



South Carolina Coastal Resources

A Blog of the S.C. Department of Natural Resources

Apr 30

Three Cool Sea Turtle Stories to Kick Off the Season

Guest Author (</?author=56faa0af55598629be8d6caf>)



A loggerhead sea turtle awaits measurements aboard SCDNR's *Lady Lisa* from biologists that study sea turtles in our coastal waters (Photo: E. Weeks/SCDNR).

Sea turtle nesting season took off at a sprint last week. Well ahead of the 'official' May 1 start date, South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) biologists confirmed (http://www.dnr.sc.gov/news/2019/apr/apr26_seaturtles.php) both the earliest-laid nest in recent history and, less than a day later, a day-nesting Kemp's ridley on Hilton Head Island (only the state's fourth nest from a Kemp's, the world's rarest sea turtle).

The 2019 nesting season has already proven a historic one, but before we get too far into the season, **we're taking a moment to look back on three important and overlooked sea turtle stories from the 2018 season.**

South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) biologists have been working since 1977 to ensure the protection of sea turtles in South Carolina. We depend on a team of approximately 1,000 trained volunteers, who help out with recording and monitoring nests on South Carolina's beaches. In 2018, the number of actively reporting volunteers increased from 528 to 637, logging an extra 1,000 hours of work from the previous year.

In 2018, the number of loggerhead nests recorded was significantly lower than the past few years. However, due to the cyclical nature of sea turtle nesting, the drop was not alarming, according to SCDNR biologist Michelle Pate. South Carolina last saw a low nesting year in 2014. Pate predicts that 2019 will prove a far busier year.



Sea turtle nesting volunteer Mari Armstrong witnessed this leatherback surfacing off the coast of South Carolina in 2016 (Photo: Mari Armstrong)

Lonely Leatherback Seeks Mate

One particular noteworthy find from last year was the discovery of three leatherback sea turtle nests on Cape Island, Isle of Palms, and Morris Island.

Leatherbacks, the world's largest sea turtles, are not uncommon visitors to the South Carolina coast in spring, when they follow jellyfish north into our waters. But leatherbacks rarely stick around through summer and nest here -- the last recorded nest was in 2015.

Unfortunately, as the season progressed, it became apparent that the eggs from each of the leatherback nests were infertile – none hatched. Through genetic testing, SCDNR scientists learned that the three nests were all laid by the same sea turtle, one that has not been identified on the South Carolina coast before. Our biologists believe that the female leatherback, who most likely migrated up the coast to feed on cannonball jellyfish, simply did not find a mate during her travels.



"North" the loggerhead sea turtle's recapture photo from SCDNR biologists aboard the Lady Lisa (Photo: SEAMAP/SCDNR)

Finding "North" Again

On November 8, 2018, biologists aboard SCDNR's Coastal Trawl Survey (which studies and monitors marine life along the southeastern coast) hauled a loggerhead sea turtle aboard their vessel, a shrimper-turned-research-boat called the *Lady Lisa*. Interestingly, the turtle had tags on their flippers, indicating it had been caught before.

It turned out the loggerhead was captured once before by the very same crew – five and a half years prior, in June of 2013, and 75 miles away from where it was recaptured. The first time biologists captured the loggerhead, he/she was actually taken to the South Carolina Aquarium's Sea Turtle Hospital for medical treatment, where the animal was dubbed "North." Upon finding the turtle again, biologists took measurements and checked North's health (good!) and then released her back into the ocean, as they do for many other turtles each year.

Recaptures of previously tagged or treated sea turtles are rare but highly valuable – in addition to providing important data about how much the turtles have grown or traveled, it's incredibly rewarding to see them thriving years later.



A reminder to keep lights out at night for sea turtles at the entrance to Folly Beach in 2015 (Photo: E. Weeks/SCDNR)

Lights Out for the Turtles

This past year, two of our municipal partners took excellent strides toward making South Carolina beaches more turtle-friendly. When sea turtles hatch, they follow the light of the moon to guide them toward the ocean. Bright lights from houses, cars, and street lamps can disorient the sea turtles. Thus, during sea turtle season, SCDNR biologists encourage all beach residents and visitors to be mindful of using lights near the beach at night.

First, the town of Edisto Beach applied for and was awarded a grant that they used to install new, turtle-friendly lights along the main road of the island, which has been a problem area for hatchlings since Hurricane Matthew leveled the protective dunes there.

Second, the Folly Beach Pier had a timer installed by Charleston County Parks and Recreation that shuts off the bright lights during the late hours of the night. These commendable changes should help more sea turtle hatchlings safely make it to the ocean.

If you are looking for ways to support sea turtle conservation in South Carolina consider volunteering your time with a nest protection group near you (<http://www.dnr.sc.gov/seaturtle/volunteers.html>). Another easy way to help is by purchasing the Endangered Species Specialty License Plate (<http://www.dnr.sc.gov/admin/endangeredplate.html>) which directly funds SCDNR's sea turtle conservation work.



About the author

Aiken native Emma Berry is a recent graduate of the College of Charleston and works with SCDNR's marine division in Charleston on science communication and outreach.

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