

SEA TURTLE PROJECT



By Tammy Smith
*Tybee Sea Turtle Project
Coordinator*

WANT TO VOLUNTEER?

An early morning beach walk is amazing especially if you have a mission. The volunteers of the Tybee Sea Turtle Project walk the entire length of Tybee Beach in search of sea turtle tracks. The dawn patrols, which begin at 6:00a.m., usually last between one and half to two hours. Tybee has less than five miles of nesting habitat that must be surveyed, during the nesting season, according to Georgia Department of Natural Resources (GADNR). Dawn patrols are conducted daily from May 1 through August 31, rain, shine and even the extreme heat, can't keep us away.

The volunteers take pride in covering the beach hoping to find a sea turtle track, which then could become "their" nest. Once a track is discovered, I am called to begin the process of collecting data for GADNR. The data includes verifying the species that left the track, determining if the female left pit area (nesting spot) or if she just turned around. When a pit area is found, the fun begins. Have you ever heard the saying "Like looking for a needle in the haystack?" Searching for the nest cavity is just like looking for that needle, only the eggs deposited are fragile, not to mention endangered. A found nest is either situated in an ideal spot for incubation or it may need to be relocated to another area with less vegetation, higher dunes and/or a darker spot on the beach. In relocation the eggs are carefully removed and placed in a new cavity identical to the original cavity left by the female sea turtle. During the process the eggs are counted and recorded on the GADNR data card. A GPS coordinate is also taken. Nest are stacked and marked with a sign reminding the public that sea turtles, nest and hatchlings are protected by the Federal Endangered Species Act.

Having nests to monitor during the daily dawn patrols gives the volunteers a little more motivation, as if we need it, to the hit the beach so early! An established nest is monitored for approximately 50-75 day. As the hatching window draws near, the volunteers begin looking for signs of a nest getting ready to hatch. This part of the season brings another exciting aspect for the volunteers; nest sitting. We are so protective of "our" baby sea turtles that we actually sit on the beach through the night beginning on day 50 and sometimes sooner. Volunteers assist the sea turtle hatchlings only when they become disorientated by artificial lighting, which is quite often on our developed beach. The volunteers make sure that the baby sea turtles safely make it to the water and begin their long journey to the Sargasso Sea.

Being a part of the Tybee Sea Turtle Project is a rewarding opportunity. I cannot thank the 50 plus



resident and non-residents who continue to volunteer their time each season. If you are interested in becoming a volunteer with the project, please email me at Tammy@TybeeMarineScience.org. I will be holding a new volunteer orientation sometime in March.

The 2010 sea turtle season is just around the corner. To kick off the season, the Tybee Island Marine Science Center will host the 6th annual Turtle Trot on Saturday, April 24th at 8:30 in the morning. This is a 5K beach run and is the only fundraiser for the Tybee Sea Turtle Project. For more info. you may email me or check out the Turtle Trot link at www.tybeemarinescience.org.

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SEA TURTLE PROJECT

By Tammy Smith
*Tybee Sea Turtle Project
Coordinator*

For millions of years sea turtles have roamed in the waters off the coast of Georgia and around the world. Scientists have identified seven different species of sea turtles worldwide. Off the coast of Georgia we are visited by five of those species. The five species commonly found in Georgia waters are: the Kemp's ridley, the hawksbill, the loggerhead, the green turtle and the leatherback. Although each sea turtle species have very similar characteristics and the same basic anatomy, each is unique in its own way.

The Kemp's ridley is the smallest and the rarest sea turtle that visits the coast of Georgia. An adult will only reach up to 28 inches in length and weigh around 100 pounds. The carapace, the top shell of a turtle, is usually an olive green color and the plastron, the bottom shell is yellow in color. Kemp's are the only sea turtle species that nest each year. Other species nest every 2-3 years. Kemp's ridleys have an unusual nesting pattern. Hundreds of nesting females will emerge at the

same time and began the nesting process. It is believed that the mass nesting will ward off predators. Most nesting occurs in Mexico. They are named after Richard Kemp, a fisherman from Key West, Florida, who helped discover the species.

The hawksbill is on the brink of extinction due to the hunting of the turtle for its beautiful shell. The shells tend to be a reddish-brown and yellow in color. Hawksbills are relatively small and reach lengths of only 36 inches and weigh no more than 150 pounds. They feed mainly on sponges usually found in coral reefs. Therefore, Hawksbills are usually found in more tropical waters and are rarely seen in Georgia. Hawksbill turtles nest every other year and lay an average of 160 eggs in one nest.

