How You Can Help Protect Sea Turtles During Nesting Season

All six sea turtle species nesting on U.S. beaches or found in U.S. waters are designated as threatened or endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA).

- Minimize beachfront lighting during the sea turtle nesting season by turning off, shielding, or redirecting lights away from the beach.
- Close blinds and draperies in oceanfront rooms at night to keep indoor lighting from reaching the beach.
- Remove recreational equipment, such as lounge chairs, cabanas, umbrellas, and boats, from the beach at night. These items can deter nesting attempts and prevent hatchlings from reaching the ocean.
- Do not to construct beach campfires during nesting season. Sea turtle hatchlings are attracted to the light and may crawl into fires and die.
- Use your natural vision and moonlight when walking on the beach at night.
- If you encounter a turtle on the beach at night, remain quiet, still and at a distance. Flash photography and human disturbance may prevent her from nesting successfully.
- Leave the tracks left by turtles undisturbed. Researchers use the tracks to identify the species of turtle that nested and to find and mark the nests for protection. If you encounter a sea turtle nest or hatchlings, leave the eggs and baby turtles alone.

How You Can Help Protect Sea Turtles All Year Long

- Properly dispose of your garbage. Turtles may mistake plastic bags, styrofoam, and trash floating in the water as food and die when this trash blocks their intestines.
- Celebrate events without the use of helium balloon releases. Like plastic trash, balloons end up in the ocean, especially when released near the coast. Sea turtles mistakenly eat the balloons and die.
- Avoid trampling beach vegetation. Use boardwalks when available instead of walking over dunes. Natural vegetation stabilizes sand and reduces beach erosion.
- When boating, stay alert and avoid sea turtles. Propeller and collision impacts from boats and ships can result in injury and death of sea turtles. Also, stay in channels and avoid running in seagrass beds to protect this important habitat from prop scarring and damage.
- Avoid anchoring boats in seagrass beds and coral reefs which serve as important feeding and resting habitats for sea turtles.

For more information about sea turtles contact:

National Sea Turtle Coordinator
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
6620 Southpoint Drive South
Suite 310
Jacksonville, FL 32216
904/232 2580

Protection Under the Endangered Species Act

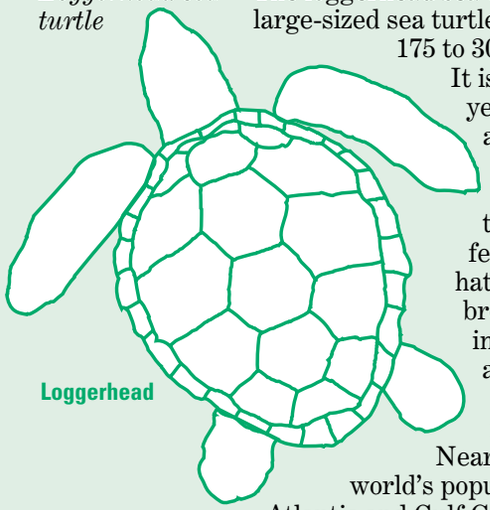
All six sea turtles nesting on U.S. beaches or found in U.S. waters are designated as threatened or endangered under the U.S. Endangered Species Act (ESA). Endangered status means a species is considered in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range. Threatened means that a species is likely to become endangered. The ESA provides penalties for taking, harassing or harming sea turtles and affords some protection for their habitat.

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

You Can Help Protect Sea Turtles

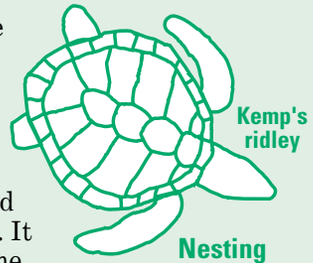
Sea turtles are among the largest living reptiles. Most species have scales and a bony shell and all species are cold-blooded, breathe air, and lay their eggs on land. Sea turtles are found throughout the world in temperate and tropical waters. Six species of sea turtles nest on U.S. beaches or are found in U.S. waters.

Loggerhead sea turtle



The loggerhead sea turtle is a medium to large-sized sea turtle usually weighing 175 to 300 pounds as adults. It is reddish brown to yellow in color and has a large head. An adult loggerhead is two and one-half to three and one-half feet long. Loggerhead hatchlings are dull brown to rusty brown in color. Loggerheads are the most common sea turtles in U.S. waters. Nearly a third of the world's population nests along Atlantic and Gulf Coast beaches.

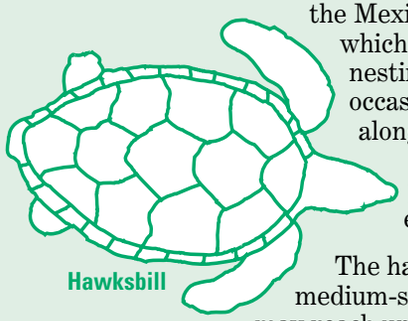
Kemp's ridley turtle



The Kemp's ridley is a small turtle with adults reaching two to two and one-half feet in length and weighing 80 to 100 pounds. The Kemp's ridley has an oval shell and is usually an olive-gray color. The Kemp's ridley is the rarest and most endangered of all sea turtles. It occurs mainly in coastal areas of the Gulf of Mexico and along the East Coast.

