



Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program

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Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

Atlantic Hawksbill Sea Turtle *Eretmochelys imbricata*

State Status: **Endangered**
Federal Status: **Endangered**

DESCRIPTION: Atlantic Hawksbill Sea Turtles have uniquely thick and overlapping scutes on a reddish-brown shell, variably patterned with darker streaks and spots. By contrast, most sea turtles have a rather uniformly colored carapace. The head is relatively narrow with a pronounced beak, which gives the species its name. Adults are about 2.5 to 3 feet long and weigh 100 to 150 pounds.

SIMILAR SPECIES: When grown, the Atlantic Hawksbill is smaller than all of the other sea turtles, except the Kemp's Ridley. This is our only sea turtle that has two pairs of frontal scutes on top of its head, and usually it has two claws on each front flipper, unlike the other hard-shelled sea turtles, which only have one.

HABITAT IN MASSACHUSETTS: This is the most tropical of all the Atlantic sea turtles and seldom wanders north of Florida. It is a turtle of tropical and subtropical reefs, eating sponges, algae, and other invertebrates. Only three dead individuals have been reported from Massachusetts, all from Cape Cod in 1909, 1968, and 1989.

RANGE: The Atlantic Hawksbill Sea Turtle inhabits tropical waters from 30° N latitude to 30° S latitude in the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans. The majority of the species' nesting sites are found along the Pacific Rim and Central Pacific. Annual movement patterns are similar to those of the Green and Loggerhead Sea Turtles, which travel exceptional distances between nesting and foraging habitat.



Photo by Thierry Cato

LIFE CYCLE AND BEHAVIOR: The lifespan of the Atlantic Hawksbill Sea Turtle is unknown, but exceeds 50 years. Adult females return to the beach where they were born every 2 to 3 years to lay eggs at intervals of every 14 to 16 days during the nesting season. Females generally lay 3 to 5 nests per season, each with around 130 eggs.

Nesting generally occurs at night between April and November. Incubation time is around 2 months, before the mostly brown hatchlings emerge and migrate to the sea. After hatching and entering the sea, juveniles find shelter in floating algal mats and drift lines of flotsam and jetsam.

THREATS: Atlantic Hawksbill Sea Turtles face threats in both their marine and nesting habitats, including boat strikes, interactions with commercial fishing gear, loss of coral reef habitat, nest predation, harvesting of their eggs and meat, and loss of nesting beaches to recreational use. In the Pacific, the harvest of their eggs is a major threat to populations in American Samoa, Guam, the Republic of Palau, the Commonwealth of the

A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan

Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

1 Rabbit Hill Rd., Westborough, MA; tel: 508-389-6300; fax: 508-389-7890; www.mass.gov/dfw

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Northern Mariana Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands.

MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS: Due to the wide global distribution of sea turtles among the world's oceans, it is easy for one country's conservation efforts to be compromised by another country's lack of protection. Since no sea turtles nest in Massachusetts, conservation actions have focused on reducing the mortality of juveniles and adults of the four hard-shelled species that are cold-stunned annually in Cape Cod Bay as the water temperatures drop in the fall. If a sea turtle is found on the beach, either dead or alive, it is important to contact one on the marine animal stranding networks by using one of the following hotlines:

Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary's Sea Turtle Hotline:
508-349-2615

NOAA Fisheries Marine Animal Hotline: 866-755-6622

New England Aquarium's Marine Animal Hotline: 617-973-5247

Provincetown Center for Coastal Studies'

Disentanglement Hotline: 800-900-3622 (mostly to disentangle leatherbacks)

REFERENCES

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