

Queensland Marine Turtle Field Guide





Queensland's coast has some of the most important marine turtle nesting sites in the world. Six species of threatened marine turtles nest along our idyllic beaches. These rookeries support significant nesting populations of green, loggerhead, hawksbill, flatback and olive ridley turtles.

One of the most serious threats to nesting turtle populations is the destruction of their eggs and hatchlings by predators. Feral pigs have been found to be responsible for destroying over 70 per cent of turtle nests at nesting beaches on Cape York, continued loss at this rate is not sustainable. Other predators include foxes, dogs, dingoes and goannas.

To reduce predation on marine turtle nests and help the recovery of threatened marine turtle populations, the Australian and Queensland Governments have together invested nearly \$7million in the Nest to Ocean Turtle Protection Program. The program supports predator control and turtle monitoring at priority nesting beaches. It also assists Traditional Owner and

community groups to increase their participation in these important activities.

This field guide has been developed as part of the Nest to Ocean Turtle Protection Program. Correctly identifying marine turtles, and the animals that prey on their nests, provides valuable information about turtle populations and shows where predator control activities are most needed.



Front Cover: Turtle hatchlings © *K Jorgen*

Inside Cover: Steven Marpoondin (APN Cape York) © *Brian Ross*

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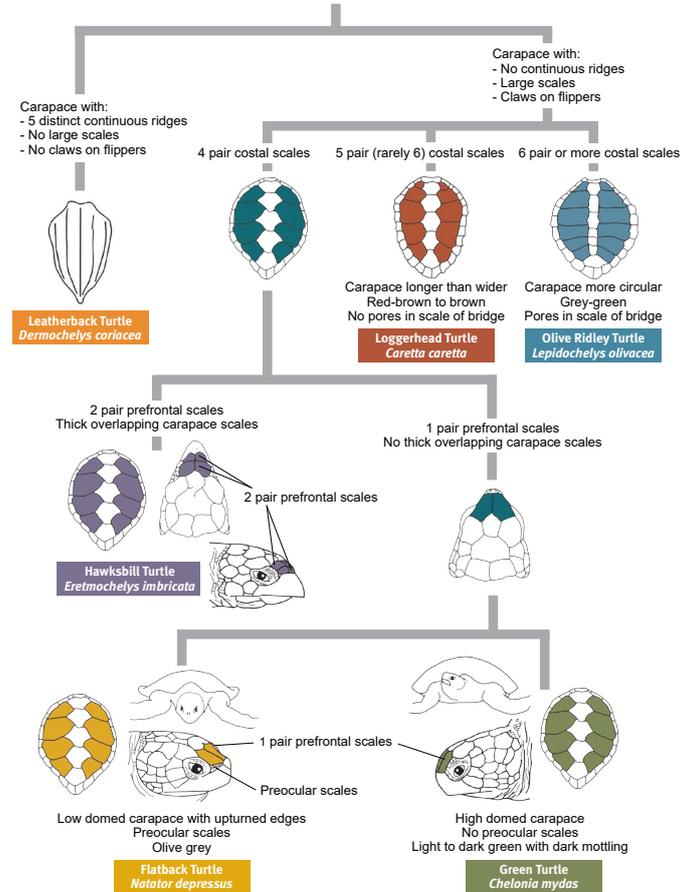
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Indo-Pacific Marine Turtles



Photographs of Adults and Hatchlings



© Colin Limpus

Green Turtle *Chelonia mydas*



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Loggerhead Turtle *Caretta caretta*



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© Bill Curisinger

Olive Ridley Turtle *Lepidochelys olivacea*



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Flatback Turtle *Natator depressus*



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© Brian Ross

Hawksbill Turtle *Eretmochelys imbricata*



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Leatherback Turtle *Dermochelys coriacea*



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Alternating Stroke

Flipper marks alternate



Track Features

Early morning monitoring is best as tracks will deteriorate over time. The clarity of tracks can be affected by flipper damage, terrain, sand moisture, tides, wind and weather. Look for several key identifying features, along different sections of track.

