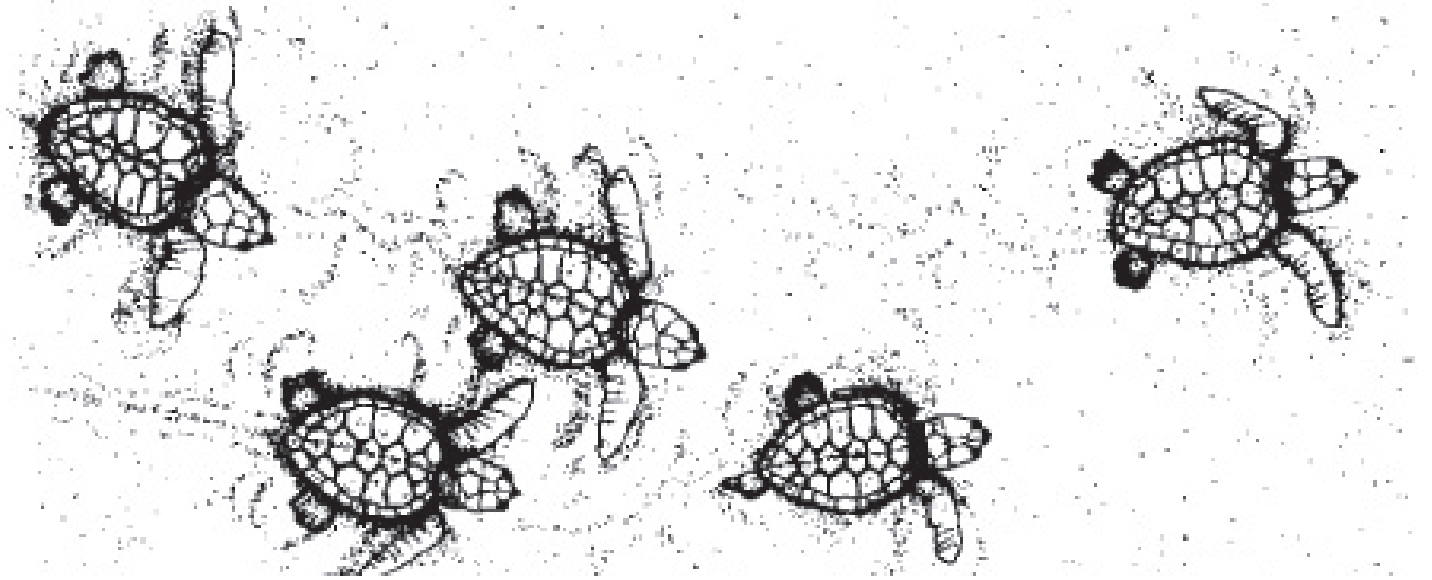




Sea Turtles



The undeveloped beaches of Cape Lookout National Seashore provide an ideal nesting area for many sea turtles each year. Although they spend most of their lives in the ocean, once in a while people can catch a glimpse of these magnificent reptiles swimming in the sound during the day. More rarely, under the cover of darkness, they might be seen nesting on the beach or as new hatchlings making their way to the ocean.

The Turtles of Cape Lookout

Cape Lookout National Seashore serves as a nesting area for four threatened and endangered species of sea turtles.

Loggerhead sea turtles (*Carretta caretta*) are the most common species in the park.

The Loggerhead sea turtle comes in all sizes from sub-adults weighing fifty pounds to enormous three hundred pound barnacle encrusted adults.

Green sea turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) are often seen in the sound as sub-adults, but also occasionally nest along the beach.

Leatherback sea turtles (*Dermochelys coriacea*) are extremely large and nest occasionally within the park.

Kemp's Ridley sea turtles (*Lepidochelys kempi*) are small, uncommon visitors in the sound, and are very infrequent to rare nesters on our beaches.

Nests and Hatchlings

In May and June, visitors may see the loggerheads mating in the ocean near Cape Lookout. Shortly after the mating season, the female turtle will come ashore under the cover of darkness to lay her eggs.

The female will crawl ashore and choose a nest site near the base of the dunes. Using her strong back flippers, she digs a hole about 14 inches to 24 inches deep. She then lays anywhere from 80 to 150 eggs in her nest before using her back flippers again to cover her nest with sand. She then starts her trek back to the ocean. A female sea turtle can lay up to eight nests in one year, but will typically lay 3 nests per year and nest only every other year.

