

# Leatherback Turtle

*Dermochelys coriacea*

## General Description

The leatherback turtle, also known as the leathery turtle or trunkback, is the largest and most distinctive of the sea turtles.

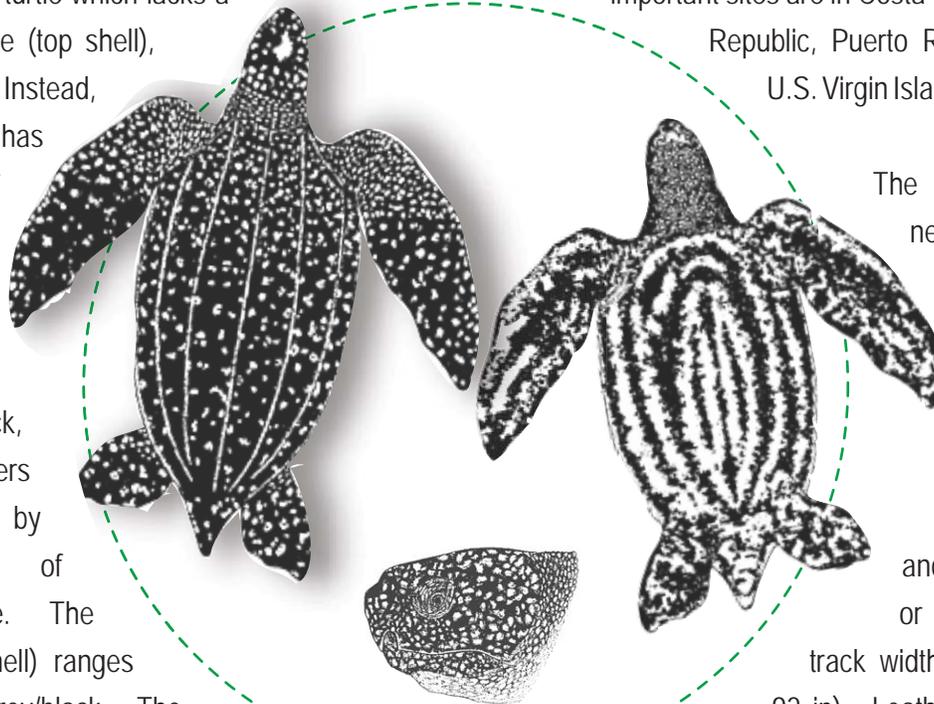
It is the only sea turtle which lacks a hard, bony carapace (top shell), scutes and claws. Instead, the leatherback has a rubbery "shell" which is strongly tapered and characterized by seven prominent ridges. The back, head and flippers are often marked by irregular blotches of white or pale blue. The plastron (bottom shell) ranges from white to grey/black. The dark upper and lighter lower surfaces in combination with the mottled coloration is effective camouflage for this open-ocean inhabitant. The leatherback has a deeply notched upper jaw.

While hatchlings are about 60-65 mm (2.4-2.6 in) in carapace length, adult females grow to 130-165cm (55-71 in) and weigh 260-500 kg (573-1102 lb); males can tip the scales at 916 kg (2015 lb)!

## Nesting Distribution and Behavior

Leatherbacks are the most migratory of the sea turtles, are globally distributed, feed in temperate waters, and nest on tropical shores. The major Caribbean nesting beaches are in Trinidad and French Guiana. Other important sites are in Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Suriname, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Venezuela.

The main Caribbean nesting season begins in March and continues to July. Leatherbacks like beaches with deep, unobstructed access and avoid abrasive rock or coral. The nesting track width is 180-230 cm (82-92 in). Leatherbacks nest every 2-5 years or more, laying an average of 5-7 clutches per nesting season at 9-10 day intervals. Typically between 70-90 fertile (yolked) eggs are laid, as well as a variable number of smaller, infertile (yolkless) eggs. After an approximately 9 weeks, the hatchlings emerge and crawl to the sea. Virtually nothing is known of the post-hatchling and juvenile life stages--hatchlings disappear, not to be seen again until adulthood!