The key track identification features are:

- Stroke Style
- Track Width
- Hind Flipper Marks
- Front Flipper Marks
- Plastron Drag
- Tail Drag



Loggerhead

- Track Width
Less than 1 meter
- Hind Flipper
- Front Flipper
- Plastron Drag
- Tail Drag
Not present



Hawksbill

- Track Width
Approx. 70-80 cm
- Hind Flipper
- Front Flipper
- Plastron Drag
- Tail Drag

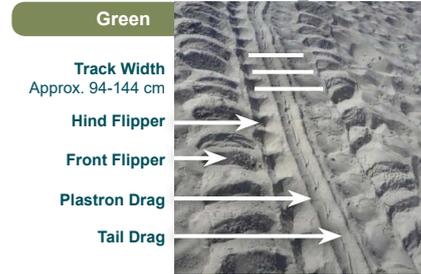


Olive Ridley

- Track Width
Approx. 70-80 cm
- Hind Flipper
- Front Flipper
- Plastron Drag
- Tail Drag

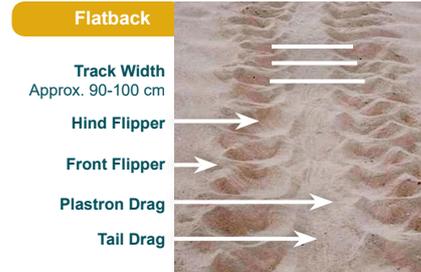
Breast Stroke

Flipper marks side by side



Green

- Track Width
Approx. 94-144 cm
- Hind Flipper
- Front Flipper
- Plastron Drag
- Tail Drag



Flatback

- Track Width
Approx. 90-100 cm
- Hind Flipper
- Front Flipper
- Plastron Drag
- Tail Drag



Leatherback

- Track Width
Greater than 2 meters
- Hind Flipper
- Front Flipper
- Plastron Drag
Not Visible
- Tail Drag

Track Direction

Clues to determine track direction:
Turtles push sand backwards, the higher sand mound is at the back.

If track overlaps, the top track is the returning track.
Sand is always thrown back over the emerging track when digging.

Measuring Width

Measure from outer edge of track. This may be the front or rear flipper, depending on species.

Guidelines on how to **Record** data and implement **Action** during a basic beach survey (see page 9). These may be tailored to suit individual monitoring programs and implemented in accordance with training.

Record

Species Identification: Use track or sighting to identify species.

GPS Nest Location: Note GPS coordinates & waypoint number.

False Crawl: Track with no nest.

Extent of Damage: Partial or complete destruction of nest.

Evidence of Predation: Diggings, tracks, sighting.

Predator Identification: Use track or sighting to identify species.

Hatchlings Emerged: Yes, hatchling tracks or sighting.

Tag Information: Note tag ID number and its location on turtle.

Curved carapace length (CCL): From front (where skin and carapace meet), down midline to back edge of carapace (over tail).

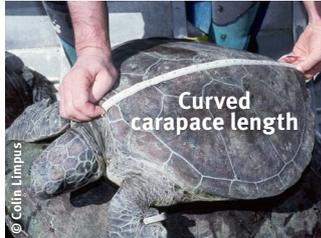
Action

Photograph: To verify species and/or nest damage/predation.

Mark Nest: Install marker to indicate nest location (if required).

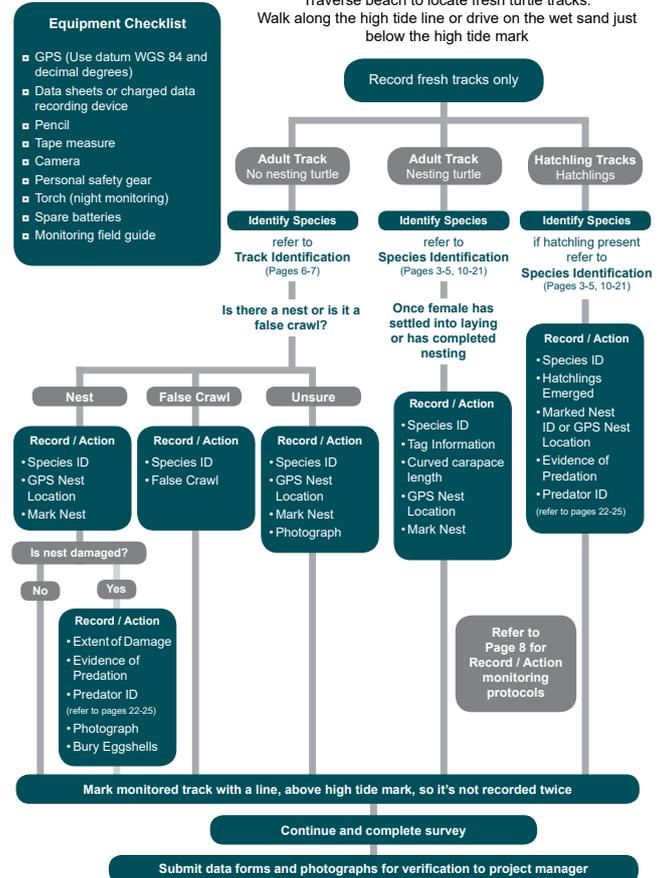
Bury Eggshells and Mark Track: To avoid record duplication; mark track line above the high tide mark.

