CHECKLIST

✔	Scientific Name	Locality	Date
Family Podocnemididae			
☐	*Erymnochelys madagascariensis*		
Family Pelomedusidae			
☐	*Pelomedusa subrufa*		
☐	*Pelusios castanoides*		
☐	*Pelusios subniger*		
☐	*Pelusios seychellensis*		
Family Testudinidae			
☐	*Pyxis arachnoides*		
☐	*Pyxis planicauda*		
☐	*Astrochelys radiata*		
☐	*Astrochelys yniphora*		
☐	*Kinixys belliana*		
☐	*Dipsochelys dussumieri*		
☐	*Dipsochelys hololissa*		
☐	*Dipsochelys arnoldi*		
Family Cheloniidae			
☐	*Eretmochelys imbricata*		
☐	*Chelonia mydas*		
☐	*Caretta caretta*		
☐	*Lepidochelys olivacea*		
Family Dermochelyidae			
☐	*Dermochelys coriacea*		

CONSERVATION INTERNATIONAL

Redlands

IUCN/SSC Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group

NATURE PROTECTION TRUST OF SEYCHELLES

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CONSERVATION INTERNATIONAL

Turtles and Tortoises of Madagascar and Adjacent Indian Ocean Islands

Pocket Identification Guide

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TROPICAL POCKET GUIDE SERIES

Turtles and Tortoises

of Madagascar and Adjacent Indian Ocean Islands

Pocket Identification Guide

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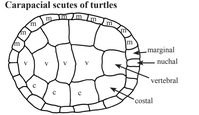
CONSERVATION INTERNATIONAL

Redlands

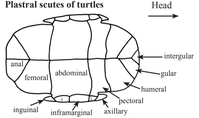
Key to map arrows

- Current range
- Introduced
- Historic range

Carapacial scutes of turtles

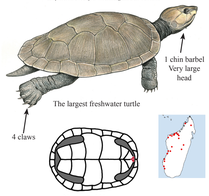


Plastral scutes of turtles

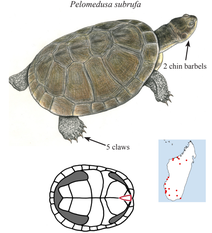


Freshwater Turtles

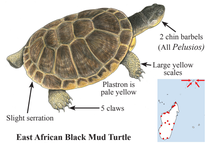
Madagascar Big-headed Turtle
Erymnochelys madagascariensis



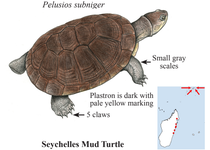
Helmeted Turtle
Pelomedusa subrufa



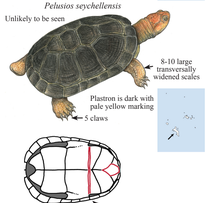
Yellow-bellied Mud Turtle
Pelusios castanoides



East African Black Mud Turtle
Pelusios subniger

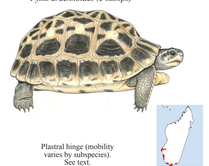


Seychelles Mud Turtle
Pelusios seychellensis
Unlikely to be seen

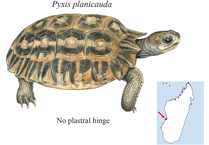


Small Tortoises

Spider Tortoise
Pyxis arachnoides (3 subspp)

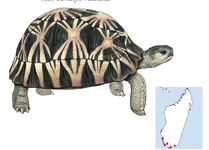


Flat-tailed Tortoise
Pyxis planicauda

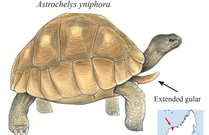


Large/ Medium Tortoises

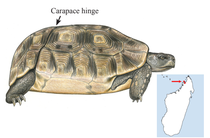
Radiated Tortoise
Astrochelys radiata



Ploughshare Tortoise
Astrochelys yniphora

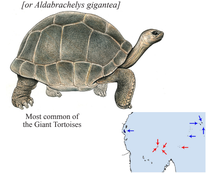


Bell's Hinge-back Tortoise
Kinixys belliana

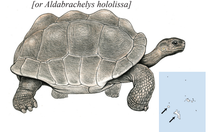


Giant Tortoises

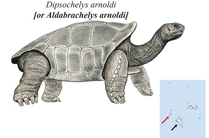
Aldabra Giant Tortoise
Dipsochelys dussumieri
[or Aldabrachelys gigantea]



