



Sea Turtles



The undeveloped beaches of Cape Lookout National Seashore provide an ideal nesting area for many sea turtles each year. Although they spend most of their lives in the ocean, once in a while people can catch a glimpse of these magnificent reptiles swimming in the sound during the day. More rarely, under the cover of darkness, they might be seen nesting on the beach or as new hatchlings making their way to the ocean.

The Turtles of Cape Lookout

Cape Lookout National Seashore serves as a nesting area for four threatened and endangered species of sea turtles.

Loggerhead sea turtles (*Carretta caretta*) are the most common species in the park.

The loggerhead sea turtle comes in all sizes from sub-adults weighing fifty pounds to enormous three hundred pound barnacle encrusted adults.

Green sea turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) are the second most common nesting species on our beaches and are sometimes seen in the sound as sub-adults.

Kemp's Ridley sea turtles (*Lepidochelys kempfi*) are small, rare visitors in the sound, but also nest occasionally on our beaches.

Leatherback sea turtles (*Dermochelys coriacea*), are extremely large and rarely nest within the park.

Nests and Hatchlings

In May and June, visitors may see the loggerheads mating in the bight area of Cape Lookout. Shortly after the mating season, the female turtle will come ashore under the cover of darkness to lay her eggs.

The female will crawl ashore and choose a nesting site on the beach. Using her strong back flippers, she digs a hole about 18 inches to 24 inches deep. She then lays anywhere from 80 to 150 eggs in her nest before using her back flippers again to cover her nest with sand. She then starts her trek back to the ocean. A female sea turtle can lay up to eight nests in one year, but will typically nest only every three years.

Sea turtle nests can be destroyed by storm overwash, by predators such as raccoons and ghost crabs who dig into the nest to eat the eggs, and by off-road vehicles that pack the sand around the egg chamber.

When the eggs hatch after about 60 days, the young two-inch long turtles have to dig their way out of the sandy nest and then begin their journey to the ocean.

The journey to the ocean is filled with many perils such as sea gulls, ghost crabs, and other predators that like to prey on the turtles.



Life in the Sea

Even after reaching the haven of the sea, the survival of the sea turtle hatchlings remains in jeopardy. They must grow quickly and avoid predators on their way to the relative safety of the Sargasso Sea, a large area in the ocean filled with floating sargassum weed.

The turtle is supremely adapted to life in the water. After the hatchlings make their way to the ocean, they will spend most of their lives in the sea far from land. The female sea turtle will return to the beach only to lay her eggs.

Many female sea turtles return to the same beach where they were born, their natal beach, to lay their nests. How the turtle does that is a mystery to scientists.

Sea turtles are capable of detecting the magnetic fields of the Earth and adult females may use variations in the magnetic field to find their way to their natal beach. They may also use visual cues and may be able to recognize the chemical composition of the sand on various beaches. This question may be answered with more research and study about the turtles.

Nest Protection

During the summer months at Cape Lookout National Seashore, visitors may encounter roped-off sections of the beach. These areas are wildlife protection zones for nests.

Cape Lookout staff patrol the beach daily looking for the signs of turtle crawls and digs. If the nest appears endangered or threatened, the patrol staff will move it to the protection zone.

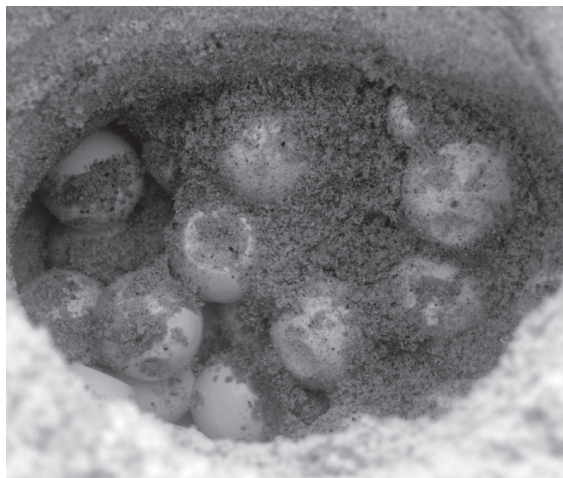
The protection zones prevent vehicle tracks that can be hazardous to the turtles. These tracks pose a particular obstacle to the emerging hatchlings. To a hatchling trapped in a vehicle track, the walls of sand may be

an insurmountable barrier.

If a hatchling gets caught in the track, they may not be able to crawl out and are easier for predators (sea gulls, ghost crabs and raccoons) to catch.

Prohibiting vehicles inside the protection zones reduces the number of tracks in which the hatchlings can get caught.

Staff members also protect sea turtle nests with screens to prevent predators from digging up the nests and eating the eggs.



Sea turtle eggs in a nest



Crawl tracks leading to a nest (bottom)

You Can Help!

Occasionally, sea turtles may be injured or killed and they will sometimes wash ashore. Information about these strandings is vital to understanding how to protect their population.

If you encounter an injured turtle on the beach, immediately call authorities. Stay away from the turtle's head: they have powerful jaws used to crush the shells of crabs and whelks, and you could lose a finger!

Report dead turtles found on the beach. (Previously reported strandings will have brightly colored paint sprayed on the shell.)

Remember: It is against the law to remove any part of the turtle.

Visitors can help sea turtles by keeping plastic bags, balloons and other items out of the water. Plastic in the water can look like jellyfish. Jellyfish are a favorite food of sea turtles, since turtles have poor eyesight, they might mistake a plastic bag for a jellyfish and eat it. The plastic can harm the turtle and even kill them.

Sea turtles dig a dark beach! Natural light from the moon and stars are okay, artificial lights shining on the beach can keep the adults from nesting and disorient hatchlings preventing them from reaching the ocean. Keep lights - flashlights, patio lights, campfires, etc. - from being seen from the beach. If you must use a light on the beach at night, use one with a red bulb, as turtles aren't bothered by red light.