## Did you know that...

- Leatherbacks are the only turtles that have a pink spot (a light window) on top of their heads!
- Leatherbacks dive deeper than any other sea turtle!
- Females and males frequently cross entire ocean basins to feed and reproduce!
- No one knows the age at maturity or life span

## Diet

Leatherbacks forage in temperate waters, and even venture into subarctic latitudes. The mouth and throat are lined with backward-facing spines that help keep their primary food, jellyfish and other soft-bodied invertebrates, from escaping. Highly venomous jellyfish, including the Portuguese Man-O-War, are considered a delicacy! Leatherbacks feed both at the surface and at great depths in the sea.

## Why Are They Threatened?

Leatherbacks are killed (mostly illegally) for meat, eggs, and the oil in their "shells" which, according to traditional lore, has medicinal value. Adult leatherbacks migrate thousands of miles every year, and can dive to depths exceeding 1000 m (3250 ft). They are vulnerable to incidental catch on long lines, in shrimp trawls, and in coastal gillnets throughout their range. Ingestion of marine debris such as plastic bags, styrofoam chunks and tar balls can be fatal. Modification or destruction of sandy beaches throughout the Caribbean region has diminished nesting habitat. Beach sand mining, commercial development and coastal lighting have also contributed to declining leatherback populations.

## What Can You Do To Help? Please:

-  Do not buy or sell sea turtle products. Remember, international law prevents the transport of sea-turtle parts and products across national borders.
-  Do not harass sea turtles at sea or on land. Do not disturb turtles in feeding areas, shine lights on nesting turtles, ride turtles, or collect hatchlings.
-  Turn off, shield, or redirect coastal lighting to prevent it from shining on nesting beaches. Artificial lighting can fatally disorient nesting and hatching sea turtles.
-  Obey all regulations regarding the protection of coral reefs, seagrass, and natural beach vegetation.
-  Do not drive your car on the beach; incubating eggs can be crushed and tire ruts trap crawling hatchlings.
-  Support local and national conservation efforts. Be familiar with existing legislation, and encourage new legislation to strengthen protection for sea turtles and their habitats.

## WIDECAST

With Country Coordinators and partner organizations in more than 40 Caribbean nations and territories, the Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network (WIDECAST) is an innovative, proactive and inclusive mechanism for sustainable development on a regional scale. By bringing the best available science to bear on decision-making, emphasizing information exchange and training, and encouraging harmonised practices, the network promotes strong linkages between science, policy, and public participation in the design and implementation of sea turtle management programmes.



# WIDECAST

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# Green Turtle

*Chelonia mydas*

## General Description

The green turtle, or green-back, has an oval, bony carapace (top shell) covered with smooth, non-overlapping scutes. Like the hawksbill, the green turtle has four pairs of lateral scutes. The carapace of the adult varies from light to dark greenish brown in color with patterns of radiating wavy or mottled markings, while the plastron (bottom shell) is white to yellowish in color.

From an average hatchling length of 49 mm (2 in), adults are generally 95-120 cm (36-40 in) in carapace length and weigh up to 230 kg (500 lb)!