Seychelles Giant Tortoise
Dipsochelys hololissa
[or Aldabrachelys hololissa]



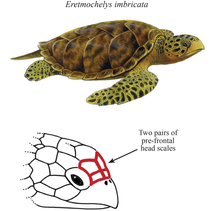
Arnold's Giant Tortoise
Dipsochelys arnoldi
[or Aldabrachelys arnoldi]



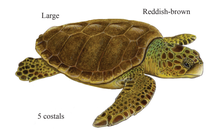
Sea Turtles

Green Turtle
Chelonia mydas

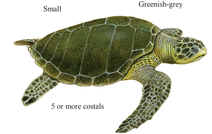
Hawksbill Turtle
Eretmochelys imbricata



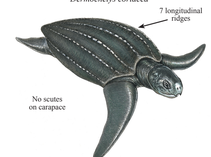
Loggerhead Turtle
Caretta caretta



Olive Ridley Turtle
Lepidochelys olivacea



Leatherback Turtle
Dermochelys coriacea



There are over 300 living species of turtles in the world today. They belong to the class Reptilia (Reptiles). Within the reptiles they form the order known as Testudines (Turtles). The Testudines are made up of two suborders: the Pleurodira (Side-necked Turtles) and the Cryptodira (Hidden-necked Turtles) with a total of 13 families. This pocket guide covers Madagascar and surrounding islands, and describes the turtles and tortoises from five families that are found in the region: Podocnemididae and Pelomedusidae (Side-neck Turtles), Testudinidae (Tortoises), Cheloniidae (Sea Turtles), and Dermochelyidae (Leatherback Sea Turtles).

FAMILY PODOCNEMIDIDAE

The family Podocnemididae Cope, 1868 is one of the two families of freshwater turtles commonly known as Side-neck Turtles that are found in Madagascar. They are called side-neck turtles because their head and neck retract into the shell laterally in a horizontal plane. In all other turtles the head and neck retract vertically into the shell. The genus *Erymnochelys*, represented by just one species, is now confined to Madagascar and is the only living member of the Podocnemididae to occur in the Old World; fossil relatives are known from the African mainland. Its closest living relatives belong to the genera *Podocnemis* and *Peltocephalus*, which occur in South America.

Erymnochelys madagascariensis (Grandidier, 1867)
(**Madagascar Big-Headed Turtle**)

Identification: This is the largest freshwater turtle species in Madagascar. The wide dorso-ventrally flattened carapace is olive to gray-brown and has a length of 43.5 cm to as much as 50 cm. Young turtles show growth lines on their scutes, but the scutes of the adults tend to be worn smooth over time. This species has a *solid plastron* (no hinge) with a *short intergular scute* that does not completely separate the gular scutes. The pointed head is brown or reddish brown with a lighter colored chin and jaw area, and the limbs are similar to the carapace in color. *One single barbel* extends from the chin. *Erymnochelys* has four claws on its hind legs as opposed to five for *Pelomedusa* and *Pelusios*. **Remarks**: This is mainly a river species but may occur in lakes, especially where its river habitat has been lost. **Conservation Status**: The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species classifies the Big-Headed Turtle as Endangered, but it probably warrants listing as Critically Endangered, because its populations are increasingly threatened and rapidly declining.

FAMILY PELOMEDUSIDAE

The Pelomedusidae Cope, 1868 is the other family of freshwater turtles in this region that are commonly known as side-neck turtles. They occur in Madagascar and the Seychelles, and are otherwise known only from the African region. There are two genera (*Pelomedusa* and *Pelusios*) found here, with four species in all. They are medium-sized, usually no larger than about 25–30 cm in carapace length, and are found naturally throughout Madagascar and the Seychelles. They have been introduced on Mauritius. Depending on the species, they can be found in rivers, lakes, floodplains, and even in roadside puddles. All pelomedusid turtle species are characterized by possessing five claws on each hind foot and a large intergular scute that completely separates the gular scutes on the plastron. All species in this region possess one pair of barbels on the chin.

