

SEA TURTLES of the Gulf of Mexico

Did you know that sea turtles are reptiles?

Sea turtles are in the Taxonomic Class of Reptilia. They share this class with crocodiles, alligators, lizards, snakes, land turtles, and tortoises. Sea turtles breathe air and are cold-blooded. These incredible animals have been around for about 110 million years and are protected by the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Five species of sea turtles are found in the Gulf of Mexico with seven species found worldwide. All species are protected but threats to their existence continue. Manmade and natural activities within the Gulf of Mexico have potential impacts to sea turtles and their surrounding habitats. The Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) studies protected species and their habitats in order to understand how human and natural activities impact them and their environment.

LOGGERHEAD TURTLE (*Caretta caretta*)

FEDERAL STATUS: ESA Endangered-North Pacific Ocean and ESA Threatened-Northwest Atlantic Ocean (2 of the 9 Distinct Population Segments).

SIZE: Adults may average about 36 inches in length and weigh up to 250 pounds.

DIET: Powerful jaws allow them to eat hard-shelled prey such as whelks, conchs, and crabs.

HABITAT: Uses 3 different ecosystems—terrestrial, oceanic, and neritic. Found in all temperate and tropical regions of the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans.

DISTRIBUTION: The Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge is the most important nesting area for loggerhead turtles in the western hemisphere. Twenty-five percent of all nesting in the U.S. occurs at this refuge on the east coast of Florida.

FUN FACTS: Named because of its relatively large head. Have callus-like traction scales beneath their flippers that allow them to "walk" on the ocean floor. During breeding season, females have been known to travel hundreds of miles to nest without foraging. Most abundant sea turtle in U.S. coastal waters.



Photo: National Marine Fisheries Service

KEMP'S RIDLEY TURTLE (*Lepidochelys kempii*)

FEDERAL STATUS: ESA Endangered—throughout its range.

SIZE: Smallest adult marine turtle in the world, averages about 100 pounds with a length of 24-28 inches.

DIET: Adults feed in areas with sandy or muddy bottom. Diet includes mainly crabs, but they also feed on fish, jellyfish, and mollusks.

HABITAT: Neritic zones containing sandy or muddy bottoms.

DISTRIBUTION: Found throughout the Gulf of Mexico and the U.S. Atlantic seaboard; 95% of worldwide Kemp's ridley nesting occurs in the state of Tamaulipas, Mexico.

FUN FACTS: Unique characteristic of synchronized nesting called "arribada" ("arrival" in English), where females come ashore to nest in high numbers. They nest mostly during daylight.



Photo: National Park Service

LEATHERBACK TURTLE (*Dermochelys coriacea*)

FEDERAL STATUS: ESA Endangered—throughout its range.

SIZE: Largest adult turtle and heaviest living reptile in the world. Measures 6.5 feet in length and can weigh 2,000 pounds.

DIET: Feeds primarily on jellyfish and other soft-bodied pelagic prey; can dive to a depth of 3,900 feet in search of prey.

HABITAT: Oceanic/pelagic, migrating between feeding areas and nesting beaches but also forages in coastal waters.

DISTRIBUTION: In the United States, nesting occurs in the U.S. Caribbean, primarily the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, and southeast Florida. Adult leatherbacks can tolerate colder water temperatures better than any other sea turtles species.

FUN FACTS: Only sea turtle that does not have a large bony shell, the leatherback is uniquely equipped with 7 ridges on the carapace. Because of its large flippers, Leatherbacks are the most migratory and wide-ranging of sea turtle species. Alone in Taxonomic Family of Dermochelyidae.



Photo: Matthew Godfrey

GREEN TURTLE (*Chelonia mydas*)

FEDERAL STATUS: ESA Endangered—breeding populations in Florida and on the Pacific coast of Mexico; ESA Threatened - all other populations.

SIZE: Largest of hard-shelled sea turtles, weighing 300-350 pounds and growing to about 3 feet in length.

DIET: Adult turtles eat only plants - primarily seagrasses and algae.

HABITAT: Can be found in both inshore and nearshore waters from Texas to Massachusetts, the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico.

DISTRIBUTION: Nesting in the U.S. occurs primarily along the central and southeast coast of Florida; found in about 140 countries throughout the world in tropical and subtropical waters between 30° North and 30° South.

FUN FACTS: Adults are strictly herbivores, hatchlings feed on pelagic plants and animals. Diet gives them a greenish-colored fat which gives them their name. Largest nesting populations can be found in Tortuguero, Costa Rica and Raine Island, Australia.



Photo: National Park Service

HAWKSBILL TURTLE (*Eretmochelys imbricata*)

FEDERAL STATUS: ESA Endangered—throughout its range.

SIZE: Adults average about 100-150 pounds with the shell ranging 25-35 inches in length.

DIET: Feeds mainly on sponges, other invertebrates, and algae.

HABITAT: Often found around healthy coral communities.

DISTRIBUTION: In the U.S., hawksbill turtles are found in the Gulf of Mexico (especially around Texas), southern Florida, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands; generally found between 30° North and 30° South in the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans.

FUN FACTS: Shape of prominent hooked beak gives turtle its name; like the bill of a hawk. Front flippers can have two claws. Day or night, hawksbill turtles use ledges and caves of coral reefs for resting and are known to rest in the same spot every night. Hawksbill turtles are renowned for their elaborate, highly colored shells.

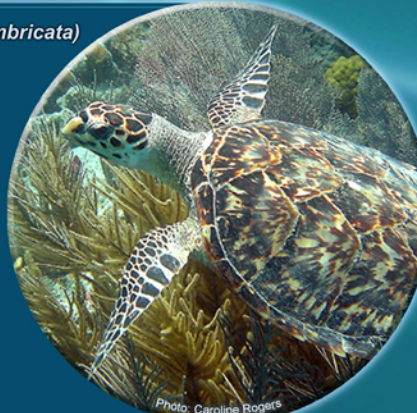


Photo: Caroline Rogers



COMMON CHARACTERISTICS: A sea turtle cannot retract its head into its shell because the muscles from the front flippers take up too much room in the shell. A sea turtle's ear is covered by thick skin; they have no external ear opening. They use their strong jaws to tear and crush food because they have no teeth. Sea turtles have four life stages—hatchling, juvenile, sub-adult, and adult. Juvenile turtles float on Sargassum mats and feed in the open ocean until they are young adults, when they move to inshore waters. They grow slowly, reaching sexual maturity between 10 and 40 years, and breed every 2-3 years. Sea turtles make long migrations between feeding and nesting grounds, and females typically nest on or near the beach where they were hatched. The sex of a sea turtle is determined by temperatures experienced during embryonic development.

THREATS to sea turtles can come from incidental catch from commercial and recreational fishing. Ingestion of and entanglement in marine debris is also a problem. There is degradation and loss of their nesting and foraging grounds. Environmental contamination can degrade habitats. Human consumption of turtle eggs and their meat is a great threat. Artificial lighting on or near beaches can deter adult female turtles from coming ashore and laying eggs, and newly-born hatchlings can be misdirected away from the sea by bright onshore lights.



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