

FRESHWATER TURTLES OF BELIZE

Belize, a country rich in natural resources and diverse wildlife, is home to nine species of freshwater turtles. Among these is the critically endangered hicatee, which has been eliminated in most of its range as a result of hunting and habitat loss. Freshwater turtles live in rivers, creeks, and lagoons, and build their nests on the banks. They eat a variety of plants, aquatic vegetation, and fruits. However, little is known about Belize's unique turtle species. We hope that this guide will help people identify, understand, and conserve these treasured resources.

Hicatee

Dermatemys mawii, Central American river turtle, tortuga blanca. Adult size: 14 to 25 inches.



The critically endangered hicatee is the largest freshwater turtle in Belize and can weigh over 25 pounds. Its grayish-green shell is smooth and its belly is light colored. Males have bright yellow heads and very large tails. Females have grayish-brown heads and much smaller tails. Jaws and throats on both are yellowish cream. This turtle is hunted for its meat, eggs, and shell.

Mesoamerican Slider

Trachemys scripta venusta, jicotea, jincotea. Adult size: 12 to 16 inches.



The shell varies from green to brown with orange circles. The outer edge of the shell has a yellow border with unique circular patterns, and the underneath is yellow with black markings. The head, legs, and body are obviously striped with yellow and black. This turtle is commonly seen in waterways.

White-Lipped Mud Turtle

Kinosternon leucostomum, casco de burro/mula, casquito. Adult size: 6 to 7 inches.



Adults have a dark, flat shell and a yellow belly with dark markings. Their heads and jaws are cream colored. This turtle can be found on land and is able to entirely close its shell to protect itself from predators.

Tabasco Mud Turtle

Kinosternon acutum, casco de burro/mula, casquito. Adult size: 4 to 5 inches.



This species looks very similar to the white-lipped mud turtle but has a ridge running down the middle of its medium-brown shell. It also has a series of barbels (soft, fleshy extensions that resemble worms) on its chin.

Red-Cheeked Mud Turtle

Kinosternon scorpioides, scorpion turtle, casco de burro, casquito. Adult size: 5 to 6 inches.



The light brown shell has three ridges and can close up completely. The belly is light in color. The head is dark brown with red or orange spots on the side, and the tip of the tail has a horny spine.

Narrow-Bridged Musk Turtle

Claudius angustatus, stinkpot, chamarro.

Adult size: 5 to 7 inches.



This turtle has a smooth, yellowish-brown shell with distinct dark markings. The bottom portion of its shell has a small bridge connecting to the top shell that resembles a cross. This species releases musk when threatened or handled.

Northern Giant Musk Turtle

Staurotypus triporcatus, guao, morokoi.

Adult size: 12 to 16 inches.



This is a large turtle with a brownish-green shell that has three rows of ridges. The bottom and top shells have a narrow attachment, and the bottom shell is yellow and very small. The head is dark with white spots, and there are two barbels under the chin. This species has a very strong bite.

Furrowed Wood Turtle

Rhinoclemmys areolata, mojina. Adult size: 6 to 7 inches.



This turtle has a high shell with a ridge in the center. The edges of its shell are deep and resemble carved wood. Its head is relatively small and dark with yellow and red marks, and it has a yellow jaw. Legs are light tan or yellow with dark spots. This turtle spends most of its time on land in burrows. Like the hicatee, its populations are in decline.

Central American Snapping Turtle

Chelydra rossignonii, tortuga lagarto, tortuga cocodrilo.

Adult size: 14 to 18 inches.



This turtle has a large, narrow head with four barbels on its chin. It has a very long, bumpy tail. The shell is rough with three low ridges. It is a lighter color underneath. This turtle has a strong, hooked jaw and is usually aggressive in nature.

Help Protect the Critically Endangered Hicatee!

Hicatees originally were found in river habitats of southern Mexico, northern Guatemala, and coastal lowland Belize. Today, despite being formally protected throughout their range, hicatee populations have disappeared in nearby countries and continue to decline in Belize because of overhunting and habitat loss. With your help, we can reverse this process and save the hicatee.

- Do not buy turtle meat.
- Do not buy jewelry made from turtle shells.
- Do not disturb turtle nests or nesting sites.
- Move turtles off of roads.
- Remember that hicatees are protected by law.
- Support the National Hicatee Conservation and Monitoring Network.



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