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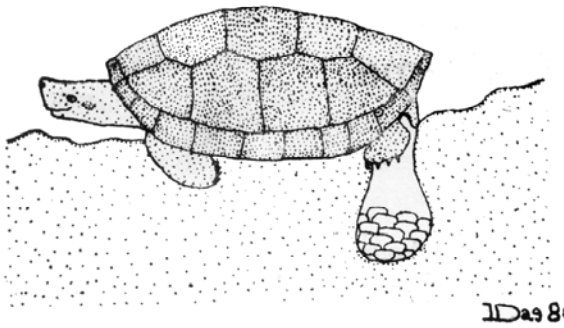

THE 'DRUMMERS' LAST STAND

INDRANEIL DAS

Witness a million-year old biological phenomenon being repeated, at certain times of the year, on deserted beaches at the dead of night : the dramatic arrival of nesting turtles.

The urge to return to the natal beach is a strong one in female turtles. And a few species do so in large numbers, bewildering potential predators with an excess of food in the form of eggs and hatchlings and ensuring that at least some of them survive to continue their line. Synchronized nesting is well documented in the ridleys, which are marine turtles. However, one estuarine species, the river terrapin, population permitting, does also nest in considerable numbers.

The river terrapin **BATAGUR BASKA** is a remarkable reptile, unfortunate in being virtually unknown to non-biologists. Females of the species are larger than males, both having deep and massive shells which evidently make predation difficult. River terrapins have curious looking turned-up snouts, permitting inspiration with the rest of their bodies submerged. Jaws are serrated to compromise for the lack of teeth and limbs are broadly webbed — a requisite for a highly aquatic life. Colour changes characterize males of the species. Hatchlings, juveniles, females and non-breeding males are grey of brown in colour, but breeding males, in Malaysia, seasonlly become jet black, the iris turning from yellow-cream to pure white. In Burma, in addition to the intense black head colouration, the area around the nostrils become pale blue, and the forelimbs and back of head a rich crimson. The species is widely distributed, from the Indian Sunderbans. through south and southeast Asia to Viet Nam. Status of the river terrapin is unclear in many parts of its range, being influenced by human activities such as overexploitation and habitat disturbances. Several important populations have already seriously declined because of these factors.