Submit Data: Project manager to submit data to the relevant Queensland Department.



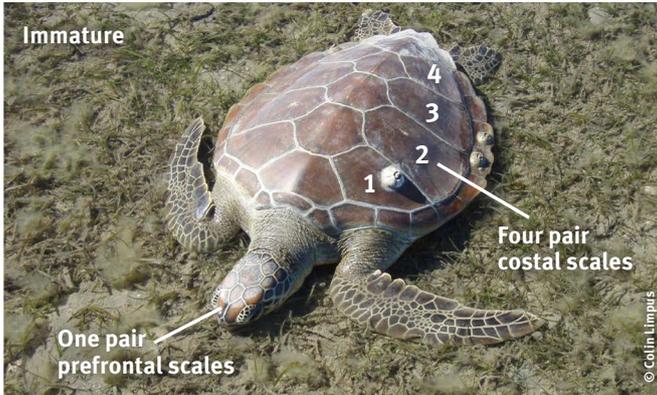
Basic Beach Survey

Traverse beach to locate fresh turtle tracks.
Walk along the high tide line or drive on the wet sand just below the high tide mark



Green Turtle, *Chelonia mydas*

Status: Nationally Vulnerable, Queensland Vulnerable



Key Identification Features



Breast Stroke Track



Carapace Scales



4 Pair Costal Scales



1 Pair Prefrontal Scales



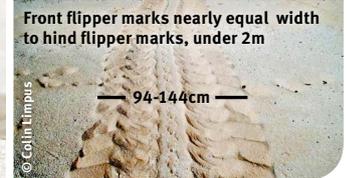
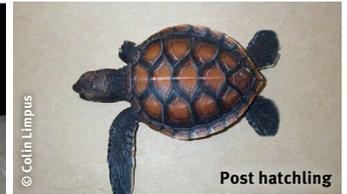
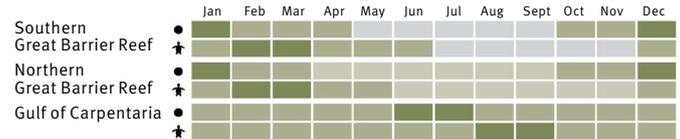
Qld Nesting Sites

Adult: Carapace is a high dome. Colour is light to dark green with dark mottling. Plastron colour is cream-white.

Hatchling: Black-dark brown with white margins, white plastron.

