

Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle

Lepidochelys kempii



TPWD PHOTO



For more than 150 million years, sea turtles have roamed the earth. Although many sea turtle species are in danger, the Kemp's Ridley sea turtle is the most endangered species worldwide.

Coastal Wetlands

Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle

Lepidochelys kempii



APPEARANCE

Length: 27 to 32 inches (68 to 82 cm)

Weight: 75 to 100 pounds (33 to 45 kg)

Distinguishing Characteristics

- Dark gray to gray-green *carapace* (upper shell)
- Cream to tan *plastron* (lower shell)
- Streamlined shells
- Appendages shaped like flippers

LIFE HISTORY

Range: Warm, shallow shore waters throughout the Gulf of Mexico and along the Atlantic Ocean

Diet: Crabs, clams, jellyfish, shrimp, sea stars and fish

Predators: Humans (hunting, boat propellers, nets, and refuse), followed by natural predation by shore birds, sharks and other sea animals

Sexual maturity: At about 10-15 years for females. Little is known about the males.

Mating: Females may nest two or three times per breeding season.

Nesting: The females come ashore and dig a deep nest in the beach sand.

Eggs: 100 soft, round white eggs about the size of ping pong balls.

Incubation: 45 to 60 days with approximately 75 percent of the eggs hatching.

Young: About 125,000 hatchlings leave nests on North American shores, but only one percent of those will survive to sexual maturity. As hatchlings, Ridentys weigh about 0.5 ounces (14 g) with a shell the size of a half-dollar.

Life span: Up to 50 years

HABITAT

Kemp's Ridentys prefer open ocean and gulf waters with the females only coming ashore to lay eggs in beach sand. Young turtles float on large mats of *sargassum* (a type of brown algae) in the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Ocean.

BEHAVIOR

The male Kemp's Ridley spends its entire life in the water while the female only comes ashore to nest, sometimes joining large groups of nesting females called *arribazones*. A female will only lay eggs during the day. She will come back to the same beach to nest year after year. Some scientists believe that baby sea turtles may remember, or "imprint" on, the particular smell, chemical make-up, or magnetic location of the beach where they hatched. Others point out that sea turtles have magnetite, an iron ore, in their brains that they may use to navigate along the Earth's magnetic fields.

NOW YOU KNOW!

- If the water grows cold, these sea turtles can adjust their metabolic rate and can remain underwater for hours.
- Turtles can go two to three months without food.
- Sea turtle "tears" are their way of ridding their body of salt-water through special glands.
- Eggs placed in a warm incubator tend to hatch as female turtles. Eggs kept at cooler temperatures hatch as males.
- The Kemp's Ridley is the smallest of all the sea turtles.
- It is also known as the *tortuga lora* in Mexico, which means "parrot turtle" in reference to the beak-like shape of its head.

KEMP'S RIDLEY SEA TURTLES AND PEOPLE

The Kemp's Ridley sea turtle was placed on the Endangered Species List in 1970. Over the centuries, people have harvested the eggs and killed the turtles for their meat and leather-like skin. Between the 1940s and 1960s, the population crashed as people harvested truckloads of eggs and sold them in small towns in Texas and Mexico. More recent threats include suffocation in shrimpers' large nets and ingesting floating trash that they mistake for food. Governments of the Mexican states of Tamaulipas, Colima and Jalisco were the very first to become involved in the protection of sea turtle eggs. The nesting beach at Rancho Nuevo, Tamaulipas, Mexico is the primary nesting site for these turtles. It is the only known major nesting beach for this species in the world. Thanks to the work of a large team of scientists, a secondary nesting population has been established on Padre Island National Seashore. To continue the success of this secondary site, citizens are asked to leave the animals alone, but report any sightings to a park ranger or local game warden.