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## Diamonds in the Rough\*

Reported by Kimberly Hayes

The eastern diamondback rattlesnake (*Crotalus adamanteus*) is the largest rattlesnake species in the world and was once a common inhabitant of the lower Coastal Plain of the southeastern United States. Diamondback rattlesnakes are perhaps the most maligned and misunderstood creature of the coastal area. They are top-level predators and are important to a healthy ecosystem feeding on a variety of prey. Population levels of diamondbacks have declined precipitously throughout its range because of habitat loss, direct persecution, introduction of exotic species, and other human-related activities.

Conservation of diamondback rattlesnakes through education and habitat management is important to stop or reverse their population declines. Through a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Inventory and Monitoring Program, the Savannah Coastal Refuges Complex entered into an agreement with Davidson College in North Carolina and University of Arkansas to inventory diamondback rattlesnakes on Wassaw, Blackbeard Island, Wolf Island, and Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuges.



**A beautiful eastern diamondback rattlesnake meanders across the "front-yard" of the research quarters on Blackbeard Island NWR.**

Photo by Nancy Hickey, USFWS

In addition to establishing baseline information on rattlesnake populations, researchers also will develop a protocol to assist refuge staff in monitoring populations over time. The initial fieldwork to inventory snakes was completed in the spring of 2015 and we await the results of the effort.

The refuge staff continues to work with Davidson College to develop the monitoring protocol and hope to have a monitoring plan in place by the spring of 2016.

### **Diamondback Terrapins**

Diamondback terrapins (*Malaclemys terrapin*) are a unique estuarine turtle threatened by activities associated with coastal development. Considered a poster species for salt-marsh ecosystems, diamondback terrapins have received international attention from conservation organizations because of range-wide declines. Diamondback terrapins were heavily harvested in the early 1900's for turtle soups and stews. Populations declined drastically and terrapins were wiped out in some local areas. However, as demand for turtle soup declined terrapin populations rebounded but have not reached the levels they once enjoyed. Today, terrapins again face significant threats to their already stressed populations. Coastal development, sea level rise, and abandoned crab traps or "ghost traps" may pose even greater threats to the terrapin population along the Georgia coast.

Through the Service's Regional Quick Response program, the Savannah Coastal Refuges Complex partnered with Davidson College in North Carolina to collect baseline population information on diamondback terrapins on Wassaw, Blackbeard Island, Wolf Island, and Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuges. The Quick Response program is a cooperative effort between U.S Geological Survey and the Service to address key scientific and information needs that will best help the Service make important conservation and management decisions. Similar to the eastern diamondback rattlesnake project, this project will include establishing a baseline inventory of diamondback terrapins as well as a monitoring protocol. In addition to the fieldwork directly associated with counting terrapins, this project will coordinate with local crabbers to get an idea of terrapin locations and mortality in traps. The initial inventory of terrapins was completed in August 2015.

### **[Save the Date](#)**

Saturday, November 21, 2015

Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge

Diamondback Terrapin Day

Learn more about terrapin conservation

Activities and programs for all ages

Stay tuned.....

\* We kiddingly call these projects "Diamonds in the Rough" since we are working with Davidson College on both of them and they both have "diamond" in the species name.