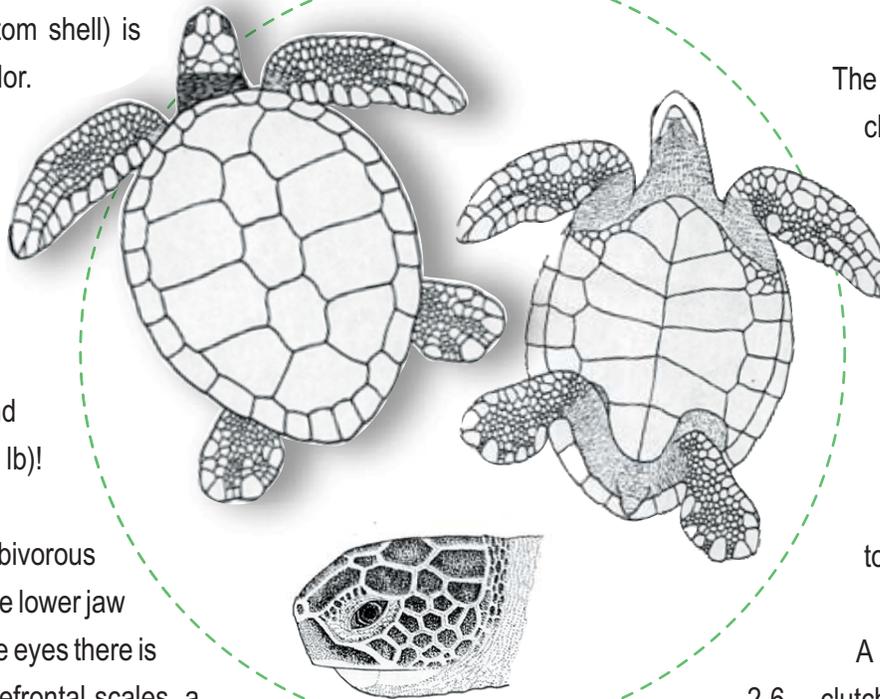
Green turtles are herbivorous and the biting edge of the lower jaw is serrated. Between the eyes there is one pair of enlarged prefrontal scales, a feature unique to green turtles. Each front and back flipper has a single claw. Hatchlings are "counter-shaded" (black above, white below) to camouflage them in the open sea during their earliest years.

## Nesting Distribution and Behavior

Small numbers of green turtles nest on the majority of islands and mainland territories of the Wider Caribbean. Major nesting colonies are found at Tortuguero (Costa Rica) and Aves Island (Venezuela). The peak Caribbean breeding season occurs between July and September.

The nest site is characterized by a deep body pit, well above the high water mark. Symmetrical tracks in the sand 100-130 cm across (40-52 in) indicate that a turtle has come ashore to deposit her eggs.

A female lays between 2-6 clutches per breeding season and typically deposits 110-115 golf ball-sized eggs per clutch. The incubation period is approximately 8-9 weeks. After breeding, 2-3 years will elapse before a female breeds again.



## Did you know that...

- Green turtles are also known as the “soup turtle”!
- The largest present-day nesting colony in Tortuguero, Costa Rica, is increasing!
- Green turtles play an important role in the ecology of seagrasses!
- Green turtles do not reproduce until they are more than 30 years old!

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## Diet

Adult green turtles are herbivores and eat seagrasses, especially “turtle grass” and algae. Green turtles forage in shallow, near-shore waters throughout the Caribbean Sea. The turtles often form grazing scars, which they repeatedly re-graze to take advantage of new, tender growth.

## Why Are They Threatened?

Before the arrival of Columbus, coastal dwelling communities consumed green turtle meat and eggs as a source of protein. As European colonies were established, settlers exploited the large populations of green turtles intensively. By the early 1800's, the largest nesting population in the Caribbean, the Cayman Islands, had been decimated. Several parts of the green turtle have commercial value: meat and calipee are used for soup; bone for fertilizer; oil for cosmetics; and eggs for food and traditional aphrodisiacs. The taking of turtles and eggs remains a serious problem throughout the Caribbean Region.

Green turtles also face a life-threatening disease in which growths called fibropapillomas can occur on several regions of their body, interfering with their ability to see, feed, breathe, swim, etc. Afflicted turtles should never be eaten.

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# WIDECAST

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# Loggerhead Turtle

*Caretta caretta*

## General Description

The loggerhead turtle has a bony, slightly tapered, reddish-brown carapace (top shell) covered with non-overlapping scutes. The carapace has five pairs of lateral scutes and, in juveniles, the carapace can show bumpy ridges along its length. The carapace is often encrusted by a heavy growth of invertebrate fauna, such as barnacles. The plastron (bottom shell) is cream-yellow in color.

The triangular shaped head is disproportionately large for the body size and may grow to 25 cm (10 in) in width in adults. Each front and back flipper has two claws.