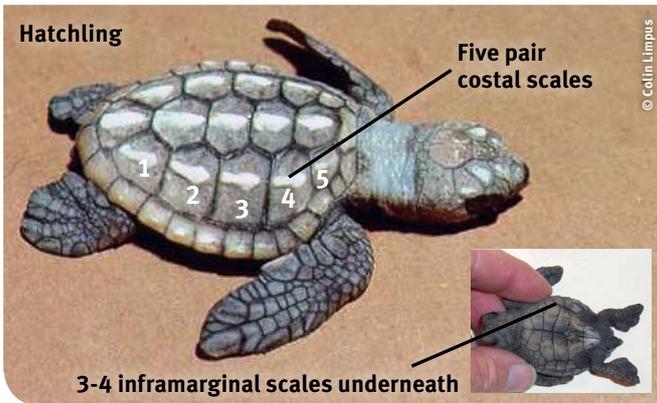
Breeding Season

Peak = ■ Nesting = ● Hatchlings = ★

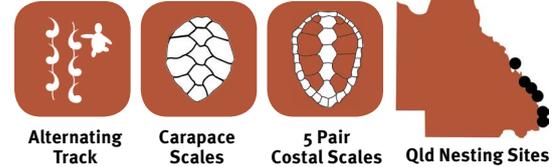


Loggerhead Turtle, *Caretta caretta*

Status: Nationally Endangered, Queensland Endangered



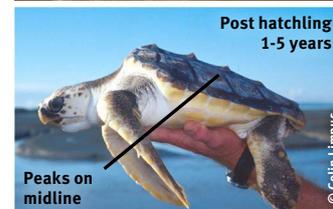
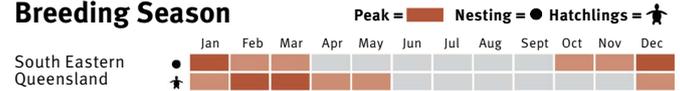
Key Identification Features



Adult: Carapace is longer than wider. Colour is red-brown to brown. Plastron colour is yellow.

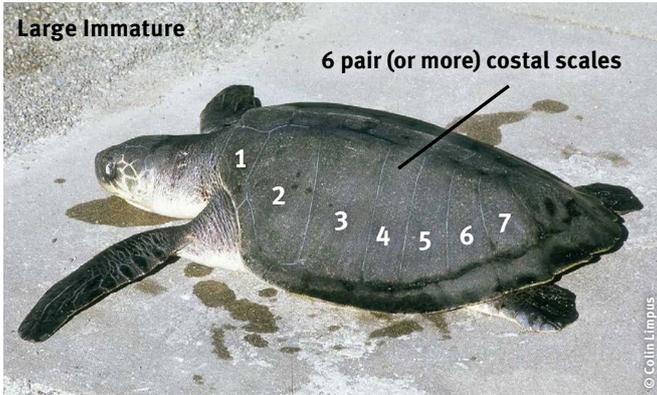
Hatchling: Dark brown with 5 costal scales and dark plastron with 3-4 inframarginal scales.

Breeding Season



Olive Ridley Turtle, *Lepidochelys olivacea*

Status: Nationally Endangered, Queensland Endangered



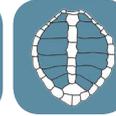
Key Identification Features



Alternating Track



Carapace Scales



6 Pair (or more) Costal Scales

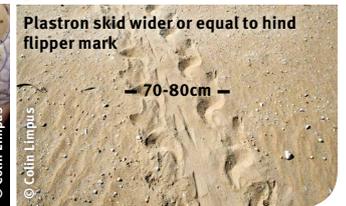
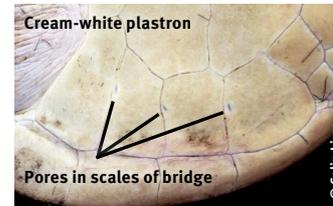
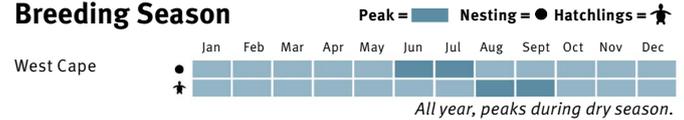


Qld Nesting Sites

Adult: Carapace is circular. Colour is grey-green with no conspicuous markings. Plastron colour is cream-white.

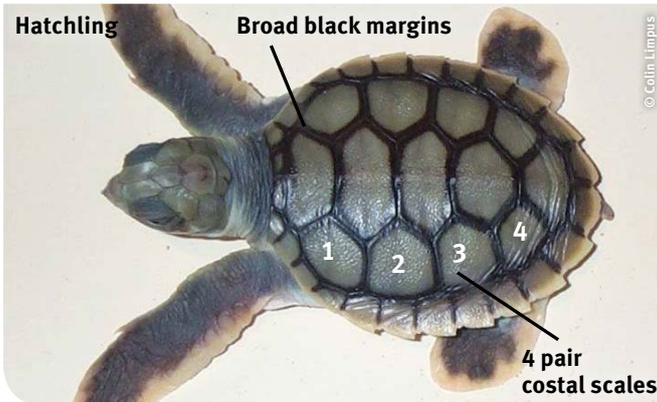
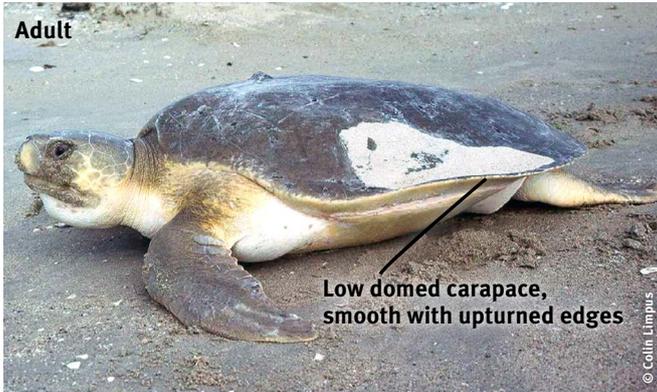
Hatchling: Charcoal-grey/black-brown on both sides.