The loggerhead is the most common sea turtle found nesting on the Georgia islands. The size of a loggerhead ranges from 32-41 inches in length and some loggerheads can weigh up to 350 pounds! They have a reddish-brown shell with a yellow plastron (lower shell). The head of a loggerhead is much larger than that of other sea turtles (hence the name). They tend to feed mainly on shellfish found at the bottom of the ocean. Females will nest every 2-3 years laying an average nest size of about 120 ping-pong sized eggs.

Green turtles are found in all tropical waters and have nested on Georgia beaches, although very infrequently. Mature green turtles can reach a maximum size of about 4 feet and can weigh as much as 400 pounds. The green turtle receives its name from the greenish color of its body fat. Their shells tend to be black, gray or brown and heart shaped. Green turtles are the only sea turtles that eat only plants.

The largest sea turtle is the leatherback. It can range in lengths between 4 and 8 feet and weigh as much as 1300 pounds! The leatherback is the only sea turtle that does not have a hard shell. Unlike the shells of other sea turtles, the leatherbacks shell is composed of rough, rubbery skin with seven narrow ridges running down the length of the carapace. Surprisingly, the diet of this massive turtle is made up of jellyfish. Leatherbacks are the most migratory of all sea turtle species traveling for thousands of miles around the world. They can even survive in waters with temperatures below 45 degrees. Nesting females return to various beaches each spring and will deposit about 80 billiard-ball sized eggs per nest.

Sea turtles are remarkable ocean creatures. They have evolved over millions of years and are one of the oldest living organisms on earth today. Just a reminder that sea turtles are endangered in the state of Georgia and also protected by the Federal Endangered Species Act of 1973.

For more information on sea turtles or the Tybee Island Sea Turtle Project please visit the Tybee Island Marine Science Center! The center is located at 1510 Strand Avenue, Tybee Island, GA 31328. If you wish to donate, please call (912)786-5917, or visit the website at www.tybeemsc.org. If you are interested in volunteering with the Sea Turtle Project, please contact the Center or send me an email at turtletammy@bellsouth.net.

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SEA TURTLE PROJECT

By **Tammy Smith**
*Tybee Sea Turtle Project
Coordinator*

THE ANATOMY OF A SEA TURTLE

A sea turtle is an amazing creature! Sea turtles have been around for millions of years. Throughout the years they changed very little. There are five sea turtle species living off the Georgia coast; the loggerhead, the hawksbill, the Kemp's ridley, the leatherback and the green turtle. All five species have very similar characteristics.

The shell of a sea turtle contains two parts; a top layer called the carapace, and the bottom layer is referred to as the plastron. The carapace of most sea turtles is covered with hard scales or scutes. The number and arrangements of these scutes help to identify each different species. The leatherback is the only sea turtle that does not have scutes; instead, leatherbacks have rough, layers of skin with seven ridges along the length of the top shell. This is where the leatherback gets its name.

Sea turtles lack teeth, but have powerful jaws. These modified jaws allow the turtle to crush or tear their food. Different species of sea turtles have different diets. Sea turtles do not have ears that protrude from each side of their head. Instead they have eardrums that are covered with a layer of skin. All species have an excellent sense of smell and eyesight. Although their eyesight is amazing underwater, they become nearsighted when on land. Females are known to release fluids

from their eyes to prevent drying out while laying her eggs. Some say the mother is crying for your unborn young.

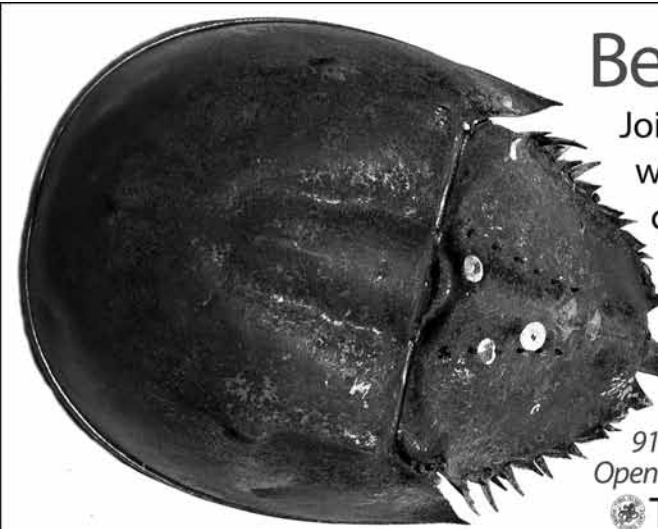
All five species of sea turtles have four limbs; two fore flippers and two hind flippers. Some species have one or two claws on each fore flipper. The front flippers are used to propel the turtles through the water. The rear flippers provide direction and stability as they act like rudders. Females also use their rear flippers when digging the nest cavity during nesting season.

