>	<p>Leatherback <i>Dermochelys coriacea</i></p>

All sea turtles are reptiles. They spend almost their entire lives swimming in the ocean. The only time they are not in the ocean is when the eggs are developing in the sand on the beach (they leave land after hatching) and when the females return to shore to lay eggs. The quickest way to tell if a turtle is a sea turtle is to look at its legs. All sea turtles have flippers instead of feet. If the turtle has feet with claws or nails then it is not a sea turtle.

All sea turtles breathe air and need to come to land to lay eggs. They are cold blooded like all other reptiles, which is why they are found in warm ocean waters. All the hard-shelled turtles have a body temperature that is the same as the water in which they live. The Leatherback is the only soft-shelled sea turtle and is the only turtle that is found in colder waters. Because its body is so big and because it has special counter current heat exchangers in its flippers, it can maintain a body temperature higher than the surrounding water.

Table of basic biological parameters for sea turtles found nesting in the territory.

	Hawksbill	Green	Leatherback	Loggerhead
How big do they get?	34 inches 214 lbs	42 inches 485 lbs	72 inches 1,864 lbs	48 inches 608 lbs
Size at hatching	1.7 inches 0.5 oz	2 inches 0.8 oz.	2.4 inches 1.5 oz.	1.8 inches 0.6 oz.
Carapace	Hard	Hard	Soft	Hard

Four species of sea turtles exist in the U.S.V.I. Hawksbill, Green, Loggerhead and Leatherback. Hawksbills are the smallest, they have a hawk like beak, and their shell is elongated and slightly tear dropped in shape. The Green turtle's shell is much rounder and the shape of the nose is much blunter. Loggerheads are very uncommon in the Territory, but several have recently been seen. They are reddish in color and have a much thicker neck and head than the Hawksbill and Green turtles. They also have five lateral scutes, instead of the four seen in the others. Leatherbacks are the largest of the turtles and instead of having plate like scutes on their shell they have seven ridges that extend the length of the body. The shell is not hard like the other turtles it is made up of a thick fatty fibrous issue.

All species of sea turtles are protected under both Federal and Territorial laws.

What you can do to help

1. If you see any turtle nesting or hatching events, please write down the date, time and location you saw the turtles then call the Division of Fish and Wildlife at 340-772-1955 (on St. Croix) or 340-775-6762 (on St. Thomas/St. John) to report the event.
2. Please make an extra effort to keep plastic out of the marine environment.
3. Turtles, especially hatchlings, will head toward the brightest light source on the beach. This used to be star and moon light shining on the ocean, but today it may be street or building lights. If you have security or safety lights near the beach use low intensity sodium vapor lights and build shades around the light so the beach is not directly illuminated. If possible turn these lights off when hatchlings are emerging.
4. Do not take flash pictures or shine lights directly toward the turtles - it will disorient them. Like us, turtle eyes will maintain the ghost image of the flash, only the hatchlings see this as a bright area and will crawl toward it.
5. If you see a nesting turtle do not crowd around it and do not harass it. You may observe nesting from a distance. You need to stay behind the front flippers of the turtle so you don't disturb her. No flash photography.
6. If you see someone harassing a sea turtle or poaching a nest, call the local police (911) or the local Division of Environmental Enforcement STT 340-774-3320, STX 340-773-5774.
7. For more information on this and other animals in the Virgin Islands please visit our web site at: www.vifishandwildlife.com

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 FOR MORE INFORMATION ON
 OUR NATIVE ANIMALS CONTACT

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