***Pelomedusa*: The Helmeted Turtle**

This genus with just a single species and occurs from Sénégal east to Ethiopia and south through South Africa. It is also found in southern Saudi Arabia and southern Yemen, as well as on Madagascar.

Pelomedusa subrufa (Lacépède, 1788)
(**Helmeted Turtle**)

Identification: The Helmeted Turtle has a dorso-ventrally flattened oval carapace, which is usually brown to olive in color (uniform or speckled). Carapace lengths are often under 20 cm; there are reports of carapace lengths up to 32 cm with the largest individuals being found in Madagascar. The plastron is yellow or cream-colored. The upper surfaces of head, neck, and limbs are brown to olive, while the jaws, chin, paired barbels and throat are cream to yellow. *Pelomedusa* can be distinguished from *Pelusios* by its rigid plastron (no movable hinge between the pectoral and abdominal scutes), and from *Erymnochelys* by its smaller size, blunt head, its five claws on the hind foot (*Erymnochelys* has four), and the presence of a long intergular scute that completely separates the gular scutes. **Remarks**: In areas where these turtles are numerous, they have been reported to work in groups to catch large prey. **Conservation Status**: No research has been done on this species in Madagascar and it is not on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

***Pelusios*: African Hinged Terrapins or African Mud Turtles**

The eighteen species of the genus *Pelusios* are found in Africa, Madagascar, and the Seychelles, and populations have been introduced to the islands of Mauritius, Cape Verde, Diego Garcia, Gloriosa and Martinique. Three of these species are found in Madagascar and the surrounding Islands. They include *Pelusios castanoides, Pelusios subniger,* and *Pelusios seychellensis* (this last now considered extinct). *Pelusios* can be distinguished from *Pelomedusa* by its possession of a movable plastron which hinges between the pectoral and abdominal scutes, allowing the turtle to close its shell like a box, and by its more elongated oval carapace.

Pelusios castanoides Hewitt, 1931
(**Yellow-bellied Mud Turtle**)

Identification: This is the larger of the two *Pelusios* species that occur on Madagascar, and the largest of the three that occur on the Seychelle Islands. Adults reach a carapace length up to 27 cm. The carapace is olive, blackish-brown, or yellowish, with slightly serrated posterior marginal scutes. The hinged plastron is yellow, as the common name suggests. The head is blackish-brown with a slight yellow vermiculation and the neck and limbs are yellow. The upper jaw has two cusps. The forearms bear large transversely-widened scales. The Yellow-bellied Mud Turtle comprises two subspecies, *P. c. castanoides* and *P. c. intergularis*, distinguished largely by differences in the seams between the long narrow intergular and gular scutes; in *P. c. castanoides* the intergular scute has a straight contact seam with each flanking gular scute, while in *P. c. intergularis* the seam is drawn into an elongated ‘S’ shape. **Remarks**: This species is nocturnal and usually lives in lowland rivers. **Conservation Status**: The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species classifies the Yellow-bellied Mud Turtle as Least Concern, although the Seychelles subspecies (*P. c. intergularis*) is listed as Critically Endangered.

Pelusios subniger (Lacépède, 1788)
(**East African Black Mud Turtle**)

Identification: Carapace length is up to 20 cm in adults. The carapace is dark brown to black with rounded posterior marginal scutes. The hinged plastron is yellow with dark triangular patches at the seams and bears a short and wide intergular scute. The head is brown (sometimes with fine black spots) and the neck and limbs are gray to black. The upper jaw is smooth. The forearms bear only small scales. The East African Mud Turtle comprises two subspecies, *P. s. subniger* and *P. s. parietalis*, distinguished largely by differences in head scales. **Remarks**: These turtles are nocturnal foragers and are found in coastal marshes. **Conservation Status**: The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species classifies the Black Mud Turtle as Least Concern, although the Seychelles subspecies *P. s. parietalis* is listed as Critically Endangered.

