

Padre Island

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Padre Island National Seashore

Sea Turtles of Texas



Kemp's ridley sea turtle. NPS photo.

Five of the world's seven sea turtle species occur along the Texas coast: Kemp's ridley, green, loggerhead, hawksbill, and leatherback. All five species have been documented nesting on Padre Island National Seashore, but the vast majority of nesting records are of the Kemp's ridley. These magnificent marine animals, once abundant in the oceans, have declined during the last century. Harvesting of eggs, slaughtering for food and consumer products, incidental capturing by the fishing industry, and other factors are to blame for dwindling sea turtle populations. Each of the five species is now classified as either threatened or endangered, and could become extinct unless steps are taken to protect and enhance their populations.

For over three decades, Padre Island National Seashore has worked to protect sea turtles. From April through mid-July, National Park Service volunteers and staff search the beaches of Padre Island from 6:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. daily. These patrols occur during the day since Kemp's ridleys nest primarily during the daytime. The goal of this program is to detect and protect nesting sea turtles, eggs, and hatchlings. Increasing their odds of survival on land may help compensate for human-caused losses elsewhere.

Kemp's Ridley The Kemp's ridley is the most endangered sea turtle species. It is also the smallest sea turtle, growing to about 2 feet long and weighing about 100 pounds. It eats primarily crabs.

(*Lepidochelys kempii*)

In Texas, Kemp's ridleys nest from April through mid-July. They are the only sea turtles that nest primarily during the day. While most sea turtles nest individually, Kemp's ridleys nest in group nesting events called arribadas (Spanish for "great arrivals"). In 1947, an arribada of about 40,000 females nesting in one day was documented at Rancho Nuevo, a 16-mile stretch of beach in Tamaulipas, Mexico. But by 1985, only 702 nests were found worldwide, and the species was nearly extinct.

In 1978, the U.S. joined Mexico in efforts to save the Kemp's ridley. Multi-agency, international programs were developed, including an attempt to increase nesting by this indigenous species at Padre

Island National Seashore and form a secondary nesting colony at a protected beach in the U.S. This was done as a safeguard against extinction.



Extensive conservation efforts have continued for the Kemp's ridley in Mexico and the U.S., including the Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle Recovery Project conducted at Padre Island National Seashore. After years of arduous effort, the Kemp's ridley population is showing signs of improvement. Numbers are increasing in Mexico, although they are still far less than formerly recorded. And a nesting population is being re-established on Padre Island. More Kemp's ridley nests are found at Padre Island National Seashore than at any other location in the United States, making it the most important Kemp's ridley nesting beach in the U.S.

Green
(*Chelonia mydas*)

The Texas population of the green sea turtle is federally listed as threatened. Named for the color of its fat, the green sea turtle can grow up to 4 feet long and weigh over 400 pounds. They are herbivores and eat algae and seagrasses.

Southern Texas provides important, year-round habitat for juvenile green sea turtles. They can often be seen foraging at rock jetties in the area. Like all reptiles, sea turtles are cold-blooded. So if temperatures drop too low too fast in winter, sea turtles can become "cold-stunned," a condition where they become paralyzed and could drown if not rescued.

Green sea turtles were once commercially harvested in Texas. Overharvest and severe freezes greatly depleted the population by 1900. But today, after decades of conservation, the juvenile green sea turtle population is increasing in Texas.



Green sea turtles nest in low numbers on Padre Island from June to September.

Loggerhead
(*Caretta caretta*)

The loggerhead sea turtle is federally listed as threatened. Named for its proportionately large head, the loggerhead grows to over 3 feet long, weighing over 250 pounds. They eat crabs, jellyfish, Portuguese man-of-war, and mollusks.

In Texas, loggerheads are most often seen swimming offshore near oil rigs. They nest in low numbers on Padre Island from May to September.



Hawksbill
(*Eretmochelys imbricata*)

The hawksbill sea turtle is federally listed as endangered. Named for its prominent hooked beak, the hawksbill grows to about 3 feet long and weighs 100-200 pounds. It eats primarily sponges.

Hawksbills are the only sea turtles with overlapping scutes, or plates, on their back shells. They are known for their beautifully patterned shells, and many were killed to make jewelry and other items.

In Texas, hawksbills are occasionally found at the jet-tied passes or elsewhere offshore in the Gulf of Mexico. Only one hawksbill nest has ever been found in Texas, at Padre Island National Seashore in 1998.



Leatherback
(*Dermochelys coriacea*)

The leatherback sea turtle is federally listed as endangered. Named for the distinct, leathery texture of its back, the leatherback is the largest sea turtle in the world. Adults are 4-8 feet long and weigh 500-2,000 pounds. Its rubbery back has 7 longitudinal ridges or keels. They eat primarily jellyfish.

In Texas, leatherbacks might be seen offshore as they travel through the Gulf of Mexico. They reportedly nested on Padre Island in the 1920's and 1930's. But only one leatherback nest, found in 2008 at Padre Island National Seashore, has been documented in Texas since nest monitoring began.



How Can You Help?

Be observant. If you see any live or dead sea turtles on the beach, immediately contact a park ranger or call the park sea turtle biologist at (361) 949-8173, ext. 226. However, do not detain nesting turtles or hatchlings emerging from a nest. Taking or having in your possession any part of these threatened or endangered sea turtles is a felony with fines ranging up to \$20,000.

If you see a nesting female, do not approach her until she has begun laying her eggs or is covering

her nest. Look at her front flippers for a metal tag and record the number, but do not remove the tag. If possible, photograph or videotape the nesting turtle or emerging hatchlings and protect them from passing traffic. Place a distinguishable marker in the sand about one foot to the side of the nest. Also mark any sea turtle tracks you find and note how far they go up the beach. Note the exact location. Any information reported to park rangers will help to save these docile creatures.

For more information:

For more sea turtle information, visit us on the web at nps.gov/pais or on Facebook at Padre Island NS Division of Sea Turtle Science & Recovery.

During sea turtle nesting season, call the recorded Hatchling Hotline at (361) 949-7163 for the latest information on nests and hatchling releases.