

Texas Turtles

By Celeste Silling

Texas is home to a wide variety of turtle species. Some of the turtle species found in Texas inhabit a very limited range comprised of only one or more rivers or watersheds. Other species, like the Ornate Box Turtle or Red-eared Slider can be found in almost every county in the state. In total, Texas has 30 turtle species. This includes some sea turtles, tortoises, terrapins, and more!

For those wondering about the difference between turtles, tortoises and terrapins, you aren't alone. These terms are often used interchangeably and incorrectly. All tortoises are in fact turtles, but not all turtles are tortoises. Tortoises live exclusively on the land and they have some physical features that distinguish them from other turtles. Tortoises have more rounded shells than other turtles and elephantine, club-like feet, as opposed to flippers or paddling feet. Texas has one species of tortoise, the Texas Tortoise (*Gopherus berlanderi*), which can be found in South-Central Texas down through Mexico. They are mostly vegetarian, feeding on prickly pears and succulent plants.

Similarly, all terrapins are turtles, but not all turtles are terrapins. And depending on where you live, the word "terrapin" can have different meaning. In the UK, "terrapin" can be used to describe turtles that live in fresh water. Here in the US, we don't tend to make this distinction very often, referring to most of these animals as "turtles." If we ever use the word terrapin, its often to describe a turtle that lives in brackish, swampy water.

In Texas, we have one species that is officially known as a terrapin, the Diamondback Terrapin (*Malaclemys terrapin*). This is the only Texas turtle species that is found in estuaries, tidal creeks, and saltwater marshes where the salinity is close to that of the ocean. These terrapins were once hunted to the brink of extinction back when turtle soup was a popular dish. Today, they are doing better, but still face conservation concerns.

Along with our land turtles, Texas also has five species of sea turtles that visit our waters. This includes the Loggerhead Sea Turtle, Green Sea Turtle, Hawksbill Sea Turtle, Kemp's Ridley, and the Leatherback Sea Turtle. While these turtles spend most of their lives in the ocean, the females do pay visits to our shores to lay eggs.

There are various ways that Texans can help our resident turtles. For the sea turtles, it's important that we limit our trash production and don't litter. These animals are often caught in nets or trash, and can easily consume litter in the ocean. We can also give the females their space while laying eggs, and don't trespass on nesting grounds. For the land turtles, we can watch where we're driving on the roads, and help any pedestrian turtles cross the street (remember to always take them in the direction in they're already headed.) As well, we can take crab traps out of the water so terrapins and other turtles don't get trapped and drown (they can't breathe underwater.)

Texas has some amazing biodiversity, and our turtles are no exception! Let's appreciate what we've got and remember to take care of it! Keep Texas Turtley!



Photo: A Green Sea Turtle projects water out of its nose. By Joshua Cotten