Pelusios seychellensis (Siebenrock, 1906)
(**Seychelles Mud Turtle**)

Identification: Carapace length reaches 16.5 cm in adults. The carapace is black, with rounded posterior marginal scutes. The plastron is completely black or black with a small, medial blotch of yellow along the hinge; the hinge is located at the level of the middle of marginal 5 (in contrast to the other *Pelusios* species in the Seychelles, which have the hinge a little farther back, level with the posterior part of marginal 5). The head is brown with orange-yellow vermiculation, and the neck and limbs are yellowish brown. There are 8-10 large, transversely-widened scales on the front of each yellow-brown forearm. The intergular scute is long and narrow. **Remarks**: This species is known only from three specimens collected in 1895; searches have failed to locate it in recent years and it may be extinct, but there remains a possibility that some individuals may remain in isolated locations. **Conservation Status**: The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species classifies the Seychelles Mud Turtle as Extinct.

FAMILY TESTUDINIDAE

The Testudinidae Batsch, 1788 is the family of all the living tortoises. Tortoises are terrestrial, have elephant-like hind legs, and a dome-shaped carapace. There are four genera (*Astrochelys*, *Dipsochelys* [both formerly *Geochelone*], *Pyxis*, and *Kinixys*), with five species on Madagascar, two in the granitic Seychelles, and one on Aldabra. Carapace lengths of these species range from 13 cm in *Pyxis planicauda* (the smallest at 670 g) to 138 cm for *Dipsochelys hololissa* (the largest at 304 kg). All tortoises in Madagascar are found along the western coast, from the extreme north to the southernmost tip of the island. Tortoises tend to undergo periods of dormancy during the dry season and are more active during wetter periods. Field identification should be fairly easy in Madagascar and Aldabra, since genus differences are substantial, and similar species are geographically separated.

***Pyxis:* small Malagasy Tortoises**

This genus is found only in Madagascar. These tortoises are geographically distinct, with *P. arachnoides* occurring in the southwest and *P. planicauda* occurring in a small area in central western Madagascar.

Pyxis arachnoides Bell, 1827
(**Madagascar Spider Tortoise**)

Identification: The carapace is up to 15 cm long. Spider tortoises are characterized by a complex, yellow web pattern on a dark carapace, thus giving the tortoise its name. The head is black with yellow speckles. Three subspecies of *Pyxis arachnoides* are currently recognized: *Pyxis a. arachnoides* has a nearly uniform yellow plastron with a movable hinge; *P. a. brygooi* has some black pigment on the plastron with a non-functional hinge; and *P. a. oblonga* has some black pigment or blotches on the plastron, and the hinge is highly movable. **Remarks**: During the cool season these tortoises take refuge by hiding or burying themselves under vegetation. Sympatric with *Astrochelys radiata*. **Conservation Status**: The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species classifies the Spider Tortoise as Vulnerable.

Pyxis planicauda (Grandidier, 1867)
(**Madagascar Flat-tailed Tortoise**)

Identification: The carapace is up to 13 cm long, and they weigh up to 670 grams. Juveniles are bright black and chestnut with yellow bands running across the scutes; the carapace of the adults is usually gray, but some keep the juvenile coloration. **Remarks**: These tortoises are inactive during the dry season, when they stay hidden under the forest litter (aestivation or summer hibernation). **Conservation Status**: The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species classifies the Flat-tailed Tortoise as Endangered, but it probably warrants listing as Critically Endangered, because its populations are small, increasingly threatened, and evidently declining.

***Astrochelys*: medium-sized to large Malagasy Tortoises**

This genus is endemic to Madagascar and accounts for the two largest species of tortoises occurring there (*A. radiata* and *A. yniphora*). They have highly domed carapaces and are geographically distinct, occurring in the southwest and the northwest of the country respectively.

Astrochelys (= Geochelone) radiata (Shaw, 1802)
(**Radiated Tortoise**)

Identification: This tortoise has a highly domed carapace up to 40 cm long, and weighs up to 14 kg. The carapace is black, with yellow to cream-colored stripes of varying width and number radiating outward from the pale center of each scute. As the tortoise ages the carapace can become more yellow and lose its radiating stripes because of wear to the shell. The plastron is yellow with black triangles. The head, neck, limbs and tail are yellow to cream-colored, with dark grey on top of the head and neck. **Remarks**: Despite the fact that this species is quite plentiful in many areas and has enjoyed a taboo [*fady*] by locals against touching or eating it, pressure from outside collection and habitat loss is taking its toll. It is sympatric with *Pyxis arachnoides*. Feral populations exist in Mauritius. It is being introduced as an ecological replacement for some of the extinct Mascarene tortoises (genus *Cylindraspis*): Radiated Tortoises have been released in the Francois Leguat Reserve on Rodrigues, while re-wilding studies are currently being carried out on Round Island. **Conservation Status**: The Radiated Tortoise is classified as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, but it probably warrants listing as Endangered because populations are increasingly threatened and declining.