Sea turtle nests can be destroyed by storm overwash, by predators such as raccoons, ghost crabs and coyotes who dig into the nest to eat the eggs, and by off-road vehicles that pack the sand around the egg chamber.

When the eggs hatch after about 60 days, the young two-inch long turtles have to dig their way out of the sandy nest and then begin their journey across the beach to the ocean.

The journey to the ocean is a race between the young sea turtles reaching the relative safety of the ocean and the many hungry sea gulls, ghost crabs, and other predators that like to eat the hatchlings.



Life in the Sea

Sea turtles are supremely adapted to life in the water. After the hatchlings make their way to the ocean, they will spend most of their young lives in the sea far from land in an area known as the Sargasso Sea, a large area of the ocean filled with floating sargassum weed.

Here the young sea turtles float among the weeds and feed on the shrimp, crabs and other small prey.

Somewhere between 7-12 years old, oceanic juveniles migrate to nearshore

coastal areas and continue maturing until adulthood.

The female sea turtle will return to the beach only to lay her eggs. Male sea turtles do not return to land.

It has been found that many female sea turtles return to the same beaches where they were born to lay their nests. How the turtle does that is still a mystery to scientists. More research and study about the turtles may solve this mystery.

Nesting in the Park

During the summer months park staff patrol the beach daily looking for signs of turtle crawls and digs.

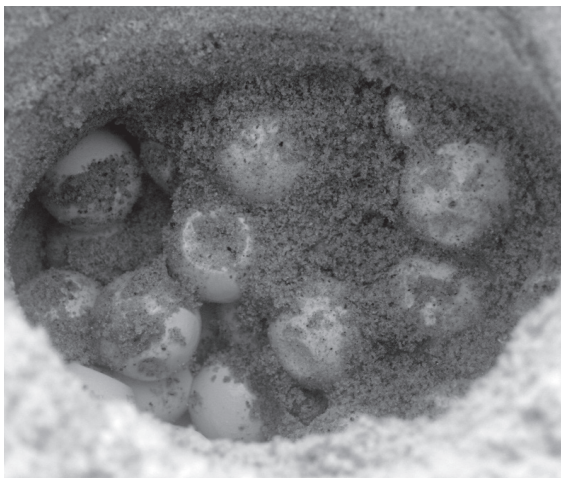
The nest area is marked to prevent vehicles from driving over it.

Turtle patrol staff also protect sea turtle nests with metal wire mesh screens to prevent predators from digging up the nests and eating the eggs.

If a nest is located too low on the beach where waves can affect it, the patrol staff will move it into a protected area higher on the beach. These areas are roped-off and signed to let vehicles know to stay out.

Later in the summer, about two weeks before the nest hatches, the beach in front of the nest will be temporarily closed to allow the wind and waves to erase vehicle tracks and human footprints. Vehicle tracks, and even our footprints, can be deep enough to trap the emerging hatchlings and prevent them from reaching the ocean.

The lack of light on our beaches is a good thing for turtle nesting. Lights shining on the beach can prevent mother turtles from nesting. Hatchling turtles can become disoriented and head towards the light rather than the ocean.



Sea turtle eggs in a nest.



Crawl tracks leading to a nest (bottom)

You Can Help!

There are some simple things that you can do to help sea turtles:

- Secure all trash, especially plastics, and recycle or dispose of it properly. Plastics, especially bags, in the water are often mistaken for food by sea turtles and other marine animals.
- Do not release helium balloons. Balloons can travel long distances and end up on the beach or in the water. Despite their labeling, balloons are not biodegradable and remain as trash for years where they come down causing trouble for marine and beach animals.
- Follow the rules for temporary beach closure areas. Do not drive on any part of the beach within a marked closure area for sea turtle nesting.
- Limit night beach driving. Headlights can cause females to abandon their nest.
- Minimize light shining on the beach from buildings by turning off, shielding, or redirecting away from the beach. Use certified wildlife fixtures and bulbs for any building lights that can be seen from the beach
- Report any injured or dead turtles found on the beach to the park or the local area Sea Turtle Stranding Network. (Turtles with shells brightly painted are already reported.)