Both male and female sea turtles have tails. The tail of a male sea turtle is usually longer than the carapace and sticks out beyond the rear flippers. The female's tail does not extend beyond much past the bottom of the carapace. This differentiation of tail lengths is a physical characteristic used to help determine the sex of a turtle.

In case you did not know sea turtles breathe air just like you and I do! Although most of their time is spent submerged under water, the sea turtle must come to the surface for a quick breath. Most species can dive for about five minutes before coming to the surface. When sleeping or resting, turtles can remain under water for several hours.

As you can see, sea turtles are truly fascinating creatures that have changed very little over the past millions of years! Sea turtles are endangered in the state of Georgia and protected also protected by the Federal Endangered Species Act of 1973.

For more information on sea turtles or the Tybee Island Sea Turtle Project please visit the Tybee Island Marine Science Center! The center is located at 1510 Strand Avenue, Tybee Island, GA 31328. If you wish to donate, please call (912)786-5917, or visit the website at www.tybeemsc.org.



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 **TYBEE ISLAND MARINE SCIENCE CENTER**

SEA TURTLE PROJECT



By **Tammy Smith**
*Tybee Sea Turtle Project
Coordinator*

Georgia completed the 2009 sea turtle season with a total of 995 loggerhead nests. This was significantly lower than the 1,646 nest during the 2008 nesting season. As mentioned in my article last month, Tybee had three loggerhead nests and Little Tybee had seven. The nesting data, collected from all 13 Georgia Sea Turtle Projects, shows a decline in the long-term nesting trends. Currently, in Georgia, loggerheads are listed as endangered. However, at the federal level they are still listed as threatened. This could soon change with an expected ruling in February, 2010, elevating the status of the loggerhead population to endangered under the Federal Endangered Species Act. The recovery goal of loggerheads in Georgia is around 2,800 nests per year.

In addition to loggerhead nesting this season, Georgia also had a total of seven leatherback nests! Leatherbacks primarily nest on Florida, but have begun

to migrate north a bit. Leatherbacks are the largest of the five sea turtle species, coming in at a whopping 1,300 pounds! An average loggerhead is between 80 and 100 pounds. DNA testing this season determined that only two females were responsible for Georgia's seven leatherback nests. One female laid two nests and the other deposited five nests. Unfortunately all five of those nests were not fertilized and did not produce viable hatchlings. No leatherbacks nested on Tybee this season. Our last visit by a leatherback occurred in 2004.

For the second year in a row, all 13 sea turtle projects participated in a genetic study of a sea turtles DNA. This study is headed by Brian Shamlin, with the University of Georgia. The study requires the removal of one egg from each loggerhead nest deposited on Tybee. The eggs were sent to the lab for testing. Results from the 2009 season so far, have identified 350 individual nesting females. Brian was also able to match 20 pairs of nesting mother loggerheads to their nesting daughter. This is incredible information because sea turtles don't reach maturity and reproduction until age 30-35. That means that the mother could be nesting well into her sixties and beyond! The genetic study determined the females generally nest in three year intervals, which could account for the lower numbers this season.

Currently, the Tybee Island Marine Science Center and the City of Tybee, are working on a lighting project with Hubble Lighting and the Department of Energy, to decrease the amount of light illuminating our beaches. Over the next few months a few test LED fixtures, some with shields, will be installed at various locations close to the beach. I will keep you updated as the project progresses.

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SEA TURTLE PROJECT



By Tammy Smith
*Tybee Sea Turtle Project
Coordinator*

The 2009 sea turtle season has come to a close. Tybee had a nice surprise to wrap up our nesting season. A crawl and potential nesting area was discovered on the morning of July 28th. After two hours of probing and digging, the eggs could not be located. The area was staked off and monitored for the next 60 days. It was looking as if nothing was going to happen and Tybee would end the season with only two nests.

On Friday, September 25, Danny Carpenter with Tybee Island Public Works, called to tell me that there appeared to be activity at this sight. I arrived to investigate the nest and sure enough there were tiny, baby turtle tracks! Tybee officially had its third and final sea turtle nest. After excavating the nest, I discovered the nest was approximately 30 inches deep. Normal depths range between 18 and 24 inches. No wonder I could not locate the eggs back in July! The nest contained 145 ping-pong ball sized eggs of which 133 hatched and 12 remained un-hatched. Three live hatchlings were found towards the bottom of the nest and were released that evening from 8th Street. Overall, Tybee had a total of ten crawls, three nests and ten false crawls. Approximately 332 hatchlings emerged and made their way to the sea from Tybee Island.