Astrochelys (= Geochelone) yniphora (Vaillant, 1885)
(**Ploughshare Tortoise**)

Identification: This large tortoise has a highly domed carapace up to 45 cm long. Adults generally have a uniform light brown carapace with pale limbs, neck, and head. Younger tortoises also have light brown carapaces, but the seams around the scutes are distinctly darker brown. The unique character that gives this tortoise its name is the large upturned projection extending from the front of the plastron, which is an enlarged gular scute often used in combats between males. **Remarks**: It is estimated that there are only 100 to 400 individuals in the wild, which makes this tortoise the rarest in the world. Ongoing breeding and reintroduction programs by the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust are helping the recovery of this species. **Conservation Status**: The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species classifies the Ploughshare Tortoise as Endangered, but it probably warrants listing as Critically Endangered, because populations are very small and under continuing threat.

***Kinixys*: Hinge-back Tortoises**

Species of the genus *Kinixys* range from 15.5 cm (*K. natalensis*) to 32.3 cm (*K. erosa*). The genus is found in western, central and southern Africa as well as on Madagascar. There are four to six recognized species. Only one of these, *K. belliana*, occurs outside of mainland Africa; it occurs in Madagascar, and it is widely believed that this is the result of human introduction. The species of this genus are called hinge-backed because they are the only extant turtles to have a moveable hinge on their carapace.

Kinixys belliana (Gray, 1831)
(**Bell’s Hinge-back Tortoise**)

Identification: Bell’s Hinge-back tortoise reaches up to 23 cm in carapace length and 2.2 kg weight. The coloration of the carapace is highly variable in adults but is more uniform straw-color for juveniles. The plastron of adults is often entirely horn-colored, or may have black blotches. **Remarks**: Bell’s hinge-backed Tortoise is crepuscular, that is they are active and foraging in the morning (6:30-10:00 hrs) and again in the evening (16:30-18:00 hrs), thus avoiding the extreme heat of the day. **Conservation Status**: The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species does not include *Kinixys belliana*.

***Dipsochelys*: Indian Ocean Giant Tortoises**

Until recently, the genus *Dipsochelys* [or *Aldabrachelys*] was included in the pantropical genus *Geochelone*. It is now considered a distinct genus restricted to Madagascar and the Seychelle Islands. These giant tortoises are most notable for the specialized nasal region of the skull associated with an unusually well-developed ability to draw water up through the nose; adaptations that evolved in the arid regions of Madagascar. The two Madagascar species became extinct some 750 years ago, but four species survived in the Seychelle Islands until one went extinct there recently. There remains controversy about the taxonomy of the surviving Indian Ocean Giant Tortoises , with some scientific authorities recognizing the three forms listed here as distinct species, but others recognizing only the Aldabra tortoise as a single variable species with different morphotypes.

Dipsochelys dussumieri (Gray, 1831) **(**aka **– *Geochelone gigantea*** or ***Aldabrachelys gigantea*)**
(Aldabra Giant Tortoise)

Identification: This is the most familiar of the giant tortoises, being kept in captivity around the world and with a robust population surviving in the wild. Adult males reach 123 cm and females 89 cm carapace length. It is usually a regularly-domed, dark grey to black species, although large, old males in captivity may become more elongate and dark brown. The body is uniformly black. Hatchlings are also uniform in color, usually black, rarely pale brown. **Remarks**: This species is naturally restricted to Aldabra atoll and nearby coral islands in the Seychelles group. Although near extinction in the early 1900s, it now numbers some 100,000 individuals. There are also introduced populations on other islands in the Seychelles as well as in the Mascarenes, where it is being introduced as an ecological replacement for some of the extinct Mascarene tortoises (genus *Cylindraspis*). Tortoises have been released in the Francois Leguat Reserve on Rodrigues Island, and re-wilding studies are currently being carried out on Round Island. **Conservation Status**: The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species classifies the Aldabra Giant Tortoise as Vulnerable.