While hatchlings typically range from 44-48 mm (1.7-1.8 in) in carapace length, adults may grow to 120 cm (47 in) in carapace length and 200 kg (440 lb) in weight. Hatchlings are uniform in color, usually above and below red-brown or grey-black.

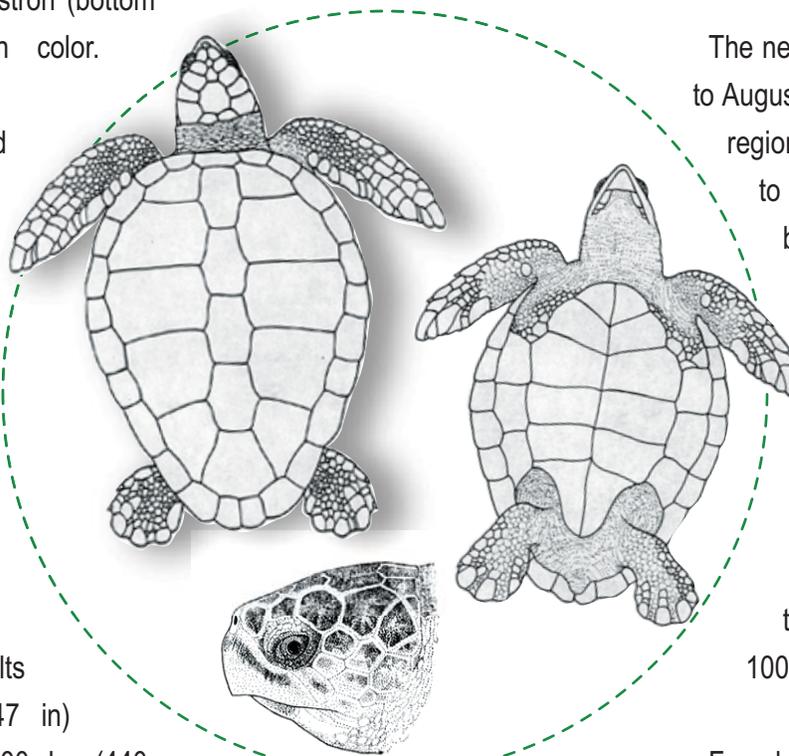
Research on loggerheads provided the first glimpses into important aspects of sea turtle biology—such as temperature dependent sex determination.

## Nesting Distribution and Behavior

Loggerheads prefer to nest on sub-tropical and temperate beaches. The largest concentration of nesting females in the world is found on the southeastern Atlantic coast of the USA. Lower density nesting is documented on beaches along the Gulf and Caribbean coasts of Mexico, Belize and the Atlantic coast of South America.

The nesting season is from May to August in the Wider Caribbean region. Loggerheads prefer to nest on continental beaches, and mating is believed to occur off of nesting beaches. A typical nesting beach is backed by a low vegetated dune. Nesting loggerheads create asymmetrical tracks measuring 90-100 cm (35-39 in) across.

Females typically nest every 2-3 years and nest several times in a season at 13-15 day intervals. The female excavates a nesting cavity 43-80 cm (17-31 in) deep where she deposits about 100-120 golf ball-sized eggs. The nests are dug well above the high tide line to prevent inundation by seawater over the 7-11 week incubation period.



## Did you know that...

- Juvenile loggerheads migrate across ocean basins!
- Loggerheads are “floating zoos”, carrying dozens of other species on their shells!
- Loggerheads mature at 25 to 35 years of age!
- Loggerheads born in Florida often spend their “teen age years” in the Mediterranean!

## Diet

Adult loggerheads are benthic (seabed) feeders on the continental shelf. A large head and powerful jaws are well suited to their omnivorous diet. They eat a variety of hard-shelled mollusks (such as conch and whelk) and crustaceans (such as crabs), and also feed on fish, jellyfish, and seaweeds.

## Why They Are Threatened?

In the Gulf of Mexico and southeastern Atlantic coast of the USA, the major cause of death for loggerheads is their incidental capture and subsequent drowning in shrimp trawls. Fitting shrimp trawls with Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs) offers an escape route for turtles trapped in trawl nets, and these devices are required by law in the U.S. and several Caribbean countries and Latin America.

