

Flatback Sea Turtle

Natator depressus



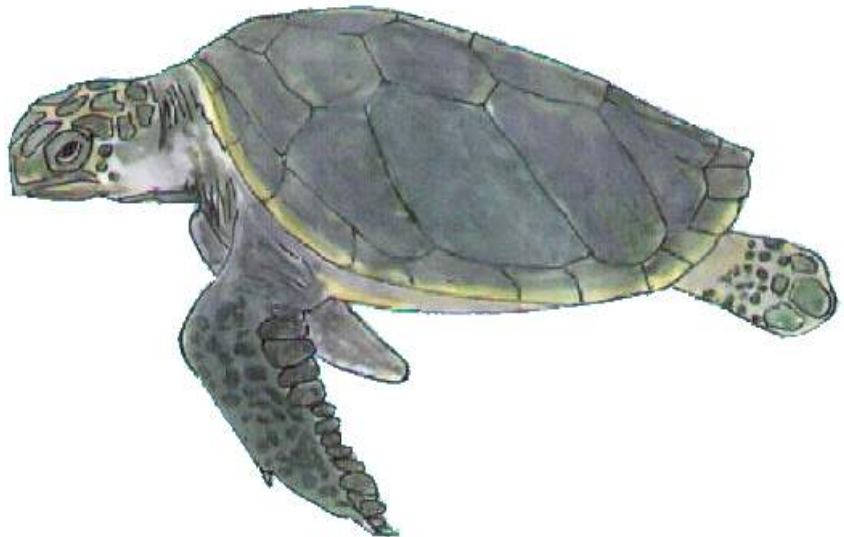
www.euroturtle.org

Picture

English - Flatback turtle (Australia)

French - Tortue plate

Spanish - Tortuga aplanada



Size and Body Mass

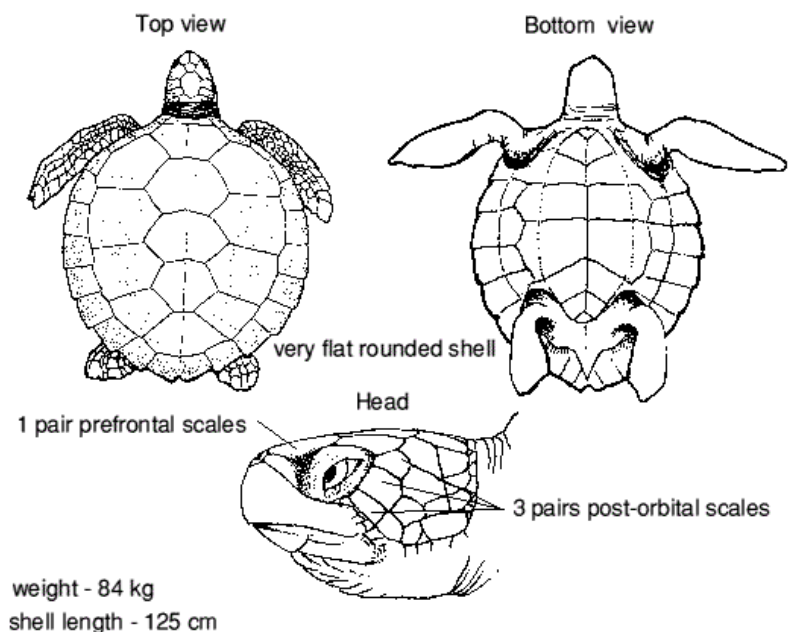
Overall body mass in Kg:

- A medium sized species
- Records only for breeding females

World variation:

- CCL mean 92.3cm (88-96cm)
- Body mass 74.4kg

Diagnostic Features



- Body flat with a smooth carapace, nearly elliptical with upturned margins
- Carapace is soft, waxy and smooth, with a thin keratin layer: very easily damaged.
- Inframarginal scutes lack pores.
- Flippers : Fore and hind had 1 claw each.
- Colour : dorsally olive grey with pale brown yellowish edge.
- Each flipper has a single claw in adults. Young adults may have extra claw on front flipper.
- Hatchlings : dark grey reticulate pattern specific to this species.

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Geographical Distribution

- Range limited to the coastal waters of Western, Northern and North Eastern Australia.
- Indigenous to Australia.

Habitat and Biology



illustration: M. Demma ©
ICRAM

Typical habitats:

- Inhabits shallow, turbid inshore waters.
- It has not been seen in the clear waters on coral reefs.

Migrations:

- Rarely seen away from the Australian coast - an endemic species .

Nesting areas:

- Mainly in tropical N.W. Australia eastward along the coast of Queensland.

Nesting periods:

- November and December: lays up to 4 times during the season.



illustration: M. Demma © ICRAM

Nesting behaviour:

- Early evening on steep sloping beaches and sand dunes.

Egg number, size and weight:

- Compared with other species, small - mean 56 eggs.
- Large mean 51 mm.

Size and weight of hatchlings:

Large (60 mm.)

Incubation time:

- Mean 53.4 days (47 to 58)



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Maturity:

- Not determined but reaches maturity early - possibly due to protein-rich diet.



illustration: M. Demma ©
ICRAM

Courtship and Mating:

Off-shore in shallow water

Sex determination:

- No data

Hatching:

- Swimming frenzy but no pelagic phase.
- They remain close inshore.

Hatchling mortality and predation:

- Egg predation due to introduced foxes, dingos, rats, endemic monitor lizards.
- Hatchlings predated at night by Rufous night herons which can eat 100% of an emerged clutch.
- It is the only species found in the nests of white bellied sea eagles which fish inshore.

Commensals and disease:

- Carapace normally free of barnacles.

Feeding:



Molluscs

Sea Cucumber

Hydroids

Soft corals

Illustrations: M. Demma © ICRAM

- Carnivorous forager.

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Threats to Survival



Loss of habitat due to coastal development, including tourism



Human predation



Animal predation

Illustrations: M. Demma © ICRAM

Flatbacks are not fished commercially, but are taken as subsistence food. Their limited range makes them vulnerable to change of their habitat and over-exploitation. The species is incidentally protected by being in National Marine Parks. Wild Duck Island National Park (Queensland, Australia) was set up in 1982 specifically for flatbacks.