

Loggerhead Turtle

Caretta caretta

General Description

The loggerhead turtle has a bony, slightly tapered, reddish-brown carapace (top shell) covered with non-overlapping scutes. The carapace has five pairs of lateral scutes and, in juveniles, the carapace can show bumpy ridges along its length. The carapace is often encrusted by a heavy growth of invertebrate fauna, such as barnacles. The plastron (bottom shell) is cream-yellow in color.

The triangular shaped head is disproportionately large for the body size and may grow to 25 cm (10 in) in width in adults. Each front and back flipper has two claws.

While hatchlings typically range from 44-48 mm (1.7-1.8 in) in carapace length, adults may grow to 120 cm (47 in) in carapace length and 200 kg (440 lb) in weight. Hatchlings are uniform in color, usually above and below red-brown or grey-black.

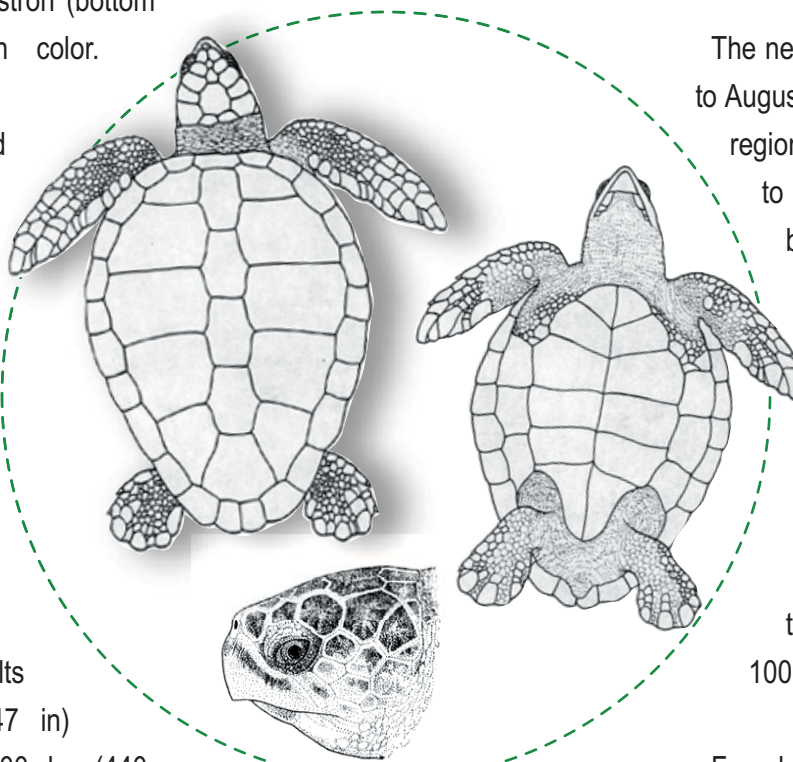
Research on loggerheads provided the first glimpses into important aspects of sea turtle biology—such as temperature dependent sex determination.

Nesting Distribution and Behavior

Loggerheads prefer to nest on sub-tropical and temperate beaches. The largest concentration of nesting females in the world is found on the southeastern Atlantic coast of the USA. Lower density nesting is documented on beaches along the Gulf and Caribbean coasts of Mexico, Belize and the Atlantic coast of South America.

The nesting season is from May to August in the Wider Caribbean region. Loggerheads prefer to nest on continental beaches, and mating is believed to occur off of nesting beaches. A typical nesting beach is backed by a low vegetated dune. Nesting loggerheads create asymmetrical tracks measuring 90-100 cm (35-39 in) across.

Females typically nest every 2-3 years and nest several times in a season at 13-15 day intervals. The female excavates a nesting cavity 43-80 cm (17-31 in) deep where she deposits about 100-120 golf ball-sized eggs. The nests are dug well above the high tide line to prevent inundation by seawater over the 7-11 week incubation period.



Did you know that...

- Juvenile loggerheads migrate across ocean basins!
- Loggerheads are “floating zoos”, carrying dozens of other species on their shells!
- Loggerheads mature at 25 to 35 years of age!
- Loggerheads born in Florida often spend their “teen age years” in the Mediterranean!

Diet

Adult loggerheads are benthic (seabed) feeders on the continental shelf. A large head and powerful jaws are well suited to their omnivorous diet. They eat a variety of hard-shelled mollusks (such as conch and whelk) and crustaceans (such as crabs), and also feed on fish, jellyfish, and seaweeds.

Why They Are Threatened?

In the Gulf of Mexico and southeastern Atlantic coast of the USA, the major cause of death for loggerheads is their incidental capture and subsequent drowning in shrimp trawls. Fitting shrimp trawls with Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs) offers an escape route for turtles trapped in trawl nets, and these devices are required by law in the U.S. and several Caribbean countries and Latin America.

Entanglement and incidental capture in longlines is also an important source of mortality in the Caribbean Sea and beyond. In addition, Loggerheads cannot easily distinguish between food and non-food items (such as plastic) and they consume marine debris, which can be fatal.

Finally, coastal development, with associated lighting and vehicular use, threatens nesting beaches. Lights confuse hatchlings so that they are unable to find the sea and vehicles crush eggs and newly hatched turtles waiting to emerge from the sand.

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 are 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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