Olive ridley sea turtle

The olive ridley is a bit larger than the Kemp's but is still a small turtle. Adult olive ridleys may reach three feet in length and will weigh 100 to 110 pounds. The olive ridley is threatened except for the Mexican nesting population which is endangered. Non-nesting individuals are occasionally found in the waters along the Pacific coast of the United States. Nesting populations occur in the eastern Pacific near Mexico.

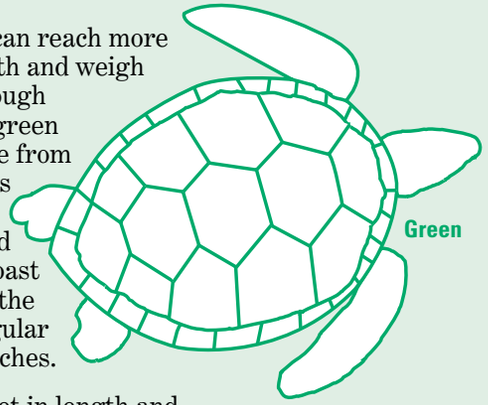


Hawksbill sea turtle

The hawksbill turtle is a small to medium-sized turtle. As an adult, it may reach up to three feet in length and weigh 100 to 200 pounds. It gets its name from its distinctive hawk-like beak. Hawksbills have a patterned top shell with overlapping scales. Most U.S. sightings are around Florida and Texas.

Nesting and Hatchling Habits

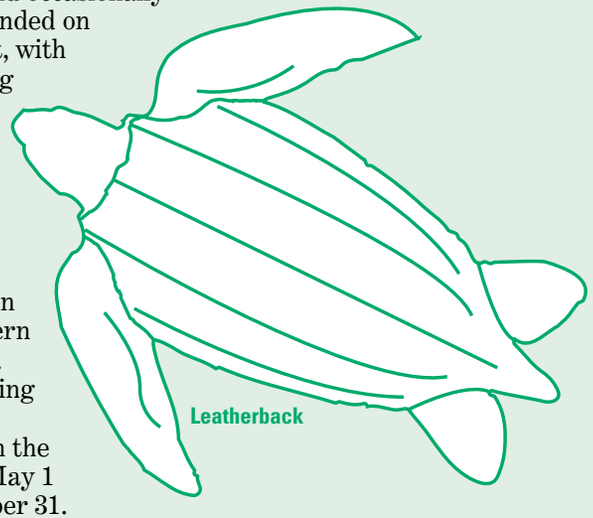
Green sea turtle



An adult green turtle can reach more than three feet in length and weigh 300 to 400 pounds. Though brownish in color, the green sea turtle gets its name from the greenish color of its fat, called calipee. Green turtles are found along both the East Coast and the West Coast of the United States with regular nesting on Florida beaches.

Leatherback sea turtle

Growing up to eight feet in length and weighing up to 2,000 pounds, the leatherback is the largest living turtle. This turtle is unique in that its shell lacks scales. Instead it is composed of a mosaic of small bones covered by firm, rubbery skin with seven longitudinal ridges or keels. Leatherbacks are seen along the East Coast, and occasionally are found stranded on the Gulf Coast, with regular nesting on Florida beaches.



Loggerheads are the most common species of sea turtle to nest in the southeastern United States. The peak nesting season for loggerheads in the Southeast is May 1 through October 31. During the nesting season, adult loggerhead females come ashore to lay their eggs. Females excavate pits using their fore and rear flippers to remove the upper layer of dry sand. Then they use their rear flippers to dig egg chambers in moist sand. Females lay from 100 to 126 white ping-pong ball-sized eggs per nest. They cover the eggs with sand, and return to the water.

Loggerhead sea turtle eggs incubate for about 60 days. Hatchlings then emerge from the nests and scurry toward the water. They spend several days swimming offshore until they reach safety within the protective masses of floating seaweed in areas where ocean currents meet. They eat, sleep and grow there for perhaps up to ten years until they reach a certain size or age at which time they return to coastal waters. As adults, female sea turtles return to the same beaches where they hatched to lay their eggs, often navigating across great expanses of water.

Turtles in Trouble

The number of sea turtles worldwide has declined. Human activity is the primary cause. From the time a sea turtle begins life as an egg buried in the sand to a grown adult swimming in the ocean, our human activities are impacting sea turtle survival. Scientists estimate that only one out of 1000 sea turtle hatchlings will make it to adulthood.

In many cases, prime sea turtle nesting sites are also prime real estate. Beaches used for nesting are lost to beachfront development or are disturbed by beach maintenance and recreation. Sea turtle reproduction is reduced when adult female sea turtles are unable to nest, nest in poor habitat, or when eggs and hatchlings die from human beach activity.

Activities in the ocean also threaten sea turtles. Sea turtles lose their lives when they become trapped or tangled in fishing nets, seines and lines. Some are injured or die when they are hit by ships, boats, and jet skis. Plastic bags, styrofoam pieces, balloons, and other trash that floats on the ocean are often mistaken for food and eaten by sea turtles. Ingested trash blocks digestion and can cause death.

At night, both adult female sea turtles and hatchling sea turtles are disturbed by artificial light, including street lights, flashlights, flash cameras, and even campfires. Females may not nest and hatchlings may become disoriented heading inland instead of toward the ocean.