Entanglement and incidental capture in longlines is also an important source of mortality in the Caribbean Sea and beyond. In addition, Loggerheads cannot easily distinguish between food and non-food items (such as plastic) and they consume marine debris, which can be fatal.

Finally, coastal development, with associated lighting and vehicular use, threatens nesting beaches. Lights confuse hatchlings so that they are unable to find the sea and vehicles crush eggs and newly hatched turtles waiting to emerge from the sand.

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# WIDECAST

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# Hawksbill Turtle

*Eretmochelys imbricata*

## General Description

The hawksbill turtle is easily identified by its strikingly beautiful carapace (top shell) which is a mosaic of brown, gold, orange and red speckled scutes that overlap each other like shingles on a roof. The oval carapace is posteriorly serrated. There are two pairs of scales, called prefrontal scales, between the eyes and two claws on each front flipper.

Adult hawksbills grow to 70-95 cm (27.5-37.5 in) and weigh 60-80 kg (132-176 lb). Hatchlings are 40-45 mm (1.6-1.8 in) in carapace length, and are uniform in color, usually grey or brown, above and below.

## Nesting Distribution and Behavior

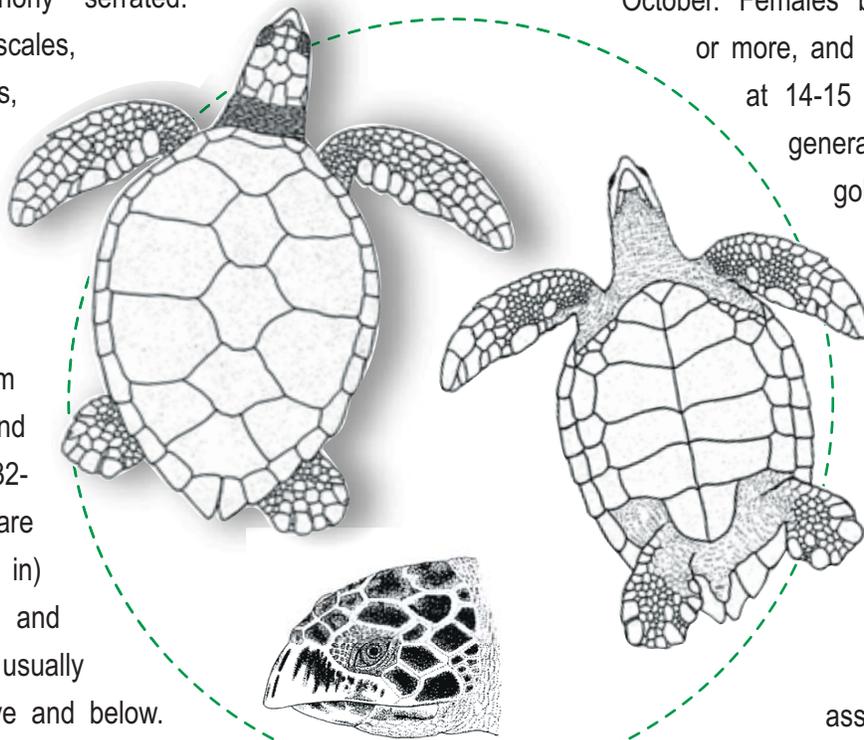
Hawksbills nest in generally low densities throughout the Wider Caribbean. The largest known nesting populations are found in Antigua & Barbuda, Barbados, Cuba, Mexico (Yucatan peninsula), Panama, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela, with

important nesting areas in Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

Hawksbills nest at night, often on beaches flanked by coral reefs and rocks, and mainly between June and October. Females breed every 2-3 years or more, and typically nest 4-5 times at 14-15 day intervals. A clutch generally consists of about 150 golf ball-sized, white eggs.