Little Tybee had a few more visits from nesting females during the 2009 season. The island finished with a total of 23 emergences, seven nests and 16 false crawls. One area was listed as unknown, because eggs were not located. Unlike Tybee, Little Tybee has extreme erosion and wildlife depredation. Forty-three percent of the eggs deposited on Little Tybee were lost due to raccoon and ghost crab destruction. Unfortunately, the last nest and unknown nest on Little Tybee were washed away with the higher than normal tides in mid-September. However, approximately 255 baby turtles made their way to the sea from the front side of Little Tybee.

Throughout the Georgia Barrier Islands, there was a total 1,002 sea turtle nests. Cumberland Island continues to maintain the lead with 251 sea turtle nests. Blackbeard Island followed with a total of 142 nests. Georgia beaches had seven leatherback nests this

season. Leatherbacks are the largest of the sea turtle species, weighing in at about 1,300 pounds! They are rare, but hopefully making a comeback in Georgia. The last time a leatherback nested on Tybee was in 2004.

Sea turtle strandings increased this season. As of October 13th, there were 138 reported sea turtle strandings in the state. A stranding includes deceased turtles that wash up on Georgia beaches or are found sick and injured along the coast. Live turtles are rescued and taken to the Georgia Sea Turtle Center for rehabilitation. Strandings can be caused by propeller strikes, parasites, marine debris, illness and old age.

As we wrap up this year's sea turtle season, I would like to thank the fifty plus sea turtle project volunteers for another season of sea turtle nesting. Well Done!

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SEA TURTLE PROJECT



TYBEE TURTLE

By Tammy Smith
*Tybee Sea Turtle Project
Coordinator*

The 2009 sea turtle nesting season has come to a close. Nesting females complete their nesting by the second week of August. The entire sea turtle season runs through the end of October. We are now in the hatching part of the season. This is the time that existing nests are monitored through the emergence process. Overall the nesting numbers, along the Georgia coast, were down from last year. There were 938 sea turtle nests as of August 14th. Tybee had two of those nests and Little Tybee had eight. Both islands have an unknown area which could prove to be a nest later in the season. That would increase the total number of nests on each island by one.

By the time this is published both of Tybee's nests will have hatched. The first nest, found on May 31, began hatching on July 21. This nest had an incubation period of 52 days. Incubation can last anywhere from 50 to 75 days. Nest one contained 140 eggs and approximately 122 little hatchlings emerged and made their way to the sea! Unfortunately, some eggs did not develop. The second nest, found on June 22, began hatching on August 13 (my dad's birthday) after 53 days of incubation. This nest emerged at 11 o'clock A.M.! It is not uncommon for a daytime emergence when the weather is overcast. That morning about four to five babies made their way to the ocean with help of some beach goers. Throughout the day eight more babies emerged, but were kept in a covered bucket, in a dark, cool place (my laundry room) until night fall. It is safer to release the hatchlings under the disguise of dark rather than during daytime hours where they can be easily spotted by predators. The majority of the nest hatched

around seven that night, after a thunderstorm. What a sight to see! The babies knew exactly where to go and looked like tiny soldiers as they marched to the surf. Thanks to the staff of the Tybee Island Marine Science Center and the Tybee Ocean Rescue for their assistance with this nest throughout the day. Fire ants were found in the nest the morning of August 14. This required an immediate excavation; normally an excavation would take place on the fifth night after emergence. There were 104 eggs total in the nest. Ninety-nine hatched and five eggs did not develop. Both of the nests on Tybee had a great hatching success.

Throughout the season many people have wondered why the low number of nests. Honestly, it is hard to provide a reason. Nesting females generally nest in intervals of two to three years. I was often asked if the re-nourishment had any effect on the turtles. Tybee had nine crawls total and only two of those were attempted nesting sites. This is where the female turtle begins to dig a nest cavity, but abandons the pit area for reasons unknown. Because we had a low number of abandoned nesting attempts, I do not believe that the new sand deterred the females from visiting our island.

As far as the filming of the movie, *The Last Song*, it is possible that the lighting from the carnival scene, the volleyball set and the filming at 19th Street could have deterred a few nesting females from exiting the sea at those locations. However, any given summer those locations are not normally visited by sea turtles due to the movement on the beach and the influence of lighting in that area. The movie folks have worked closely with Mark Dodd, Sea Turtle Coordinator with GA Department of Natural Resources, to ensure that turtles were not impacted too much. There will be several scenes regarding a sea turtle nest in the movie. One scene captures little hatchlings as they emerge and journey to the ocean. Live loggerhead hatchlings were used for that scene.