Breeding Season



Flatback Turtle, *Natator depressus*

Status: Nationally Vulnerable, Queensland Vulnerable



Key Identification Features



Breast Stroke Track



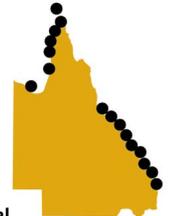
Carapace Scales



4 Pair Costal Scales



1 Pair Prefrontal Scales



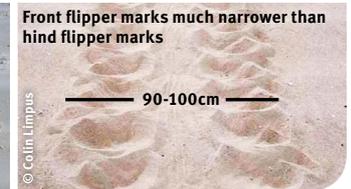
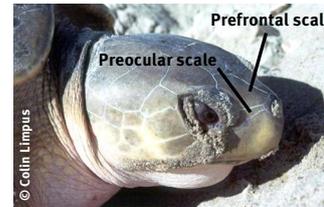
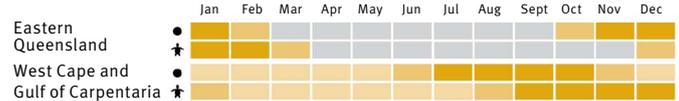
Qld Nesting Sites

Adult: Carapace is a low dome, smooth with upturned edges. Colour is grey to pale-grey or olive. Preocular scales. Plastron is creamy-yellow.

Hatchling: Olive-green, scales with broad black margin. Plastron is a solid white.

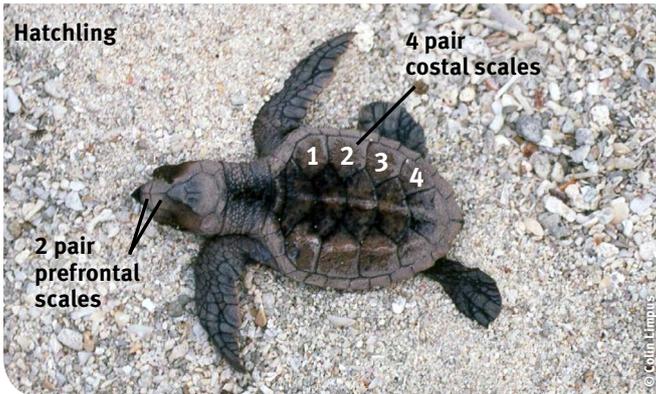
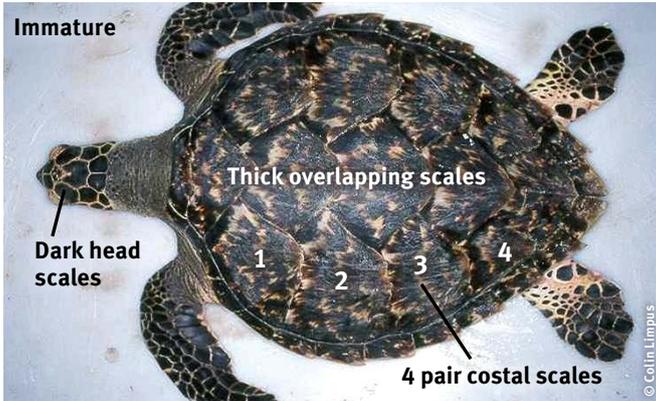
Breeding Season

Peak = ■ Nesting = ● Hatchlings = ✎



Hawksbill Turtle, *Eretmochelys imbricata*

Status: Nationally Vulnerable, Queensland Vulnerable



Key Identification Features



Alternating Track



Scales Thick Overlapping



4 Pair Costal Scales



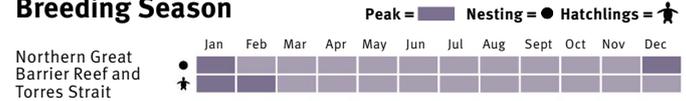
2 Pair Prefrontal Scales



Adult: Carapace has thick overlapping scales. Colour is olive green or brown and is extensively variegated with brown/black markings. Adult plastron is yellow or white with black spots.