The female hawksbill carefully selects her nesting site well above the high water mark where the eggs will remain dry for the next 8-9 weeks until they hatch. The asymmetrical track she leaves behind is 70-85 cm across. Hawksbills like to nest amongst

vegetation, perhaps because their nests are quite shallow ( $\leq 10$  cm to top layer of eggs), and vegetation helps to shade the buried eggs from the scorching sun. Unfortunately, shallow nests are also more vulnerable to predators. Hatchlings emerge at night and use natural light to find their way to the sea.



### Did you know that...

- The hawksbill sea turtle is the Caribbean's only major sponge predator!
- The Caribbean sea supports 20-30% of the world's hawksbill population!
- A female hawksbill is two decades old (or more) before she nests for the first time!

## Diet

As the name suggests, the hawksbill has a narrow pointed head and a "beak" which is used to pry prey from reef crevices and take clean bites out of marine sponges. They specialize on sponges in the Caribbean Sea, and to a much lesser degree will also eat hydrozoans, crabs, clams, gastropods, tunicates, and plants.

## Why Are They Threatened?

The hawksbill turtle is amongst the most endangered of the six species of sea turtle found in the Wider Caribbean. The beauty of this turtle's shell (also called tortoiseshell, carey or bekko), and its use in the manufacture of hair combs, jewelry and other ornaments, is the main reason for the heavy exploitation of this species over the years. For example, Japanese Customs data show that shells from more than a quarter-million hawksbills were imported from the Caribbean from 1971-1989. Japan ended this trade in 1993. Hawksbill eggs and meat are eaten as delicacies in many Caribbean territories. Destruction of coral reefs (foraging habitats) through pollution, dynamite blasting and careless diving and anchoring, as well as degradation of sandy beaches (nesting habitats) due to increased coastal development, have further contributed to the decline of hawksbill populations in the Caribbean.

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# Kemp's Ridley Turtle

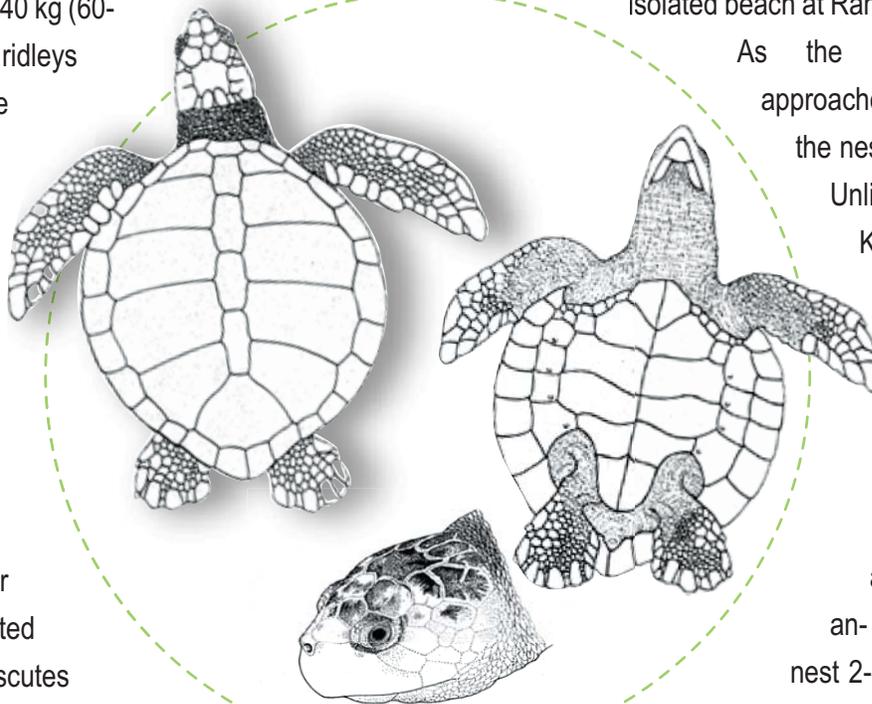
*Lepidochelys kempii*

## General Description

Numbering no more than 6000 adult females (but rising!), the Kemp's ridley turtle is the most endangered sea turtle in the world. It is a small sea turtle, ranging from 58-76 cm (23-30 in) in carapace (top shell) length and from 27-40 kg (60-90 lb) in weight. Kemp's ridleys have a bony carapace covered with non-overlapping scutes, including five pairs of lateral scutes.