Although it was a low and slow season, the data that was collected for GA DNR is very valuable in planning the future protection of all sea turtle species. I want to close by thanking our wonderful and dedicated volunteers who tirelessly complete dawn patrols and nest sitting assignments throughout the season. I am very grateful for all your help! I need to send a special thanks to Cheryl Tilton, for taking care of things while I was on vacation, thanks for taking the phone calls and letting me sleep in.

For more information on sea turtles or the Tybee Island Sea Turtle Project please visit the Tybee Island Marine Science Center! The center is located at 1510 Strand Avenue, Tybee Island, GA 31328. If you wish to donate, please call (912)786-5917, or visit the website at www.tybeemsc.org.

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SEA TURTLE PROJECT

By **Tammy Smith**

*Coordinator of the Tybee Island
Sea Turtle Project*



As I sat down to write this article, I am surprised to realize that we are already

75 days into the sea turtle season. Only 109 more days to go! Each sea turtle season runs from May 1st through October 31st. The sea turtles began gathering off our coast in early spring in preparation for mating. When mating is complete, only the female will come ashore to lay her nest. She will do this under the cover of darkness. Out of the water she slowly crawls towards shore in search of a suitable nesting site. Once a site is found, the mother turtle will dig a nest cavity about 18-24 inches deep using her rear flippers. Next she will deposit the 100 plus eggs, cover the nest and journey back to the sea, never returning to check on the future babies. The entire nesting process can take hours and will be repeated, by the female sea turtle, multiple times throughout the season.

The eggs left in the nest are about the size of a ping pong ball and will incubate for approximately 60-75 days. Many factors can affect the success of the baby sea turtles: raccoons, ghost crabs, dogs, birds, fire ants, heavy rain and storm surges. The temperature of the nest will determine the gender of the hatchlings. The hotter the temperature the more females are produced, the cooler the temperature will lead to more males. After the incubation period, the hatchling will use an "egg tooth" to break

out of the shell and begin the crawl over its siblings to the top of the nest. Hatchlings usually wait until dark to emerge from the nest. Majority of the nest will emerge from the nest that first night making a mad dash towards the brightest point on the horizon. Unfortunately, for hatchlings on Tybee, the brightest spot tends to be lighting for streets, pools,

porches, signs, dune crossover, flashlights, cars and even cell phones.

To date, Tybee only has had five crawls and only two nests.

The first nest, laid on May 31st, will begin hatching in the next couple of weeks. Please remember and remind others that sea turtles need a dark beach! Please turn off all outdoor lighting, shield



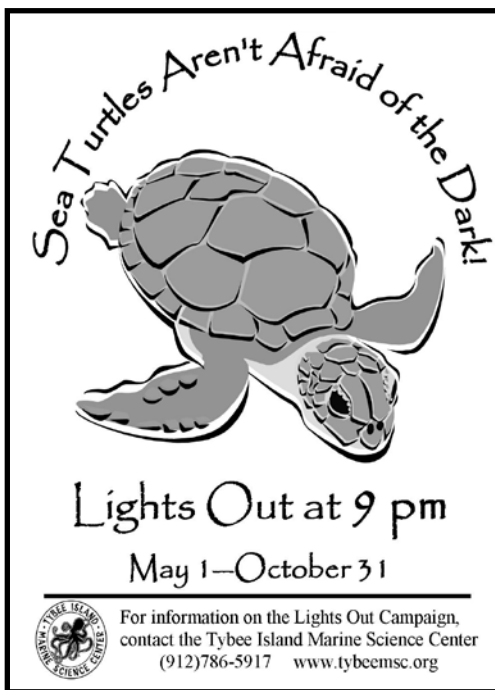
inside lighting by closing curtains, use only red filtered lighting when on the beach at night. Applying red cellophane over a flashlight will provide an inexpensive red filtered light.

If you haven't heard, there is a movie being filmed on Tybee this summer. Ironically, there are several scenes that include a sea turtle nest which will lead to some filming on the beach

at night. Mark Dodd and Georgia Department of Natural Resources are working closely with the movie folks for accuracy and protection of our turtles. Fortunately, the filming is taking place on a part of the beach that doesn't tend to be visited by nesting turtles.

As I close, I would like to thank all the volunteers who are dedicated to the Tybee Island Sea Turtle Project by making sure that the beach is walked daily at six o'clock a.m., rain or shine. I know the season is slow, but your efforts are noticed. Thanks also to Danny Carpenter, Tybee Ocean Rescue and the Tybee Police Department for assisting with

stranded sea turtles.



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