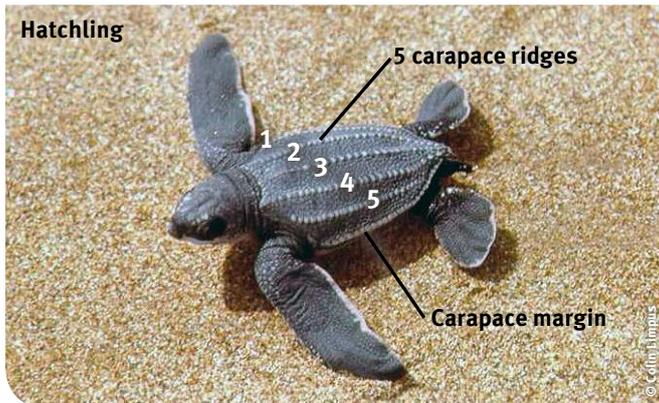
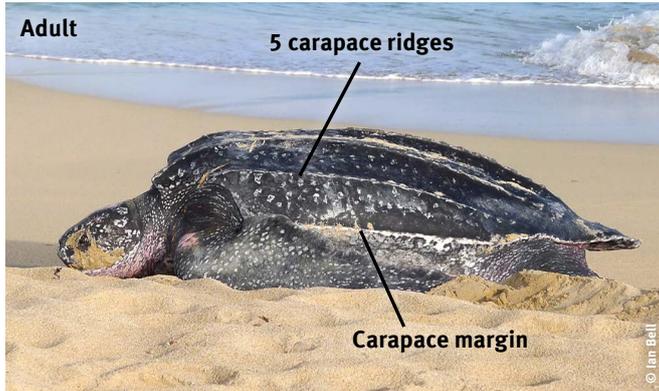
Hatchlings: Dark brown.

Breeding Season



Leatherback Turtle, *Dermochelys coriacea*

Status: Nationally Vulnerable, Queensland Endangered



Key Identification Features



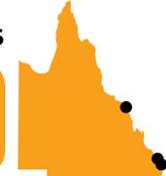
Breast Stroke Track



No Carapace Scales



5 Carapace Ridges

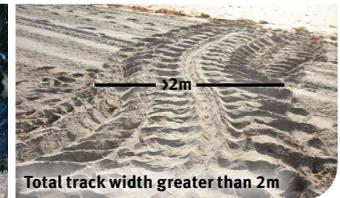
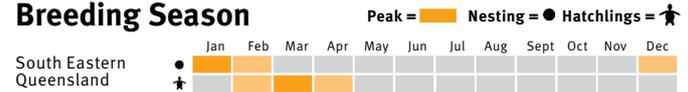


Qld Nesting Sites

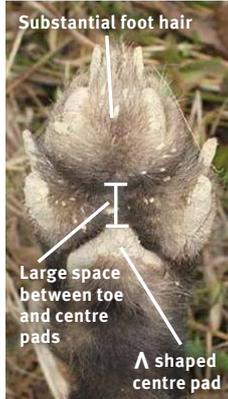
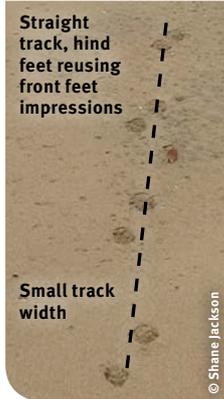
Adult: Carapace is long and pointed. Long ridges run down the length of carapace. Colour is a uniform black-brown. Soft leathery skin.

Hatchlings: Finely beaded, black with white markings on the carapace ridges and plastron.

Breeding Season

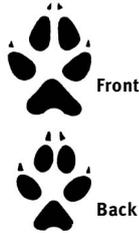


Fox



Track Identification Features

- Front foot is larger than back foot.
- Elongated oval shaped claws, may not show on track.
- Substantial foot hair, sometimes visible on track impression.
- Large space between centre pad and toe pads.
- Centre pad has a distinct inverted V shape.
- Tracks are straight, hind feet reusing front feet impressions.
- Small track width.