The carapace is almost round in shape, and dark grey in color. The plastron (bottom shell) is yellowish in color and has small pores located in the inframarginal scutes ("bridge scutes" that connect the carapace to the plastron). The exact function of these pores is unknown.

Between the eyes are a variable number of prefrontal scales. They have two claws on each flipper, although some adults lose the secondary claw on their front flippers. Hatchlings are uniformly grayish black in color, and typical carapace length is 42-48 mm (1.7-1.9 in).



## Nesting Distribution and Behavior

The existence and whereabouts of Kemp's ridley nesting beaches remained a mystery to the scientific community until 1947, when film footage became available of an estimated 40,000 females emerging to nest on an isolated beach at Rancho Nuevo, Mexico!

As the breeding season approaches, adults gather off the nesting beach to mate.

Unlike other sea turtles, Kemp's ridleys are typically day-time nesters. The nesting crawl is asymmetrical, measuring 70-80 cm (29-32 in) across. Females nest annually and typically nest 2-3 times per season, usually depositing over 100 eggs per nest. Incubation lasts 7-8 weeks.

## Diet

Kemp's ridleys are carnivorous. Crabs and shrimps are the main food items but jellyfish, sea urchins, star fish, clams, mussels and fish are also eaten.

## Did you know that...

- Kemp's ridleys require only 7-15 years to reach sexual maturity!
- The Kemp's ridley is the smallest and still the most endangered of all the sea turtles!
- Recent population increases can be attributed to increased protection of nesting females, and the use of Turtle Excluder Devices in the shrimp trawling industry!

## Why Are They Threatened?

The primary nesting beach is at Rancho Nuevo, Mexico, where females and their eggs are now protected. Scientists once believed the species to be confined to the Gulf of Mexico, but their range is now known to extend north along the US eastern seaboard. Incidental capture and drowning in shrimp trawls is a major cause of mortality. The installation and proper use of Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs) in all shrimp trawling boats fishing in areas where Kemp's ridleys are found continues to be critical to the survival of this species. Other causes of mortality are ingestion of pollutants and marine debris (oil, discarded fishing lines, plastics), and wounds sustained in boat collisions and dredging operations. Conservation efforts have resulted in a small population recolonizing Texas shores, with more than 60 U.S. nestings confirmed between 1996 and 2002!

## Successful Conservation Effort

Rising numbers of nesting Kemp's ridleys, including a small population beginning to establish itself on beaches in Texas (USA), is a tribute to nearly four decades of intensive bilateral conservation by the USA and Mexico. Full protection at the nesting beach and continued emphasis on the use of TEDs in offshore waters is key to the survival of this ancient species. Still classified as Critically Endangered by the World Conservation Union (IUCN), this is one turtle species whose future looks bright!

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# Olive Ridley Turtle

*Lepidochelys olivacea*

## General Description

The olive ridley sea turtle, one of the smallest of the sea turtles, may have been named for the olive green color of its carapace (top shell). Olive ridleys can grow to 64-72 cm (25.6-28.8 in) in carapace length and weigh up to 45 kg (100 lb). The carapace is nearly circular, with 6-9 pairs of lateral scutes. The plastron (bottom shell) is yellowish-white in color, and has small pores around the edges.

The olive ridley has a small, narrow head and a finely serrated horny beak. Between the eyes there are a variable number of prefrontal scales. There are two claws on each flipper. Hatchlings are uniformly grayish black in color. Ridleys begin reproducing at 12-15 years of age.

The only way to positively identify an adult female is to observe her laying eggs. Adult male identification is based on the presence of a long, prehensile tail. Juveniles cannot be sexed based on physical characteristics.