Dipsochelys hololissa (Gunther, 1877)
(aka – ***Aldabrachelys hololissa***)
(Seychelles Giant Tortoise)

Identification: This is the largest of the extant Indian Ocean giant tortoises, with males reaching 138 cm, and females 95 cm carapace length. It is a domed species, superficially resembling the Aldabra Giant Tortoise. The dark blackish-brown carapace is domed but is broader than that of the Aldabra species and is flattened on top. The vertebral scutes are raised into distinctive bosses. Hatchlings of this species are pale gray, darkening to black after a few days. **Remarks**: This species inhabited the granitic islands of the Seychelles, but wild populations were exterminated by hunting in the 1800s. Six adults with the characteristics of this species were recently discovered in captivity, and a captive breeding program has had some initial success. **Conservation Status**: Treated by the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species as part of the Aldabra Giant Tortoise (Dipsochelys dussumieri).

Dipsochelys arnoldi Bour, 1982
(aka – ***Aldabrachelys arnoldi***)
(Arnold’s Giant Tortoise)

Identification: This giant tortoise has a highly distinctive appearance, being elongate with a raised opening to the shell. This ‘saddle-backed’ shell may be raised at the front or may descend. Females are more domed than males. Both sexes show a distinct depression on the 1st or 2nd costal scutes. This, along with some internal anatomical characters, is associated with the feeding adaptations of this specialist, browsing species. The carapace and body are uniformly black; hatchlings are pale yellow-brown with dark brown margins to the scutes, darkening to black after 1–2 weeks. It is slightly smaller than the other giant tortoises, males reaching 96 cm and females 85 cm carapace length. **Remarks**: This species used to occur on the granitic islands of the Seychelles, but wild populations were exterminated by hunting in the 1800s. Six adults with the characteristics of this species have been discovered in captivity, and a captive breeding program has been set up. Currently, five adults have been reintroduced to the wild, and a number of juveniles have bred. **Conservation Status**: Included on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species Treated by the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species as part of the Aldabra Giant Tortoise (Dipsochelys dussumieri).

FAMILY CHELONIIDAE

All marine turtles, with the exception of the Leatherback Turtle *Dermochelys coriacea*, belong to the family *Cheloniidae* Oppel, 1811. In this family there are six living species, four of which inhabit the Western Indian Ocean.

Chelonia mydas (Linnaeus, 1758)
(**Green Turtle**)

Identification: The Green Turtle reaches 1.3 m carapace length, and can weigh up to 230 kg. It is easily identified by the combination of four pairs of costal scutes and a single pair of prefrontal scales between the eyes. **Remarks**: The green turtle is the most widespread of the marine turtles, being found wherever sea temperatures are above 20°C. They nest throughout the year in Madagascar and the Seychelles, particularly on the off-shore islands to the north of Madagascar, Aldabra atoll and the other atolls of the Seychelles. Small numbers nest in southern Madagascar and on the other islands. Juveniles are carnivorous, feeding on marine invertebrates, but become increasingly herbivorous. Adults feed mainly on sea-grass, although they also occasionally eat invertebrates. **Conservation Status**: The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species classifies the green turtle as Endangered. It has suffered dramatic population declines due to excessive human consumption of eggs and adults. This is now controlled in the Seychelles, although poaching does continue.

Eretmochelys imbricata (Linnaeus, 1766)
(**Hawksbill Turtle**)

Identification: The Hawksbill reaches 1 m carapace length and usually weighs less than 60 kg. The upper jaw is distinctly narrow and slightly hooked (giving rise to its common name). It is most reliably identified by the combination of its two pairs of prefrontal scales between the eyes and the fixed arrangement of five vertebral scutes and four pairs of costals on the normally serrated and flamed brown carapace. **Remarks**: The hawksbill turtle is found in coral reef areas of the tropics, and rarely occurs in the open ocean. The Western Indian Ocean population is exceptional in being the only sea turtle population to nest during the day. It nests from September to April, mainly on the granitic islands of the Seychelles, with small numbers also in the northwest and south of Madagascar and the other islands. Juveniles are herbivorous, but adults also feed on a wide variety of invertebrates. The hooked beak enables the turtles to feed on encrusting marine invertebrates, such as corals and sponges. **Conservation Status**: The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species classifies the Hawksbill as Critically Endangered. The beautifully patterned carapace scutes are the source of ‘tortoiseshell’ (*bekko*) and, until recently, the species was heavily exploited throughout its range. Effective protection in the Western Indian Ocean has resulted in significant population increases. It is currently threatened by development of the nesting beaches.