Management Options

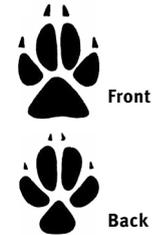
- Den detection and fumigation
- Ground shooting
- Trapping
- Baiting
- Exclusion fencing
- Nest protection (cages)

Wild Dog or Dingo



Track Identification Features

- Front foot is larger than back foot.
- Little or no foot hair in between pads.
- Small space between centre pad and toe pads.
- Centre pad almost triangular.
- Foot imprint rounded.
- Tracks are straight but not as neat and aligned as a fox's track.



Management Options

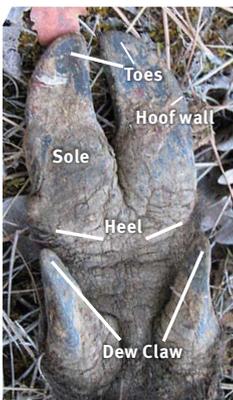
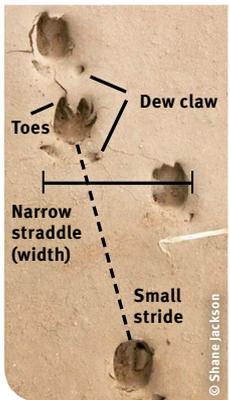
- Ground shooting
- Leg hold trapping
- Baiting (1080 or strychnine)
- Exclusion fencing
- Nest protection (cages)

Feral Pig

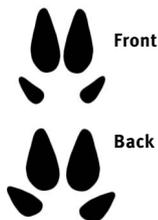


Track Identification Features

- Back feet slightly larger than front.
- Foot print consists of a two toe hoof and two dew claws.
- Dew claws distinctive identification feature but may not be present in harder soils.
- Small stride and narrow straddle.



Dew claw visible in sand impression



Management Options

- Ground/aerial shooting
- Trapping
- Baiting
- Exclusion fencing
- Nest protection (cages)

Goanna

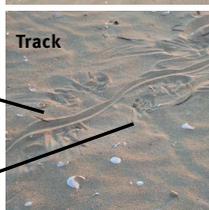


Track Identification Features

- Both walk and run tracks have alternating foot prints.
- Trail drag usually visible.

Nest Predation Identification

- Goannas burrow into nest at an angle from the side of the nest, not vertical from directly above.
- The burrow is typically domed shape, not circular.



Management Options

- Trapping
- Exclusion fencing
- Nest protection (cages)

Principles of Pest Management

Managing pest animals requires long-term control programs and a variety of approaches. Effective programs are designed around these eight principles:

1. INTEGRATION

Ensuring pest management programs are an integral part of the management of natural areas.

2. PUBLIC AWARENESS

Raising public awareness and knowledge of pests to increase community and individual participation in pest management.

3. COMMITMENT

Gaining a commitment to long term programs by the community, industry groups and government entities.

4. CONSULTATION AND PARTNERSHIP

Establishing partnerships between local communities, industry groups, state government agencies and local governments to achieve a collaborative approach.

5. PLANNING

Consistent planning at local, regional, state and national levels ensures combined resources target the agreed priorities.

6. PREVENTION

Preventing the spread of pests, and using early detection and intervention to control pests.

7. BEST PRACTICE

Using ecologically and socially responsible pest management practices to protect the environment and natural resources.

8. IMPROVEMENT

Research and regular monitoring and evaluating of programs helps improve and refine pest management practices.

Threats to Marine Turtles

Marine turtles are long-lived and slow to mature. Depending on the species they can take anywhere between 8–50 years to reach breeding age. Due to the range of threats, at their different life stages, it is thought that only 1 in 1000 hatchlings will survive to adulthood and then return to the beach to nest. For this reason it is critical to address the range of threats throughout their lifecycle.

Threats include:

- Native and introduced animals predated turtle eggs and hatchlings.
- Vehicles compacting turtle nests or forming tyre ruts that trap hatchlings.
- Humans taking turtle eggs.
- Bycatch of marine turtles in fisheries.
- Marine debris.
- Impact to breeding habitat from coastal development and artificial lighting.
- Deteriorating water quality.
- Unknown and possibly unsustainable levels of turtle harvesting, in and outside Australian waters.

