Olive Ridley Turtle

The olive ridley is a small turtle with adults reaching 2 to 2 1/2 feet in length and weighing 80 to 100 pounds. The olive ridley has an oval shell and is usually olive-gray in color. The olive 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.

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 2 1/2 to 3 1/2 feet long. Loggerhead hatchlings are dull brown to rusty brown in color. Loggerheads are the most common sea turtle nesting in North Carolina. They are also the most common species found in coastal and inshore waters in North Carolina.

Kemp’s Ridley Turtle

The Kemp’s ridley is a small turtle with adults reaching 2 to 2 1/2 feet in length and weighing 100 to 110 pounds. The Kemp’s ridley has an oval shell and is usually olive-gray in 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.

Green Turtle

An adult green turtle can reach more than 3 feet in length and weigh 300 to 400 pounds. Though brownish in color, the green turtle gets its name from the greenish color of its fat, called calipee. Green turtles are found along the East and West Coasts of the United States and are occasional nesters on North Carolina beaches.

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. This is the rarest species of sea turtle occurring in North Carolina.

Leatherback Turtle

Growing up to 8 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 a 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 rare nesting on North Carolina beaches.

Nesting and Hatchling Habits

Loggerheads are the most common species of sea turtle to nest in the southeastern United States. The peak nesting season for loggerheads in North Carolina is May 1 through August 31. During the nesting season, adult loggerhead females come ashore to lay their eggs. Females excavate pits using their fore and rear flippers to dig egg chambers in moist sand. Females lay 100 to 180 white ping-pong ball-sized eggs per nest. They cover the eggs with sand and return to the water.

Loggerhead sea turtles incubate for about 60 days. Hatchlings then emerge from the nests and scurry towards the water. They spend several days swimming offshore until they reach safety. Hatchlings get their name from the dish-like shape of their top shell with overlapping scales. Loggerhead females come ashore to lay their eggs. They cover the eggs with sand and return to the water.

Activities in the ocean also threaten sea turtles. Sea turtles die 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 campfires. Hatchlings may become disoriented, head inland instead of toward the ocean.
How You Can Help Protect Sea Turtles During Nesting Season

- Minimize beachfront lighting during the sea turtle nesting season by turning off, shielding, or redirecting lights away from the beach.

- Close blinds, draperies in oceanfront rooms at night to keep indoor lighting from reaching the beach.

- Remove recreational equipment, such as lounge chairs, umbrellas and boats, from the beach at night. These items can deter nesting attempts and prevent hatchlings from reaching the ocean.

- Do not construct beach campfires during the 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 disturbances 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. 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.

Protection Under the Endangered Species Act

All six sea turtles found in U.S. waters or using U.S. beaches 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.

For more information about sea turtles in North Carolina, contact:
North Carolina Sea Turtle Project
N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission
1701 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, N.C. 27699-1701
or visit:
www.seaturtle.org