

Olive Ridley Turtle

Lepidochelys olivacea

General Description

The olive ridley sea turtle, one of the smallest of the sea turtles, may have been named for the olive green color of its carapace (top shell). Olive ridleys can grow to 64-72 cm (25.6-28.8 in) in carapace length and weigh up to 45 kg (100 lb). The carapace is nearly circular, with 6-9 pairs of lateral scutes. The plastron (bottom shell) is yellowish-white in color, and has small pores around the edges.

The olive ridley has a small, narrow head and a finely serrated horny beak. Between the eyes there are a variable number of prefrontal scales. There are two claws on each flipper. Hatchlings are uniformly grayish black in color. Ridleys begin reproducing at 12-15 years of age.

The only way to positively identify an adult female is to observe her laying eggs. Adult male identification is based on the presence of a long, prehensile tail. Juveniles cannot be sexed based on physical characteristics.

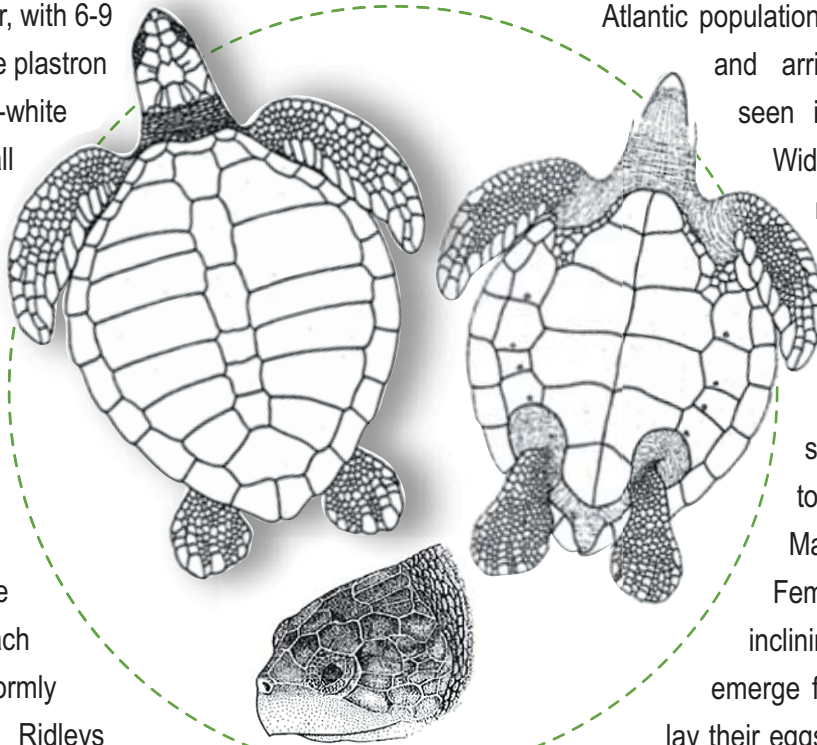
Nesting Distribution and Behavior

In many parts of the world, the olive ridley comes to shore to nest in synchronized emergences of large numbers of turtles, an event known as an *arribada*. On a global scale, the olive ridley is the world's most abundant sea turtle. However,

Atlantic populations are severely depleted and *arribadas* are no longer seen in our region. In the Wider Caribbean, remnant nesting colonies occur in Suriname, French Guiana and Brazil.

The nesting season is from April to August, peaking in May-July in the Guianas. Females prefer gently inclining beaches and typically emerge from the sea at night to lay their eggs in the warm sand. The

female's nesting track is asymmetrical and about 70-80 cm (29-32 in) in width. Nesting appears to be affected by weather conditions and therefore there is no predictable inter-nesting interval, although females tend to nest 1-3 times during a breeding year. Females tend to lay just over 100 eggs per nest; the incubation period is approximately 8 weeks long.



Did you know that...

- The olive ridley sunbathes at the ocean's surface, providing a foot-rest for sea birds!
- Olive ridleys participate in massive and spectacular nesting aggregations, known as arribadas!
- Olive ridleys occur in the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Oceans and are the world's most abundant sea turtle!







Diet

Olive ridleys forage both in shallow coastal waters and in the open sea, where they have been known to dive to depths greater than 150 m (500 ft). They are primarily carnivorous and feed on a variety of food items such as shrimp, crabs, sea urchins, jellyfish and gastropods (snails). They are also known to eat algae and seagrasses.

Why Are They Threatened?

The tendency of olive ridleys to form large nesting aggregations, called *arribadas*, has made them easy targets for harvest, and their meat and eggs were once important resources for people in coastal areas. In the Wider Caribbean, populations that once may have numbered in the hundreds of thousands now number in the hundreds. The incidental capture and drowning of olive ridleys in shrimp trawls may have contributed significantly to their decline. Similarly, incidental capture in gillnets is a serious challenge in the Eastern Pacific, where numbers declined dramatically due to excessive egg harvest and many years of large scale commercial harvest. Nest predation by domestic dogs, opossums, coyotes and ringtail cats are an added burden on depleted populations. Finally, marine debris (such as plastic bags) is easily mistaken for food, and can cause death.

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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