Turtle Tracker

Volusia & Flagler Sea Turtle Volunteer News

Volume 7 – Issue 2 **Summer 2001**

Look at those Leatherbacks

Every sea turtle nesting season is different and brings something new. The majority of the turtles nesting on our beaches are loggerhead turtles. So, as sea turtle enthusiasts, we get excited when other species nest here. Last year set a record for green sea turtle nests, not only in Volusia and Flagler Counties, but all over the state. We saw more green sea turtle nests in 2000 than we have seen in all of the other years put together. This year has been the year of the leatherbacks. So far there have been 17 leatherback nests laid in Volusia and Flagler Counties, and it has been a record year all over the state.

The leatherback (Dermochelys coriacea) is the largest species of sea turtle in the world and the largest reptile in the world. Leatherbacks are so physiologically different from other species of sea turtles that they have their own family name, Dermochelyidae. The most distinct difference is that the leatherback has no shell. Instead, it has leathery skin covering an oily mosaic of thousands of small polygonal bones. The leatherback's body is black with white, pink or blue blotches and seven longitudinal ridges on its back. The under belly is more whitish and also has ridges. They have large clawless flippers almost as long as their carapace. Their heads are large and smooth with a jagged jaw line and a white splotch in the center of the head called the pineal gland. These giant sea faring creatures grow to an impressive 5 to 8 feet in length and weigh from 700 to 1,600 pounds. The largest recorded leatherback weighed over 2,000 pounds.

One of the most remarkable things about leatherbacks is that they feed almost exclusively on jellyfish. This probably accounts for their regular migrations as far north as Canada and Iceland in search of large concentrations of jellyfish. Leatherbacks unlike other reptiles have the capacity to raise their body temperature above that of the water around them. They can travel thousands of miles over open ocean and dive up to depths of 3000 feet, more than any other species of sea turtle.

Leatherbacks nest earlier in Florida than other sea turtles, usually starting in early April and ending in July. They lay eggs more frequently than other sea turtles, usually at 9 to 10 day intervals. The female leatherback also lays fewer eggs, about 50 –120 per clutch, and the eggs are larger, about the size of a cue ball. They also deposit several smaller infertile eggs that range in size from peas to ping-pong balls. This may be to confuse predators. The incubation period is longer for leatherback nests, usually 70 to 90 days.

Distinctive tracks lead to a new leatherback nest

Because leatherback turtles travel such great distances and so little is known about them, it is difficult to determine population numbers. However, leatherback nesting has shown an upward trend in the last few years and gives us hope that the population is increasing. The greatest threats to the survival of the species are commercial fishing, exploitation in other countries, loss of nesting habitat and ingesting pollution such as plastic bags and balloons, which are mistaken for jellyfish.

Leatherback hatchling crawling to the ocean

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Tracking the Elusive Leatherbacks

Sea turtle biologists have wondered for years what sea turtles do. How far do they migrate, where do they nest, do they nest on the same beaches, how fast do they travel, do they stop and rest or feed? These are just a few of the questions that puzzle us about these magnificent creatures that only leave the ocean to lay their eggs. How can you track an animal that swims fast and migrates all over the world in a corrosive environment? This has been the challenge to researchers trying to learn more about sea turtle behavior.

This year research biologists from the University of Central Florida developed a tracking program to study the movements of leatherback turtles. Five turtles were fitted with satellite transmitters strapped to their bodies when they were nesting at the Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge in Brevard County. Of these five turtles, two of them ended up nesting in Volusia County. "Brown Eyed Girl" was first documented nesting in Daytona Beach on May 25. The tracking device she was wearing confirmed her identity. She then made four non-nesting emergences (false crawls) on June 5, before successfully nesting on June 6. She nested again on June 15."Surfer Girl," another turtle carrying a GPS (Global Positioning Satellite) unit as well as the satellite transmitter, nested on June 9 and possibly again 10 days later in Flagler County.

Genetic sampling from all of the leatherback nests laid in Volusia and Flagler Counties will determine if any of the other "girls" came here to nest and how many times they succeeded. Look for an update on the movement of these turtles in our next newsletter.

