

Nature Notes

...from Sharon

Sea Turtles

From all of the marked nests on the beach, I'm sure everyone is aware that it is "Turtle Nesting" season. The season starts in May and runs through October each year. Of the seven species of sea turtles in the world, five may be found in Florida waters. Of these five, three nest in Florida: the loggerhead, green, and leatherback. The loggerhead nests the most in our area, although there is an occasional green turtle nest. We hear the most about the females, because once the turtles hatch, only females come back to shore to nest, usually to the same beach where they were born. Males may linger offshore shore to mate with the females, but never return to shore.



The loggerhead (*Caretta caretta*) is listed as a threatened species under the Federal Endangered Species Act. It is named for its large, block-like head, which can be 10 inches wide. Its powerful jaws can crush the thick-shelled clams, conchs, crabs, and encrusting animals that it eats. Loggerheads reach sexual maturity between 12-30 years and can live up to 70 or more years. Very few hatchlings survive to this age. It is estimated that about one in a thousand hatchlings survive to adulthood. Adults can grow over 3 feet long and weigh 200 to 350 pounds and hatchlings weigh about one ounce and are just 2 inches long.



Late at night, the female drags her massive body from the water to somewhere between the rack line and the dunes. She actually leaves alternating flipper tracks that lets us know she has been there and is a loggerhead. (For detailed information to identify specific crawl tracks, checkout the following link:

research.myfwc.com/images/articles/31770/crawl_identification_guidelines.pdf.)

She uses her flippers to create a body pit and dig an egg cavity to deposit 80-120 rubbery eggs the size of ping-pong balls. After burying the eggs, the turtle disguises the nest by flinging sand over it. Once she leaves the nest, she never returns. Females nest every 2-3 years and will lay 4 to 7 nests per season. Nest temperatures during incubation determine a sea turtle's sex—cooler for males and warmer for females.

Barefoot's first nests this season will be hatching soon. After incubating for about 60 days, the hatchlings break out of their egg shells and thrash about together, causing walls of the nest to collapse and the bottom of the hole to rise. Once near the surface, the hatchlings wait until the sand temperature cools to emerge as a group—usually after dark. The young turtles instinctually seek the water by looking for natural light reflecting off the water and swim offshore where they will live for several years in beds of drifting algae such as sargassum, feeding on whatever they find drifting with them. As the sea turtles grow older they move to inshore feeding grounds where they spend the rest of their pre-adult lives.

Collier County Parks & Recreation Department monitors sea turtle nests on 23.7 miles of beach, including Barefoot. This is part of an ongoing statewide nesting sea turtle population study. There are patrols on the beaches every morning, before anyone arrives. Patrols mark each nest with stakes and warning tape and, if necessary, cover with a metal screen to protect it from predators, such as raccoons. Visitors should stay at least 10 feet away from marked areas. After nests hatch, the patrols excavate the nest to determine how many hatchlings emerged from the nest by counting the number of hatched egg casings in relation to the total number of eggs in the nest.

If you see an injured, dead, or nesting sea turtle, call a Ranger immediately. Please stay back from any nesting turtles, so they are not frightened back into the water before completing laying eggs.