Caretta caretta (Linnaeus, 1758)
(**Loggerhead Turtle**)

Identification: Loggerheads reach 1.2 m carapace length, and can weigh up to 250 kg. It has a robust head, a distinctive arrangement of *five* costal scutes and five vertebrals, and its shell and head are characteristically reddish-brown. **Remarks**: The loggerhead is found in tropical, subtropical and sometimes in temperate waters of all oceans. From October to December it breeds in small numbers in two sites in the south of Madagascar (some 100 nests per year), and it is occasionally seen in the waters of the Seychelles. The jaws are powerful, enabling it to crush mollusk shells. It also eats crustaceans, echinoderms, fish, and algae. **Conservation Status**: The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species classifies the Loggerhead as Endangered. It is threatened by development on its nest sites, incidental capture in fisheries, and egg harvesting.

Lepidochelys olivacea (Eschscholtz, 1829)
(**Olive Ridley Turtle**)

Identification: This species is one of the smallest of the marine turtles, reaching 75 cm in length and weighing 45 kg. It is characterized by its irregular arrangement of carapace scutes, including *at least five* pairs of costal scutes and six vertebrals, and its distinct olive-grey coloration. **Remarks**: The Olive Ridley is found in the coastal waters of all the major oceans. Small numbers nest in Madagascar, but only three individuals have ever been recorded in the Seychelles (all in 2007). It feeds on marine invertebrates and vegetation. **Conservation Status**: The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species classifies the Olive Ridley as Endangered, but it may soon be downlisted to Vulnerable due to substantial recent recovery of some populations.

FAMILY DERMOCHELYIDAE

The family Dermochelyidae Fitzinger, 1843 has just one living species, the Leatherback Turtle.

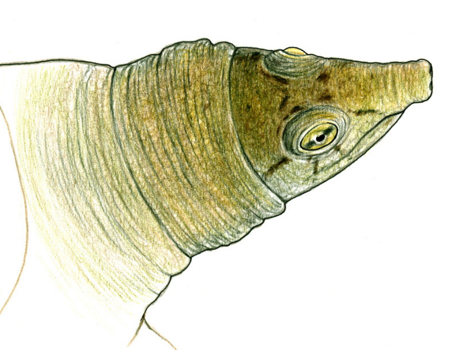
Dermochelys coriacea (Vandelli, 1761)
(**Leatherback Turtle**)

Identification: The leatherback is the largest and most distinctive marine turtle. It can be over 1.5 m shell length and weigh up to 950 kg. It has a ridged carapace consisting of small bones covered with thin black skin. It is the most widespread and pelagic of the marine turtles and occurs throughout the oceans, even entering sub-polar waters. This species does not nest on Madagascar or any of the region’s islands, but small numbers have been recorded near Madagascar and the Seychelles. **Remarks**: It is highly specialized, feeding mainly on jellyfish, although it will occasionally also take other marine invertebrates. **Conservation Status**: The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species classifies the leatherback as Critically Endangered. It is threatened by disturbance of its nesting beaches, incidental take in high-seas fisheries, and by marine pollution (it eats plastic bags, mistaking them for jellyfish).

INTRODUCED SPECIES

Red-eared Slider
Trachemys scripta elegans

Chinese Softshell
Pelodiscus sinensis



There are two species of introduced freshwater turtles that occur in the Seychelles: the North American Red-eared Slider (*Trachemys scripta elegans*) and the Chinese Softshell Turtle (*Pelodiscus sinensis*). Both are easily distinguishable from the native species described and illustrated in this guide. The Red-eared Slider is a medium-sized species (to 28 cm carapace length) with a distinctive patch of red on each side of the head. The Chinese Softshell reaches up to 25 cm in length and, as the name implies, it has a tough, leathery skin covering a reduced bony carapace, instead of the usual solid bony turtle shell covered with scutes. These turtles’ long necks and snorkel-like noses allow them to stretch up to the water surface to breathe without having to leave their hiding place.