"Brown Eyed Girl" heading back to the ocean

What Should YOU do ?

If you come across a sea turtle trying to nest:

- Stay at least 10 feet away from the turtle
- Do not touch the turtle or crowd around her
- Do not shine flashlights at the turtle
- Do not take flash photos
- Discourage others from harassing the turtle
- Contact the turtle patrol for assistance
  (386)-763-0977 Ponce Inlet to Flagler
  (386)-423-4278 New Smyrna Beach
  Volusia County Sheriff 248-1777, press 0
  Flagler County Sheriff 515-2020

If you find a hatchling on the beach:

- Do not put it in the ocean, it may be too tired to swim
- Put the turtle on wet sand or a wet towel
- Give the turtle to a lifeguard or call the turtle patrol

If you see someone disturbing a nest:

- Tell them it is a against the law to disturb nests
- Call the turtle patrol or the Sheriff's Office
- Tell a beach patrol officer

If you see someone harassing a nesting turtle:

- Tell them it is against the law to harass a protected species
- Call the turtle patrol or the Sheriff's Office
- Tell a beach patrol officer

If you find a dead or injured turtle:

- Dead turtles – leave alone and call the turtle patrol
- Call the turtle patrol or Sheriff's Office and try to stay with the turtle until help arrives
- Keep the shell of live turtles wet

What else can you do to help sea turtles?

- Keep lights from shining onto the beach at night, turn off or shield exterior lights, draw your drapes to keep interior lights from disturbing turtles
- Protect dune vegetation
- Do not drive in soft sand areas
- Do not dig holes in soft sand areas
- Dispose of your trash properly
- Share your knowledge with others

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ADOPT A SEA TURTLE NEST

Help Save a Threatened Species!

Sea turtles have been nesting on our beaches for over 100 million years. The population of these ancient mariners has been greatly depleted by loss of nesting habitat, incidental catch by fisheries and exploitation for sea turtle products. Without the help of people like you, they could face extinction in the near future.

By adopting a sea turtle nest, you will provide funding to the nonprofit Turtle Patrol and show your support for the protection of an endangered species.

Sponsorship Fee $20.00

Adopter Name _____

Address _____

City, State _____

Zip _____ Phone # _____

Please make check payable to:

Volusia/Flagler Turtle Patrol

4738 S. Peninsula Drive

Ponce Inlet, FL 32127

Here's what you will receive when you adopt a sea turtle nest:

* official adoption certificate
* one year subscription to the Turtle Tracker
* sea turtle educational packet
* nest watching guidelines
* nest success evaluation report
* 1 bumper sticker

If you really want to get involved, you can do a "Hands On" adoption!

This actually involves baby sitting a sea turtle nest. You will go to the beach in the evening to check "your" nest, and report back to the Turtle Patrol if there are any problems. You will provide valuable protection for the nest, and you may even be lucky enough to see the hatchlings emerge from their nest and crawl to the sea!

Regular Adoption ____

Hands On Adoption ____

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Yes, I would like to help sea turtles!

Name _____

Address _____

City/State _____

Zip _____

Telephone _____

Annual membership (4 issues) $15.00

T-shirt total (add $2 shipping) _____

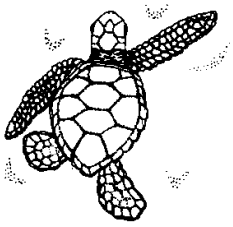
Other donation (greatly appreciated) _____

Total enclosed _____

Shirt Style	Size	Color	Quantity	Total

Please make checks payable to Volusia Turtle Patrol and mail to the return address below.

All T- shirts are sturdy, 100% cotton with beautiful original design
Short sleeve: White or ash with front pocket and design on back. Teal, sage, tan, coral, stone washed blue or green with design on front or back (please specify). Back prints have logo on front. Please give second choice.
Sizes M, L, XL $15.00
Please add $2.00 for shipping and allow 1-2 weeks for delivery.



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****Special Announcement****
2001 Florida Coastal Cleanup
September 15, 2001

Sponsored by the Ocean Conservancy (727) 895-2188 www.oceanconservancy.org
Volusia County (386) 763-0977 Flagler County (386) 439-2332

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