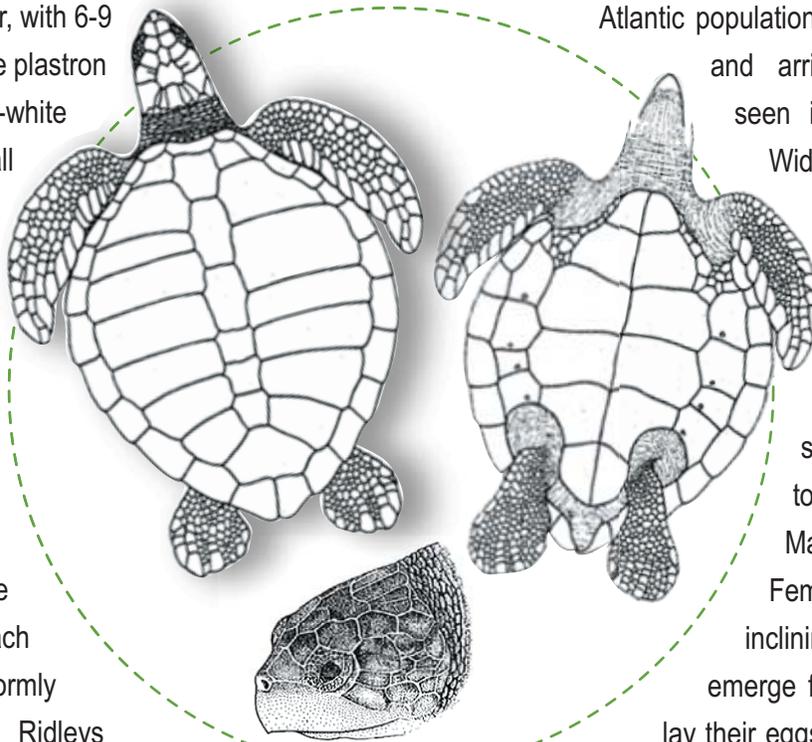
## Nesting Distribution and Behavior

In many parts of the world, the olive ridley comes to shore to nest in synchronized emergences of large numbers of turtles, an event known as an *arribada*. On a global scale, the olive ridley is the world's most abundant sea turtle. However,

Atlantic populations are severely depleted and *arribadas* are no longer seen in our region. In the Wider Caribbean, remnant nesting colonies occur in Suriname, French Guiana and Brazil.

The nesting season is from April to August, peaking in May-July in the Guianas. Females prefer gently inclining beaches and typically emerge from the sea at night to lay their eggs in the warm sand. The

female's nesting track is asymmetrical and about 70-80 cm (29-32 in) in width. Nesting appears to be affected by weather conditions and therefore there is no predictable inter-nesting interval, although females tend to nest 1-3 times during a breeding year. Females tend to lay just over 100 eggs per nest; the incubation period is approximately 8 weeks long.



## Did you know that...

- The olive ridley sunbathes at the ocean's surface, providing a foot-rest for sea birds!
- Olive ridleys participate in massive and spectacular nesting aggregations, known as arribadas!
- Olive ridleys occur in the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans and are the world's most abundant sea turtle!

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## Diet

Olive ridleys forage both in shallow coastal waters and in the open sea, where they have been known to dive to depths greater than 150 m (500 ft). They are primarily carnivorous and feed on a variety of food items such as shrimp, crabs, sea urchins, jellyfish and gastropods (snails). They are also known to eat algae and seagrasses.

## Why Are They Threatened?

The tendency of olive ridleys to form large nesting aggregations, called *arribadas*, has made them easy targets for harvest, and their meat and eggs were once important resources for people in coastal areas. In the Wider Caribbean, populations that once may have numbered in the hundreds of thousands now number in the hundreds. The incidental capture and drowning of olive ridleys in shrimp trawls may have contributed significantly to their decline. Similarly, incidental capture in gillnets is a serious challenge in the Eastern Pacific, where numbers declined dramatically due to excessive egg harvest and many years of large scale commercial harvest. Nest predation by domestic dogs, opossums, coyotes and ringtail cats are an added burden on depleted populations. Finally, marine debris (such as plastic bags) is easily mistaken for food, and can cause death.



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