

Sea Turtle Fact Sheet

Olive ridley (*Lepidochelys olivacea*)

Endangered Sea Turtles

Ancient ocean dwellers, sea turtles have lived on the Earth for 150 million years, since before the time of the dinosaurs. All seven species of sea turtles are endangered and protected under various national laws and international treaties. Sea turtles' hydrodynamic body shape and paddle-shaped limbs or flippers make them agile swimmers. Though fully adapted to marine life, sea turtles depend on land to complete the most critical stage of their life cycle, reproduction. They build their nests and deposit their eggs only on tropical and subtropical sandy beaches.

Appearance

The carapace of this species is a plain olive gray above and is creamy or white below.

Weight: 85 lbs (39 kg)

Carapace length: 2.5 feet (0.76 m).

Status

One of the endangered sea turtle species, olive ridleys are thought to be the most abundant. However, they are still endangered because there remain only a few nesting sites worldwide where they congregate in large numbers.

Habitat and Feeding Behavior

Olive ridleys live primarily in the northern hemisphere, principally in the eastern Pacific and Indian oceans. In the recent past, there were important populations in northern South America. They migrate thousands of miles in the course of a year, between nesting and feeding grounds. Adults travel and rest mostly in surface waters, but have been observed diving and feeding in waters 550 ft (about 200 m) deep. Olive ridleys spend their entire lives in the ocean; only the females come ashore when it is time to nest.

Food: The food of the adult olive ridley includes lobsters, fish, crustaceans, mollusks, algae, fish eggs and jellyfish.



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Nesting

The olive ridley is one of two turtle species with a phenomenal nesting behavior known as *arribada* (Spanish for "arrival"). During the *arribada*, breeding turtles congregate in the waters in front of the nesting beach and then, signaled by some, as yet unknown, cue, they emerge from the sea *en masse*. Olive ridleys may take 20 years or more to reach sexual maturity. They return to lay their eggs on the very same beach from which they first hatched. As many as 610,000 females may nest in one *arribada*, which may continue for several days. Nesting occurs mainly in the summer and fall in the Eastern Pacific and may be repeated several times each season.

Olive ridleys lay about 100 eggs in each nest. Incubation takes from 45-65 days, depending on temperature. When born, hatchlings are about 1.5 inches long, around .6 oz., and are almost completely black. In their race to the water, their dark coloring against the light-colored sand of some of the beaches where they hatch makes them easy prey. Predators include birds, raccoons, hyenas, ghost crabs, monitor lizards, feral pigs and dogs. Once they reach the sea, they must contend with sea birds and carnivorous fish. The known natural predators of adult olive ridleys include sharks, orcas, jaguars, and crocodiles. It is estimated that approximately 1 adult nesting turtle will survive for every 3,000 eggs laid.

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Primary breeding grounds: The most important breeding grounds are in the eastern Pacific Ocean, on the western central coast of Mexico, the west coasts of Costa Rica and Nicaragua, and in India. Nesting grounds are also found in Surinam, French Guinea, Angola, Mozambique, Japan, Guatemala, Panama, and Papua New Guinea.

Threats

Major threats to the survival of the olive ridley turtle include:

- ◆ large-scale poaching of adult turtles for meat, shells and leather;
- ◆ drownings of sea turtles in shrimp nets, longlines, and gillnets;
- ◆ development and destruction of nesting beaches;
- ◆ ocean pollution; and
- ◆ commercial exploitation of sea turtle eggs.