



# Sea Turtles of the Gulf Islands

## Kemp's Ridley Turtle (*Lepidochelys kempi*)

Photo: Victoria Withington, NPS GUIS



Federally Endangered, rarest sea turtle, found in both Mississippi and Florida waters, known to nest on Florida District beaches, grows up to 2 feet in length, weighing 100 pounds.

## Green Turtle (*Chelonia mydas*)

Photo: Andy Bruckner, NOAA



Federally Endangered, grows up to 4 feet in length, weighing 440 pounds, known to nest on Florida District beaches.

## Leatherback Turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*)

Photo: Scott R. Benson, NOAA



Federally Endangered, the largest sea turtle, grows to 4-8 feet in length, weighing from 500 to 800 pounds.

## Loggerhead Turtle (*Caretta caretta*)

Photo: Justin Bryars, NPS GUIS



Federally Threatened, grows up to 3 feet in length, weighing up to 200 pounds, nests on Florida and Mississippi District beaches.

# Eggs in the Sand

Every year from May through September, female sea turtles crawl out of the waters of the Gulf of Mexico onto the white sand beaches of Gulf Islands National Seashore in search of an undisturbed nesting site. If a good spot is found, the turtle will use its hind legs to dig a vase shaped hole and lay up to 180 white ping pong sized eggs. Sixty to seventy-five days later, after incubating in the warm sand, the nest will erupt with hatchlings. With flippers flailing, each little turtle makes a mad dash to the Gulf. If hatchlings are able to escape predators, survive harsh tropical weather, and avoid manmade hazards, these little hatchlings will eventually return to the same white beaches to start the cycle once again.

Photo by Victoria Withington, NPS GUI5

Photo by Gary Hopkins, NPS GUI5

Photo by Rebecca Carruth, NPS GUI5

Photo by Victoria Withington, NPS GUI5



## The Danger

Sea turtles are vanishing because of the loss of nesting beaches due to beachfront developments and through the entanglement and drowning in floating manmade debris such as abandoned fishing gear.

Hatchling sea turtles are attracted to natural light reflecting off the breaking surf onto the beach. Lighting from unnatural sources such as beachfront properties, street lights, and automobiles can disorient hatchling sea turtles leading them away from the Gulf. Disoriented hatchlings often die of exposure to the weather, or fall prey to predators such as ghost crabs, raccoons or birds.

## How You Can Help

- **Dispose of litter properly.** Litter floating in the water can entangle sea turtles and can also be mistaken for food.
- **Shield your lights.** Lights from your boats and campers can disturb nesting sea turtles and disorient hatchlings.
- **Boat responsibly.** Throughout the nesting season, female sea turtles swim off the beach waiting to come ashore to nest. Avoid boating at high speeds along the offshore bar along barrier island beaches. Be on alert for sea turtles surfacing to breathe in the path of your boat.
- **Do not disturb nesting.** Sea turtles can nest anytime, day or night. If you see a sea turtle nesting, stop and do not approach. Report your observation to a Park Ranger. You may watch from a distance. As you watch, take time to appreciate all the obstacles these magnificent creatures have to overcome to return to these beaches.