

There are five species of sea turtles in south Florida

There are five species of sea turtles found in waters of south Florida: loggerhead, green, leatherback, hawksbill, and Kemp's ridley. During summer months, it is estimated that there are approximately 50,000 turtles in Florida waters. Florida is the most important nesting area in the United States for loggerhead, green, and leatherback turtles. Hawksbill and Kemp's ridley turtles are not known to regularly nest in Florida.



Loggerhead turtle (*Caretta caretta*). The loggerhead gets its name from its large, wide head with powerful jaws. It is classified as a threatened species. It is the most common sea turtle in south Florida and it is estimated that as many as 68,000 loggerhead nests are found in Florida each year. Loggerheads eat mollusks, crabs, and encrusting animals.

Nesting

Sea turtles nest on beaches typically from April – October with some variability depending on their species. A female typically nests every 2 or 3 years and can lay several nests during one nesting season. They dig nests with their back flippers and deposit about 100 eggs, each the size of a ping pong ball. They disguise their nest by flinging loose sand over it, and once a female leaves the nest she does not return.

Eggs incubate for about 2 months, then hatchlings make their way to the surface and emerge at night when the sand cools. Hatchlings scramble to open water and swim offshore, where they live for several years drifting with Sargasso weed. As turtles grow older, they swim into coastal waters.

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Green turtle (*Chelonia mydas*). The green turtle gets its name from its green-colored body fat. It is listed as an endangered species in Florida. Most greens nest in the Caribbean, but as many as 2000 nests can be found in Florida each year. It was hunted for its meat that was made into soup. Eggs are still harvested in some countries. Green turtles graze on seagrasses and are the only sea turtles to eat plants.

Threats

For centuries, millions of sea turtles roamed the oceans. However, in the past 100 years their numbers have been greatly reduced and all species are in danger of extinction. They have been hunted for their meat and eggs. Loss of nesting habitat and ocean pollution have also contributed to their decline.

A main danger to hatchlings is from artificial lighting. Hatchlings move toward the brightest direction, normally the sky over the ocean. However, artificial lights adjacent to beaches cause them to crawl in the wrong direction. Other dangers include obstructions on beaches that can block their path to the sea, and predators such as raccoons, dogs, and fire ants.

You can help

If you live near a beach, you can help by keeping outside lights off during turtle nesting season and closing your window blinds if light is visible from the beach. Remove chairs and other objects from the beach at night; level sand castles and fill any holes dug during the day. Use trash containers for all trash. Sea turtles mistakenly eat debris, particularly plastics, which often results in death. Never buy products made from sea turtles, including meat, soups, shell jewelry, or other items.



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Leatherback turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*). The leatherback is an endangered species. It is the largest of the sea turtles and grows up to 2.4 meters (8 feet) in length. It has a rubbery dark shell with seven ridges that run the length of its back. They can travel many thousands of kilometers and dive hundreds of meters deep. They feed primarily on jellyfish and other soft-bodied animals. Ingestion of plastic bags and egg collecting are the prime reasons for population declines. About 200 leatherback nests occur in Florida each year.



C. Rogers - USGS

Hawksbill turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricata*). The hawksbill turtle is an endangered species and is named for its narrow beak. It was once common in Florida but now is very rarely seen here. It is a relatively small sea turtle, growing to about 87 centimeters (34 inches). They feed on sponges, jellyfish, and other invertebrates. Sponge predation by hawksbills may influence succession and diversity by freeing space on reefs for settlement by other benthic organisms. Their highly specific sponge diet makes them vulnerable to deteriorating conditions of coral reefs. Hawksbills have been hunted to near extinction for their beautiful shell. Japan and Cuba have exempted themselves from the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) ban on hawksbills. Other countries with hawksbills, such as Haiti, do not belong to CITES and offer shells for sale.



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Kemp's ridley turtle (*Lepidochelys kempii*). Kemp's ridley is the rarest and smallest of the sea turtles. They grow to about 71 cm (28 in). It is an endangered species and nests on a single beach in the United States at Padre Island National Seashore, Texas. They feed predominantly on crabs, but also eat jellyfish and sea stars. Many have died after being tangled in shrimp nets or from eating trash mistaken for food. The species is named after Richard Kemp of Key West.

Sea turtle facts

- Approximately 80% of the loggerhead turtles found in the United States use Florida beaches and nearshore waters.
- Sea turtles can migrate for thousands of kilometers, but they usually return to lay their eggs on the same beach where they hatched.
- Sea turtles have existed for over 100 million years.
- It can take 15 – 50 years before a sea turtle reaches reproductive age.
- Only one in a 1000 – 10,000 turtle hatchlings will survive to adulthood.
- When it is time to sleep, loggerhead turtles sometimes wedge themselves under a rock close to shore or take a nap while floating on the surface in deep water.
- The nest temperature during incubation determines the sex of sea turtles. Cool conditions produce males; hot conditions produce females.
- Sea turtles have good underwater vision, but are nearsighted out of the water.
- Sea turtles do not have external ears, but they respond to low frequency sounds.

Adapted from www.seefloridaonline.com/turtles/