

Kemp's Ridley Turtle

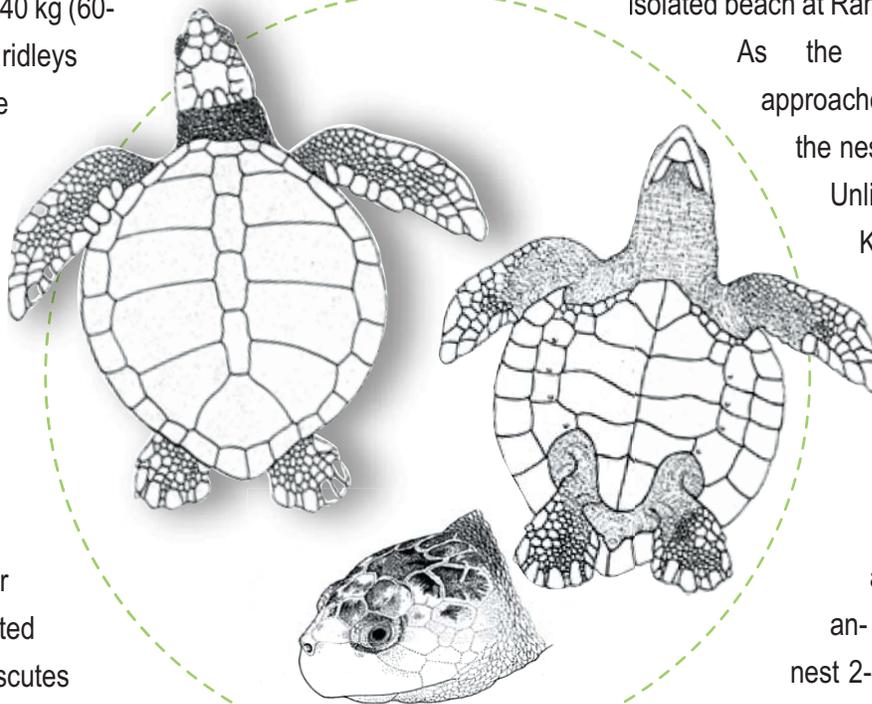
Lepidochelys kempii

General Description

Numbering no more than 6000 adult females (but rising!), the Kemp's ridley turtle is the most endangered sea turtle in the world. It is a small sea turtle, ranging from 58-76 cm (23-30 in) in carapace (top shell) length and from 27-40 kg (60-90 lb) in weight. Kemp's ridleys have a bony carapace covered with non-overlapping scutes, including five pairs of lateral scutes.

The carapace is almost round in shape, and dark grey in color. The plastron (bottom shell) is yellowish in color and has small pores located in the inframarginal scutes ("bridge scutes" that connect the carapace to the plastron). The exact function of these pores is unknown.

Between the eyes are a variable number of prefrontal scales. They have two claws on each flipper, although some adults lose the secondary claw on their front flippers. Hatchlings are uniformly grayish black in color, and typical carapace length is 42-48 mm (1.7-1.9 in).



Nesting Distribution and Behavior

The existence and whereabouts of Kemp's ridley nesting beaches remained a mystery to the scientific community until 1947, when film footage became available of an estimated 40,000 females emerging to nest on an isolated beach at Rancho Nuevo, Mexico!

As the breeding season approaches, adults gather off the nesting beach to mate.

Unlike other sea turtles, Kemp's ridleys are typically day-time nesters. The nesting crawl is asymmetrical, measuring 70-80 cm (29-32 in) across. Females nest annually and typically nest 2-3 times per season, usually depositing over 100 eggs per nest. Incubation lasts 7-8 weeks.

Diet

Kemp's ridleys are carnivorous. Crabs and shrimps are the main food items but jellyfish, sea urchins, star fish, clams, mussels and fish are also eaten.

Did you know that...

- Kemp's ridleys require only 7-15 years to reach sexual maturity!
- The Kemp's ridley is the smallest and still the most endangered of all the sea turtles!
- Recent population increases can be attributed to increased protection of nesting females, and the use of Turtle Excluder Devices in the shrimp trawling industry!

Why Are They Threatened?

The primary nesting beach is at Rancho Nuevo, Mexico, where females and their eggs are now protected. Scientists once believed the species to be confined to the Gulf of Mexico, but their range is now known to extend north along the US eastern seaboard. Incidental capture and drowning in shrimp trawls is a major cause of mortality. The installation and proper use of Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs) in all shrimp trawling boats fishing in areas where Kemp's ridleys are found continues to be critical to the survival of this species. Other causes of mortality are ingestion of pollutants and marine debris (oil, discarded fishing lines, plastics), and wounds sustained in boat collisions and dredging operations. Conservation efforts have resulted in a small population recolonizing Texas shores, with more than 60 U.S. nestings confirmed between 1996 and 2002!

Successful Conservation Effort

Rising numbers of nesting Kemp's ridleys, including a small population beginning to establish itself on beaches in Texas (USA), is a tribute to nearly four decades of intensive bilateral conservation by the USA and Mexico. Full protection at the nesting beach and continued emphasis on the use of TEDs in offshore waters is key to the survival of this ancient species. Still classified as Critically Endangered by the World Conservation Union (IUCN), this is one turtle species whose future looks bright!

What Can You Do To Help? Please:

- 🐢 Do not buy or sell sea turtle products. Remember, international law prevents the transport of sea-turtle parts and products across national borders.
- 🐢 Do not harass sea turtles at sea or on land. Do not disturb turtles in feeding areas, shine lights on nesting turtles, ride turtles, or collect hatchlings.
- 🐢 Turn off, shield, or redirect coastal lighting to prevent it from shining on nesting beaches. Artificial lighting can fatally disorient nesting and hatching sea turtles.
- 🐢 Obey all regulations regarding the protection of coral reefs, seagrass, and natural beach vegetation.
- 🐢 Do not drive your car on the beach; incubating eggs can be crushed and tire ruts trap crawling hatchlings.
- 🐢 Support local and national conservation efforts. Be familiar with existing legislation, and encourage new legislation to strengthen protection for sea turtles and their habitats.

WIDECAST

With Country Coordinators and partner organizations in more than 40 Caribbean nations and territories, the Wider Caribbean Sea Turtle Conservation Network (WIDECAST) is an innovative, proactive and inclusive mechanism for sustainable development on a regional scale. By bringing the best available science to bear on decision-making, emphasizing information exchange and training, and encouraging harmonised practices, the network promotes strong linkages between science, policy, and public participation in the design and implementation of sea turtle management programmes.



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