

# LEATHERBACK TURTLES

By Peter R. Bacon

The Leatherback Turtle, *Dermochelys coriacea* Linn. comes to the beaches of both Trinidad and Tobago at certain times of the year to lay its eggs, and even though it is protected by Game Laws it is slaughtered in large numbers by hunters. Recently the Field Naturalists' Club has been taking an interest in the turtles, firstly in the hope of seeing this magnificent animal and its egg-laying process, and secondly with thoughts of protecting it from poachers. It has been difficult, however, to obtain accurate information on the exact dates and times that the animals come up from the sea to lay, so that I have been prompted to publish the following records which, though rather inconclusive, may give some guidance for future observation.

1. Members of the club visited Matura beach, east of Fishing Pond, on 15th. May 1965, the night of the full moon, saw and photographed one large turtle lay 120 eggs in one nest at approximately 9 p.m.

2. A large party visited the same beach a week later, 22nd. May, and saw the carcasses of eight individuals, averaging six feet across the "shell" and one with the eggs still inside, which had been killed during the previous week.

3. A club excursion was held to Matura beach, north of the Oropuche River, on 4th. May 1966 (full moon). We were rewarded by seeing the following:

One carcass, approximately one week old.

Two sets of tracks partly obliterated by the tide which had been high earlier in the evening.

Five sets of fresh tracks and nests made just prior to our arrival at about 10-30 p.m. Eggs were found in three of the nests, the others were not examined. One turtle seen leaving a nest at approximately 10-30 p.m. A second turtle seen on the beach between our arrival and midnight dug a hole but did not lay any eggs even though it stayed out of the water for so long.

4. A further visit was made to Matura, east of Fishing Pond, on 3rd. June 1966 (full moon). One nest with eggs was found, probably made the previous night. Three carcasses were seen of animals killed during the last week. But no live turtles were found between 7 p.m. and midnight.

5. On the 4th. June 1966, again at Matura north of the Oropuche River a turtle was found at 9 p.m. dying from a cut across the neck. A

nest hole had been dug but whoever killed it had not allowed it time to lay any eggs.

6. On the same night, June 4th. 1966, one turtle was killed before it could lay at Las Cuevas beach.

I am grateful to Messrs. G. E. L. Laforest and R. P. French for providing some of the information listed above, and would be interested to hear from anyone else who has dates and times when this species has been observed around Trinidad or Tobago.

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THE DEVIL'S EAR TREE