



Learning on the Edge

Spotlight on a Species

Fact sheets discussing species found on the Nueces Delta Preserve

Diamondback Terrapin



Fast Facts:

Scientific name:

Malaclemys terrapin littoralis

Common names: ***Diamondback terrapin, terrapin***

Habitat: ***brackish water; marshes, estuaries & tidal creeks***

Fun fact: ***The pattern of the dots and lines are unique to each turtle***

The Diamondback Terrapin is a unique aquatic turtle that lives in brackish water. Unlike sliders and coots which inhabit freshwater or sea turtles which only inhabit salt water, the diamondback terrapin lives in the estuary and marshes where there is a mixed salinity. Diamondback terrapins are found along the Atlantic coast from Cape Cod to Texas. In Texas there is a subspecies of terrapin which lays fewer eggs and is slightly smaller than terrapins in other states. There is also a northern subspecies and an ornate subspecies.

Diamondback terrapins are a top predator in the marsh food web. Female terrapins, which are larger than males, eat small crabs, mussels, and marsh snails. Male terrapins tend to eat softer prey such as fish, worms and insects. Like many reptiles gender is determined in the nest by temperature. Generally, a cooler nest produces more males and a warmer nest produces more females.

The diamondback terrapin is a protected species in Texas (globally they are listed as near threatened on the IUCN Red List). Their numbers were threatened in the late 1800s and early 1900s as they were the popular turtle used in turtle soup. Current threats from humans include being caught in crab traps and motor boat strikes. New crab trap excluder devices are reducing the numbers of terrapins that get into traps and drown. Their numbers are on the rise in many states.

Sources for Further Reading:

<http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/huntwild/wild/species/terrapin/>

<http://www.arkive.org/diamondback-terrapin/malaclemys-terrapin/>

<http://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/59652.html>