

YZC Animal of the Month, February 2012

Leatherback Turtle

Dermochelys coriacea



Go to the back of the upper gallery and you can find this skeleton complete with shell. Leatherback turtles are the largest of all turtles alive today. Take a look at the skeleton and you can see how well suited it is for its life swimming in the sea. Its arms legs are like flippers – perfect for moving through water. There have been leatherback turtles found with front flippers measuring a whopping 2.7m long!

The turtle's body shape is streamlined, making swimming easier. Take a look at the shell. This is quite different to many of the other turtle shells you can see in the museum. Most

turtles and tortoises have a bony shell with the ribs fused to the inside, and an outer shell made out of the same stuff as you hair and fingernails (a protein called keratin). But the leatherback's shell is not bony, and is not fused to

the ribs. The shell itself is leathery (as the animal's name suggests) and hardened with tiny bony deposits called osteoderms.

So, the leatherback turtle spends most of its life out at sea. But there is one really important thing they have to do on land – lay their eggs. The female digs a hole in the sand of their nesting beach and lays a clutch of eggs (can be as many as 110) before covering them with sand to hide them from predators. After around 60-70 days the eggs hatch, the baby turtles dig themselves out and clamber down the beach to the sea.