What you can do:

- Support the management of predators such as pigs, dogs and foxes around turtle nesting beaches.
- Report turtle nests and predated turtle nests to your local ranger.
- Keep your dogs on a lead when walking on the beach during nesting/hatchling season.
- Drive slowly on beaches and avoid driving over nests. Drive on the wet sand below the high tide mark to avoid making wheel ruts.
- Pick up marine debris from the beach and waterways.
- Report ghost nets to your local ranger.
- At night, minimise lights on the beach, including campfires.
- Support sustainable, traditional use of adult turtles and turtle eggs.

Acknowledgements

The Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service Nest to Ocean Turtle Protection Program Team would like to acknowledge the contribution of staff from the following organisations in the development of the field guide: Western Cape Turtle Threat Abatement Alliance supported by Cape York Natural Resource Management, Balkanu Cape York Development Corporation, Aak Puul Ngantam, Feralfix, World Wildlife Fund for Nature, and University of Queensland. Also acknowledged is the input and advice of staff from our partnering Australian and Queensland Government departments.

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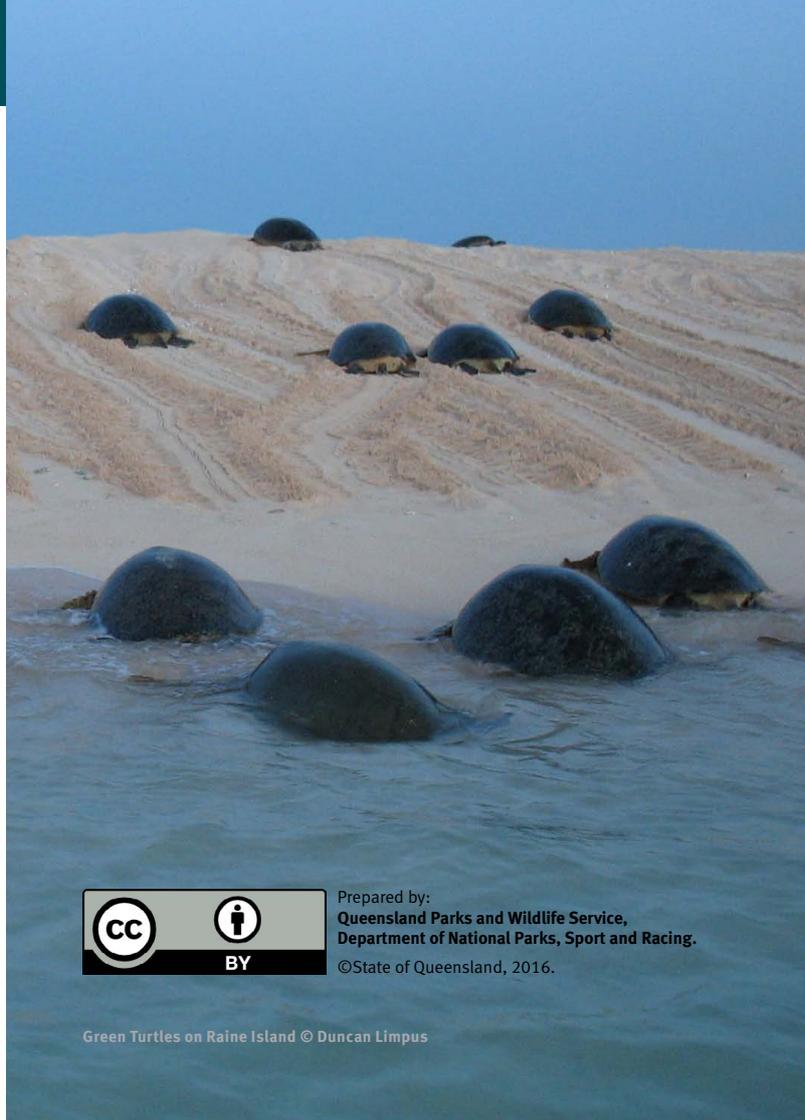
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Prepared by:
Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service,
Department of National Parks, Sport and Racing.

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Green Turtles on Raine Island © Duncan Limpus

